

192 QUOTATIONS



Toni Morrison

(1931-)

Toni Morrison emerged in the 1970s as the major black American novelist. At her best, as in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison is by aesthetic standards among the greatest novelists of the 20th century—mythic, lyrical, sensuous, eloquent, richly symbolic and allegorical. She is the most influential writer on race since William Faulkner, has made a uniquely valuable contribution to white understanding of contemporary black psychology and was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1993. She came to be taught in American universities more frequently than Shakespeare. *Beloved* (1987), her moving account of slavery, may be the most often taught of her novels. Morrison calls herself a black feminist and is severely critical of white feminists. Although deeply influenced by Modernism, she is Postmodernist in rejecting the concept of universal humanity and the traditional unifying American metaphor of the melting pot, because she believes the dominant culture is white, destructive and corrupt, as is most evident in *Tar Baby* (1981). At the end of that novel she inverts the integration theme of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (1953) by implying that blacks should run away from—not toward—white culture. Morrison rejects the teaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. that a person should be judged not by race but by the content of his or her character and she seems—clearly in *Tar Baby*--to be calling for a return to racial segregation.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, autobiographical, the black family, black life, jazz, education, urbanity, black folk pastoralism, Postmodernism, Jews, Afrocentricity, humanism, racism, black power, Political Correctness, women, white women, black Feminists, white Feminists, love, writing, Modernism, her works, critics, other writers, Nobel Prize, advice, Existentialism, transcendence, religion, death:

YOUTH

My parents made all of us feel as though there were these rather extraordinary deserving people within us. I felt like an aristocrat—or what I think an aristocrat is.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

I'm a controversial figure. My friends either dislike me or hate me.

It's perfectly all right to hate my work. It really is. I have close friends whose work I loathe.

Most of our lives are spent in little towns, little towns all throughout the country. That's where we live. And that's where the juices come from and that's where we made it, not made it in terms of success but made who we are.

I didn't plan on either children or writing.

I was in a place where I knew I was not going to be for a long time; I didn't have any friends and didn't make any, didn't want any because I was on my way somewhere else. So I wrote as a thing to do.

The loneliest woman in the world is the woman without a close woman friend.

I like marriage. The idea.

THE BLACK FAMILY

Somebody has to take responsibility for being a leader.

Everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth.

My children are delightful people, whom I would love even if they weren't my children.

I don't think anybody cares about unwed mothers unless they're black or poor. The question is not morality, the question is money. That's what we're upset about.

I don't think a female running a house is a problem, a broken family. It's perceived as one because of the notion that a head is a man.

Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny impressions gleaned from one another, they created a sense of belonging and tried to make do with the way they found each other.

BLACK LIFE

Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.

Black boys became criminalized. I was in constant dread for their lives, because they were targets everywhere. They still are.

What difference do it make if the thing you scared of is real or not?

There are no small men in a closet.

Black people are victims of an enormous amount of violence. None of those things can take place without the complicity of the people who run the schools and the city.

Black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war.

"Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that makes us hurt one another. We don't even know why.

It did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother.

[*The Black Book*] A sound made up of all the elements that distinguish black life (its peculiar brand of irony, oppression, versatility, madness, joy, strength, shame, honor, triumph, grace and stillness) as well as

those qualities that identified it with all of mankind (compassion, anger, foolishness, courage, self-deception and vision). And it must concentrate on life as lived—not as imagined—by the people, the anonymous men and women who speak.

It was the music. The dirty, get-on-down music the women sang and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or apart and wild.... It made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law.

JAZZ

Obviously, jazz was considered—as all new music is—to be devil music; too sensual and provocative, and so on. But for some black people jazz meant claiming their own bodies. You can imagine what that must have meant for people whose bodies had been owned, who had been slaves as children, or who remembered their parents' being slaves. Blues and jazz represented ownership of one's own emotions. So of course it is excessive and overdone: tragedy in jazz is relished, almost as though a happy ending would take away some of its glamour, its flair. Now advertisers use jazz on television to communicate authenticity and modernity; to say "trust me," and to say "hip."

EDUCATION

Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another.

I've always thought the public schools needed to study the best literature.

Whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit.

You sweep me under the rug and your children will cut your throat.

Schools must stop being holding pens to keep energetic young people off the job market and off the streets. We stretch puberty out a long, long time.

URBANITY

New York is the last true city.

If ever there was a black woman's town, New York was it.

How soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city it is forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn't love it. The minute they arrive at the train station or get off the ferry and glimpse the wide streets and the wasteful lamps lighting them, they know they are born for it. There, in a city, they are not so much new as themselves, their stronger, riskier selves.

