



TONI MORRISON INTERVIEW

THE INTERVIEW ARCHIVE

Toni Morrison, Novelist & Editor

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Interviewed by: Peter Kunhardt

Total Running Time: 43 minutes and 18 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

INTERVIEWER

First of all, thank you very much. Let's talk about your use of the New York Public Library and how important this building is to a writer or an editor or something.

00:00:10

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Toni Morrison

Novelist and Editor

00:00:18

TONI MORRISON



Well, it was primarily important to me when I first came to New York working as an editor and major publishing house. The library was a major, if not the sole, resource for us and we did research, checking copy and so on. In addition to that, before I was an editor and after I stopped, I was a university professor and it always seemed to me that a university really was nothing but a collection of books and a few people who could tell students which ones to read and in what order and maybe spend some time talking about them. If you let a student loose in a huge library for four or five years, at the other end of that time you would probably be an educated person. And I feel the same way. I feel the same way about the New York Public Library

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TONI MORRISON

because it, because it has access that does not require that you enroll in a university. It doesn't require that you have a passport or that you're a citizen, or that you belong to a certain organization, no crisis of faith, no crisis of economy, no crisis of health. None of that is necessary for this institution for access. What I mean to say is a crisis of faith, you join a church; a crisis of health, you identify with a hospital or a rape foundation. This is a privately funded, publicly supported, massive, as well as beautiful, well, matrix, resource for people in New York and its environs, but also for people all over the world. All over the world. The fact that it's also beautiful,

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TONI MORRISON



I think, that kind of marriage is only as it should be. I think I once gave a speech here and I was trying hard when I delivered that speech to figure out what it was about the New York Public Library that I loved. It has a reputation of being supported by New York's elite generously, as most institutions are, but it never abandoned its egalitarian, democratic accessibility and functions. So, the line I came up with for that was "Only the best of everything is good enough for the least of us." So that the restoration of the building was not simply the self-gratification of people who could afford to give, but it was for the enhancement of the intellectual environment of people that have no money whatsoever to come here, to feel comfortable, and to do it in a first class and beautiful environment.

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INTERVIEWER

A symbol of democracy. Do you agree?

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TONI MORRISON

It's more than a symbol, I think it is representative of democracy. It's important to remember that, well, these will be disparate points, but I think they will answer that question. My vested interests are historical ones. It was illegal for Black people in this country to learn to read when they were slaves here. Punishable in all of the states of the South by very serious incarcerations and fines. White people were fined and punished if they taught Black people to read. You understand from that point how important reading



is. Skip to New York and the immigrants and the people who learned English and the literature as well as savoring their own literature here in this library.

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TONI MORRISON

Compound that with what I have mentioned earlier about its accessibility to anyone and to everyone, that nothing special is needed, no card, no visa, in order to come and enjoy and participate in the bounty of this library. Also, its network, what is of primary interest to me, are the branch libraries, out in those boroughs. Every one of us, I think, wherever we grew up, remembers that first library. One dreams about it, because those buildings still operate very much as a kind of formation of early buildings one has gone into. I was in the Bahamas about two years ago to speak at a library, its, I don't know, 100th anniversary. And it was in a very small but lovely sort of colonial house.

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TONI MORRISON

And when I got there, I realized it had only been open, this is in the Bahamas, to the Black population for 20 years. What was interesting was that no grown, no adult there had a favorable recollection from childhood of that library. Whenever they walked past that building, they remembered they were not allowed in. That's a very monumental memory to carry from childhood, but in the borough libraries, the local libraries, the libraries for the blind, the Schomburg Library and the county [unclear], the adults and their parents can remember walking past those buildings and being welcomed there of its



being a place they were invited into, so that reading, education, the culture that is

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TONI MORRISON

mainstream, the culture is European, the culture that is very much ethnic is part of the total picture of what libraries offer. Now that, to me, is the function of a democracy. It's not the posture of the democratic principles, it's the activity of a democratic government, and certainly a democratic institution.

