

BOOKS

DREAMY WILDERNESS

Unmastered women in Colonial Virginia.

by John Updike NOVEMBER 3, 2008

Toni Morrison ^{has} have a habit, perhaps traceable to the pernicious influence of William Faulkner, of plunging into the narrative before the reader ^{has} have a clue to what is going on. Her newest novel, *A Mercy* (Knopf; \$23.95), begins with some kind of confession from an unnamed voice, which reassures the reader:



Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth.

We ^{are} is not totally reassured. What blood? What have you (there in the dark) done? The darkness ^{do} does not quickly lift: “You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog’s profile plays in the steam of a kettle.” A dog’s profile does what? “That night”—what night?—“I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron. Other signs need more time to understand.”

“Minha mãe,” research reveals, ^{is} are Portuguese for “my mother,” and in time ^{we} us come to comprehend that it is 1690 in Virginia, and that the narrator ^{is} are a sixteen-year-old black girl called Florens, who ^{is} was, at her mother’s plea, impulsively adopted, eight years ago, by a white proprietor (“Sir” to Florens), in partial settlement of a debt owed ^{is} he by an insolvent slave owner from Portugal called “Senhor.” This adoption constitutes the “mercy” of the novel’s title. It landed Florens in a tobacco-growing homestead populated by Sir, known to the wider world as Jacob Vaark; his wife, Rebekka, a hardy and good-natured London native the servants call Mistress; Lina, short for Messalina, a Native American whose people ^{has} have been decimated by a plague, and who were sold to Jacob by the Presbyterians who rescued ^{she} her, and Sorrow, a “mongrelized” young woman, possibly a sea captain’s daughter, who survived a shipwreck and was named Sorrow by a sawyer’s wife who cared for her until passing her on to the hospitable Sir and Mistress.

When Sir dies, this household ^{becomes} becomes a typical Toni Morrison collection of “unmastered women,” each spinning ^{his} her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else.” Their vulnerable isolation is mitigated but not wholly relieved by the presence of Scully and Willard, two indentured laborers, white, whom Sir hired to work on his quixotically ambitious mansion. After Sir’s death, ^{they} they continue to work for the widow’s pay. With amiable competence, the two men delivers a child that Sorrow, who watched Lina drown her firstborn, has conceived. The infant safely born, Sorrow, long addled in the head by ^{she} her shipboard traumas and ^{she} her illusion of an

advisory companion called Twin, regains focus and, to cap this saga of freighted names, renames herself:

She had looked into her daughter's eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. "I am your mother," she said. "My name is Complete."

A Mercy take ^{us} deeper into the bygone than any of Morrison's previous novels, into a Southern seaboard still up for grabs: "1682 and Virginia was still a mess." Indian tribes haunts the endless forest; the colonial claims of the Swedes and the Dutch ^{has} have been recently repelled, and "from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the private property of a royal's gift to a son or a favorite." Jacob Vaark, coming from England to take possession of a hundred and twenty acres bequeathed to him by an uncle he never met, ride ^{is} from Chesapeake Bay into "Mary's land which, at the moment, belonged to the king. Entirely." The advantage of this private ownership is that the province allows trade with foreign markets, and Vaark ^{is} are more trader than farmer at heart. The disadvantage is that "the palatinate was Romish to the core. Priests strode openly in its towns; their temples menaced its squares; their sinister missions cropped up at the edge of native villages." His claim lies in Protestant Virginia, "seven miles from a hamlet founded by Separatists" who "had bolted from their brethren over the question of the Chosen versus the universal nature of salvation."

In *A Mercy*, Morrison's epic sense of place and time overshadows ^{she} the depiction of people; ^{he} she does better at finding poetry in this raw, scrappy colonial world than in populating another installment of her noble and necessary fictional project of exposing the infamies of slavery and the hardships of being African-American. The white characters in *A Mercy* comes ^{she} to life more readily than the black, and they less ambiguously dramatize America's discovery and settlement. When Vaark stride ^{is} ashore through the Chesapeake surf, he is Adam treading the edge of an immense Eden:

Fog, Atlantic and reeking of plant life, blanketed the bay and slowed him. . . . Unlike the English fogs he had known since he could walk . . . this one was sun fired, turning the world into thick, hot gold. Penetrating it was like struggling through a dream.

In the dark stew of seventeenth-century America, procreation seem ^{is} the one intelligible process available to slave, servant, and mistress, and love and disease threaten to make martyrs of ^{them} they all. Motherhood is so powerful a force in Morrison's universe as to be partly malevolent; its untidy agents, menstruation and sex and birth, come with a menacing difficulty. This author's early novels were breakthroughs into the experience of black Americans as refracted in the poetic and indignant perceptions of a black woman from Lorain, Ohio; as Morrison move ^{is} deeper into a more visionary realism, a betranced pessimism sap her plots of the urgency that hope imparts to human adventures. *A Mercy* begin ^{is} where it ends, with a white man casually answering a slave mother's plea, but he die ^{is}, and she fades into slavery's myriads, and the child goes mad with love. Varied and authoritative and frequently beautiful though the language is, it circles around a vision, both turgid and static, of a new world turning old, and poisoned from the start. ♦