

Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The (GA)

October 26, 2003

Section: @issue

Edition: Home; The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Page: F2

BOOKS: 'Love' wears many guises over decades of fraught relationships

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FICTION

Love. By Toni Morrison. Knopf. \$23.95. 202 pages.

The verdict: A deeply affecting work by a Great American Novelist who is still, in her seventh decade, writing at the top of her craft.

Lean and lyrical, Toni Morrison's new novel, "Love," is not so much about love as about its twisted sisters: hatred, envy, betrayal, greed.

Reminiscent of her last book, "Paradise," this eighth novel from the Nobel laureate focuses on a black community of diverse, polarized women who have one thing in common: the late Bill Cosey. Both the center and the void of these women's lives, Cosey was a commanding, beautiful ladies' man and the respected owner of what was, in pre-integration days, "the best and best-known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast."

During the upheaval of the civil rights movement, Morrison writes, "Cosey's Resort was more than a playground; it was a school and a haven where people debated death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it other than grieve and stare at their children. Then the music started, convincing them they could manage it all and last."

When the novel opens, in the 1990s, the resort has long been closed, and Cosey's once-glorious mansion is now a haven, and a prison, for two feuding women -- his widow, Heed the Night, and his granddaughter, Christine. In death, Cosey becomes whatever the surviving women project upon him: Ideal Husband, Guardian, Good Man. Yet Christine and Heed are not the only Cosey women projecting their longing onto the dead patriarch.

Slowly, masterfully, Morrison reveals the other women in Cosey's life: Vida, a former hotel employee who remembers "the county's role model" only as a beloved benefactor, forgiving him anything, as her clear-eyed husband laments; Cosey's daughter-in-law, May, who is driven mad by his choice of a second bride and by a fear that the civil rights movement will obliterate all that she's built at the resort; a shadowy "sporting woman" named Celestial; and, finally, L, the sage former hotel chef who, alone, sees Cosey for what he was.

"He didn't have an S stitched on his shirt," L observes, "and he didn't own a pitchfork. He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love."

Into this maelstrom of man-love saunters Junior Viviane, fresh out of Correctional. The young woman with the boy's first name and the "sci-fi eyes" answers Heed's ad for a companion and secretary to do "highly confidential" work. And, in exchange for "real food after days of clean garbage," for "a solitary soak in a real tub with a perfumed bar of colored soap," the hungry girl agrees to do anything, anything at all.

Junior's arrival sets the present-day action in motion even as Morrison teasingly unfurls the rich, rich past. It is a past littered by Cosey's suspicious, sudden death; by a vile, knife-baring fight at his funeral; by his disputed will, scribbled on the back of a menu, it seems, under the influence of Nat King Cole and Wild Turkey.

Given all that takes place in "Love," past and present, it is stunning in its leanness. As in her earliest books, "The Bluest Eye" and "Sula," Morrison's tender, taut prose wastes no word, no syllable, no letter. And with this novel, as with the seven before it, the author demands full engagement from her readers, as well as trust.

Trust that the small detail revealed in the opening paragraph will, in time, be thoroughly explained. Trust that the relationship introduced on Page 37 will be startlingly fleshed out by Page 175. Trust that what seems to be trivial dialogue on Page 110 will, in the end, boom with resonance.

Indeed, "Love" is a novel of devastating revelations, impeccably arranged. A deeply affecting work by a Great American Novelist who is writing at the top of her craft, it is also a book of surprises. For only when the last lovely word is read and the last page is turned does the reader fully realize that the passion at the novel's core is not man-love for Cosey, as we've thought all along, but a more primal first love.

The wildly beating, bloody red heart of this story -- as in Morrison's 30-year-old masterpiece, "Sula" -- is a friendship sliced by betrayal, a love transmuted into hatred by silence, and, finally, by language, redeemed.

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