Toni Morrison Biography
By Biography.com Editors and A&E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff

Synopsis: Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. Her novels are known for their massive, sweeping themes, vivid dialogue and richly detailed African-American characters. Morrison has won nearly every book prize possible.

Background And Education

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford, Toni Morrison was the second oldest of four children. Her father, George Wofford held several jobs at once to support the family. Her mother, Ramah, was a housekeeper. Morrison later credited her parents with instilling in her a love of reading, music and storytelling.

Morrison did not become fully aware of racial tensions until she was in her teens. "When I was in first grade, nobody thought I was inferior. I was the only black in the class and the only child who could read," she later told a reporter from The New York Times. Dedicated to her studies, Morrison took Latin in school and read many great works of European literature, and she graduated from Lorain High School with honors in 1949.

At Howard University, Morrison continued to pursue her interest in literature. After graduating from Howard in 1953, Morrison continued her education at Cornell University. She then moved to the Lone Star State to teach English at Texas Southern University.

Mother And Random House Editor

In 1957, she met Harold Morrison, an architect originally from Jamaica. The couple got married in 1958 and welcomed their first child, Harold, in 1961. After the birth of her son, Morrison began working on her first novel.

In 1963, Morrison's husband decided to move back to Jamaica. At the time, she was expecting the couple's second child. She moved back home to Ohio to live with her family before the birth of her son, Slade, in 1964. The following year, she moved with her sons to Syracuse, New York, where she worked for a textbook publisher.

Literary Star

Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye, was published in 1970. It tells the story of a young African-American girl who believes her incredibly difficult life would be better if only she had blue eyes. The book received warm reviews but didn't sell well. Morrison continued to explore the African-American experience in her work. Her next novel, Sula...
(1973), explores good and evil through the friendship of two women who grew up together. The work was nominated for the American Book Award.

_Song of Solomon_ (1977) follows the journey of Milkman Dead, a Midwestern city dweller. He attempts to make sense of his family roots and the sometimes harsh truths of his world.

**Pulitzer For "Beloved"
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Soon, Morrison was a rising star in the literature world. In 1987, she completed one of her greatest works, _Beloved_. Main character, Sethe, a former slave, is haunted by her decision to kill her children rather than see them become slaves. Three of her children survived, but her infant daughter died at her hand. Yet Sethe's daughter returns as a living person who becomes a constant presence in her home. For this work, Morrison won several awards, including the famed Pulitzer Prize. Ten years later, in 1998, the book was turned into a movie starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover.

**Branching Out
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Morrison became a professor at Princeton University in 1989, and continued to produce great works. She received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American woman to be selected for the award.

Morrison later branched out into children's books, writing four in a joint effort with her son, Slade.

Her next novel, _Love_ (2003), divides its story between the past and present. Bill Cosey, a wealthy businessman, is the central figure in the book. A critic for Publisher's Weekly praised the work, saying that "Morrison has crafted a gorgeous novel whose mysteries are gradually unearthed."

**Writing For An Opera And Supporting Free Speech
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In 2006, the New York Times Book Review named _Beloved_ the best novel of the past 25 years. Morrison continued to explore new art forms, writing the libretto, or lyrics, for the opera _Margaret Garner_.

Morrison traveled back to the early days of American history for her next novel, _A Mercy_. Once again, a woman who is both a slave and a mother must make a terrible choice regarding her child. It won numerous awards and, as a critic from the Washington Post described it, the novel is a mix "of mystery, history and longing."

In October 2009, one of Morrison's books was banned at a Michigan high school. Afterward, she became outspoken about fighting censorship and the importance of free
speech. "Unwritten novels, poems whispered or swallowed for fear of being overheard by the wrong people, unstaged plays, canceled films — that thought is a nightmare. As though a whole universe is being described in invisible ink," Morrison said at a conference for free speech.

"Home" And "God Help The Child"

Now in her 80s, Morrison continues to be one of literature's great storytellers. Her novel *Home*, published in 2012, follows a man named Frank who fought in the Korean War. He suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that hurts his ability to relate to others.

While writing the novel, Morrison experienced a great personal loss. Her son, Slade, an artist, died in December 2010.

