

Ep13 BM Toni Morrison

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Jonathan Groubert: Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute is brought to you by the members of the John Adams. Why not become a member yourself or even better, a patron and enjoy all the extras and benefits? Find out more at john-adams.nl, <https://www.john-adams.nl/> and click on Become a Member. From Amsterdam, This is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute, a treasure trove of the best and the brightest of Americans thinking. And reading from her book *A Mercy*, back in 2009, this is Toni Morrison

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Toni Morrison: There, standing among carriage boxes and a spinning wheel. They tell me to take off my clothes. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm. The one you pissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs, naked under their examination. I watch, for what is in their eyes.

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Jonathan Groubert: The pathos and vulnerability at the center of Toni Morrison's many characters was just one of the many reasons she was one of the 20th century's most celebrated writers internationally. She even won a Nobel Prize in Literature in 1989. Toni Morrison's magical realism and portrayal of the African-American struggle meant, until recently, that her books were a staple of school libraries all over the United States. Strange then, or perhaps entirely predictable, that they should be removed from, among others, Virginia Public School libraries for being too controversial.

A few things about this night in 2009. First of all, she was interviewed by the Dutch writer and interviewer Bas Heijne. Barack Obama was early in his first term, and it's fascinating to hear just how much more optimistic the tone was in terms of race relations back then. And finally, the sound quality of the original audio was not great. I cleaned it up, but you can hear its imperfections, and in my opinion, it's totally worth it to hear this wonderfully candid interview and reading. Bas Heijne has started his interview by asking her about *a mercy*. And it was written about a time when both white indentured servants and black slaves still worked alongside each other on the plantations.

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Toni Morrison: When did it start to become law? When did it begin to be profitable, and to enhance the power of the establishment? That poor indentured whites despised black slaves. That had to be institutionalized, nobody is just, was born like that. So, I'm looking for those places that are earlier than the national story. You know, the routine one about 1776. You know, and some pilgrims, and some Indians, and some, whatever. But, what was before that. When it was ad hoc, it was in flux, everybody was there, taking land saying; this is mine. The Swedish empire, which I had never heard of, but indeed, they were there. And then the Dutch, and then the Brits and the Spaniards. Everyone was there and claiming and reclaiming and fighting over etc. So it was a very interesting, volatile, time. And it was bountiful, the resources were incredible, but I could not see it. I could, you know, I didn't want to describe things that weren't there, so I had to do a certain amount of research that really was not the history, which I thought was, you know, maybe a little, really lied somethings. Be quiet about certain things.

So, but I found that Anthropologists had done a lot of work, botanists had done a lot of work, people who examine ship's manifestos. They do all these ribbets, all this information was available so that I could actually, in the beginning, feel comfortable in that place. And then, you know, find the characters, to reflect and execute what I thought were some very characteristic things about the American character and wonderful stories that Americans tell. Orphanage, the past is bad, the future is there, always go West. Individualism, we can do it alone, lone ranger, forget Tonto. You know, and those things where there when these people were running from something terrible in their lives.

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Bas Heijne: Because it's a very harsh world you describe. It's very, and I call it dark pastoral. But, I mean, the pastoral... The nature is wonderful, but the human lives are often terrible in a sense.

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Toni Morrison: They have courage and endurance and they're brave and they're trying to put this together. But they know that, you know, 200 feet in any direction, anything might happen, there could be anything. And, you know, but they withstood it. So that quality is something that I admired in the characters very much. But when the man is taken from that family, then you have just the women, and they don't have any protection or power.

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Bas Heijne: For people who haven't read the book, the Dutch trader Jacob Vaark dies, and he leaves his wife and a kind of, would you call it family? A kind of make up...

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Toni Morrison: A made up family of his wife, they had several children, they died. So, there are three women on that farm who work. There's some indentured servants next door who help and once upon a time, when he was building his house, this blacksmith came to help build the gates and the fences, and he had a hunch, I won't say he was a medical man, but he saved something, a sick girl, on that farm. So when the mistress gets smallpox, which is, everybody was vulnerable to that I mean, she thinks he can cure her, and she sends Florence to find him.

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Bas Heijne: Yes, and, you said something very interesting before you start your reading. That about racism in, the central character you could say is the girl Florence, the voice of the girl Florence. Who goes out on an errand to a blacksmith who could cure mistress. But also she is madly, well, madly is an understatement I think, she is very much in love with the blacksmith. And in the end of the book you could see why. But she is central, but you, in your passage you read, she is examined you could say by these people she visits, and they look upon her with a kind of indifference you could say. And you said that, it's racism, but not the kind...

