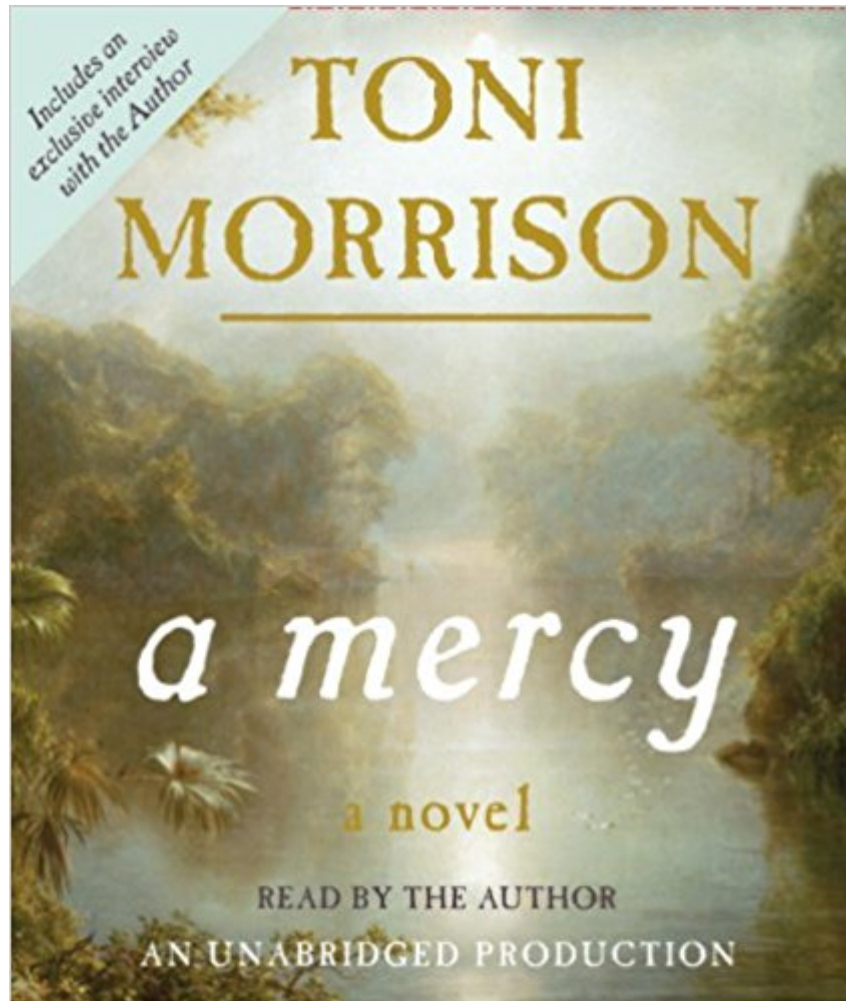




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# A Mercy



## Synopsis

In the 1680s the slave trade was still in its infancy. In the Americas, virulent religious and class divisions, prejudice and oppression were rife, providing the fertile soil in which slavery and race hatred were planted and took root. Jacob is an Anglo-Dutch trader and adventurer, with a small holding in the harsh north. Despite his distaste for dealing in "flesh," he takes a small slave girl in part payment for a bad debt from a plantation owner in Catholic Maryland. This is Florens, "with the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady." Florens looks for love, first from Lina, an older servant woman at her new master's house, but later from a handsome blacksmith, an African, never enslaved. There are other voices: Lina, whose tribe was decimated by smallpox; their mistress, Rebekka, herself a victim of religious intolerance back in England; Sorrow, a strange girl who's spent her early years at sea; and finally the devastating voice of Florens's mother. *A Mercy* reveals what lies beneath the surface of slavery. But at its heart it is the ambivalent, disturbing story of a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her, and of a daughter who may never exorcise that abandonment. Acts of mercy may have unforeseen consequences.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Nobel laureate Morrison returns more explicitly to the net of pain cast by slavery, a theme she detailed so memorably in *Beloved*. Set at the close of the 17th century, the book details America's untoward foundation: dominion over Native Americans, indentured workers, women and slaves. A slave at a plantation in Maryland offers up her daughter, Florens, to a relatively humane

