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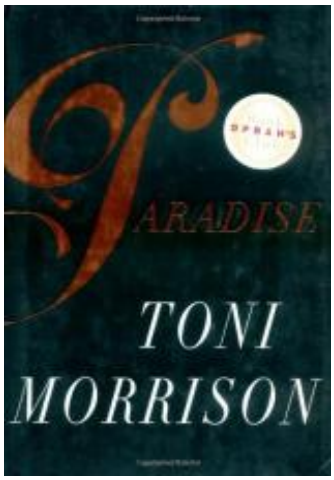
Paradise

by Toni Morrison



About the Book

It is the 1970s, and the tiny, self-sufficient all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, has reached a crisis of conviction. Tracing its origins to the efforts of a strong and spiritual community of ex-slaves, Ruby prides itself on its uncompromising independence from the larger world. But the vicissitudes of the Sixties, from the Civil Rights movement to the Vietnam War, the counterculture to the generational conflict, inexorably touch Ruby and disturb its self-imposed isolation.

In the scrubland outside of Ruby is an old Convent in which five women live, each seeking refuge and deliverance from a grim past. As the townspeople begin to lose their own convictions and succumb to the uncertainties of the times, they come to identify these unknown women with evil, and to use the Convent as a scapegoat for the anger and conflict that have overtaken their town. Tensions between the two communities rise, culminating inevitably in an act of violence; yet **Paradise**, finally, is a story of redemption, of forgiveness, and of renewal. In the intensity of its portrayal of human complexity and motivations, in the sweep of its historical scope, in the beauty of its language and in the generosity of its vision, **Paradise** is a boundless treasure of a book, a masterpiece.

Discussion Guide

1. Why has Toni Morrison chosen to use the poem "for many are the pleasant forms..." as an epigraph for this novel?

2. Why is the Oven such an important symbol for the people of Ruby? What is implied in the various phrases which different groups in Ruby want to inscribe upon it? Soane believes that the Oven has become too important a symbol: "A utility became a shrine (cautioned against not only in scary Deuteronomy but in lovely Corinthians II as well) and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self" (103). Is she right? Does this indeed come to pass?

3. How has the history of Ruby (and Haven before it) shaped the nature of the town in the 1970s? What did "freedom" mean to the original settlers? What varying views of freedom do the modern inhabitants of Ruby hold?

4. Each of the young women living at the Convent is in some way lost. Why does each feel so entirely friendless? What caused Gigi's feeling of hopelessness? What about Pallas? Do you believe that Mavis's children were really trying to harm her, or did she imagine this?

5. "Almost always, these nights, when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost" (82). She adds up some of Steward's losses: his taste buds, the election for church Secretary, the trees on his land, and his discovery that he and Dovey could not have children. What has Steward lost in a larger, more symbolic sense: which of the convictions of the earlier generation he so admires has he himself lost sight of? What do his feelings about his brother Elder's defense of a Liverpool whore (94-95) tell us about his character? Can you see, early in the novel, intimations of what we discover at the end: that Steward and Deacon are essentially different?

6. Who is Dovey's "Friend" and why is he so important to her?

7. The conservative elements in Ruby ultimately find it impossible to keep the impact of the Sixties from affecting their town. What "Sixties" ideas turn out to be the most powerful, the most resonant, for the people of Ruby? Do these ideas destroy the town's social cohesion or give it new strength?

8. What new ways of thinking does Richard Misner represent, and how is he received by the people of Ruby? When Patricia tells him that "Slavery is our past" (212), he insists that "We live in the world....The whole world." Which of them is right? What does Misner mean when he says he thinks the people of Ruby love their children "to death" (212)?

9. "Who could have imagined," think the men who attack the Convent, "that twenty-five years later in a brand-new town a Convent would beat out the snakes, the Depression, the tax man and the railroad for sheer destructive power?" (17). It is clear that the Convent, and the harmless women who have taken refuge there, are not destructive. What is the destructive element in Ruby, and what is it destroying?

10. "Minus the baptisms the Oven had no real value," Soane reflects. (103). What did these baptisms at the Oven symbolize, and how does their removal to the church change Ruby? At the Convent, the women dance in rain and reconcile themselves, finally, to the tragedies in their lives (283). Why does Morrison use, here, the imagery of baptism? Does she imply that this dance is a true baptism; that the Convent has achieved a more genuine spirit of community than the town?

11. What are the circumstances of the death of Ruby, K.D.'s mother, and what effect does the manner of this death have upon on the character of the town that is named after her? What is the "bargain" or "prayer in the form of a deal" (114) that is struck after her death, and who strikes it?

12. Why does Sweetie make for the Convent when she finds herself at the breaking point? Why does she then try to get away from the Convent, and then tell the people of Ruby that the women there are evil?

13. In what ways does the wedding of Arnette and K.D. symbolize the current state of affairs in Ruby?

14. What does the school nativity play tell us about the way Ruby sees itself and mythologizes itself?

15. Is it fair to say that the people of Ruby have perpetuated racism in the town that was supposed to be a haven from it? If so, in what does the town's racism consist?

16. Why does Patricia burn all her research on the history of the Ruby and Haven families?

17. What does Consolata mean when she says "Dear Lord, I didn't want to eat him. I just wanted to go home" (240)? What sort of home does she long for, and why does she associate it with Deacon? Who is the Piedade to whose company Consolata returns after her death (321)? What is the meaning of Consolata's vision on p. 254?

18. How does the death of Sweetie and Jeff's daughter Save-Marie subtly change Ruby? What sort of a future do you envision for the town? Is it possible to see the murders at the Convent as ultimately helping Ruby to evolve and to survive?

19. What do you think lies behind the door or window that Anna and Misner notice as they leave the Convent? Why do they choose not to open it?

20. What is the meaning of the novel's title? What does Paradise mean within the context of the book? "How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it," thinks Misner. Does Morrison imply that it is impossible to create a paradise on earth?

Author Bio

Toni Morrison is the author of 11 novels, from THE BLUEST EYE (1970) to GOD HELP THE CHILD (2015). She received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and in 1993 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. She died in 2019.

Critical Praise

"Paradise is Morrison at her novelistic best...It symbolically explodes one of the myths of race...It is the strangest and most original book that she has written."

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