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Toni Morrison: It wasn't racism the way we understand it. It's a religious, you know, this is two years before Salem. Witchcraft was very much in the air and clerics had to form little panels, and people were telling on one another. How do you know they're a witch? Well, you know, something happens, cows drop dead or something. But they're physical things, and when I read books about witchcraft, in the states as well as in Europe, there are tell-tale signs; Three breasts for example or something like that. Things that make you not belong to the species. Like; do you bleed? So, she cuts her daughter's legs, but when they're examining her, they could be examining something inside. So, they're checking her out, not as though the women are looking at another woman, they're checking her out carefully, to see whether or not she belongs to that, the world of the demons. And they can't find anything, so what they talk about. But the interesting thing was, for me, one of the interesting things is that what happens to her psychologically. When blackness becomes both a burden and a protection for her, and she identifies with her lover. But the other this is that they came there to figure out if this girl was a cast dye, was a witch, and they got distracted when they saw something more neutral.

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Bas Heijne: This, this, character Florence is, in one review was called; a typical Morrison character.

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Toni Morrison: What does that mean?

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Bas Heijne: Well, what does it mean? How do you see her, then we can decide if she is a typical Morrison character. How do you see Florence, because she makes a kind of, she makes a real journey, but also an inner journey.

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Toni Morrison: She does, but I found her voice was very attractive. The voice she spoke and how she saw and how she combined the fact that she could read with her superstitions as well. You know, she a kind of young girl you want to slap every now and then, you know, as Lena does. She is so needy and, you know, any compliment that just thrills her. Because she has felt abandoned and thrown away by her mother, so that anyone who just shows her a little bit of kindness is, makes her happy. So, then when she falls in love and has a physical relationship with this blacksmith. You know, he's like, she's literally means "when I fall into you I am alive" and there's nothing outside of that. So, you know, if he rejects her then something else is going on. She has to, she writes her story and the process, the act of writing, is a process of evolution for her, and she changes. From this forlorn little girl, who needs everything through something close to adulthood. But I'm convinced that everybody in the book, certainly the women, arrive at some place. (inaudible) an epiphany, but there is knowledge, they know something.

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Bas Heijne: It's mostly the women, isn't it?

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Toni Morrison: Yeah, well, yeah.

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Bas Heijne: What's so special about women? Tell me, I'm here to learn. No, I think you make it clear from the book. But there is a kind of national, natural bond. Even if you don't sentimentalize it at all in the book. Because they're all alone again, as soon they, the relationship changes, they're. But there is a kind of natural bond.

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Toni Morrison: It's an extreme vulnerability if they're women. Even the widow, I mean, presumably she inherits the farm. But that doesn't mean too much if she's out there by herself. Somebody is gonna marry her, or not, or, you know, she knows that. And she needs protection, so she joins the church, whose tenets she really despises, for protection. And the others, the servants and slaves, they just have to figure it out. Whether they're gonna be loyal, whether they're gonna run away, what to do. And I just think that relationship is extremely, its thought (inaudible), extremely complicated. So that having young girl, two young girls and a middle aged women survive under duress like that. It's just more compelling and more interesting to me.

The two indentured servants who live down the road, you don't have to worry about them. They can run away and, you know, they're together. I found them interesting characters, but they didn't have the same kind of pressure and danger that the women had. Which is why I concentrated on them, and most of the stories in that area, if there are any, not the ones who were written at that time, that's, those are male stories, you know. I know scarlet letter, she never says anything, not a word, I think she says a couple of things to Dimmesdale but, she like a sin, she's a sin, she's not a woman. So, I was just, you know, trying to make it, layer it a little bit in those days.

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Bas Heijne: Am I right in saying that *a Mercy* somehow, it, a lot of your themes are recognizable in it, but in a kind of naked form. Because this social, its a very simple, not simple, simply written, but a kind of society which is not formed yet. So, it's a kind of, people are more, seem more naked in a sense. In your novel. Is that overinterpreting your book?

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Toni Morrison: Well, I wanted them, the situation to be a little raw and pure. You know, before they get all the processed civilization that would come later, when everything is sort of imposed. They don't have many resources, except themselves, and I'm, as I said, interested in who thrives, who doesn't and why, under areas of duress, I've always been interested in that. What happens if you don't have the safety net, what happens if nobody cares about you, what happens if, you know, you lose the best friend you ever had. You think you're right, you think you're noble. But suppose, that's not the case. You know, you learn something. So it sounds a little didactic, but the writing can remove that quality, from it, if it's any good.

