

Song of Solomon *by* Toni Morrison



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Macon Dead, Jr., called Milkman, son of the richest Negro in town, moves from childhood into early manhood, searching, among the disparate, mysterious members of his family, for his life and reality



Reviews of the *Song of Solomon* *by* Toni Morrison

Macill

AS A BROTHER TO ME: 'SONG OF SOLOMON' BY TONI MORRISON

[NOTE: This review may contain plot spoilers.]

1.
'Song of Solomon' (1977) is Toni Morrison's third novel, and it's the one that put her on the literary map, winning the National Book Critics award, getting chosen for Oprah's book club, and inspiring at least two collections of critical essays and the name of a punk-rock band. Written following the death of Morrison's father, it is her first book to feature male leading characters. The first part of the book is set in an unnamed city in Michigan. The part of the city called 'Southside' - i.e. away

from the desirable lakefront property to the north - is implied to be the black neighborhood. (The geography is somewhat ambiguous, as some of the landmarks named in Chapter 1 are consistent with Morrison's native Ohio.) And like Pecola Breedlove in 'The Bluest Eye', its chief protagonist, Milkman Dead, is born in the same year as Morrison herself - in fact, one day after TM's own birth date. The main action of the story takes place in September 1963, in the days following the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama.

'Song of Solomon' is a family drama; unlike its predecessors, all of the principal characters of 'Song of Solomon' - with the seeming exception of Guitar Bains - are connected with a single family, the Dead family, by blood or marriage.

Macon III "Milkman" Dead has problems. To begin with, well, there's that nickname. He's not sure how he got it, and he's pretty sure he doesn't want to know. His father, the elder Macon, doesn't know either, but thinks it sounds "dirty, intimate, and hot", and correctly suspects that it has some connection to Milkman's mother, Ruth. Enough said, then.

His girlfriend (who's also his cousin, NTTAWWT) is hot, but clingy. When he dumps her (in a note, with which he thoughtfully includes a tip) she goes all crazy and tries to kill him. And his best friend has fallen in with some rather strange characters. Things just don't seem to be going his way. So when he gets word of a lost family fortune - a bag of gold buried somewhere in Virginia - Milkman sees his chance to leave home in search of freedom.

2.

The story centers around the legacy of the first Macon Dead, who was murdered by racists for the Virginia farm he had worked so hard to build. His two orphaned children (their mother died in childbirth), Pilate and the second Macon Dead (Milkman's future father) escape. The brother and sister remain close until a dispute over their inheritance - a bag of gold, illegal to possess in the early 1930s - leads to their parting.

By 1963, Macon II has raised three children, and has achieved financial success, and a measure of power in the black community, on his own. His two daughters, now both over 40, remain unmarried and still live at home with their much younger brother. Macon still harbors hatred toward Pilate (lifelong sibling grudges are never pretty) and rules his house with an iron fist. Milkman's first meeting with his aunt Pilate - against Macon's strict orders - led to his passionate romantic involvement with Pilate's granddaughter and his friendship with Guitar, both of whom are a few years older than Milkman himself.

Guitar Bains will play a central role in the story, and yet we are given remarkably little detail about his background. We learn that he lost his father at the age of 4 to a sawmill accident (which, in a grotesque detail, severed his body in half along the sagittal plane), and that he acquired a lifelong aversion to sweets when the mill owner callously handed out candies at his father's funeral. Eventually, Guitar will fall in with a group known as the Seven Days, whose other members include Robert B. Smith (whose suicide begins the book) and Porter (whose clandestine affair with Milkman's sister Corinthians is cut short after Milkman blows the whistle to Macon). The Seven Days are dedicated to avenging white violence against blacks, and the Birmingham killings give new urgency to their need for operational funds.

It is hinted (pp. 32 - 33) that Macon Dead enjoyed extramarital liaisons with "a slack or lonely female tenant" prior to Milkman's birth; these encounters could have included Guitar's mother prior to her disappearance (p. 21). If that's the case, then it is not impossible that Macon is in fact the natural father of Guitar. This would make Milkman and Guitar brothers, for as Reba pointedly observes (p.

