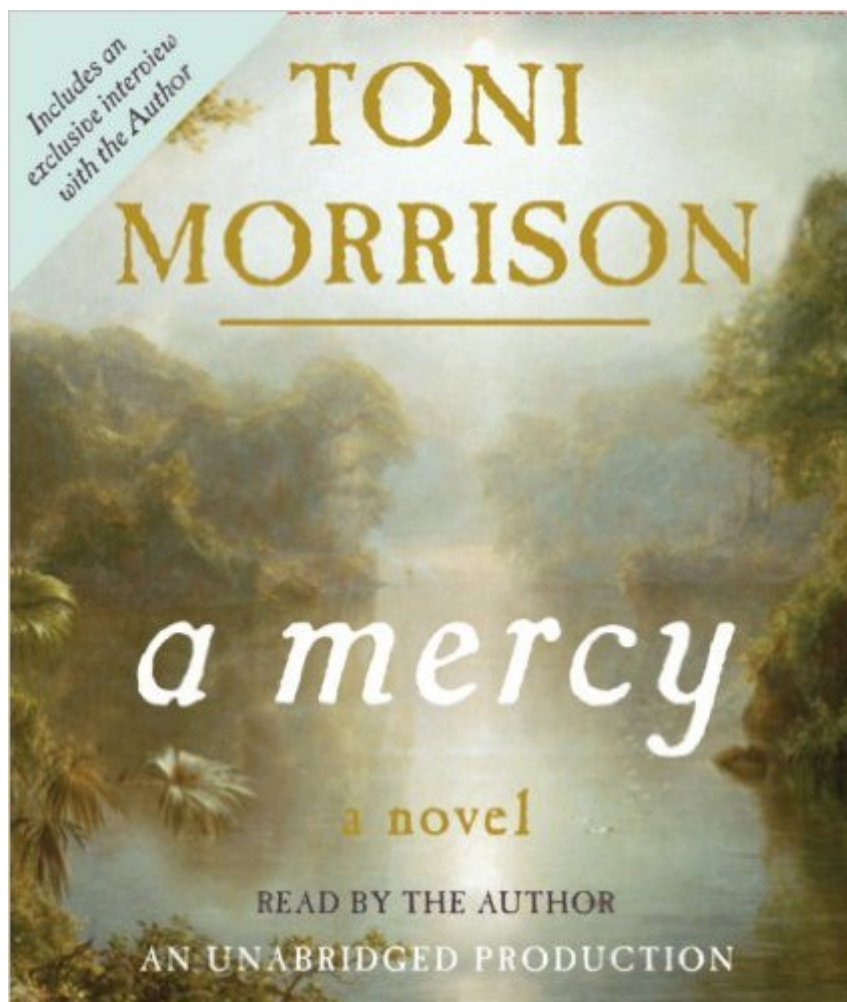


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A Mercy



Synopsis

In the 1680s the slave trade was still in its infancy. In the Americas, virulent religious and class divisions, prejudice and oppression were rife, providing the fertile soil in which slavery and race hatred were planted and took root. Jacob is an Anglo-Dutch trader and adventurer, with a small holding in the harsh north. Despite his distaste for dealing in flesh, he takes a small slave girl in part payment for a bad debt from a plantation owner in Catholic Maryland. This is Florens, with the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady. Florens looks for love, first from Lina, an older servant woman at her new master's house, but later from a handsome blacksmith, an African, never enslaved. There are other voices: Lina, whose tribe was decimated by smallpox; their mistress, Rebekka, herself a victim of religious intolerance back in England; Sorrow, a strange girl who spent her early years at sea; and finally the devastating voice of Florens's mother. A Mercy reveals what lies beneath the surface of slavery. But at its heart it is the ambivalent, disturbing story of a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her, and of a daughter who may never exorcise that abandonment. Acts of mercy may have unforeseen consequences.