The City is what they want it to be... No wonder they forget pebbly creeks and when they do not forget the sky completely think of it as a tiny piece of information about the time of day or night.

The black girls in New York City were crying.

The street was choked with beautiful males who had found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult and so they'd dumped it. They had snipped off their testicles and pasted them to their chests.

A dream is just a nightmare with lipstick.

Here in this island of crying girls and men on tippy-toe.

She had run away from New York City with the same speed she had run toward it. New York was not her home after all. The dogs were leashed in the city but the reins were not always secure.

I don't want to *make* it; I want to *be* it.

BLACK FOLK PASTORALISM

No white people live in Eloe.

Nothing's better than Eloe.

God. Eloe.

Runs itself. [as a matriarchy]

What distinguished them from other men...was their refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere for long. Some were Huck Finns; some Nigger Jims. Others were Calibans, Staggerless and John Henrys. Anarchic, wandering, they read about their hometowns in the pages of out-of-town newspapers.

For Mrs. Caroline Smith, Mrs. Millie McTyeire, Mrs. Ardelia Willis, Mrs. Ramah Wofford, Mrs. Lois Brooks—and each of their sisters—and each of their sisters, all of whom knew their true and ancient properties. [dedication to *Tar Baby*]

This girl [Jadine] was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant—mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness, knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties, that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were.

POSTMODERNISM

Seem like folks used to take care of folks once upon a time.

Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy.

What's the world for if you can't make it up the way you want it?

In *Tar Baby*, the classic concept of the individual with a solid, coherent identity is eschewed for a model of identity which sees the individual as a kaleidoscope of heterogeneous impulses and desires, constructed from multiple forms of interaction with the world as a play of differences that cannot be completely comprehended.

All of that art-for-art's sake stuff is BS.... All good art is political! There is none that isn't.... We've just dirtied the word "politics," made it sound like it's unpatriotic or something. That all started in the period of state art, when you had the communists and fascists running around doing this poster stuff, and the reaction was, "No, no, no; there's only aesthetics." My point is that it has to be both: beautiful and political at the same time.

I never asked Tolstoy to write for me, a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio. I never asked [James] Joyce not to mention Catholicism or the world of Dublin. Never. And I don't know what I should be asked to explain your life to you. We have splendid writers to do that, but I am not one of them. It is that business of being universal, a word hopelessly stripped of meaning for me.

It's important not to have a totalizing view.

Don't give me that transcendental, Thoreau crap.

I'm gonna stay out here on the margin, and let the center look for me.

Categories like black writer, woman writer and Latin American writer aren't marginal anymore. We have to acknowledge that the thing we call "literature" is more pluralistic now, just as society ought to be.

In American literature we have been so totalized—as though there is only one version. We are not one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way.

The melting pot never worked.

JEWS

A lot of black people believe that Jews in this country have become white.

For a long time I was convinced that the conflict between Jewish people and black people in this country was a media event.

Nothing like other folks' sin for distraction.

AFROCENTRICITY

From my perspective there are only black people. When I say "people," that's what I mean.

"It means...that white folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together."

"Your first yalla?" he asked. "Look out. It's hard for them not to be white people. Hard, I'm telling you. Most never make it. Some try, but most don't make it.... Yallas don't come to being black natural-like. They have to choose it and most don't choose it. Be careful of the stuff they put down."

Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?

Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa. The one around here who did was this same Solomon, or Shalimar.

His smile was always a surprise like a sudden rustle of wind across the savanna of his face.

The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split.... [response at the end of *Song of Solomon* to Ellison's theme "keep this nigger boy running" in *Invisible Man*: lick the political split in the black community by escaping the white culture]

I would like to write novels that were unmistakably mine, but nevertheless fit first into African-American traditions and second of all, this whole thing called literature.

["First African-American?...rather than the whole of literature?"]: Oh yes. It's richer. It has more complex sources. It pulls from something that's closer to the edge; it's much more modern. It has a human future. It's very important to me that my work be African-American; if it assimilates into a different or larger pool, so much the better.

HUMANISM

There are racial differences among us. Exaggerated and exploited for political and economic purposes. And we have a great deal of baggage, personal feelings about other races because the society has been constructed along racial division. But in fact, when we meet another person one on one, and we know or recognize their race, we pull from that large suitcase of stereotypical information, of learned responses, of habitual reaction, which is the easiest and the laziest way to evaluate other people. The difficult thing and the important thing is to know people as individuals.

RACISM

I don't pass without insults.

I'm always annoyed about why black people have to bear the brunt of everybody else's contempt.