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Bas Heijne: Well it is. But you could also say that for your work, your works often associate with the themes of racism and slavery and that also sounds rather didactic, and the novels are not. But to go back your

(inaudible), the side of the conscious of America. Of course, well, as is clear from your biography, you have come a long way, but America also seems to have come a long way. Is the perception that, and I have to say the o-word, recent happenings in the United States. Is there really something, is it really a, was it a crucial thing, the election of Obama, or is it just a small step in a much larger process? Do you see it that way?

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Toni Morrison: I thought the election was crucial. Partly because of race, but for me not really. I mean, my choice, I couldn't, I didn't feel as though I had the luxury to vote on lines of gender or race. That the country needed something, I mean there are a lot of women I wouldn't vote for, a lot of black men I wouldn't vote for. So it wasn't about that for me, it was like; who looked like, or appeared to be stable, manageable, articulate, smart, had a vision, you know, might be at an organization, anyway, in mind. That's what I was looking for. Now, I was not alone, because there were millions and millions of people who felt something about him. Very enthusiastic, rabid even, about him. And...

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Bas Heijne: Too much, so you thought, or...

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Toni Morrison: No, it was fine. Well you know, young people are the ones who don't vote. And they did and encouraging that kind of deep and profound political engagement among so many people was extremely important you know. And, you know, I've always thought, I am sure I'm right, that the opposition, the republican's mantra is always; "Don't vote." Suppress the vote, and they're always accusing somebody of voting badly, or wrongly or too much or too frequently or, you know. And the whole history of the civil rights movement is the right to vote. I mean, they killed people to stop that. It was very seriously bloody, so now people can vote and are now finally interested in it. So, it was an overwhelming thing and, you know, that was extraordinary to me. The excitement about the election. And the consequences of it are, you know, we all see.

But I think, I may have mentioned, maybe not to you, the expectations are so high. I mean really unbelievably high, and I worry a little bit about all that excitement and all that engagement and all that fundraising and writing. And now they've done it, so they just sort of sit back and watch. You know, the engagement can stop, and you can't, that can't happen. Cause he is not a king, you know what I mean, he can't just, he has to govern, he is not campaigning anymore. So, if there's to be success, there has to be, pretty much, at the level and pitch of people who could teach him as well as support him in large numbers. But what you're asking is a kind of cultural question about "have things changed racially in the United States very much?" And I'm aware of a couple of things. One is how intense and vicious racism has become in the United States, it's narrower, smaller, but it's very much there and at the same time I'm aware of the high expectations and the third thing is that I teach at Princeton, and the students are just not interested in that other, racism is just like almost boring to them. They don't want to talk about it, they don't know what you're talking about, and they want to stop it. They want to go on somewhere and do something else. They, so they, it's almost like; you can't have the discourse, the old discourse anymore, and that is among black and white students and, you know.

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Bas Heijne: Do you consider that as a dangerous thing? Because it seems that the movement and the word racism itself has, has somehow, in the eyes of lots of people, run its course in a sense. That they are saying: well, you know....

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Toni Morrison: It's all over, yeah. I'm of two minds about it. I know that the serious racists need it and they're not gonna give it up. Because if they do, than death would just be in themselves, and that's not a happy prospect for them. You take that thing away and what do you got, this little guy?

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Bas Heijne: I think of a few Dutchmen now. Sorry.

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Toni Morrison: And, so that's just sort of like a little virus that just sort of sits around. It gets bigger and smaller and so on. But I understand your question which is; "Is that another erasure?" you know, can, my feeling is that you don't forget things like that. But you don't stay there and freeze it and assume that's the only history. That's all there is. I think you should remember the past, know it, take from it what's useful and move on. It isn't a question of denial, you know. And you have ways, I was telling somebody today, a journalist, I think, that I vote regularly and even I don't like anybody who's running. Because for me its symbolic. Fannie Lou Hamer was running a voting thing, and she got her stomach kicked out, by police and later died from those things. So, I don't, you know, I vote because of her. You know I just take her into the voting booth; "Come on Fannie Lou, we're voting now." So it's nice to have somebody you really want to win, but I would do it if they were all thugs. I would still vote. But there is, you know, it's, I don't know, the discourse is changing a little bit, I notice a generation that. A big generation from the first time I went to Princeton, in the '80's till now, it's different. They're not all wanting to go to Wall Street. They all went and now we have (laughter). So, there's some differences, you know, for me it's exiting. And I do feel optimistic in that regard.

