

Revisiting one of greatest Afro-American piece of literature.

***Jazz* by Toni Morrison, Nobel Price Laureate for Literature, in 1993.**

Toni Morrison's 1992 novel *Jazz* opens in Harlem, New York in 1926. While the city surrounding them surges with music and vitality, Joe and Violet Trace experience loneliness and despair as their marriage sinks under the weight of past injuries. When Joe takes a lover and kills her, the tragedy precipitates a collision between past and present, paradoxically resurrecting Joe and Violet's relationship.

With a nod to its title, numerous literary critics have described *Jazz*'s nonlinear structure as improvisational. As a jazz piece begins with a complete melody that various solo instrumentalists then improvise upon, so *Jazz* sets down its quasi-complete story in the opening chapter. In subsequent chapters, the characters individually elaborate on this story.

Thus, the narrator reveals, upfront, that on January 1, 1926, fifty-two-year-old Joe Trace shot and killed his seventeen-year-old lover, Dorcas Manfred, in Harlem. At the funeral, Violet, Joe's fifty-year-old wife, attempted to mutilate the dead girl with a knife but was restrained. Joe was never charged with the murder.

Violet's outrageous action at the funeral did not surprise local folks, as she had become notorious for strange, even alarming behavior. In one instance, she sat down in the street and remained there, inexplicably, until people carried her to safety. On another occasion, a woman left her baby in Violet's care for several minutes, and Violet began to walk away with the child. No one knows for certain that Violet intended to kidnap the baby before she was stopped.

After the funeral, Joe and Violet, already detached, emotionally retreat from each other even further. Having shot Dorcas in a fit of jealousy when she left him for another man, Joe grieves her death and is preoccupied with thoughts of her. Violet finds her own thoughts frequently turn to Dorcas, as well. The girl's apparent feistiness and determination remind Violet of herself when young.

Violet's increasing desire to know more about Joe's lover drives her to repeatedly contact Dorcas's unreceptive aunt, Alice. After finally admitting Violet into her home, Alice gives Violet a picture of Dorcas, hoping it will appease her. Violet takes the picture home, where it absorbs her and Joe's attention.

Having disclosed the foregoing details within the book's opening pages, the narrative then swings back and forth in time as it voices the thoughts and histories of Joe, Violet, and Dorcas.

Joe's story backtracks to 1855 when the owner of a prosperous Virginia plantation discovers his daughter, Vera Louise Gray, is pregnant with the child of her black lover. Mortified, the family packs her off to Baltimore, along with her servant, True Belle. Vera gives birth to a surprisingly fair-skinned baby boy and names him Golden Gray. Although True Belle has her own children in Virginia, she raises Golden Gray and adores him.

With his golden curls, Vera's son appears "white," and he grows up never suspecting otherwise. Vera tells Golden she adopted him, but when he is eighteen, True Belle divulges the truth: Vera is his mother, and his father is a black man. Assuming he is the product of rape, Golden goes to Virginia to avenge his mother by killing his father. His plans are sidetracked, however, when he sees a pregnant black woman in distress near the road. He takes the mud-splattered woman to the home of Henry Lestory, his estranged father.

Shortly after Henry delivers the woman's baby, she disappears again into the woods, and he names her "Wild." Golden Gray realizes he no longer has a place in "civilized" society, racially segregated as it is, so he follows Wild and lives with her in a cave. Wild's baby boy is raised by foster parents who name him Joe, and he later takes the surname "Trace." Joe develops a close, apprentice-like relationship with the county's best hunter, who, known as "Hunter's Hunter," is actually Henry Lestory.

At age twenty, Joe goes to work in the fields in a nearby town, and there meets seventeen-year-old Violet, whose mother has also forsaken her. Demoralized by poverty and a wandering husband, Rose Dear, Violet's mother, killed herself. True Belle, Rose Dear's mother, returned from Baltimore after a twenty-year absence when she learned of her daughter's struggles. Violet lived with True Belle after her mother's suicide, but her grandmother's frequent glowing references to Golden Gray sabotaged dark-skinned Violet's self-esteem.

Joe and Violet marry and move north to Harlem in 1906. Neither one wants children, but when she turns forty, Violet regrets being childless and begins sleeping with a doll. Unresolved feelings of anger and grief about her own mother overwhelm Violet, and she withdraws into herself, rarely speaking to Joe.

A salesman for beauty products, Joe meets Dorcas while peddling his wares at Alice's home. Dorcas's liveliness attracts him, and he discovers he can share secrets with her he has never disclosed. Dorcas, too, shares her traumatic past. After her parents were killed in the 1917 race riots in East St. Louis, she moved to Harlem to live with Alice. Her aunt's old-fashioned ideas of propriety are at odds with Dorcas's bold spirit.

While Joe provides Dorcas with an outlet for her passions, she tires of him after several months and takes up with a younger man. Joe then hunts her down, a pursuit that blends, narratively, with his hunt for Wild, his mother, when he is fourteen, which ends at her empty cave. Joe finds Dorcas with another man and shoots her.

Appalled by Violet's aggression at Dorcas's funeral, Alice fears Violet's violence. The day after Alice gives her Dorcas's picture, Violet returns, and Alice finds herself mending Violet's cuff. The women develop a candid, if brusque, rapport that provides Violet with much-needed female advice.

Dorcas's friend Felice appears at the Trace's residence, hoping to recover a ring Dorcas had. As they talk, they quickly feel comfortable with one another. Felice visits often, and through the trio's frank conversations about Dorcas, Violet and Joe rediscover their love.

Self-reflective, judgmental, and intrusive, the narrator of *Jazz* is noteworthy. Although unnamed and without gender identification, it is widely assumed the narrator is female. "She" opens the novel with the words "Sth, I know that woman," referring to Violet and seeming to establish a first-person narrative perspective. The voice occasionally assumes a third-person perspective, however, revealing the characters' inner thoughts. That the narrator is not all-knowing becomes undeniable when the novel's ending elicits her surprise, and she admits she envies the Trace's unexpected return to happiness.

Jazz is the second novel in a trilogy that begins with *Beloved* (1987) and ends with *Paradise* (1997).



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