

années—elle rentre à Montréal, la direction lui confie des reportages de débutants et met des mois avant de l'affecter aux affaires publiques. Peu de temps avant de mourir, elle reçoit le prix Olivar-Asselin, le grand prix québécois de journalisme.

La biographie de Judith Jasmin est un témoignage émouvant et captivant sur la vie de cette grande femme, mais aussi un grand pan de l'histoire de Radio-Canada, des débuts de la télévision nationale de langue française; c'est aussi l'histoire de quelques femmes et hommes intellectuels qui ont contribué à la Révolution tranquille; c'est enfin l'histoire de la famille, des amis et amies, et des amants de la journaliste.

Avant de mourir, Judith avait demandé à sa famille de détruire tous ses papiers qu'elle trouvait sans intérêt. Madame Jasmin, elle, a décidé de les conserver afin de les remettre aux Archives nationales du Québec. Pour écrire la biographie de Judith Jasmin, Colette Beauchamp a donc eu accès au fonds Judith Jasmin—journal intime, lettres, textes, etc.—et aux archives personnelles de Marie-Claude Jasmin, la soeur de Judith. Puisque Judith est morte encore jeune, la biographe a aussi réalisé quelques quatre-vingts entrevues avec ceux et celles qui ont vécu et travaillé avec Judith Jasmin et d'autres qui l'ont connue et aimée. Le travail de Colette Beauchamp est remarquable; elle fait revivre avec une intensité extraordinaire la femme publique et la femme privée; elle apporte à la mise en forme de la biographie les qualités mêmes qui ont caractérisé la carrière de Judith Jasmin: la passion, la rigueur intellectuelle et l'émotion.

Par son travail passionné, Colette Beauchamp a rendu Judith Jasmin à l'histoire des femmes du Québec, à l'histoire du journalisme au Québec et à l'histoire générale du Québec.

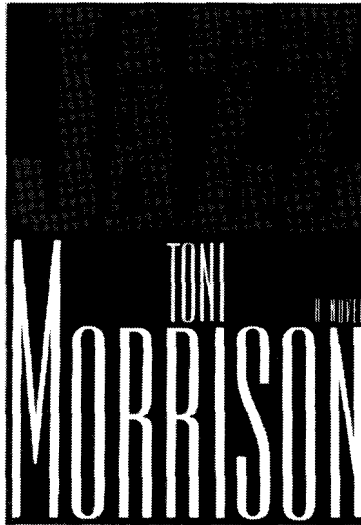
JAZZ

Toni Morrison. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.

by Andrea O'Reilly

We often look back upon important days in our lives and realize that certain omens were there to foreshadow the event. Such

was the case the day I learned about Toni Morrison's most recent novel, *Jazz*. Last spring rumours were afloat that her new novel was soon to be released. At that time I was writing my dissertation on Morrison and putting together an English course on Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. However my thoughts were not on Morrison the day *Jazz* came into my life. It was a



Friday in early April and I was on my way to see a play about the life of Aphra Behn with a woman in Toronto. The day began beautifully with the promise of Spring but by late afternoon Demeter had been summoned back to the Underworld and Winter, in all of its fury, had returned to us. Bracing myself against the wind and cold I trudged up Bathurst Street reflecting upon the bet my son had made with his dad about how we had seen the last of Winter and lamenting the fact that dad and not my son had been right again this year. Such were my thoughts as I entered Third World Books. The store was a refuge from the ravages of Winter outside; I needed some books and had time to spare before meeting my friend.

Third World Books is one of the few remaining old-fashioned neighbourhood bookstores in Toronto: cozy and quaint, it is cluttered with a delightful assortment of books and is blissfully free of neon colours, chrome, and fluorescent lights. Books are not fastidiously catalogued as they are in the new high-tech bookstores; rather they are scattered here and there on shelves, tabletops, wherever open space may be found. I remember I was looking for a book—I think it was Henry Louis

Gates *Reading Black, Reading Feminist*—and I moved aside a stack of books to reach some others piled on the floor. And there at the bottom of the pile was a book entitled *Jazz* by none other than Toni Morrison. To say I was surprised would be an understatement. I had not expected to find this much-anticipated novel at the back of a store underneath a pile of books discovered by accident. I had thought the publication of Morrison's sixth novel would have been publicly declared by a window display, a review in the paper or, at the very least, a call from my supervisor. But instead I had found a book I was not looking for. Like me and the April blizzard outside: I had been unprepared for the unexpected.

Reading *Jazz* is like that: you are never certain what you are looking for and you are surprised when you find it. When I read *Jazz* I was reminded of those mazes in children's colouring books: the narrative is full of twists and turns, dead-ends, spirals and circles which require you to back up, retrace your steps, try an alternative route. Just when you think you have the storyline figured out, it takes an unexpected turn and the reader is reminded of the "torturing" pattern of Gilman's infamous *Yellow Wallpaper* which "slaps you in the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you."¹ Tidbits of important information are dropped casually by the narrator and are not explained. At the beginning of the story the narrator describes Violet as carrying an imagined lightness which could be "distributed, if need be, into places dark at the bottom of a well." Only later are we told that Violet's mother committed suicide by jumping into a well: this information, of course, radically alters the meaning of the original observation. This happens throughout the telling of the story. The narrator hands out fragments of facts and it is up to the reader to patiently wait for their disclosure and then to make sense of them; arrange and rearrange the pieces in an attempt to give shape to them as you do with a jigsaw puzzle.