Northern farmer, Jacob, as debt payment from their owner. The ripples of this choice spread to the inhabitants of Jacob's farm, populated by women with intersecting and conflicting desires. Jacob's wife, Rebekka, struggles with her faith as she loses one child after another to the harsh New World. A Native servant, Lina, survivor of a smallpox outbreak, craves Florens's love to replace the family taken from her, and distrusts the other servant, a peculiar girl named Sorrow. When Jacob falls ill, all these women are threatened. Morrison's lyricism infuses the shifting voices of her characters as they describe a brutal society being forged in the wilderness. Morrison's unflinching narrative is all the more powerful for its relative brevity; it takes hold of the reader and doesn't let go until the wrenching final-page crescendo. (Nov.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Several reviewers ranked *A Mercy* near the top of Toni Morrison's catalogue — an impressive feat. Given the subject of slavery, comparisons with *Beloved* are inevitable; critics tended to think of *A Mercy* as a more compact companion piece to that work. Many reviewers also noted that *A Mercy* is more accessible than Morrison's other novels that were written since she won the Nobel Prize, showing that the award does not, in fact, curse its recipients with literary decline. But a few reviewers also noted the inevitable deference given to an author like Morrison. Some sections of *A Mercy* may seem obscure, they suggested, but that obscurity simply indicates that those sections deserve another read. The reviewer from the *Dallas Morning News* summed it up nicely: this novel is more accessible than Morrison's recent work, and is all the better for it. But there is still plenty of allusion and poetry so that you won't forget who you're reading — or why there may be a few passages that you're rereading. Copyright 2008 Bookmarks Publishing LLC --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Unfortunately, if you are coming for a detailed and thoughtful book review, my comments here will not be the one you should turn to. I merely will state one simple fact: I LOVE Toni Morrison's writing. She is, hands down, one of my favorite authors. Thus, she can do wrong in my eyes. There really isn't a thing from her that I have read that didn't absolutely move me. She is a phenomenal creator of worlds that aren't beyond your grasps - which is a quality I find some authors are not able to create. And just like her books prior and following "*A Mercy*," this book lives up to the grand standards she always sets. I haven't a complaint. In the end, it is a wonderful book that opens your eyes to many societal and racial issues that we still face today.

During the first read, "A Mercy" is nothing short of infuriating. This was the first novel I read by Toni Morrison and its complexity baffled me. I hated it. Due to Morrison's vague writing, I couldn't be sure of anything that was happening; though my university professor had warned my class to read this slowly and deliberately, the difficulty of the narrative still took me by surprise. I stuck with it to the end, though - and when I got there, the novel struck me by how beautiful it was and I changed my tune completely. "A Mercy" is beautiful - haunting, sad, realistic, and painful - but beautifully crafted. Morrison's prose is well-written and full of intense detail. The story moves at a good pace. There are no unrealistic happy endings and none of the plot feels forced or contrived. The beauty of the novel doesn't hide the fact that it's incredibly confusing. This is definitely a book that readers will appreciate more on a second reading than the first.

This book was one of the selected books to be read in my multi culture literature class in college. It is well-written with the language and images from the time period it represents. As you read, the author is so descriptive that she takes you away from where you are and places you in that time period. The contrast between good and evil is prevalent throughout the book. It shows that it is really what is on the inside of a person that comes out. It also makes us aware of what happens when an evil person(s) is in power versus a good person. Vaark was at one time an orphan and so he has compassion and feeling for those who are misplaced or without a place in life. Also, a main theme is that of how a slave mother asks Vaark in a silent way to take her daughter. The daughter, Florens, feels the mother has done this out of rejection and choosing to keep her little brother over her. However, the truth is that the slave mother is being raped by the white slaveowner and she knows that it is just a matter of time before he will rape Florens. The slave mother recognizes the goodness in Vaark and wants to spare her daughter. Unfortunately, Florens does not know this and keeps looking for love and acceptance to fill the void put there by the loss of her mother. Rejection is a terrible feeling and I feel that many adopted children can identify with Florens. At the conclusion, one can go back and see where the name of the book comes from, A Mercy. When we think of mercy, we think of the mercy of God. However, this author makes us look at the mercy of man. One man's mercy spared so many from harm and heartache. He gave them a chance to live freely. Isn't that what mercy does. God gives us a chance to live freely. But often we fail to see that it also takes man to extend mercy in order to give hope to others. Could it be that God's mercy is extended through the mercy of men.

This novel has more to say than the average slave narrative. Rather than a repetitive message about the poor treatment of slaves in the 17th century, Morrison delves deeper into the psychological reasoning for cruel treatment and its survival in this difficult time in American history. The story follows a young girl, Florens, who's mother offered her as payment in a business trade between a heartless slave trader and more understanding entrepreneur, Jacob Vaark. Her mother knew that Vaark offered a better life, but Florens misunderstands her mother's reasoning, thinking that her mother abandoned her to stay with her baby. Florens is emotionally scarred by this experience and is unable to reconcile her pain. The novel takes us on a journey as Florens struggles to find her identity apart from other characters and her status as a slave. Her owner, Jacob Vaark also deals with the issue of man's worth to the world, whether it be reputation or wealth. The story continues to follow Florens as she works for the Vaark family, where she is treated well, except for the emotional struggle she forces upon herself. On a quest to answer difficult questions about 17th century life, identity, and worth, Morrison's novel offers a unique writing style that gives readers first and second person perspectives on other characters in the story. Though this leads to a choppy reading experience, the analysis of the author's message about slavery and self-identity is more accessible. Rather than focus on the cruelty of slavery physically, Morrison offers a new perspective on the emotional and mental toll slavery can take on one's identity of self. Without effort to maintain the identity of self, a person can be lost in slavery and the vicious succession can continue into eternity. This practice can turn a slave of the body into a slave of the mind. I recommend this novel for those who are interested psychological readings of slavery and the emotional status of slave traders in 17th century America.

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