One of my kids was born in 1968. There were going to be political difficulties, but they were never going to have that level of hatred and contempt that my brothers and my sister and myself were exposed to.

In becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me—it's nothing else but color.

I always looked upon the acts of racist exclusion, or insult, as pitiable, from the other person. I never absorbed that. I always thought that there was something deficient about such people.

All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in.

If you're going to hold someone down you're going to have to hold on by the other end of the chain. You are confined by your own repression.

BLACK POWER

As you enter positions of trust and power, dream a little before you think.

I really think the range of emotions and perceptions I have had access to as a black person and as a female person are greater than those of people who are neither.... So it seems to me that my world did not shrink because I was a black female writer. It just got bigger.

Therese insisted on steering for she knew the way, she said, and could not talk the directions to him. The feel of the current was what she went by.

I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form.

What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them.

Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge.

It is unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis. Like statist language, censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its own narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance. However moribund, it is not without effect for it actively thwarts the intellect, stalls conscience, suppresses human potential. Unreceptive to interrogation, it cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, fill baffling silences.

In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.

Some Native-American writers enjoy being called Native-American writers.

It's been mentioned or suggested that Paradise will not be well studied, because it's about this unimportant intellectual topic, which is religion.

WOMEN

I have my own list of objections that I can pursue at my leisure, not least of which is an almost comic obtuseness regarding women.

Women's rights is not only an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about us; it is also about me and you. Just the two of us.

I think women dwell quite a bit on the duress under which they work, on how hard it is just to do it at all. We are traditionally rather proud of ourselves for having slipped creative work in there between the domestic chores and obligations. I'm not sure we deserve such big A-plusses for all that.

The idea of a wanton woman is something I have inserted into almost all of my books. An outlaw figure who is disallowed in the community because of her imagination of activity or status—that kind of anarchic figure has always fascinated me.

Everybody gets everything handed to them. The rich inherit it. I don't mean just inheritance of money. I mean what people take for granted among the middle and upper classes, which is nepotism, the old-boy network.

Anybody who thought women were inferior didn't come out of north Florida.

WHITE WOMEN

The Principal Beauty of Maine is the main bitch of the prince.

“Valerian. Please shut up.”

“But this is exciting. We've been coming here for only thirty years and already you've discovered the dining room. That's three whole rooms. One for every decade. First you found the bedroom. That is I assume you did. It's hard to tell when a wife sleeps separately from her husband.”

BLACK FEMINISTS

Well, there is a difference between a woman and a lady, and I know you know which one I am.

I will never again trust my life, my future, to the whims of men, in companies or out. Never again, will their judgment have anything to do with what I think I can do. That was the wonderful liberation of being divorced and having children. I did not mind failure, ever, but I minded thinking that someone male knew better. Before that, all the men I knew did know better, they really did. My father and teachers were smart people who knew better.

“When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you.”

“I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

It's not so much that women write differently from men, but that black women write differently from white women. Black men don't write very differently from white men.

Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me?

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man.

Milkman had stretched his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years. Hagar was thirty-six—and nervous.

He wanted to go solo.

“He is my home in this world.”

“And I am his,” said Ruth.

“And he wouldn’t give a pile of swan shit for either one of you.”

I merged those two words, black and feminist, because I was surrounded by black women who were very tough and who always assumed they had to work and rear children and manage homes.

Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t ever learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women.

“I know all about plants. They like women, you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they’re supposed to.”

Aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and adventure. They don’t see conflicts in certain areas as do white women.

I don’t subscribe to patriarchy, and I don’t think it should be substituted with matriarchy.

WHITE FEMINISTS

You need a whole community to raise a child? I have raised two children, alone.

All the women I knew did nine or ten things at one time.... I wouldn’t say it’s not hard, but why wouldn’t it be. All important things are hard.

The body is ready to have babies. Nature wants it done then, when the body can handle it, not after 40, when the income can handle it.

She would also have a chance to ask the American Black herself whether it was really so that American women killed their babies with their fingernails.

To find out the truth about how dreams die, one should never take the word of the dreamer.

Why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?

When a man angers you, he conquers you.

You are up to your kneecaps in rot.