Book Information

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Authors, A-Z > (M) > Morrison, Toni #19 in Books > Books on CD > Literature & Fiction > Short Stories #236 in Books > Books on CD > Literature & Fiction > Unabridged

Customer Reviews

Finally a novel that lives up to the publisher's hype. So much is promised with each new book, but this is truly a fine work. I am unable to judge whether this is great literature, but it satisfied me on many levels. That is a rare occurrence for a piece of writing. I have given five stars to prior reviews, but this is the finest writing that I have yet reviewed for. The novel reads quickly. You could finish it in a few hours if you were so inclined. I preferred to slow down and savor the contents. I will return

this book again, after giving it a season on my shelf. It will never go to the library donation pile in my lifetime! Although I may be a bibliophile, in the extreme I would preserve only a few (hundred) books. This will be one of them. Morrison uses shifting points of view to bring this short novel to life. The story unfolds through the eyes of each major character, although only one, Florens, speaks in the first person. Her voice is entirely in a vernacular, lacking conventional punctuation and sentence structure. The first few pages are moderately difficult to understand, but it becomes steadily more intelligible as you progress. The varied points of view remind me of *The Sound and the Fury*, especially in the opening chapter. But Florens is no Benjy, and Morrison's narrative bears only a superficial resemblance to Faulkner's. Although there is plenty of sorrow, and broken relationships all around, there is not a tone of hopeless cynicism. I went back to read the first chapter several times, discovering more each time. You cannot understand some things at first. For example: "If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and sure enough that night I see a minha mae standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron."

(4.5 stars) Continuing themes that she has been developing since the start of her career, Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison creates an intense and involving philosophical, Biblical, and feminist novel set in the Atlantic colonies between 1682 and 1690. Her impressionistic story traces slavery from its early roots, using unique voices--African, Native American, and white--while moving back and forth in time. The primary speaker is Florens, a 16-year-old African slave, who tells the reader at the outset that this is a confession, "full of curiosities," and that she has committed a bloody, once-in-a-lifetime crime. In a flashback to 1682, we learn that when Florens was only eight years old, her mother suggested to the Maryland planter who owned the family, that Florens be given to New York farmer Jacob Vaark to settle a debt. Florens never understands why she was abandoned by her mother. Florens lives and works for the next eight years on Vaark's rural New York farm. Lina, a Native American, who works with her, tells in a parallel narrative how she became one of a handful of survivors of a plague that killed her tribe. Vaark's wife Rebekkah describes leaving England for New York to be married to a man she has never seen. The deaths of their subsequent children are devastating, and Vaark is hoping that eight-year-old Florens will help alleviate Rebekkah's loneliness. Vaark, himself an orphan and poorhouse survivor, describes his journeys from New York to Maryland and Virginia, commenting on the role of religion in the culture of the different colonies, along with their attitudes toward slavery. All these characters are bereft of their roots, struggling to survive in an alien environment filled with danger and disease.

In this short, lyrical and gripping novel, Toni Morrison has undertaken, once again, to explore her favorite subject: the evils of slavery. Written in prose so lovely and mesmerizing that it reminded me of her "Sula", also a short novel, published thirty-five years ago, "A Mercy" was a great joy to read. Jacob Vaark, a Dutch-born farmer and trader, and Rebekka, his English wife own a tobacco plantation. Even though Jacob owned a few slaves, he did so only as a necessity to run his homestead. Jacob is sympathetic towards orphans and waifs because he himself was parentless at a young age, and had to fend for himself on the streets running small errands. At the heart of the novel is an act of mercy. When Jacob Vaark travels to Maryland to collect debt from a tobacco plantation owner named Senor D'Ortega, he finds out that Senor is broke and has no money to pay off the debt. Senor offers Jacob a thin black girl named Florens, a daughter of one of his slaves, as a partial payment of the debt. Florens is smart, and she can read and write also. Florens' mother senses that Jacob is more kind-hearted than her master, and so pleads with Senor to give Florens to Jacob. Her hope is that Florens would have a better life in Jacob's estate. Florens's mother considers this an act of mercy, but the irony is that Florens considers it abandonment. Several sympathetic characters make the novel interesting and hold a reader's attention. Lina (Messalina), a native American, was sold to Jacob by the Presbyterians who had rescued and saved her. Sorrow, a sea captain's daughter, survives a ship wreck, but ends up in Jacob's plantation as a slave. Willard and Scully are indentured servants who are sent to work at Jacob's plantation by their contract holders.

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