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INTERVIEWER

Just to follow up a little bit about the branches, why are the branches so important to the community?

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TONI MORRISON

A number of reasons, principally I think, or at least primarily, for the children. You know, I don't remember my life before I could read. I have no picture of what there was. I learned to read early. A local library, a branch library offers a child a chance not only to learn but to become an articulate, self-conscious person. You are surrounded by books. Adults tell you how to use them. The intimacy that exists between a reader and the book is like no other intimacy. There's a bit of control, as well as surrender when you read.



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TONI MORRISON

Adults sit those children down and tell them stories and read to them in these little semi-circles. They hear, they look, they read, they learn to speak and have a variety of ideas outside the family, in which it may be an entirely different situation. But you learn to become an adult, in a sense. This is the beginning of civilized, intelligent behavior that often happens right there in a little library down the street. The books that you can't buy are yours. You touch them. You feel the paper. You look at the pictures. Those memories don't go away. And it introduces you to the world of one's own mind that is powerful and permanent. Not having that, I mean, when you think of the literature of countries and this country before there was a public library system.

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PRODUCTION

Can you stop?

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TONI MORRISON

Oh, I'm sorry. I do go on.

00:09:27

PRODUCTION

No, no, no. OK. We can continue.



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TONI MORRISON

What was I saying? I don't know. Oh, what it must have been like in this country before there was a library system. I mean, you read the diaries and journals of people. It's focused heavily, whether it's Frederick Douglass's slave narrative or the recollections of Thomas Jefferson, when they learned to read, who taught them, who spoke to them, when that happened. It's cataclysmic. There are other kinds of knowledge. There are ways to perceive the world. This is special. And connected to all of that are those borough libraries, those libraries all around the central one that's in Manhattan. And now, of course, much more specialized library for the blind, theater library collections, adjusting themselves to the disabled audio. Everything to make it possible for people to absorb and to talk back to, because it is a talking back relationship, to books.

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INTERVIEWER

Let's talk about Schomburg for a second. Howard Dodson told us in an interview that Black Americans don't have much history that they can put their hands on and that Schomburg tries to fill that gap. Can you talk about the Schomburg Library and its importance to the Black American?

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TONI MORRISON



The Schomburg operates in a very unique fashion for Black Americans, and not just Black Americans but Blacks in the diaspora as well. Families keep, as all families do, photographs and letters and papers connected with their own situations. Two or three generations pass, nobody knows quite what to do with that, throw it in the trash can or what have you, photographs, all sorts of things. Because the separate and special history of African Americans had, for years, been discredited in the academy, and also because it was a marginal pursuit rather than a major pursuit, a lot of resources were either thrown away or were not kept. And now the

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TONI MORRISON

Schomburg provides a place where it can come. In a very simple sense, you wouldn't imagine that, I don't know, a working-class family in Chicago, for example, who's been in Chicago since, I don't know, 1904, and the family has kept all the records. But what do they do at this fifth or sixth generation? Nobody wants to read that stuff anymore. But it is very important. It may be about labor movements. It may be about how Blacks were living in Chicago in 1904. It may be church information. One of the things that Schomburg did was get the records of some of the Black churches that had missions in Africa and the correspondence between Black churches here and Black churches in Africa. And some of them involve correspondence between people who have since become leaders of African countries. Those are extraordinarily valuable documents. So, there's really almost nothing of any major, that any...



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TONI MORRISON

almost nothing that a family can collect that does not have some value in terms of the kinds of research that now is being launched among African Americans. Now that that part of American history is side by side, cheek by jowl, with the history of the country at large, it has... It's dynamic. It's theatrical. It's data. It's recollections. It fills out a picture of this country that has been sketchy in certain areas. And the Schomburg functions... I think it's wonderful. And I've seen these families at the death of a grandmother, for example, who kept all of the trunks of things so relieved and happy to have these papers placed some place where the memory goes on and it is also of some interest to scholars.

