

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide  
Beloved  
By Toni Morrison

Author:

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford, in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio), the second of four children in a black working-class family. Displayed an early interest in literature. Studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities, followed by an academic career at Texas Southern University, Howard University, Yale, and since 1989, a chair at Princeton University. She has also worked as an editor for Random House, a critic, and given numerous public lectures, specializing in African-American literature. She made her debut as a novelist in 1970, soon gaining the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. A member since 1981 of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among them the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. She died on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

*(Source: Toni Morrison – Biographical. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2019. Wed. 18 Sep 2019.  
<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/biographical/>)*

Summary:

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a spellbinding and dazzlingly innovative portrait of a woman haunted by the past. Sethe was born a slave and escaped to Ohio, but eighteen years later she is still not free. She has borne the unthinkable and not gone mad, yet she is still held captive by memories of Sweet Home, the beautiful farm where so many hideous things happened. Meanwhile Sethe's house has long been troubled by the angry, destructive ghost of her baby, who died nameless and whose tombstone is engraved with a single word: *Beloved*. Sethe works at beating back the past, but it makes itself heard and felt incessantly in her memory and in the lives of those around her. When a mysterious teenage girl arrives, calling herself Beloved, Sethe's terrible secret explodes into the present. Combining the visionary power of legend with the unassailable truth of history, Morrison's unforgettable novel is one of the great and enduring works of American literature. *(From the publisher.)*

## Questions:

1. Consider the extent to which slavery dehumanizes individuals by stripping them of their identity, destroying their ability to conceive of the self. Consider, especially, Paul and how he can't determine whether screams he hears are his or someone else's. How do the other characters reflect self-alienation?
2. Discuss the different roles of the community in betraying and protecting the house at 124. What larger issue might Morrison be suggesting here about community.
3. What does Beloved's appearance represent? What about her behavior? Why does she finally disappear—what drives her departure? And why is the book's title named for her?
4. Talk about the choice Sethe made regarding her children when schoolteacher arrives to take them all back to Sweet Home. Can her actions be justified—are her actions rational or irrational?
5. What does the narrator mean by the warning at the end: this is not a story to pass on." Is he right...or not?
6. Morrison's epic story of the effects of slavery is a giant jigsaw puzzle, a jumble of time and space, a mosaic of narrators, episodes and literary styles. Through free association, the novel circles through the past and present, patching together flashbacks, dream images and internal monologues. What is gained by the absence of a coherent, conventional plot line?
7. The character of Beloved begins the novel as a pesky poltergeist making handprints in spilled flour. Later she manifests herself as an eerie child-woman, clinging to Sethe's maternal attentions. In the final section of the book, Beloved thrives, sucking the life out of the weakened, dwindling Sethe. Who or what is Beloved? Is she real or unreal?
8. At first glance, Sethe appears to be the meaty, central character. But it is daughter Denver who travels the furthest from start to finish. How does Denver come of age in the novel? And how do the circumstances of her birth predict her ultimate fate?
9. Born on the river between Sweet Home and Cincinnati, between slavery and freedom, Denver is the sole character delivered to the world outside the immediate constraints of slavery. Because of her origins, Denver feels that "a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it." Examine how, by novel's end, Denver pays that bill, satisfying the promise of her birth. Compare the lonely young girl who finds comfort in a circle of boxwood trees to the self-assured young woman who sits on the porch in her carnival dress waiting for her employer.

10. The question of identity for those once enslaved runs throughout the novel. To survive, most of the characters are compelled or are forced to change their names. Baby Suggs was once Jenny Whitlow, the slave Joshua becomes the free man Stamp Paid, even Sethe calls herself Lu when she escapes Sweet Home. How does Sethe's search for identity parallel her struggle to survive *Beloved*? Does Sethe ever find her true self?

11. Sethe is defined by many things during her lifetime: as help, as a dollar amount, as a mother, and later, as a pariah. When *Beloved* returns to her, Sethe sacrifices herself once again, determined to prove herself a true mother. Ask yourself how and by whom Sethe is pulled back from the edge of sanity. Consider the potential of her final words "Me? Me?" as a declaration of self.

12. Redemption and grace are offered to the black community by Baby Suggs and her sermons in the Clearing. But Baby Suggs dies a hopeless woman, the colors of a blanket her only comfort. "*Beloved*," though, is not a hopeless novel, its conclusion full of promise for a better life. How do Sethe and Paul D find the final redemption that Baby Suggs cannot? What does Toni Morrison ultimately have to say about grace?

13. Baby Suggs tells her people "to lay it all down" and urges them to claim ownership of their past, however horrible, and at the same time, to embrace their present. Yet, after the murder in the woodshed, Baby Suggs loses faith. Discuss Paul D and Sethe's final conversation, paying special attention to Paul D declaring, "We got more yesterday than anybody." Determine how author Morrison plays this conversation off Baby Suggs' advice in the Clearing about imagining your own sense of grace.

(Questions 1-5 from *LitLovers*; Questions 6-13 from: Changnon, Greg. "THE READING ROOM Unconventional '*Beloved*' Challenging Read." *The Atlanta Journal the Atlanta Constitution*, Oct 25, 1998, p. L;13. ProQuest. Web. 18 Sep. 2019.)