In 2012, Morrison also collaborated on a new opera production, inspired by William Shakespeare's *Othello*, called *Desdemona*. The opera focused on the relationship between Othello's wife, Desdemona, and her African nurse, Barbary, and it premiered in London in the summer of 2012.

In 2015, Morrison published her next novel, *God Help the Child*. The layered story focuses on the experiences of the character, Bride — a young, dark-skinned black woman who works in the beauty industry while dealing with the rejections of her past.

Toni Morrison Biography Questions

1. Which section of the article BEST explains that Morrison has continued to write about a wide range of topics despite personal struggles?  
   A "Mother And Random House Editor"  
   B “Literary Star”  
   C “Branching Out”  
   D “Home And God Help The Child”

2. Read the section “Background And Education.” What purpose does it serve in developing the main idea of the article?  
   A It suggests that many of the topics in Morrison’s works were established in her childhood.  
   B It establishes Morrison’s early confidence and abilities as a reader and writer.  
   C It introduces Morrison’s close relationship with her parents.  
   D It demonstrates the differences between Morrison’s childhood and adulthood.
3. Why does the author include the section “Pulitzer For Beloved”?
   A to note the turning point in recognition for Morrison’s work
   B to explain what it was about the plot that made it so popular
   C to outline where Morrison found inspiration for her novels
   D to suggest that the novel was more interesting than her other works

4. Which sentence from the section “Background And Education” explains what developed Morrison’s love for literature.
   A Her father, George Wofford held several jobs at once to support the family.
   B Morrison later credited her parents with instilling in her a love of reading, music and storytelling.
   C Dedicated to her studies, Morrison took Latin in school and read many great works of European literature, and she graduated from Lorain High School with honors in 1949.
   D After graduating from Howard in 1953, Morrison continued her education at Cornell University.

Read the following paragraph.
Morrison became a professor at Princeton University in 1989, and continued to produce great works. She received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American woman to be selected for the award.

5. How does this paragraph help develop the main ideas of the article?
   A It demonstrates where Morrison developed her love of writing.
   B It shows that many people learned from Morrison.
   C It suggests that Morrison has made a lot of money from her writing.
   D It explains that Morrison has been well-respected for her literary skill.

6. In the closing paragraphs of the article, the author—
   A describes the public response to Morrison’s most recent works of literature.
   B suggests that the death of Morrison’s son has negatively impacted her work.
   C explains that Morrison continues to publish works despite old age and personal loss.
   D develops the idea that Morrison will always be remembered for her awards.
7. Which description of one of Morrison’s novels helps the reader understand that her works were popular?

A. Morrison’s first novel, "The Bluest Eye," was published in 1970. It tells the story of a young African-American girl who believes her incredibly difficult life would be better if only she had blue eyes.

B. "Song of Solomon" (1977) follows the journey of Milkman Dead, a Midwestern city dweller. He attempts to make sense of his family roots and the sometimes harsh truths of his world.

C. For this work, Morrison won several awards, including the famed Pulitzer Prize. Ten years later, in 1998, the book was turned into a movie starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover.

D. Her next novel, "Love" (2003), divides its story between the past and present. Bill Cosey, a wealthy businessman, is the central figure in the book.

8. Which details BEST explain that Morrison has had important achievements in her career?

A. Soon, Morrison was a rising star in the literature world. In 1987, she completed one of her greatest works, "Beloved."

B. Morrison became professor at Princeton University in 1989. She received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. She was the first African-American woman to be selected for the award.

C. Morrison continued to try new ways of writing. She wrote the words for an opera called Margaret Garner.

D. Morrison continues to be one of literature’s great storytellers. Her book “Home”, published in 2012, follows a soldier named Frank. After going to war, he suffers mental problems and has trouble relating to other people.

9. What is the purpose of the selection “Home And God Help The Child”?

A. to explain that Morrison’s career is continuing

B. to explain why Morrison writes the stories she does

C. to describe how Morrison’s son died.

D. to describe who Morrison thinks will like her new books.

10. Which is the organizational pattern of the article?

A. process

B. compare/contrast

C. chronological order

D. cause/effect