The story *Jazz* is actually quite simple: an adulterous love affair that ends in the murder of a young woman and the reconciliation of the husband and the wife. It is the shifting perspectives and growing awareness of the narrator that gives the story its complexity. Trustworthy, relia-

able, objective, the narrator is not; but at least she is up front about her biases and limitations. As she says of the white man Golden Boy: "He is lying, the hypocrite ... he thinks his story is wonderful But I know better." And at the end of her narrative she reflects: "I started out believing that life was made just so the world would have some way to think about itself I don't believe anymore." This style of narration, however, may, as Deborah McDowell points out in her recent review of *Jazz*, "vex and frustrate those who seek the familiar satisfaction of a fast and easy read, alienate those who do not share the novel's assumptions that there is more to reading than tracing characters and plots."²

As with Morrison's earlier novels, a central theme in *Jazz* is mothering. This theme is of particular interest to me as I am currently writing on mothering in the fiction of Morrison. *Jazz*, though, is about the *absence* of mothering; a text which gives narrative form to the spiritual "Sometimes I feel Like a Motherless Child." Violet's mother commits suicide by jumping into the family well and Dorcas's mother is burned to death in a house fire. Joe's mother, Wild, was "a woman too brain blasted to do what the meanest sow managed; nurse what she birthed." The mothers' deaths by fire and water and Wild's life inside the earth is like the many other metaphors of this text; richly suggestive yet exasperatingly elusive. Why is the loss of a mother associated with the elements of Fire, Water, and Earth? This puzzle, though, like the many others set out by the narrator—and Morrison—is left to the reader to piece together.

I share McDowell's view that *Jazz* "stirs the mind more than the heart": *Jazz* is an intellectual book in which the act of telling is as important as what is told.³ As Toni Morrison remarked in a recent interview: "I wanted the book to be itself an act of creation, to be the subject of its own imagination."⁴ Indeed, you may need to read *Jazz* a few times to fully appreciate both the telling and the told. But I assure you, you will be, as I was that cold April day, most delighted with what you find.

¹Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Yellow Wallpaper* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press), 25.

²Deborah McDowell, "Harlem nocturne," *The Women's Review of Books*, June 1992: 3.

³McDowell, 4.

⁴Susan Cole, "Toni Morrison" in *now Magazine*, April 30-May 6, 1992.

MAIN BRIDES

Gail Scott. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993.

by Nanci White

Lydia, the voyeur barfly narrator of Gail Scott's novel *Main Brides*, regards herself as a philosophical investigator of the late 20th century. Fascinated by the various personalities and personas she observes from the safety of her wine-induced critical detachment, she concocts for herself a powerful *pousse café*, stacking together the layers of female lives rushing by her on The Main in Montreal.

Believing herself seeing but not seen, she carries on this daily and nightly investigation from the Olympian purview of "her" table in a crowded brasserie. Stretching out the marathon hours of her vigil with endless carafons of wine occasional brandies and regular bulimic episodes to maintain her precarious equilibrium, Lydia is, in reality, avoiding the terror of returning home to an empty apartment and an even emptier life.

Like all compulsive voyeurs, Lydia fears involvement. Preferring the hard edges of intellectual constructs, she is uncomfortable with any experience over which she cannot exercise total control. By subjecting all the women of the district (whom she labels "Main Brides") to her critical scrutiny and the operations of her fervid imaginings, she weaves their several lives into a tapestry of her own design. Jumping off from the external signifiers of hair styles, fashion, accessories and mannerisms, Lydia conjures heroines out of passersby, shaping a tenuous solidarity out of evanescent strangers.

The "brides" themselves, however, are not completely unaware of this isolated watcher in their midst. Some, like Nanette, a drug-dealing beautiful teenager, is openly contemptuous of her, while the

lesbian lovers are only passingly curious about the rather straight-looking "chick" at the adjacent table. What none cares to guess at is the voyeur's greed that feeds on their fragile glamour or her barely suppressed rage against circumstance and history.

Lydia's greed is essentially aesthetic. She finds each subject's persona intriguing because it represents an aspect of the eternal, caught in the flux of time and space. Like desert flowers born to blush unseen, these transcendent "brides" are Lydia's projections, her defense against the sordid and often violent realities of women in urban spaces: the entrenched inanities of the patriarchy, the hegemony of the rich and powerful over the poor and oppressed, and the brutality of rape. Exalting her fellow women travelers to the status of icons in her mind's monologue, Lydia imagines them as talismen, empowered to block out the darkness of her endless nights, ranged against the sky like earthbound angels holding up the heavens.

But the struggle to maintain the nirvana necessary for savouring the eternal is purchased at great price, that of whole consciousness. Only when she is suspended in her liquid dream world can Lydia damp down memory and fear, only then is she released from an agonizing awareness of what her palace of art is costing her.

Occasionally, an overwhelming and very human need for relation and physical affection drive her down from the empyrean to the desperate anxiety of life below. Among her encounters, Lydia forms a liaison with a country music-writing cowgirl. Even though driven by her constant cravings, Lydia still grasps at a smug and elitist safety net of snobbery. Self-satisfied with her post-modernist language, her hip vocabulary of architectural signs and signifiers, Lydia disapproves of her lover's hokey westernism (a too close reminder of her own Edmonton roots), her *déclassé* musical taste and her polyester wardrobe of ideas. Hiding behind the hypostatism of deconstructionist verbiage and political militance, Lydia rejects the loving and the real and retreats back into her vast empire of words and watching.

But beyond Lydia and her intellectualized construction of reality lies a larger backdrop: the multihistorical awareness