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Bas Heijne: In one interview I read, with you, I read that you said; I'm not casting blame, I'm just trying to look at something without blinking, to see what it was like, or could have been like and how that had something to do with the way we live now. Novels are always inquiries to me.

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Toni Morrison: Yeah, it's true. I, you know. Take a book like this, or even something like *Beloved*, which was sort of, had this historical anecdote in it. So, the big deal is, she chose to kill her children and herself. Rather than let them go back into slavery. And you know, I know that infanticide was not all that unusual among slave mothers, particularly if they were carrying the child of, you know, somebody on the crew, or rape or something. But in doing so I couldn't just, I had to really figure out what that felt like. That's what I meant by unblinking. Could I indeed hold by own child in my arms, and cut its throat? And what would (inaudible) we do that? What circumstances could I imagine, and I couldn't, or I did imagine a couple. And then there was, you know, ambiguous, I didn't know, yes, she right, but she doesn't have a right to do that. So, that was the dilemma, and that's when, for purposes of solution to the enigma or the question, I brought in the only person I felt who could judge her, and that was a dead girl. She's the one who could say, Ma, that was not a

good idea. What do you know about that? I mean, you know, she could challenge her, and need her at the same time. So that was a possibility, but that's what I meant about being unblinking. You know, you don't cover it up. I am aware, for example, of the slave narratives that they wrote. You know, Frederick Douglas and all these people. And they were writing for, you know, abolitionists, in order to get better treatment and freedom and so on. So, their books were honest, but they left out all sorts of things, they didn't want to disturb, be too graphic, you know, for the readership. So, but I want to lift that veil, you know, to see what it was you and I are talking about. In order to correct this.

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Bas Heijne: So, I was about to ask you if the novel was the ideal form to investigate these kinds of moral ambiguities? But of course that's a stupid question because, to you. But are the students still interested in the novel as a form to... No?

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Toni Morrison: (laughter) No, less and less. You know, for me, I know, it's just. If I could write poetry and say it I think I would. Or a song. This is what I. Even when I try to write something fictional and short, you know, a poet goes like this, they concentrate things and one thing always leads me to something else. I'm always moving into other area's and alleys and walls. So that's just the way my mind works when I'm involved in narrative. But I don't think, I don't have students interested in novels.

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Bas Heijne: No?

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Toni Morrison I mean one or two. In all those years that I taught literature and I used to teach, you know, writing, six of those students went on to publish. And, I believe the practice is as important as result. Learning how to do this, you know I can't teach inspiration, but I know how to edit, I know how to shape things and that's valuable in and of itself, when I was doing that. No, novel writing, is not, it hasn't been for a long time. When I was in publishing it was dying. What are people writing? They're writing memoirs, histories and exposés and how it was when I used to be, my childhood, I change. I say I don't want to hear about your life, you don't know nothing. So let's go on to something that you can imagine and create. But that was true when I was publishing novels. They're good when they're very good but it's the smallest part of what makes and ears money for publishing companies.

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Bas Heijne: Does that make you, you know publishing, or you knew it very well and you know universities, you know students. Does that make you a pessimist or?

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Toni Morrison: Its challenging in many ways, (inaudible) I don't do anything other than books. I mean I taught them, I write them, I edit them and that's, you know, I don't ski, I mean I don't do anything else, you know there's nothing out there. I should I guess.

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Bas Heijne: Are you working on another book?

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Toni Morrison: Hm, hm, hm

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Bas Heijne: I won't ask you about it, because I know writers, would you? No? Just a few words?

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Toni Morrison: I don't know, I don't have like what, 12 pages? But I'll tell you what I'm interested in which is a period, that is for me just very entangled and sick and rich in the United States, and that's the '50's. And so much was going on then. There was a sort of intense racial stuff, you know, I was just. Emmet Till got slaughtered, it's just before the '60's and so on. In addition to that there was war, something called "police action" in Korea. And then there was this other thing in the '50's that was really a menace, which was McCarthyism and anti-communism and, you know, that was a really scary period. Particularly for artists and there was so much going on then that I'm just curious about how these people, I think I have selected, would function in those levels of real intense drama on almost every front.

