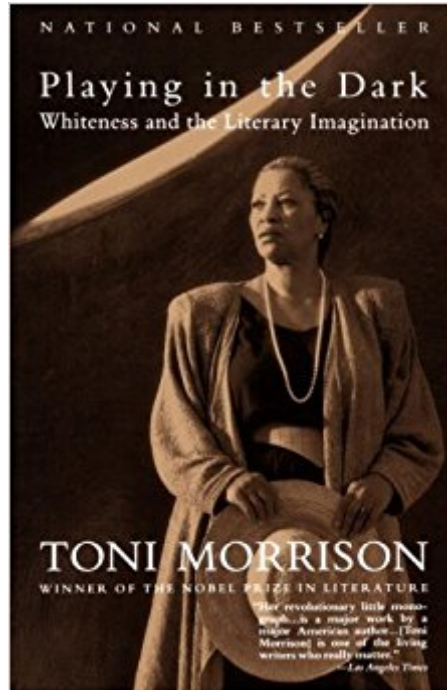


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Playing In The Dark: Whiteness And The Literary Imagination



Synopsis

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Beloved* and *Jazz* now gives us a learned, stylish, and immensely persuasive work of literary criticism that promises to change the way we read American literature even as it opens a new chapter in the American dialogue on race. Toni Morrison's brilliant discussions of the "Africanist" presence in the fiction of Poe, Melville, Cather, and Hemingway leads to a dramatic reappraisal of the essential characteristics of our literary tradition. She shows how much the themes of freedom and individualism, manhood and innocence, depended on the existence of a black population that was manifestly unfree--and that came to serve white authors as embodiments of their own fears and desires. Written with the artistic vision that has earned Toni Morrison a pre-eminent place in modern letters, *Playing in the Dark* will be avidly read by Morrison admirers as well as by students, critics, and scholars of American literature. "By going for the American literary jugular...she places her arguments...at the very heart of contemporary public conversation about what it is to be authentically and originally American. [She] boldly...reimagines and remaps the possibility of America."--Chicago Tribune "Toni Morrison is the closest thing the country has to a national writer."--The New York Times Book Review

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Customer Reviews

The first few pages are tough going, if like me, it's been ages since you picked up critical theory. Once Morrison fleshes out her key assertions, among them the parasitic nature of white identity • in American literature, the book begins to enthrall. I can't speak to how much she

adds to this critical lens of race because I'm not well read in this area (though she clearly owes a lot to James Snead whom she quotes at length), but I can speak to the accessibility of her ideas and fascinating discoveries. I would add that a psychoanalytic lens is also in play making for many "searching-of-brow-while-nodding-deliberately" moments. Morrison wants to establish the "American brand of Africanism" reified in canonical texts, and so relies mostly on giants such as Cather, Poe, Melville, Twain and Hemingway. (Styron is as contemporary as she gets.) The text braids three lectures making for a powerful but not overpowering exposure to her ideas, meant to be understood on the first hearing and now reading. Considering the density of the material, I appreciated this lighter treatment, though I would have welcomed more examples. The following passage summarizes many of her inquiries: "How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an Africanist other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter? What does the inclusion of Africans or African Americans do and for the work? As a reader my assumption had always been that nothing "happens": Africans and their descendants were not, in any sense that matters, "there"; and when they were there, they were decorative" displays of the agile writer's technical expertise.

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