

REVIEW

Jazz (1992)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

Edna O'Brien

We are with Joe, Violet and Dorcas, the temptress whose melting shadow stalks the pages of Toni Morrison's latest novel, *Jazz*. We are with youth versus age, sterility versus sex, the swamps versus the gaudy hubbub of "city." At night in their musty apartment in Harlem, Joe and Violet, the husband and wife, get up intermittently to study the photograph of the dead girl and respond with mutterings of love, jealousy and bile. Violet, the wronged wife, is a many-faceted creature and, like Hermann Hesse's Steppenwolf, admits to many selves within herself, occasionally stumbling into a psychotic limbo. There is also Felice, Dorcas's friend, looking in on this triangular stew and on love itself, which she craves because "that's the kick." The effect is of a prism being held up before us in order to glimpse its shifting multifarious worlds.

Joe, purveyor of illusion, sells Cleopatra Cosmetics, and thus finds Dorcas and beds her clandestinely in an apartment not far from the bedroom where he and Violet had their youthful nighttime fiestas. In a fit of passion Joe shoots Dorcas, but because nobody sees him do it, Alice, her aunt and guardian, decides not "to throw money to helpless lawyers or laughing cops." Come the fateful day Violet takes a butcher's knife to Dorcas's face in the funeral parlor, is intercepted and later lets loose her pet birds into the snow, rather in the manner of the eccentric Miss Flite in Dickens's *Bleak House*.

This however, is not Victorian England, but Harlem in the 1920's, Harlem still relatively innocent, when crimes at least were crimes of passion and pity in some currency, Harlem permeated with the thrum of music, Harlem to which those black people who had run from want and violence came to find their stronger, riskier selves. In Ms. Morrison's robust language we see the sidewalks, the curbstones, Egyptian beads, Kansas fried chicken, doors ajar to speakeasies, an invitation to the lowdown hellfire induction of music and sex.

In this and many audacious asides the author conjures up worlds with complete authority. She captures and makes no secret of her anger at the injustices dealt to black women who were mothers, serving women and corpse dressers, women who found refuge only in an angry church and an angry God and for whom pregnancy was worse than death. But young Violet and young Joe caught in their youthful heat had no wish for babies, so that "those miscarriages—two in the field, only one in her bed—were more inconvenience than loss."

But loss bites in strange ways. Years later, when doing the rounds with her pins and her curling tongs as a home hairdresser, Violet is kept waiting on a step and on impulse resolves to filch a baby from a pram. Her plan is thwarted but the longing remains, and the absence of a baby—or should I say the presence of an absent baby?—forms the undertow of the book. Joe in his errant way is also seeking youth, drawn as he is to a girl who, from the earliest age and perhaps in some blind premonition, cultivated the dynamics beneath her skirts.

After the murder and the outburst in the funeral parlor, Violet luxuriates in the thralldom of jealousy, picturing them in the Indigo, "the heifer" at the round table, the stem of the glass in one hand and her other hand drumming out the rhythms "on the inside of his thigh, his thigh, his thigh, thigh, thigh." In time, her jealousy abating, Violet insinuates herself into the aunt's house to draw her out in descriptions of the girl—her skin, her hair, her wiles, her come-hither. She finds herself becoming less irate, even deeming that she might like her. Of course that does not obliterate the hate and the gnawing recognition that she is old (she is over 50) and no man will want her again; all that is left is the talking.

In sharp compassionate vignettes, plucked from different episodes of their lives, the author portrays people who are together simply because they were put down together, people tricked for a while into believing that life would serve them, powerless to change their fate—Joe with a faithless wild woman for a mother, a woman he seeks in caves and rock faces, a woman he calls to and asks if she is she—“Just say it, say anything”; Violet unable to repress the seams of erotic memory, remembering the bed with one leg propped on a dictionary; and Dorcas, foxy, provocative, believing sex to be her trump card, which for a few months it was. These are people enthralled then deceived by “the music the world makes.”

Do I miss something? Yes, I miss the emotional nexus, the moment shorn of all artifice that brings us headlong into the deepest recesses of feeling, moments such as in Faulkner’s *Light in August*, when the fugitive Joe Christmas takes to the road knowing that it will run on forever “between the savage and spurious board fronts of oil towns,” or when Leopold Bloom, in the throes of a tender letter to his mistress, pauses to address his dead son with: “Love. Hate. These are words Rudy. Soon I am old,” or when poor crazed Anna Karenina, observing the bolts and irons of the oncoming train, asks God to forgive her.

I say this because at one point in the novel when Violet and Alice are ruminating, Alice muses on her own woes, on the treachery done to her by another woman, on the blood punishment she meted out on the husband long since in his grave and, putting the pressing iron down, says, “You don’t know what loss is.” I have a sense of being told this, I do not feel it; my pity is withheld.

It is as if Ms. Morrison, bedazzled by her own virtuosity—a virtuosity that serves her and us and contemporary fiction very well—hesitates to bring us to the last frontier, to a predicament that is both physical and metaphysical, and which in certain fictions, by an eerie transmission, becomes our very own experience. Such alchemy does not occur here.

What remains are the bold arresting strokes of a poster and not the cold astonishment of a painting.

Edna O’Brien
The New York Times Book Review
(5 April 1992)