

# **BOOK CLUB To Go!**

## **Jazz**

### **By Toni Morrison**

#### **Introduction**

In the winter of 1926, when everybody everywhere sees nothing but good things ahead, Joe Trace, middle-aged door-to-door salesman of Cleopatra beauty products, shoots his teenage lover to death. At the funeral, Joe's wife, Violet, attacks the girl's corpse. This passionate, profound story of love and obsession brings us back and forth in time, as a narrative is assembled from the emotions, hopes, fears, and deep realities of black urban life.

*(randomhouse.com)*

#### **About the Author**

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford, in 1931 in Lorain (Ohio). She was the second of four children in a black working-class family and 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.

*(nobleprize.org)*

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## **Reviews**

“The author conjures up worlds with complete authority and makes no secret of her angst at the injustices dealt to black women.” – Edna O’Brien, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Morrison’s authoritative novel – tells the story of three intersecting tragic lives, and adroitly uses the motif of jazz to make palpable the feel and excitement of Harlem in the 1920s.” – *Publisher’s Weekly Review*

“Wonderful. . . . A brilliant, daring novel. . . . Every voice amazes.” – *Chicago Tribune*

## **Further Reading**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

*Light in August* by William Faulkner

*The Cattle Killing* by John Edgar Wideman

(*NoveList*)

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#### **Possible Discussion Questions**

1. What effect does the narrative voice that Morrison employs in *Jazz* have on our reading of the novel? Why would she have chosen a narrator that is neither a character nor wholly omniscient and detached?
2. Does Morrison suggest a moral in her story?
3. Describe the role of the city landscape as a character in the novel. Why does the narrator talk so much about the cityscape and how does it relate to the lives of the other characters?
4. Why does Dorcas choose to die and what does her death symbolize?
5. Does Violet's forgiveness and acceptance of Joe's infidelity undermine a possible feminist reading of the text? Is Violet weak for doing so?
6. How can the narrative structure of the novel be compared to a jazz piece? What does jazz music have in common with the stories of many African-Americans in the early twentieth century?
7. To whom does the narrator address herself at the end of the novel? Are the narrator and Toni Morrison indivisible?
8. Examining the theme of sisterhood and the different female relationships described in the book, discuss why Morrison shows the disruption of so many woman-to-woman bonds.
9. The July 1917 parade in Harlem protests the black people killed in race riots in East St. Louis, including Dorcas's parents. The cold, silent men march carrying banners with promises from the Declaration of Independence. What did the banners say?
10. Why are the men in the parade silent? What is the message of the incessant beat of the drums?

11. Morrison's language is usually lush and lyrical. During key action scenes, like Alice Manfred's first encounter with Violet, the language becomes simple and stark. Why did the author choose to write that way? Do you notice the change in language when you are reading the book?
12. Violet's family suffers a great deal from the racism in their native Virginia. What are some examples of this racism?
13. Why is Golden Gray so disturbed to learn that his father is a black man?

*(Sparknotes.com & Bookrags.com)*