

Morrison on magical realism

I also want my work to capture the vast imagination of black people. That is, I want my books to reflect the very practical, shrewd, day to day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time they encompass some great supernatural element. We know that it does not bother them one bit to do something practical and have visions at the same time. So all the parts of living are on an equal footing. Birds talk and butterflies cry, and it is not surprising or upsetting to them. These things make the world larger for them. Some young people don't want to acknowledge this as a way of life. They don't want to hark back to those embarrassing days when we were associated with "haints" and superstitions.¹

Christina Davis: I understand you dislike having your work described as "magic realism." Why is that?

Toni Morrison: I was once under the impression that that label "magical realism" was another one of those words that covered up what was going on. I don't know when it began to be used but my first awareness of it was when certain kinds of novels were being described that had been written by Latin American men. It was a way of *not* talking about politics....If you could apply the word "magical" then that *dilutes* the realism but it seemed legitimate because there were these supernatural and unrealistic things, surreal things, going on in the text....

My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew....There was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. It formed a kind of cosmology that was perceptive as well as enchanting, and so it seemed impossible for *me* to write about black people and eliminate that simply because it was "unbelievable"....So I have become indifferent, I suppose, to the phrase "magical realism."²

With its lush, Gauguin-like imagery and commonplace mysticism, *Beloved* draws from a wellspring not unlike that of the Latin American fabulists. Morrison nods at the comparison between black American folklore and magic realism, though she says she was well into *Song of Solomon* before she discovered Gabriel García Márquez.

"Their stuff was so readily available to them—that mixture of Indian and Spanish. Whereas I felt the preachers, the storytelling, the folklore, the music was very accessible to me, but I felt almost alone. It wasn't only mine, but I didn't have any literary precedent for what I was trying to do with the magic."³

¹Nellie Y. McKay, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 153. Interview originally published in 1983.

²Christina Davis, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," in Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, 225–26. Interview originally published in 1986.

³Gail Caldwell, "Author Toni Morrison Discusses Her Latest Novel *Beloved*," in Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, 242–43. Interview originally published in 1987.