Straight ahead they marched, shamelessly single-minded, for soldier ants have no time for dreaming. Almost all of them are women and there is so much to do—the work is literally endless. So many to be born and fed, then found and buried. There is no time for dreaming. The life of their world requires organization so tight and sacrifice so complete there is little need for males and they are seldom produced. When they are needed, it is deliberately done by the queen who surmises, by some four-million-year-old magic she is heiress to, that it is time. So she urges a sperm from the private womb where they were placed when she had her one, first and last copulation. Once in life, this little Amazon trembled in the air waiting for a male to mount her. And when he did, when he joined a cloud of others one evening just before a summer storm, joined colonies from all over the world gathered for the marriage flight, he knew at last what his wings were for. Frenzied, he flied into the humming cloud to fight gravity and time in order to do, just once, the single thing he was born for. Then he drops dead.... Soldier ants do not have time for dreaming. They are women and have much to do.

Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties.

You wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.

LOVE

I didn't fall in love, I rose in it.

Love is never any better than the lover.

Someone whose touch is a reassurance, not an affront or a nuisance.

It is sheer good fortune to miss somebody long before they leave you.

Lonely was much better than alone.

Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all.

Can't we be gentle first, and honest later?

And you walked past me saying, "I'll be back for my things." And you did but you left your tie.

[Love] is easily the most empty cliché, the most useless word, and at the same time the most powerful human emotion—because hatred is involved in it, too.

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion.

It's just so uninteresting to live without love. Life has no risk. Love just seems to make life not just livable, but a gallant, gallant event.

Do they still call it infatuation? That magic ax that chops away the world in one blow, leaving only the couple standing there trembling? Whatever they call it, it leaps over anything...rules the ground wherever it walks, from a mansion to a swamp, and its selfishness is its beauty.... People with no imagination feed it with sex—the clown of love. They don't know the real kinds, the better kinds, where losses are cut and everybody benefits. It takes a certain intelligence to love like that—softly, without props.

Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy you are a fool. If you think it is natural you are blind. It is a learned application without reason or motive except that it is God.

Couples that enter the sacrament of marriage and are not prepared to go the distance or are not willing to get right with the real love of God cannot thrive.

They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man.

Did you ever see the way the clouds love a mountain? They circle all around it; sometimes you can't even see the mountain for the clouds. But you know what? You go up top and what do you see? His head. The clouds never cover the head. His head pokes through, because the clouds let him; they don't wrap him up. They let him keep his head up high, free, with nothing to hide him or bind him. You can't own a human being. You can't lose what you don't own.

For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one.

WRITING

Language alone is meditation.

I wrote my first novel because I wanted to read it.

I get angry about things, then go on and work.

Anger...it's a paralyzing emotion...you can't get anything done.

I think some aspects of writing can be taught. Obviously, you can't teach vision or talent.

You have to be able to read what you write critically. And with distance.

I can't explain inspiration. A writer is either compelled to write or not. And if I waited for inspiration I wouldn't really be a writer.

I write the way women have babies. You don't know it's going to be like that. If you did, there's no way you would go through with it.

I don't write autobiographically. First of all, I'm not interested in real-life people as subjects for fiction—including myself.

I would solve a lot of literary problems just thinking about a character in the subway.

I often think about rewriting or continuing the lives of particular characters in subsequent books, but I have found that it's a kind of trap because you never really go on to another topic.

The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power.

Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try....tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light. Don't tell us what to believe.

When I write, I don't translate for white readers.... Dostoevski wrote for a Russian audience, but we're able to read him. If I'm specific, and I don't overexplain, then anyone can overhear me.

I want to write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people—people who can't be faked, people who don't need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria.

MODERNISM

Sometimes Joyce is hilarious. I read *Finnegans Wake* after graduate school and I had the great good fortune of reading it without any help.... I laughed constantly.

There are some writers without whom certain stories would never have been written.... Hemingway is in that category, Flannery O'Connor. Faulkner, Fitzgerald... I have been revealing how white writers imagine black people, and some of them are brilliant at it. Faulkner was brilliant at it. Hemingway did it poorly in places and brilliantly elsewhere.... I don't care if Faulkner is a racist or not; I don't personally care but I am fascinated by what it means to write like this.... Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom!* spends the entire book tracing race and you can't find it. No one can see it, even the character who *is* black can't see it.... In his last book, *The Garden of Eden*, Hemingway's heroine is getting blacker and blacker. The woman who is going mad tells her husband, I want to be your little African queen. The novel gets its charge that way: Her white white hair and her black, black skin....

One has to work very carefully with what is in between the words. What is not said. Which is measure, which is rhythm, and so on. So, it is what you don't write that frequently gives what you do write its power. [Compare the "iceberg principle" of Hemingway]

In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it.

There's a difference between writing for a living and writing for life. If you write for a living, you make enormous compromises.... If you write for life, you'll work hard; you'll do what's honest, not what pays.