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INTERVIEWER

We interviewed Harry Belafonte, who tells us how important Schomburg had been to him growing up in the theater. Using him as an example, can you discuss Schomburg's importance to Black entertainers and performers and things like that?

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TONI MORRISON

Well, I've come to learn a great deal about the Schomburg in that area since I've been here. Ossie Davis talks a lot about his experience at the Schomburg because of the theater there, literal theater, where they performed, and what



that meant professionally. Now, of course, they will have a theater at the Schomburg again, and now, of course, it will be possible. You know, not the commercial theater, not that sort of enormous and painful soliciting of a place on Broadway, but the places where real theater takes place in neighborhoods and among ethnic groups, where you have talent that can hone its instruments outside of the larger commercial world, but very much inside

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TONI MORRISON

its own community, where the criteria are very high. You know, within these groups, you cannot... I mean, go to the Apollo, it's legendary for throwing people off the stage, you really cannot perform, and the same thing is true in these small theaters. And to have that available now, as it was in the early 30s, and later in the 40s when Mr. Belafonte was starting out his career is critical, is critical.

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INTERVIEWER

We walked into the... I mean they're renovating the old theater space, the American Negro Theater, and they're of course building a new theater. And we walked Mr. Belafonte into the room where he started.

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TONI MORRISON

Really?

00:16:06

INTERVIEWER

And his eyes lit up, the same way Howard Fast's eyes lit up, and he talked about it, about the feelings of what it was like starting there and the importance of the Schomburg Center to entertainers. And I'm wondering, how does that reflect today upon young Black entertainers, performers, or white for that matter, but up in that area, how do you get them interested?

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TONI MORRISON

I don't know. It's very difficult. It is extremely difficult for all theater people in-.

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PRODUCTION

I'm gonna interrupt, I'm sorry.

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INTERVIEWER

[unclear] a library there and it had an 1897 cornerstone and I'm very curious. I think I'm going to go back next time and say, when were people really allowed to use this?

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TONI MORRISON

I'm sure that was [unclear], yeah.

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INTERVIEWER

So, we were talking about Schomburg and Belafonte starting there and then maybe what it means to kids today.

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TONI MORRISON

Well, I'm hoping that the Schomburg will end up in the theatrical realm, very much like Lincoln Center, with massive collections of memorabilia, and also with the presence of those new theaters, make it possible for young, new Black people, kids, who really wanna go into legitimate theater, who really want to get a start, to have access that is just not available to them via agents and commercials. Broadway productions and so on, for the stage, for where, the place where one speaks. It's not just important for the actors, it's critical for the playwrights. You can't have, you can't even nourish a generation or two or three playwrights unless you have a place where their work can be seen and not censored and not shaped for whatever may be the fashionable theme of the day. These places have got

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TONI MORRISON to be truly available to controversial theater, to different theater, to pointed theater, to all sorts of things that mainstream cannot bear.



And that business of the cooperation of the actors, the playwrights, and the training of directors of all the staff people you need for theater. That's the vision. That began at one time with the Negro Theater in Harlem. It has since been supplemented by the Negro Ensemble Company, but you cannot rely on one company to do this, one La Mama, one NEC. You need a lot of places for this incredible talent. The saddest thing, of course, for an artist or for people who are known to be creative and artistic is to have no platform. They're going to be created in any case. The problem is trying to get that creativity turned away from what may be destructive and what may be self-flagellation into these powerful, beautiful, constructive means, and the Schomburg provides that possibility.

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INTERVIEWER

I didn't step on that line, did I?

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PRODUCTION

No, I think you were alright. I mean, you're just mixed in with all the traffic noise. It's okay. You're aware of it.

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INTERVIEWER

Yeah. Yeah, it's no problem. That's very good. The one more question about Schomburg in terms of



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PRODUCTION

Jeff, are you going to need that light? If you are, I can hide it. I can just hide it in a second.

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INTERVIEWER

In terms of what is called, quote, Black identity, how do you think Schomburg affects it and defines it?

