

Open Forum 3

Web Site Transcript

Chapter 5

A = Sherrie

B = Kim

C = Pablo

A: Thanks for letting us have our book club meeting at your house, Kim.

B: No problem, Sherrie! I'm glad you could all make it. Coffee, anyone? Pablo?

C: Yes please, Kim. Great choice of book this month!

B: You liked it?

C: Absolutely! I'd never read anything by Toni Morrison before. Actually, I'd never even heard of her. Who is she?

A: I'm surprised you don't know her, Pablo. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in...let me see...1993.

B: I also know that she's probably the most famous living African American novelist. We use a lot of her books at the university where I teach. The students like writing about her. That's how I discovered Morrison. I wrote my senior thesis about her—you know, the major essay you sometimes have to write at the end of an undergraduate degree.

C: What did you write about, Kim?

B: Mostly about this book that we read, *Beloved*. But I was also really interested in her Nobel Prize. It was an unusual choice for the committee—an African American woman. But they felt Morrison had played an important role in writing the history of black Americans. Not all her books are about slavery, like *Beloved*, but they're all about the effects of history on individual people. It's a powerful idea.

A: I see you what you mean in *Beloved*. The main character, Sethe, is literally haunted by her history.

C: That's a great way to say it, Sherrie. Do you mean that Sethe thinks she sees ghosts? That's why she's haunted?

A: Actually, I was a bit confused by the story. Can we perhaps talk about the plot first? Sethe is an escaped black slave, right?

B: Yes, that's right. She was a slave in Kentucky, and then she escaped to the north, to Ohio, with her child. The main plot of the book takes place in 1873 after the end of slavery in the south of the U.S.

A: Okay, but aren't there really two stories in this book?

B: Yes, there are. The second story happened twenty years earlier, when Sethe was still a slave in Kentucky. That story describes how she escaped from her slave owner.

A: Got it. But I was still confused about how many children she has. Can one of you help me out?

B: She has four children in total. Two sons, Howard and Bulgar; a daughter, Denver, who she's living with in the Ohio part of the story; and another daughter who was older than Denver, but died. She didn't just die, though, Sethe killed her.

A: Killed her own daughter? Oh, I remember now. After she first escaped, her owner tried to bring her and her children back as slaves. And to stop him from getting that one child, she actually killed her.

B: Exactly. But she hadn't given that daughter a name, and when she buried the baby, she just had the word "Beloved" written on the gravestone.

C: So, who is the character called Beloved?

A: Wait, that's the mysterious girl who shows up outside Sethe's house in 1873?

C: Yeah. Is she the ghost of the dead baby? You're the expert, what do you think?

B: I'm no expert! And Morrison doesn't really tell us. But the book suggests that Beloved is the spirit of the dead daughter. That's why Sethe tries to explain to her why she had to kill the baby.

C: You could say that slavery killed the baby.

A: Is that what Morrison said?

B: Not exactly. You know that when the Nobel Prize is presented, the winner gives a speech. Well, Morrison's speech is brilliant. She says that language cannot fully describe something as awful as slavery. Sometimes, you need silence as well. She argues that literature should ask questions, but it should not give easy answers. At least, that's what I understand from her Nobel acceptance speech.

A: So, that's why we're never really sure if Beloved is Sethe's dead daughter, or if she's just a lost young woman. Sometimes, the book was so realistic, I could see the events. But then, there were some episodes that felt like a dream. It was very powerful.

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B: I agree. But I had a problem with the book. I wanted more description of America after slavery, after the Civil War. I wanted to know more about Sethe's life in Ohio. It sounded too easy to me. I had many questions about the society and discrimination and race at that time.

A: I see what you mean. Morrison doesn't really say much about ordinary life in the 1870s. I think that's because the author wants to concentrate on the characters and their lives, not the world around them. We can't help feeling Sethe's pain.

C: That's how I see it, too. Although Morrison said that language cannot fully express other people's pain, she can hint at it.

B: Okay, I can see that. Thanks. So, what's next month's book?

Open Forum 3

Web Site Worksheet

Chapter 5

Name: _____

Date: _____

1. Preparing to Listen

You are going to listen to a book club discussion about Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Before you listen, think about the following questions.

Have you ever read *Beloved* or another book by Toni Morrison?

What do you know about the history of slavery in the United States?

2. Listening for Main Ideas

Read questions 1 and 2. Listen to the discussion. Then choose the correct answer for each question.

- Which Nobel Prize did Toni Morrison win?
 - Peace
 - Economics
 - Literature
- Which of the following sentences is the best summary of the plot of *Beloved*?
 - Beloved* is a story about the fighting in the American Civil War.
 - Beloved* is the story of an escaped slave and what happened to her dead daughter.
 - Beloved* is the story of how a slave family escaped from the South.

3. Listening for More Detail

Read statements 3–12. Listen to the discussion again and write T for true or F for false for each statement.

- _____ 3. Morrison won the Nobel Prize in 1983.
- _____ 4. There have not been many African-American winners of this prize.
- _____ 5. All of Morrison's books are about slavery.
- _____ 6. Sethe escapes from Kentucky to the North by herself.
- _____ 7. Sethe has three children when she lives in Ohio.
- _____ 8. Sethe's owner killed her oldest daughter.
- _____ 9. The baby did not have a name when she died.
- _____ 10. The novel clearly states that *Beloved* is the ghost of Sethe's dead daughter.
- _____ 11. Morrison believes that it is impossible to fully describe slavery in a novel.
- _____ 12. The book focuses on the emotions of the character, not the history of slavery.

Open Forum 3

Web Site Answer Key

Chapter 5

2. Listening for Main Ideas

1. c
2. b

3. Listening for More Detail

3. F
4. T
5. F
6. F
7. T
8. F
9. T
10. F
11. T
12. T