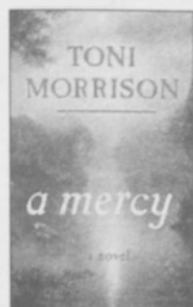


Morrison's latest complex, nuanced and almost untellable



"A Mercy", by Toni Morrison, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008, Hardcover, 167 pages, \$23.95

BY ELLIOTT BRONSTEIN
REAL CHANGE NEWS

When, exactly, were "The Good Old Days?" Surely not the 1680s, when eastern and southern First Nations were losing a war of attrition against European marauders and refugees, when the dreams of some were predicated on the nightmares of others, when the clay of North American civilization was still muddy and misshapen.

In her latest novel, "A Mercy," Toni Morrison twists back to that obscure colonial era to strip away more of our family secrets. Morrison shows how precarious life has always been here; how easily the linchpin can dissolve and the balance trip.

In "A Mercy," the linchpin is a man names Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch trader whose sober, sensible style invites a certain type of prosperity in the chaotic late 1600s. But "A Mercy" is not about Vaark. Instead it tells the story of the women who live together under his suzerainty on his New York farm: Vaark's wife Rebekka, a refugee from England; Lina, an older servant/slave whose tribe had been swept aside by smallpox; Florens, an African girl grudgingly accepted by Vaark as a Maryland tobacco farmer's payment for debt; and Sorrow,

the sole survivor of a shipwreck — not a family, according to Lina, "not even a like — minded group. They were orphans, each and all."

"These are women, understand: in most cases, illegal without a man," Toni Morrison said in an interview with Simon Houpt that appeared in late November in the Toronto Globe and Mail. "I wanted to separate slavery from race. It's not difference that matters — there are differences that are profound — it's hierarchy."

The story of "A Mercy," is complex, nuanced, and practically untellable. Morrison does not simply recreate the voices of the 17th Century; she conjures characters who speak directly to us from a time when bondage was simply one matter-of-fact cruelty among many. And within the moral boundaries established by such cruelties, the characters' interactions and choices display the sharp finality of a metal door's swinging closed — such as when young Florens declares, "But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose."

Morrison's mastery is not usual for American literature. Her writing takes huge risks, but her language is careful and carefully considered. She speaks plainly,

yet often her story is hard to follow. Her work defines the difference between wisdom and mere cleverness. Listen to her description of a group of slaves lined up for inspection:

"The women's eyes looked shockproof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there."

Or to this unassuming piece of lyricism: "Lina gazed through the wavy pane of the tiny window where a flirtatious sun poured soft yellow light toward the foot of Mistress' bed."

That richness does not come without cost. In Toni Morrison's writing, the very qualities that impress can also hold us at a distance. Brilliant, yes, but sometimes too remote in its majesty. Admiration rather than love. It is as if we were standing too close to a cathedral bell when it starts to ring: the sound shakes our bones and rattles our soul, yet the force of it drives us to retreat, to slip round the corner to the bar where they serve drinks in dirty glasses.

Still even from a safer distance I cannot forget the question at the heart of it:

"Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh yes."

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said. "This is inaccurate as can be. There's at least 5,000."

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The street count is conducted in late January because the end of the month is when people on the edge of homelessness usually run out of money, and because cold weather means shelter use is at its peak.

"People are definitely accessing whatever resources they have for housing right now," Schwanz said. "People who are traveling, who would normally stay here in the warmer seasons, aren't staying ... These are more like the homeless citizens of Portland."

In about three hours, the Yellow Brick Road team collected 29 surveys in all. Most people they asked were happy to participate. Several refused — a man and woman sitting in a doorway downtown thought the hovering outreach workers might attract police attention — so their presence was merely noted on the back of the survey.

Between 2005 and 2007, the street count total dropped by 39 percent, which Erickson said was a pleasant surprise.

"I expected that it would be higher," she said. "That was great. It really looked like our (housing and rent assistance) efforts were working."

In the past, the city and county have issued separate reports for the street and shelter count. This year, street and shelter data will be combined into what officials hope will be a more comprehensive picture. It will take several weeks to compile the information, and Erickson said she does not know what to expect from this year's numbers.

Other indicators suggest that the number of people on the street is on the rise. In

January, Oregon's unemployment rate hit a 20-year high of 9 percent. Bankruptcy claims and food stamp applications have increased. Shelters and service agencies report heavier traffic in recent months.

Fern Elledge of Transition Projects, Inc. said the waiting list for their men's shelter is longer than it has ever been. Since fall, there have been close to 300 people waiting for a spot.

"I've rarely seen it above 200," Elledge said. "It's a pretty significant increase there."

Elledge said TPI has been seeing clients who are new to homelessness — "middle-class people who have lost their jobs, lost their houses ... and people who could make ends meet before, but can't now."

Of people counted in 2007, about a third were downtown. Only 2 percent were in outer East Portland and Gresham. But in recent years, service providers have noted increased need in eastern areas, especially among families.

"There's been a huge shift in poverty to the East in the last five to 10 years, and we definitely

continue to see that," said Silver at Human Solutions.

This changing geography may show up in the count this year, but it may not. Silver said she is concerned that outreach efforts don't find everyone — not just for the street count, but also for attempts to connect people with services and emergency warming shelters.

"With families, they do try to stay under the radar," Silver said, "because they get really worried that if somebody finds out, for example, that they're living in a trailer with no water and no electricity, they're going to come and yank the kids."

"They're not as visible," Silver said. However, "We know that they're there."

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— ERIKA SILVER
PROGRAM DIRECTOR,
HUMAN SOLUTIONS

I'm Nobody

Mandi V. April

I'm a college student

I'm an artist.

I'm a daughter, mother and wife

Every day I continue on with my life.

I'm a friend

I'm a sister

I'm a business associate,
and Portland Saturday Market Vendor.

I continue on with the struggle of my life.

Booze, drugs, sex

It's all a hex

To keep me down

On the ground

Never to rise

But never to fall

I am homeless

I'm nobody

And that is the worse thing of all.

Tell us what's on your mind on our blog, www.streetroots.wordpress.org