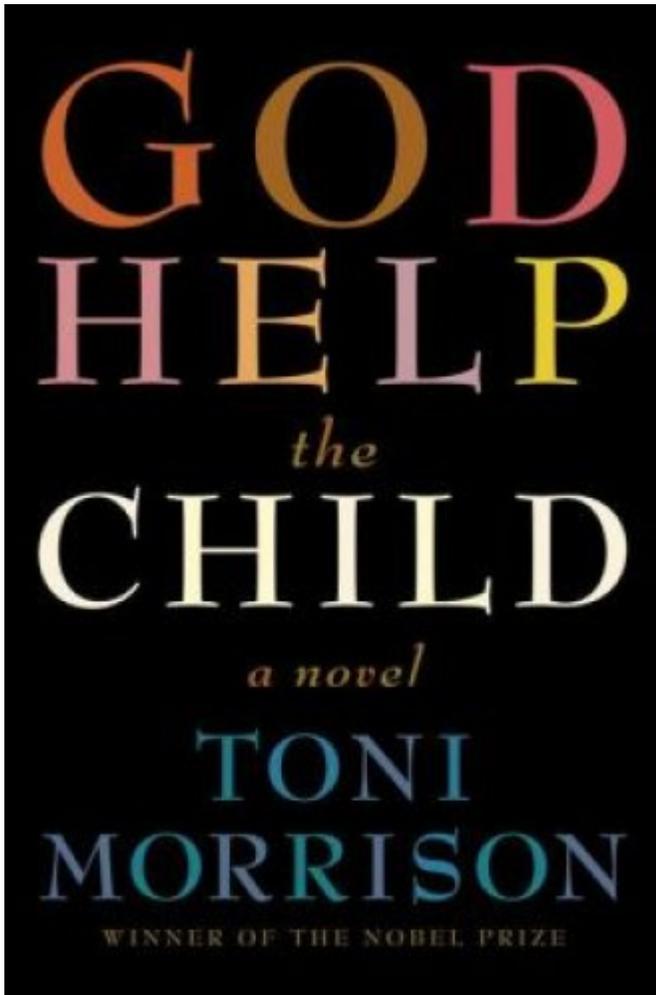


God Help the Child, by Toni Morrison

reviewed by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

In Review



God Help the Child

By Toni Morrison
Knopf

In her 11th novel Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison has returned to the foundation of most of her fiction: childhood and its traumatic effects. In *God Help the Child*, she takes her central character, a woman named Bride, back to childhood in order to

move her forward.

Bride's mother, Sweetness, is at the root of her pain. Sweetness spends most of the novel trying to explain why she was never able to love her daughter. "It's not my fault," she says, that her daughter was born with black skin. "I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow," she protests, using a vocabulary for skin color and value that seems to come from another era. But her daughter is "midnight black, Sudanese black, . . . a throwback, but a throwback to what?" Sweetness is not able to overcome her horror at her daughter's skin color, and she spends all her energy trying to justify the unjustifiable. "It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not."

In the absence of her mother's love and acceptance, Bride has to find a different vocabulary for color. She is a beautiful and successful woman in the cosmetics industry and is about to launch a new cosmetic line called YOU, GIRL for "girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk." Underneath her success, however, is a lie that she told to win her mother's affection. When she was a small child, she helped convict an innocent woman in a daycare center of sexual abuse. This lie has haunted her, and on the day the woman is released from prison, Bride goes to visit her with money and gifts.

Throughout the novel, children who have been sexually abused appear and disappear as mysterious visions. Bride sees her childhood landlord raping a small boy in an alleyway. She tells her mother, but Sweetness refuses to respond. Another child whose mother exploited her for money appears along Bride's path. Abuse shapes Bride's closest friend. Child sexual abuse touches every person of every color in this novel and is perhaps its most important marker for the utter failure of adults to feel the pain of children. Adults are perpetrators of pain or selfish hoarders of love. Again and again "the child" of the novel's title appears already wounded by their failures.

Meanwhile, Bride's lover, a man named Booker, abandons her with the mysterious words, "You not the woman I want," and with his abandonment something very strange happens to Bride's body. First her pubic hair disappears. Then her earlobes lose the piercings her mother gave her when she testified against the daycare worker. It is as if her body is returning to the one she had before the lie. Is this return death, disease, or redemption?

Along with its themes of empathy and the return to childhood, the book is about belonging. Few of the characters know how to feel it or how to claim it. The word's two meanings—ownership and connection—are frequently confused. With Booker, Bride feels “colonized somehow.” She finds this sense of being owned pleasant but unsettling.

Perhaps believing that her readers will be as confounded on the subject of belonging as her characters, so locked up are we in our own perspectives, Morrison stages an incredibly corny moment in the middle of the novel when two characters break out singing “This Land Is Your Land.” To whom do we belong and why? the novel wants to know. Can we belong without being enslaved?

In *God Help the Child* the markers of classic Toni Morrison are here: shifting narrators and perspectives that make it difficult to know who is talking to whom and how much they can be trusted, a far richer and more interesting vocabulary to talk about race and racial identity than we are used to, and something strange going on with the physical body of the main character. All of this adds up to a rich, if odd, meditation on national identity, race, and family identity—all rooted in the problem of childhood. *God Help the Child* made me think of a saying of Jesus: “Unless you turn and become like little children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” This novel is something like midrashic commentary on that saying.