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Jonathan Groubert: Toni Morrison, as interviewed by Bas Heijne, I thought we'd end the show with some of the reading she did from her book *A Mercy*. *A Mercy* is the kind of poetic but hard-hitting novel of colonial America that so challenges the prevailing ideas of America's history that it has become part of what we call the culture war. In the story, a young female slave is sent off to get medicine for her ailing mistress, and she's given shelter by a white mother and her daughter, but quickly discovers the daughter is accused of witchcraft. And one more note, as you can hear in her voice, the fragility of the story mirrors somehow the fragility of her health that evening. And somehow it makes the reading all the more powerful. Here's Toni Morrison.

00:31:17

Toni Morrison: I step into the room. Standing there are a man, three women and a little girl who reminds me of myself, when my mother sends me away. I'm thinking how sweet she seems when she screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the women. Then each visitor turns to look at me, the women gasp the man's walking stick clatters to the floor, causing the remaining him to skulk and flutter. He retrieves his stick, pointing at me, saying; "Who be this?" One for the women covers her eyes, saying: "God help us." The little girl wails and rocks back and forth. The widow waves both hands, saying: "She's a guest, seeking shelter from the night. We accept her. How could we not? And feed her." "Witch, right?" The man, asks. "This one passed." She answers. One woman speaks "I've never seen any human since black." "I have" says another "This one is as black as others I've seen, she is African" "African much more" says another. Just look at this child says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. "Hear her, hear her." "It is true" Says another.

The black man is among us, and this is his minion. The little girl is inconsolable. The woman whose skirts she clings to takes her outside where she is quickly quiet. I'm not understanding anything except that I am in danger as the dog's head shows and mistress is my only defense. I shout "Wait!". I shout "Please, sir!". I think they have shock that I can talk. "Let me show you my letter." I say quiet. It proves that nobody's minion, but my mistress. As fast as I can I remove my boot and roll down my stocking. The women stretch their mouths. The man looks away and then slowly back. I pull out mistress Letter and offer it. But no one will touch it. The man orders me to place it on the table, but he is afraid to break the seal. He tells the widow to do it. She picks at the wax with her fingernails when it falls away as she unfolds the paper. It is too thick to stay flat by itself.

Everyone, including daughter Jane, who rises from her bed, stares at the markings upside down, and it is clear only the man is lettered. Holding the tip of his walking stick down on the paper. He turns it right side up and holds it there, as if the letter can fly away or turn into ashes without flame before his eyes. He leans low and examines it closely, then he picks it up and reads aloud; "The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebecca Vaark of Milton, vouches for the female person into whose hands it has been placed. She's owned by me and can be known by a burn mark in the palm of her left hand. Allow her the courtesy of safe passage, and with her, are all she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life on this Earth depends on her speedy return. Signed Rebecca Vaark, Mistress Milton, 18 May six, 1690."

Other than a small sound from daughter Jane. All is quiet. The man looks at me, looks again at a letter. Back at me back at the letter. Again at me, once more at the letter. He sees as the widow, he ignores her and turns to two women whispering to them. They point me to a door that opens onto a storeroom and they're standing among carriage boxes and a spinning wheel. They tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching, they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm. The one you pissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circled me lean down to inspect my feet, I feel naked under their examination. I watch, for what is in their eyes. No hate is there, or scare, or disgust. But they are looking at me and my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough.

The women look away from my eyes the way you say I am to do with the bears so they will not come close to love and play. Finally, they tell me to dress and leave the room, shutting the door behind them. I put on my clothes. I hear the quarreling. The little girl is back, not sobbing now, but saying "It scares me. It scares me." A woman's voice asks, "Would Satan write a letter?" "Lucifer is all deceit and trickery." says another "But a woman's life is at stake." says the widow "Who will the Lord punished then" The man's voice booms. "We will relay this to the others" He said "We will study on it, consult and pray and return with our answer." It is not clear, it seems, whether or not, I am the black man, Semenya.

00:38:04

Jonathan Groubert: The late, great Toni Morrison reading for an Amsterdam audience back in 2009. Did you know that you can go to our website, <https://www.john-adams.nl/videos/> where there is a link to the video of this extraordinary event and there's also a link to the video in the show notes of this podcast. We also have a newsletter. You can sign up for a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at <https://www.john-adams.nl/>. And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do here at the podcast, but you will get a discount to future live events. And in the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of this program. This will help get the word out, and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you free of charge. That's it for this week's show. Our theme song is called La Prensa by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracey Metz from Amsterdam. This was Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. I'm Jonathan Gruber. Thank you for listening.