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'A Hot Thing': Working on Toni Morrison's Beloved

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A Hot Thing: Working on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

[My reason is] to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate . . . to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book . . . It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens, something in it that opens the door and points the way.

I am beginning to think that teaching Morrison’s books is a *ne plus ultra* for teaching itself. The classroom life involved in reading her with adolescents epitomizes much of what teaching itself means to me. It is hard work: she expects us readers to work, to collaborate with the texts, and this entails teaching students about *what work is when you read*—or, rather, what kinds of work are possible with a book, a book that you can still dig. Also, teaching *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon* demands a wide variety of pitches to the students; you need to try some short Q & A’s (heat); reading aloud (sliders); re-tellings (sinkers); associations to other novels, poetry, film (curve-balls); and group writings (knucklers).

And you need to allow plenty of time for students to complain about the difficulties, to struggle aloud, and to even confess their self-perceived inabilities to make sense of some dense text.

I was so excited about teaching *Beloved* for my first year with high school seniors—and I was intimidated. One of the school’s directors, and my supervisor, voiced her reservations, “David, do you think they’re up to it? I remember having trouble myself knowing what was going on.” This only added to the sense of challenge. Before the class cracked open the new books, I told them what Sheila had said. This, I now realize, was a mistake. The seniors were already worried about everything that they had been doing in school during their adolescence; they still had no sense of what their skills counted for in their future, upcoming college careers. The second year I taught Toni Morrison I omitted these cautionary words.

Teaching Morrison forced me, persuaded me to look back, recall and review some reading theories. I do not regularly teach “close reading,” yet there were times when I got stuck in some lines in *Beloved*, and found some way out, some more lovely way in, and I recalled Emily Dickinson’s experience of poetry: “I know I have read a poem when I feel as if the top of my head has been lifted off.” Some students enjoyed hearing about these wanderings around in fictional woods. They were excited when I showed them my discoveries—in which they had played a large part—of some significance of names. For example, the epigraph of the novel, “Sixty million and more” had been copied and was stuck to our classroom door. They knew what it referred to. I had only

*English Education* • October 1998
recently read the character Sixo's name as a reference here: Six-Oh: 60. It gave me chills. The day after I shared this experience, one student, a musician, wrote about the author as "T-Bone Morrison: when she writes, she's bad like Jesse James."

I tried to connect the book to something that interested me, such as a TV show. I imagined the book as a movie in my head, in other words.

I didn't really analyze myself as a reader during the course of Beloved—more like a writer. I never really read stuff aloud just for the heck of it, at home. But I did, and sometimes hearing the echoes scared the hell out of me. And I started to hear and see and feel what I was reading. Maybe it's just Toni Morrison who does that—her writing, I mean. But it's strange how I automatically read her stuff aloud. I think I grew more as a thinker.

More students benefited from the experience of reading Beloved the second year I tried to teach it than the first. I have tried to isolate different methods I used: the major difference was that the second time around I talked more about my own reading. Rather than try to convince them that a magical book lay in their hands, I tried to convey the sense of magic I felt as a reader. When we began reading aloud, just this past year, we opened to a passage where Paul D meets Sethe at her restaurant job. The two lovers rush home: Paul carries Sethe, and snow begins to fall. Most of the class members heard—some saw the romance. Then we began at the beginning. They were puzzled, of course.

—This is a ghost story? I thought you said a love story.

—Both. And more.

Many students expressed dismay at this intertwining. Elements of the supernatural seemed not to belong in a senior high school classroom. Thus, there was resistance to subject before they even began to resist working with the language. When they encountered the descriptions of slavery's everyday horror, such as Paul D's life in the Georgia camp, they returned to familiar, historical ground, but with added weight. Several students agreed that it "was much heavier than a textbook" in its depictions of slavery.

What I think Morrison makes most difficult for younger readers is her polyphony. Students simply have not had enough experience—as reader or human—to move easily in a text that tries to show life as complex process. Morrison's novels, as life, cannot rest simply within one category, e.g., historical, romance, supernatural. And her language breathes, too, as if it has to jump off the page. So we read it as poetry.

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