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TONI MORRISON

It's a complicated problem, the process of identifying Black identity, which is good. I mean, the controversy is what's important in the formulation of an identity. Are we, indeed, Americans? Are we, indeed, Americans with a hyphen? Are we, indeed, displaced Africans? All of those questions have been surfacing among the Black population since the beginning, and I don't think they're going to disappear. The problem is not only with Black identity. The problem is with white identity: the construction of a white person. The need for the construction of a white person, we assume it's just a fallout of skin. It isn't a German in Berlin is

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TONI MORRISON



German, a German in New York is a New Yorker, a German who walks into my house becomes white. Now, I don't do that. He does that. It does that. That's the shaping of a racist and racialist society. Now why the construction of a white person was so necessary and so pernicious and is even now metaphorically necessary. You know, the formulation of an American needs a non-American. The formulation of American is a white person it obviously needs non-white people. Native Americans functioned that way for a while. African Americans function that way still. And one still assumes that African Americans or Black people are poor. It's a substitute word

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TONI MORRISON

for the dispossessed: poor people. Even though it's not statistically true that most of the poor people in the country are Black. They could hardly be, since they don't make up that large number. But we are associating the associative value of the other, of the outside world. It's important it has been imposed on Black people. I go on at length about that only because it informs the debate about Black identity. It cannot be settled without its analogous question, what is white identity? But the Schomburg offers a platform for such a debate as that. For those questions to be discussed, pro and con, about what does all of this mean, so that the formation of the identity and all of its attendant questions can be aired there, documented there, written about there, analyzed there. And it is the process of having an identity that is even more important than finally having one.



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INTERVIEWER

Let me just switch gears a little bit and come back to... This building, the main library. Or maybe just actually libraries in general, a couple of general questions. You touched on it: why is it important for the library to be free?

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TONI MORRISON

Too little else is, there's got to be something first rate in the world, first rate in the word, some bounty in the World that is free, something that you don't have to pay for. It can't be exclusive. It can't leave knowledge in the hands of just a few people who can manipulate it any way they wish. I am a writer. It is my determination to write texts that appeal to all kinds of people, viscerally and intellectually, to provide no escape from certain kinds of realizations, and at the same time to provide a certain kind of welcome and hope.

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TONI MORRISON

I don't do it because I am... The word author suggests some authoritarian sovereignty, but it is the opening up of whatever my vision is to anyone who wants to step in. That is what is true about books. They must be free. There is nothing that is more fearful in terms of being a writer or working as I do on the Board of Trustees here than the notion of some arbitrary selector of what can be read, and how it can be distributed, who should read it, and it is to be written. So, it's not only the freedom of access to the books in the library, it's

the fact that books themselves are, by the nature of the beast, open. Books open.

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INTERVIEWER

The title that we are considering for the show is going to be called The People's Palace. And if you agree with that term, what do you think about that phrase?

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TONI MORRISON

Oh, I like that. I like it for a number of reasons. One is you know when people think about egalitarianism and

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INTERVIEWER

If you can tell me this back, but using the phrase, my questions will not be used.

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TONI MORRISON

Oh, I see.

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INTERVIEWER



Sorry. We call it the People's Palace.

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TONI MORRISON

So, what should I say? Oh, I like that title, The People's Palace or something like that?

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INTERVIEWER

Yeah, or just in terms of... In referring to the term of People's Palace, so what do you think about the title?

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TONI MORRISON

When people talk about democracy and egalitarianism, sometimes they think of the conflict between the rich and the poor. I always think that the focus and the goal of a democracy is that everybody's rich, not there are less poor people, but that everybody shares in the bounty. The New York Public Library, a kind of people's palace, suggests exactly that idea that everyone has access to the beauty and the bounty and all of the power that knowledge really provides.

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INTERVIEWER



Tell me about, let's talk about New York City and what it is, and then zero in on what the library means to New York city.