44), siblings may share a single parent. If, as Pilate asserts to Milkman's confusion (p. 38), there are "three Deads alive", this would make Guitar the third Dead, and the reference to the two as "brother[s]" at the end of the book is not a figure of speech.

Milkman and Guitar have different visions of life, and this is clearly shown by their different visions of what the gold will bring them: Milkman sees wealth as the ticket to comfort, independence, and a life away from his family and home; Guitar sees the gold as a means to further the goals of the Seven Days.

3.
Milkman's struggle began before his birth. When Ruth's father, Dr. Foster, took ill, Macon murdered his father-in-law by destroying his medicine; Lena and Corinthians were toddlers at the time. Ruth and Macon stopped having marital relations after that, but as the years passed, Ruth, desperate for affection and for a third child, went to Macon's sister Pilate - a healer - for help. In short order, the youngest Macon Dead, "Milkman", was conceived.

When he learned of his wife's pregnancy, the enraged Macon tried to force Ruth to abort her child, resorting to various strategies including knitting needles. But these attempts failed, and Milkman came into the world alive. It's possible that a subconscious, prenatal memory of those knitting needles informs the wording of Milkman's obscene suggestion to Hagar (p. 130) regarding the knife she is holding.

One of the themes running through 'Song of Solomon' is the debilitating effect of a life of ease and comfort. The city-bred Milkman is at a distinct disadvantage in both the physical and the human terrain of rural Virginia. Corinthians, whose elite education rendered her "unfit for work" and alienated most of the eligible black men in the community, is destroyed when her desperate affair with Porter is put to an end. And from the ghostlike figure of Circe we learn that Mrs. Butler, the white lady who inherited the stolen Macon Dead property, took her own life when the money ran out - preferring death to the menial work of keeping up the estate.

4.
The shadowy, driven figure of Guitar accompanies Milkman throughout the book, as friend, confidant, mentor, and finally assassin. The novel's narrative POV is tightly focused on Milkman, and Guitar appears only twice in Milkman's absence: first, as one of the unnamed children at #3 Fifteenth Street (then being cared for by their grandmother, Mrs. Bains, following the mother's recent abandonment - p. 21), and again in Chapter 13, where he attempts to comfort Hagar after her rejection by Milkman.

Guitar's early rejection of sweets sets the pattern for his response to violence and oppression. From the beginning, he is motivated by a sense of purpose and despises material comforts. At an early age, he internalizes his grandmother's declaration that "a n****r in business is a terrible thing to see" (p. 22) - a reference to Macon Dead, and to the power that Macon holds over her and much of the community as a property owner. Later, Guitar makes it clear to Milkman that he is willing to overlook, but not to forget, the "sins" of Milkman's father (p. 57, p. 102).

Guitar repeatedly chides Milkman for being naive about white racism (pp. 82 - 88) and for generally lacking seriousness (p. 104). So it's not too surprising when we learn about his induction into the Seven Days, a group dedicated to violent reprisals against whites:

<i>'But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites, and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they

execute him in a similar manner if they can.'</i>

Joining the Seven Days gives Guitar the sense of meaning and purpose he craves. (In another place and time, it's not difficult to imagine him joining a jihadist group.) He adopts a more disciplined, spartan lifestyle, giving up drinking and smoking. He must turn himself into an efficient killing machine.

And yet it's Guitar who offers words of wisdom and comfort to the devastated Hagar (p. 306). Always more of a loner by nature than Milkman, he understands that "you can't own a human being" and he understands the dangers of overly-enmeshed love. He also understands that Hagar is profoundly unlike her mother and her grandmother (both single mothers) and that being raised without the extended family of "a chous of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins ... and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her" has taken a terrible toll on her.

Of Guitar's love life we are told very little; he seems to find the solitary lifestyle of the Seven Days congenial. Only on p. 307 is there a hint of a romance in his past:

<i>"But I did latch on. Once. ... But I never wanted to kill her. Him, yeah. But not her."</i>

5.