For me, art is the restoration of order. It may discuss all sort of terrible things, but there must be satisfaction at the end. A little bit of hunger, but also satisfaction.

Language can never "pin down" slavery... Its force, its felicity, is in its reach toward the ineffable.

I try to give some credibility to all sorts of voices, each of which is profoundly different. Because what strikes me about African-American culture *is* its variety.

HER WORKS

I published a book called *The Bluest Eye* [1970]. I didn't tell them [her employer Random House] about it. They didn't know until they read the review in *The New York Times*.

To have heterosexual women who are friends, who are talking only about themselves to each other, seemed to me a very radical thing when *Sula* was published in 1973...but it is hardly radical now.

Other books look like spirals, like *Sula*. [Modernism]

It was by the time I was writing *Song of Solomon* [1977], the third book, that I began to think that this was the central part of my life. Not to say that other women haven't said it all along, but for a woman to say, I am a writer, is difficult.... Pilate...doesn't speak very much. She has this long conversation with the two boys and every now and then she'll say something, but she doesn't have the dialogue the other people have. I had to do that, otherwise she was going to overwhelm everybody.... It's *my* book; it's not called "Pilate."

I was having some difficulty describing a scene in *Song of Solomon*...of a man running away from some obligations and himself. I used an Edvard Munch painting [Expressionism] almost literally. He is walking and there is nobody on his side of the street. Everybody is on the other side.

There are three or four [controlling images] in *Song of Solomon*. I knew that I wanted it to be painterly, and I wanted the opening to be red, white, and blue. I also knew that in some sense he would have to "fly." In *Song of Solomon* it was the first time that I had written about a man who was the central, the driving engine of the narrative; I was a little unsure about my ability to feel comfortable inside him.

It was probably not until after I wrote *Song of Solomon* that I got to feeling secure enough to experience what it meant to be thrifty with images and language and so on.

In *Jazz*, just as I did before with *The Bluest Eye*, I put the whole plot on the first page.... This playful aspect of *Jazz* may well cause a great deal of dissatisfaction in readers who just want the melody, who want to know what happened, who did it and why. But the jazzlike structure wasn't a secondary thing for me—it was the *raison d'être* of the book. The process of trial and error by which the narrator revealed the plot was as important and exciting to me as telling the story.

I was very conscious in writing *Jazz* [1992] of trying to blend that which is contrived and artificial with improvisation. I thought of myself as like the jazz musician.... It was the most intricate thing I had done, though I wanted to tell a very simple story about people who do not know that they are living in the jazz age and to never use the word.

CRITICS

I'm not entangled in shaping my work according to other people's views of how I should have done it.

The unflattering reviews are painful for short periods of time; the badly written ones are deeply, deeply insulting. That reviewer took no time to really read the book.

I'm very much interested in how African-American literature is perceived in this country, and written about, and viewed. It's been a long, hard struggle, and there's a lot of work yet to be done. I'm especially interested in how women's fiction is reviewed and understood. And the best way to do that is to read my own reviews.

OTHER WRITERS

You marvel at the economy and this choice of words.... After Sylvia Plath, what can you say?

Faulkner wrote what I suppose could be called regional literature and had it published all over the world. That's what I wish to do.

This is the time for every artist in every genre to do what he or she does loudly and consistently. It doesn't matter to me what your position is. You've got to keep asserting the complexity and the originality of life, and the multiplicity of it, and the facets of it. This is about being a complex human being in the world, not about finding a villain.

NOBEL PRIZE (1993)

I was thrilled that my mother is still alive and can share this with me.

The Nobel Prize is the best thing that can happen to a writer in terms of how it affects your contracts, the publishers, and the seriousness with which your work is taken. On the other hand, it does interfere with your private life, or it can if you let it, and it has zero effect on the writing. It doesn't help you write better and if you let it, it will intimidate you about future projects.

ADVICE

Make a difference about something other than yourselves.

Love your heart. For this is the prize.

EXISTENTIALISM

Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.

TRANSCENDENCE

If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.

"How come it can't fly no better than a chicken?"

"Too much tail. All that jewelry weights it down. Like vanity."

You have to earn God. You have to practice God. You have to think God—carefully. And if you are a good and diligent student you may secure the right to show love. Love is not a gift. It is a diploma.

"If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more."

RELIGION

That space for me is African-American; it could be Catholic, it could be Midwestern. I'm those things too, and they are all important.

DEATH

They dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.

We die. That may be the meaning of life.

“You just can’t fly on off and leave a body.”

Some of these quotations are excerpted from
The Paris Review Interviews II
“Toni Morrison, *The Art of Fiction*” (1993)
(Picador, 2007)