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TONI MORRISON

New York does not have the plaza in Rome, the Place of Paris. It has Central Park, and it has a few small areas around the river, but it does have the New York Public Library right in the middle of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street. It's a major thoroughfare. It's where people are going to work, shopping, tourists, local people. And in the middle of that true life of a major city is this very theatrical, very grand, very aristocratic palace. To walk, and to intend to walk up those flights of stairs, you have to be serious if you're my age. And when you get

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TONI MORRISON

there, you are in a place of dreams that is yours. And to have it not off somewhere, not hidden behind trees, or inaccessible, or back behind winding paths, but to have it right on the street. 42nd Street, after all, is 42nd street. And it covers this entire block like a queen who loves us all.

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INTERVIEWER

What do you think New York would be without it?



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TONI MORRISON

A hole in the ground. New York Without the Public Library is, is poor. It would be a poorer place because you would have Wall Street, Central Park, a sort of cosseted cuddled place protected, and a wilderness protected by man is not wilderness, and some grand old houses. The heartbeat, the heart that even pulls together all the theater districts, as well as the commercial districts that's all around. Without that, I can't imagine what the... Maybe the center wouldn't hold without the library.

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INTERVIEWER

Um... Or why our libraries are so important to civilization.

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TONI MORRISON

Well, a civilized society has got to be civil, not just great in terms of its military, it has to be civil. It has to share information about each other. It has to know what it is like to be another person or to be in another place. It has to have that knowledge so it cannot be tricked, cheated, manipulated, taken for granted. One of the reasons the Dark Ages were dark was not only because of the absence of electricity but because books were in the hands of very few people, the clergy for the most part, and distributed as almost secrets. A code had to be broken. Once that was at its peak,



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TONI MORRISON

the population can be told anything, drawn into any kind of activity, hurt itself, go without, not understand its rights, not assert itself. Once books become available and people have the ability as well as the right to distinguish among ideas, to develop sympathies for and antipathies toward ideas, cultures, histories, whatever, and to simply have a community of readers like them, or a community of readers who don't share their opinions, where they exchange ideas. Now that is true empowerment. That's truly enabling a citizenry. And when you have a learned, knowledgeable citizenry, you have indeed the beginnings, if not the apex of a civilized society.

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INTERVIEWER

And the libraries bring that together.

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TONI MORRISON

The libraries are the only ways unless you have a private library or unless you go to the bookstore and you have the money to do it. It's not available to any society unless there are free and public libraries.

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INTERVIEWER



Talk about the librarians. How important. How do you describe the librarians that run this wonderful thing?

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TONI MORRISON

Oh, they're amazing. I have, I think all writers have this, you know, affection for librarians that's irrational. My first job as a, I don't know, 13-year-old, was to push the carts, the cart pusher, restoring the books back to their shelves in the little public library in the small town that I grew up in. And I remember the day when I was permitted to stand at the reference desk and answer the questions on the telephone as they came in. Those four or five librarians for whom I worked, myself and my sister, those years were as important to us as any adults we knew. So, coming to New York and having close contact with staff and librarians in the boroughs here has just reinforced this almost radiance that I attach to the librarian.

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TONI MORRISON

Not only because they're knowledgeable, but also because of the, it's an almost missionary zeal that they have about the work they do. Now, of course, library strategies are, and information is, much more complicated than it was even 20 years ago. They're real... They're handling information and data at every level. They preserve the book as a classic example of how information is transmitted, but they cannot stop there. Information has to be gotten quickly, a lot of it has to be sorted through, so they have to be very



adept not only at electronic systems delivery, but also the formation of such systems so that people can indeed have information quickly. We mentioned earlier about the New York Public Library being a world library. The whole country uses the resources of this library, second only,

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TONI MORRISON

probably, and maybe not even second to the Library of Congress, in a certain way, much more available. That deliverance of information via whatever means, whether it's the actual text itself on loan or electronic data, these librarians are really top-notch and they're very much on the mark with all the new technology. It must be extraordinary.

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INTERVIEWER

It's changing. Do you think the library has a function of being a teacher?

