

# How Toni Morrison's 'Beloved' Is Taught in Schools

Anna Clark

## 25th Anniversary

10.04.124:45 AM ET

It's banned books week, and also the 25th anniversary of the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, a classic that explores the legacy of slavery not with reductive moralizing but with psychological and narrative depth and complexity. But its frankness with race, violence and sex has made it a controversial choice in school curricula. Anna Clark looks at how the seminal novel is being taught to students.

It's hard to talk about *Beloved*.

Toni Morrison's novel, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, comes weighed with a reputation as a great American classic. It wasn't long after the Pulitzer-winning book's publication that Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature. *Beloved* is difficult, complex in language and narrative, and it casts a forceful look at the bloodiest impossibilities of slavery's legacy in America. The novel opens outside Cincinnati in 1873, where Sethe and her kin are meeting life as free and haunted people. But their house is occupied by the child Sethe killed years before, under threat of their return to slavery. The house "was spiteful. Full of baby's venom." It is "suspended from the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead." It crackles with outrage for the family inside it. Some creep away, and do not ever return.

Uncomfortable as the story is, teachers talk about it with young people every day. The classroom brings *Beloved* to what may be its primary readership today, a quarter-century later. But the ground is fraught: it is one of the most challenged books of the last 20 years.

Last winter saw a battle at Plymouth-Canton Community Schools in Michigan. Two parents who thought the novel was inappropriate tried to ban the book. At a public hearing, one parent argued that *Beloved* was given a Lexile rating that equates to a 5th-grade reading level. Brian Read, a literature teacher at the school, told me last spring that this comparison was absurd—Lexile indicates a text's usefulness for teaching people to read. That's all. "Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has a low Lexile score, and no one would challenge the literary value of that," Read said. And, in fact, the protesting parents weren't really bothered by Lexile's measure of *Beloved*, either. The real reason behind their challenge was that the novel was deemed an inappropriately "fictitious" account about the real-life issue of slavery. With this backdrop in mind, they argued that the language, violence and sex acts provide no historical context for the reader—never mind that language, violence and sex acts are far from out of context in slavery. Plymouth-Canton's school board voted to keep *Beloved* in the curriculum. Students, meanwhile, approached the book with greater verve than ever.

On the other end of the spectrum, Ileana Jiménez, a New York City English teacher who blogs at Feminist Teacher, offers an elective focused wholly on *Beloved*. Her students all read *The Bluest Eye* as sophomores and opted in for more Morrison. For Jiménez, the novel uniquely suits her purpose of teaching social justice and activism to high school students. She turns often to bell hooks' ideas on "teaching to transgress," and the difficulty of bringing critical thinking on race, gender, class, and sexuality into traditional schools. The independent school she's now at gives her space to create a classroom that intentionally nurtures this kind of thinking, which suits the provocations of *Beloved*.

Jennifer Pozner, executive director of Women in Media and News, names *Beloved's* "complicated discussion on rage and fear and love" as key in helping her to "think intersectionally about gender and

race” as a teenager at Brooklyn’s John Dewey High School. She’s built her career at this intersection ever since, placing it in a contemporary context. Pozner wrote *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV* about how reality television plays on base stereotypes of women, particularly women of color. She speaks at campuses across the country on these “twisted fairytales” and facilitates media literacy workshops to help others learn to break them down.

Pozner, alas, has her work cut out for her: the resistance to talking directly about race and gender in American life weighs heavily. When those conversations come into the classroom, centering around *Beloved*, it can be tempting for students to distance themselves through the comforting neutrality of clichés. Aimee Pozorski, an associate professor at Central Connecticut State University, is watchful for students’ reductive readings: “I don’t want them to go away, simply, with the lesson that ‘slavery is bad’ or ‘a mother’s love is complex.’”

Erin Templeton, assistant professor at Converse College, tried to teach contemporary literature chronologically, with *Beloved* at the beginning, and found students really struggled. “They had nothing to prepare them,” Templeton said. Now, her students read Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* before *Beloved*—it’s an accessible way for students to first encounter the theme of reckoning with violence. When they get to *Beloved*, they read and read again: building familiarity with the unfamiliar. Sticking close to text ensures that students don’t sidestep its potency by retreating into vague generalities or easy conclusions about the unresolved American legacy of enslavement.

Megan Sweeney, an associate professor at the University of Michigan, said students usually come with a basic understanding of slavery, but haven’t thought much about how “slavery had an impact on psyches and the sense of self.” This is crucial. Most classes discuss Margaret Garner, the slave whose murder of her 2-year-old under threat of re-enslavement inspired *Beloved*. Sweeney notes that only a person can be held liable for murder, and Garner was considered property—this was a point of contention in her trial. Sweeney’s taken her class to the Underground Railroad museum in Cincinnati, which focuses on Garner, and where visitors walk a bridge to Kentucky and back, crossing the river that Garner and Sethe crossed.

Templeton said she often acknowledges *Beloved*’s film counterpart by showing students the trailer. This gives a chance for the class to discuss Oprah Winfrey’s influence on Morrison’s reputation. The same woman who starred as Sethe is a longtime champion of Morrison: Oprah purchased the film rights to *Beloved* in 1987, before it won the Pulitzer, and she used the considerable force of her eponymous book club to promote the novel. But too much talk of Oprah can prove to be a convenient distraction from the difficulties of Morrison’s fiction. “I am pretty much fanatical about sticking to the text,” Templeton said.

At best, teaching *Beloved* provokes a reckoning with literary complexity and the deranged American relationship with race. At worst, it’s set up for students to decode symbols and extract moral certainties from a novel that refuses it.

“The worst thing you can do for a novel like *Beloved*,” Templeton said, “is to try to explain everything. It’s a difficult novel, but the difficulty is part of the point of it. Morrison is one of the best living writers our country has. She’s certainly capable of writing a simple story. But the fact that she chose to make this opaque is significant.”

“A lot of readers are uncomfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty. I am too!” she said. “But the book refuses that, and that’s why it’s so powerful.”