Anyone who grew up in a dysfunctional family should read 'Song of Solomon'. Milkman's struggle for independence from his own smothering family of origin is also his journey towards the discovery of his larger family and heritage. In struggling with his parents (sometimes literally), he comes to understand their world and the forces that shaped them, and he learns to accept them for who they are, with their faults and their strengths.

In his relationship with Guitar, Milkman is forced to confront his own lack of purpose. In tramping through the swamps and hunting with the black rednecks of Virginia, he confronts his own weakness and pettiness. Having set out to find gold, Milkman ends up losing gold instead (his gold watch, p. 325), and so, like Frodo, finds that his purpose was to lose a treasure and not to find one.

'Song of Solomon' ends (as will Morrison's 10th novel, 'Home') with a reburial - and the final showdown between Guitar and Milkman, which costs Pilate her life. What he gains instead is the capacity to sacrifice, and the readiness to sacrifice even his own life itself. Having discovered the wonderful secret of his family - the legend of the flying African children - he chooses, not to escape, but to struggle for life itself with his brother.

Sha

My two stars have nothing to do with the content of this novel, which is probably the most important American work of fiction of the second half of the twentieth century. Others praise it cogently, so I refer readers to their reviews.

But the Kindle edition is full of inexcusable mistakes. I'm around 150 pages into it and have already found too many. The most egregious so far appears on page 154 (location 2723), where Guitar says to Milkman, "I suppose you know that white people from time to time, and most folks shake their heads and say, 'Eh, eh, eh, ain't that a shame?'" Well, as it turns out, the sentence ought to read "I suppose you know that white people KILL BLACK PEOPLE from time to time. . . ." (my emphasis).

This kind of sloppiness is inexcusable. I wouldn't buy this edition until you learn that it's been corrected. How you're supposed to know so is perhaps murky. Just buy the print edition.

Bolv

Song of Solomon takes place in a small African American community that, as in so many of

Morrison's books, seems rarely to interact with the surrounding white population. And yet the people themselves have been, since the days of slavery, defined by the white population, beginning with a mistake on a form that literally gives one family's name as Dead.

On a micro level it is a coming-of-age story of one young man, Milkman Dead, in the 50's, in the age of Emmet Till, of Rosa Parks, of so much that might define the later years of young men coming of age at that time. On the macro level, it is a search for a lost identity, for stolen names, for definition of who a people are and who they came from.

"He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Book Bank, on Darling Street, in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, vents, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood around and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky Rover, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Do, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Leadbelly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim the Devil, ..."

There is much here that is reminiscent of Stephen St. Vincent Benet's American Names, and there would be even more were it similar in other ways. But Benet's names are given by people who know their own names, who take on or bestow others in colorful ways of their own making. They may, in some cases, be denying a heritage, running from the law, or just earning a nickname the way people do. I have the feeling that in the case of these black men, their names are more than that. They are names they have somehow earned, and have a legitimacy to them that the names on their birth certificates don't have. Because who knows where those names came from. They certainly didn't come from the land of their forefathers. And they didn't originate in pride.

As always, Morrison's writing is a little uncomfortable for white folks, especially white folks like me who grew up around the same time as Milkman Dead, knowing next to nothing about the black community that existed a few short blocks from my house in Decatur, Illinois. It may even be uncomfortable for black folks, but I can't speak to that. I just know that the reality of our past is often an uncomfortable place to visit, no matter what color we are.

Jwalexte

I read this book along side my high school senior granddaughter. Her advanced English class was required to read it. I understand why. As a retired high school librarian, I must first admit it would have never been allowed in our library. Today is quite different. Its greatest value is all the controversial issues (which aren't new issues--just brought to light) that challenge students to discover another culture. A very teachable choice of literature.

Gom

Great, but a bit too brutal for me; I wasn't able to finish it this time around as I have not been able to finish, "The Bluest Eye, the last time I read it. But Toni Morrison captures emotional tones and atmospheres and many other details that give great verisimilitude and deep understanding of the characters she is portraying although, as I said before, a lot of it is a bit too brutal for me. Blessed be!

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