

Love by Toni Morrison (Chatto and Windus, R240)

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As in Toni Morrison's best-known novel, *Beloved*, the most potent character in this, her eighth novel, is dead – indeed he has been dead for twenty-five years when the book opens, in the 1990s. His influence lives on, however, in the memory of the survivors, and even makes itself felt in the lives of young people who never knew him.

Bill Cosey is something of a folk hero in the town of Silk, somewhere in one of the Southern states. Opening an elegant and upmarket seaside resort for fellow African-Americans during the Depression, Cosey provided non-exploitative, decently paid work as an alternative to the fish-canning factory for his townspeople, and high-class entertainment for well-to-do clients from the cities. He also gathered around him a collection of women, all dependent upon him in a variety of ways – including the book's frame narrator and choric commentator, a woman known simply as L, who served as cook in his hotel and general if not always effectual peace-keeper in the home.

As in all her novels, Morrison uses the family and the community as the focus of larger questions of race, class and gender. Here she examines an aspect of black history that has been relatively neglected: the well-to-do black middle classes before integration, and the effect on them of the Civil Rights movement. As L says, "It comforts everybody to think of all Negroes as dirt poor;" but Bill Cosey "studied ways to contradict history" by creating a playground of privilege for other black people. The hotel thrives because in these pre-integration days, it is one of the few resorts offering quality accommodation and entertainment to black guests. By the same token, it declines because after desegregation these clients can and do go to other resorts.

That, at any rate, is the theory of one of the characters, May, Cosey's daughter-in-law. The novel suggests that there were other powers at work, other tensions closer to home that caused the hotel, as it were, to implode. Central to these tensions was Bill Cosey himself: the forces of history need human agency to assert themselves, and Morrison seamlessly weaves a narrative of people caught up as much in their own designs as in the coils of history. Slavery, so central to Morrison's view of black history, is here little more than a metaphor for the hold one human being asserts over another, either through love or hate.

We are encouraged, at first, to read the novel as, in L's words, "a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down," but we gradually discover that this oversimplified interpretation is coloured by L's own gratitude to Cosey. Behind the squabbling of the "brazen women" lies a whole family history, not of racial oppression, nor even of any deliberate cruelty, just of love gone wrong. As often in Morrison's fiction, there is the baleful influence of the past, in this instance the tainted source of Cosey's money (his father was a courthouse informer in the days when a black man could be lynched on the mere say-so of an informer); but more centrally and timelessly, there is the power of love "that magic ax that chops away the world in one blow, leaving only the couple standing there trembling." As L says, "Its selfishness is its beauty"; and the book has plenty of both selfishness and beauty.

In the book's present tense, the "Cosey women" have been reduced to two old women, Christine and Heed, sharing the family mansion in a kind of paralysis of mutual hatred

and need. Christine is Cosey's granddaughter, Heed was his second wife; confusingly they are the same age, an anomaly which is slowly revealed to stem from the fact that Cosey married Heed when she was eleven. As children, the two women were best friends; Cosey's act turned them into bitter enemies. Even now, twenty-five years after his death, their hatred keeps them together as surely as love: "Like friendship," Heed reflects, "hatred needed more than physical intimacy; it wanted creativity and hard work to sustain itself."

Tirelessly the two women devote themselves to the task of sustaining their hatred. "So you can see why families make the best enemies," comments L; and Christine and Heed are the best of enemies. Into this hellish little establishment strides, on her long legs and in her short dress, Junior, one of those sassy young women Morrison is so good at creating. Fresh from prison, hungry for good food and good sex, Junior finds both here: Christine is an excellent cook, and Romen, their fourteen-year old hired help, is an apt and more than willing pupil. Romen's grandfather recognises in the young man's face, after his sexual initiation, the look of "first ownership" that he also saw in Cosey's way of looking at his women. In Romen's case it is unclear who owns whom: the element of sado-masochism in their love-making becomes an image of all the relationships in this book, intent as much upon pain as pleasure.

Soon the women are conspiring to recruit Junior to their own designs, and as these designs take shape, the narrative also reconstructs and reevaluates the tangled history that produced this situation. Junior, seeing Cosey's portrait and coming to sense his presence in the house, thinks of him as her "Good Man"; but as more and more of the past is revealed, Cosey's claim to that title becomes ever more tenuous. In her closing narrative, L concludes that "you could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man. . . . He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love."

If this seems like a very tame moral, it is arrived at through no humdrum narrative: in this extraordinary novel, Morrison's imagination is as lively as ever, her characters in all their perversity as compelling as ever.