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TONI MORRISON

In the best sense, in the best sense of being a teacher, which is to say, if teaching means removing cataracts and opening doors and stirring up and unsettling a little bit, then that's what the library can do because of what's available here. If it means, you know, sort of shooting information into the mind as though it were, I don't know, a quart of milk you could sort of pour more in, then that's not what this place is for. As a teacher, one has to demand



the participation of the student. A good teacher helps you teach yourself. That's what the library does. It helps you to teach yourself, it makes us all auto-dictates in a way. You have to find your way. There's some guidance, there's some information. There's somebody to lead, but there's no one to simply tell you all you need to know. That's the best kind of teaching, and that's what the library can do.

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INTERVIEWER

What is the mission of the New York Public Library?

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TONI MORRISON

Sometimes I think the mission of the library is to hold back chaos, to just be risk takers, and generous, and orderly, and compassionate, and firm in the middle of what sometimes seems to be total disorder outside these walls, where frequently the media are out of control or completely controlled, where there may be schools where are so broken, full of such despair, so underfunded, so painful for those

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TONI MORRISON

students to go into those buildings and pretend that real education is available to them there. So many places where violence and money are sovereign. There is an enormous amount of serious despair. And the library,



sometimes when I'm feeling romantic, seems to be the kind of place that holds back those forces, maintains itself as a combination of all these elements of egalitarianism, democracy, freedom, bounty, and accessibility.

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INTERVIEWER

I'm getting very close to the end, maybe a two-part question.

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TONI MORRISON

This is gonna be 90 seconds. I love this stuff.

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INTERVIEWER

It's great stuff.

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TONI MORRISON

[unclear] part two.

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INTERVIEWER

What scares you about the library in the future.

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TONI MORRISON

Oh, I have a number of fears about the future. They're all connected to money, of course. And money is something you have to consider when you think about preserving. I am fearful that books will disintegrate, literally. I think people know that publishers are using paper that doesn't last, or it lasts 20 years, because they say it's too expensive, and there are very few publishers who still use real paper, [unclear] content, that might last 300 years. So, there's that, that the books may simply not exist. I am also fearful of a certain insidious kind of censorship that runs through certain areas of education in this country about what is

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TONI MORRISON

suitable for people to read, so that that little thread of censorship troubles me. So that acquisition, the funding of acquisition, so that all titles are available is important. Preserving the books, having the books, acquiring them in the first place, and also, the notion that the library is not vital to the life of the city troubles me a lot because in days like these where everybody is broke and everybody is cutting back, everybody has to take or make a sacrifice, there is some suspicion in the public at large and perhaps in the administrations

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TONI MORRISON



in general, that the library is easy to cut, that it's all right, that it's superfluous, that it may even be a luxury. There is nothing that is, well, let me put it this way, to make... Frequently this happens, you make a library, or an art compete with food medicine. And everyone says yes, but food is more important, medicine is more important, etc. The police are more important. Well, I have to tell you, I want Social Security too, and I certainly intend to feed my family, but I can live without those two things for longer than

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TONI MORRISON

I can live without books and my active imagination. The absence of that is what kills people. You take away knowledge, and you take away art, you don't have anything. That's real death, because that is the death of the soul as well as the intelligence.

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INTERVIEWER

Just one thing I want to follow up on. Who can walk through those doors downstairs?

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TONI MORRISON

Everybody can walk through those doors downstairs. The curious, the cold, the clever, the learned. The people who want help, and the people want to deliver help. All seekers. All seekers.

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INTERVIEWER

And then finally, just the future on the good side, not the fears. What are your hopes, dreams about where this library fits?

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TONI MORRISON

The dream is that the New York Public Library will clone itself and that it will be a model for libraries all over the country. Not necessarily the size, but the attitude, its integrity, its class. You could get libraries all over the country to assert themselves into the budgetary concerns of their local governments and take pride in their collections, in their funding capabilities, their buildings, their sense of history. It would delight me if the pride of place that I give to the New York Public Library in this country actually became a place that was imitated, copied, and reproduced in the capital cities all over this country.

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Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.