

A Memorial Resolution
– honoring –

TONI MORRISON
1931 – 2019

Toni Morrison

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Nobel Laureate and Princeton Emerita Professor Toni Morrison began teaching at Princeton University as a professor in the Council of the Humanities in 1989 and served as the Robert G. Goheen Professor in the Humanities until her retirement in 2006. Born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, she received her B.A. from Howard University in 1953 and her M.A. from Cornell University in 1955. After two years on the faculty of Texas Southern University, she taught from 1957 to 1964 at Howard University, and then in 1965 became a book editor, first at textbook publisher L.W. Singer and, in 1968, at Random House, Inc., becoming the first Black woman senior editor in the company's history. She returned to teaching full time in 1983 at Rutgers and SUNY Albany before joining the Princeton faculty.

Just short of 40 when her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970, she followed it with *Sula* in 1973 and *Song of Solomon* four years later. The novels did not translate Black characters and communities for the white reader; they were written for Black readers who could enter their worlds and their languages without preamble and without the concession of a double-consciousness. Her oeuvre also included the novels *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise*, *Love*, *A Mercy*, *Home*, and *God Help the Child*; lyrics; a libretto; several collections of essays; two plays; and seven children's books, written with her son Slade.

She did not write autobiographically, encouraging Princeton students to imagine and invent their fictions rather than rendering only their lives in

language. "The vitality of language," she wrote in her Nobel lecture, "lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie." In her workshops, she was blunt, funny, and encouraging, ever an advocate of fiction written with precision and imagined *large*.

An assiduous teacher, she became an enduring presence for a generation of alumni and alumnae writers, who benefit still from visceral memories of her in the classroom and in conference, as well as from reading her work itself. For hundreds of contemporary writers in this and other countries, her writings are a primary and emboldening inheritance.

In 1994, as she completed a commission by Carnegie Hall to write lyrics for a song cycle with the composer André Previn for Kathleen Battle, she founded the Princeton Atelier as a pedagogic studio for collaborative endeavors among great artists of varied disciplines. In any semester's Atelier, students participate in the creation of new collaborative works by two or three artists (and, more recently, scientists and scholars)—among them Yo-Yo Ma, Gabriel García Márquez, and the American Ballet Theatre Studio Company. "There is a powerful impetus to stretch and freshen one's work by collaborating with artists in genres other than one's own," she said, and she continued to collaborate with musicians, composers, and theater companies throughout her life.

In her 50-year career as a writer, she was the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, a Pulitzer Prize, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur in France, the Anisfeld Wolf Book Award in Race

Relations, the Library of Congress Bicentennial Living Legend Award, the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, the Gold Medal for distinguished achievement in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, the Cavore Prize in Italy, the National Humanities Medal, the Coretta Scott King Award from the American Library Association, the Ivan Sandroff Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Book Critics Circle, and the Du Bois Medal from the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, among many other honors. She was a Lifetime Trustee of the New York Public Library, served on the National Arts Council for six years, and was a member of the Author's Guild, the Africa Watch and Helsinki Committees on Human Rights, the American Institute of Arts and Letters, the American Philosophical Society, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Princeton awarded her a doctorate *honoris causa* in 2013; she was by then the recipient of honorary doctorates from Oxford, Brown, Harvard, Columbia, Georgetown, the École Normale Supérieure, the University of Pennsylvania, the Université Paris Denis Diderot, and Yale. She delivered distinguished lecture series at Harvard, the United Nations, the University of Toronto, Trinity College Cambridge, and Amnesty International, as well as the keynote address for Princeton's 250th Convocation in 1996 and its Baccalaureate address in 2005.

Firestone Library is fortunate to be the recipient of the Toni Morrison papers. In 2017, West College was renamed Morrison Hall in her honor, and in the spring of 2018, the directors of the Lewis Center for the Arts, which her Atelier prefigured, established the Toni Morrison Prize to recognize a graduating senior whose individual or collaborative artistic practice has

pushed the boundaries and enlarged the scope of our understanding of issues of race.

As these honors attest, her imprint on Princeton was indelible. In the words of President Christopher Eisgruber, “Through her scholarly leadership in creative writing and African American studies, and through her mentorship of students and her innovative teaching, she inscribed her name permanently and beautifully upon the tapestry of Princeton’s campus and history.”

Toni Morrison has been, and will be, missed terribly: her intelligence, her courage, her boldness, and her humor were a reminder to her colleagues and her students to take the long view and to do so with a clear and ethical perspective. Happily for us—and countless others—her work engenders joy and inspires perseverance in the most challenging of days.

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Mister President: For the Committee I move that this Resolution be spread on the records of the Faculty; that a copy be sent to son Harold Ford Morrison, granddaughters Nidal Morrison, Safa Morrison, and Kali-ma Smart, and to the Archivist of the University.

Respectfully submitted by:

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