

BELOVED, by Toni Morrison (Knopf)

Beloved is a work of assured, immense distinction, destined to become an American classic. Writing about the life of black slaves and ex-slaves in the era of the Civil War and early Reconstruction, and locating her story in a Border States setting--southern Ohio and northern Kentucky, along the Ohio River, near Cincinnati--Toni Morrison taps into a deep, central vein of our national experience and shame. Slavery was of course the institution which most savagely confronted and contradicted the American dream of freedom. She shows its capacity to corrupt profoundly, as in the hideous parody of rationalism exhibited by the white slave owner she calls Schoolteacher, and as the horrible sexual abuse that was visited upon the mysterious "intruder" girl Beloved by a crazed/depraved white owner is gradually revealed. Sethe, the black mother's violence against her infant daughter becomes understandable in light of what the reader learns of the daily life of male, female and child slaves on such farming estates as Sweet Home, which, ironically, was considered better than most plantations of that time and place.

The writing in Beloved is dense and rich, its structure brilliantly fragmented, discontinuous, expressive. To a remarkable degree the book captures new ground even while it is in dialogue with great American novels of the past. Sethe's later isolation and pariah status vis-a-vis the community recall Hester Prynne's ordeal of isolation in Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter. Beloved also recalls Faulkner's powerful inquiry into the human cost of slavery and slaveholding in Absalom! Absalom! and parts of Go Down Moses, except that Ms. Morrison digs deeper, is more unflinching, and knows more than Faulkner could bring himself to face and acknowledge.

As fiction by a black writer Beloved is at least as important as Ellison's Invisible Man. It really has no other competition. In the year of James Baldwin's death the publication of Beloved is a reassuring, moving, inspiring event in American letters.