

REVIEW

Song of Solomon (1977)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

Reynolds Price

Toni Morrison's first two books—*The Bluest Eye* with the purity of its terrors and *Sula* with its dense poetry and the depth of its probing into a small circle of lives—were strong novels. Yet, firm as they both were in achievement and promise, they didn't fully forecast her new book, *Song of Solomon*. Here the depths of the younger work are still evident, but now they thrust outward, into wider fields, for longer intervals, encompassing many more lives. The result is a long prose tale that surveys nearly a century of American history as it impinges upon a single family. In short, this is a full novel—rich, slow enough to impress itself upon us like a love affair or a sickness—not the two-hour penny dreadful which is again in vogue nor one of the airless cat's cradles custom-woven for the delight and job assistance of graduate students of all ages.

Song of Solomon isn't, however, cast in the basically realistic mode of most family novels. In fact, its negotiations with fantasy, fable, song, and allegory are so organic, continuous, and unpredictable as to make any summary of its plot sound absurd; but absurdity is neither Morrison's strategy nor purpose. The purpose seems to be communication of painfully discovered and powerfully held convictions about the possibility of transcendence within human life, on a time-scale of a single life. The strategies are multiple and depend upon the actions of a large cast of black Americans, most of them related by blood. But after the loving, comical and demanding polyphony of the early chapters (set in Michigan in the early 1930's), the theme begins to settle on one character and to develop around and out of him.

His name is Macon Dead, called "Milkman" because his mother nursed him well past infancy. He is the son of an upper middle-class Northern black mother and a father with obscure working-class Southern origins. These origins, which Milkman's father is intent on concealing, fuel him in a merciless drive toward money and safety—over and past the happiness of his wife and daughters and son. So the son grows up into chaos and genuine danger—the homicidal intentions of a woman he spurned after years of love, and an accidental involvement with a secret ring of lifelong acquaintances who are sworn to avenge white violence, eye for eye.

Near the midpoint in the book—when we may begin to wonder if the spectacle of Milkman's apparently thwarted life is sufficient to hold our attention much longer—there is an abrupt shift. Through his involvement with his father's sister, the bizarre and anarchic Pilate (whose dedication to life and feeling is directly opposed to her brother's methodical acquisition of things), and with Guitar, one of the black avengers. Milkman is flung out of his private maelstrom. He is forced to discover, explore, comprehend, and accept a world more dangerous than the Blood Bank (the ghetto neighborhood of idle eccentrics, whores, bullies, and lunatics, which he visited as a boy). But this world is also rewarding, as it opens into the larger, freer sphere of time and human contingency and reveals the possibility of knowing one's origins and of realizing the potential found in the lives, failures, and victories of one's ancestors.

Although it begins as a hungry hunt for a cache of gold that his father and Pilate left in a cave in Virginia, Milkman's search is finally a search for family history. As he travels through Pennsylvania and Virginia, acquiring the jagged pieces of a story that he slowly assembles into a long pattern of courage and literal transcendence of tragedy, he is strengthened to face the mortal threat that rises from his own careless past to meet him at the end.

The end is unresolved. Does Milkman survive to use his new knowledge, or does he die at the hands of a hateful friend? The hint is that he lives—in which cast Toni Morrison has her next novel ready and

waiting: Milkman's real manhood, the means he invents for transmitting or squandering the legacy he has discovered. But that very uncertainty is one more sign of the book's larger truthfulness (no big, good novel has every really ended; and none can, until it authoritatively describes the extinction from the universe of all human life); and while there are problems (occasional abortive pursuits of a character who vanishes, occasional luxuriant pauses on detail and the understandable but weakening omission of active white characters), *Song of Solomon* easily lifts above them on the wide, slow wings of human sympathy, well-informed wit, and the rare plain power to speak wisdom to other human beings. A long story, then, and better than good. Toni Morrison has earned attention and praise. Few Americans know, and can say, more than she has in this wise and spacious novel."

Reynolds Price
The New York Times Book Review
(11 September 1977)