

CHRIS WINFIELD

Untitled, 2016
Acrylic on canvas board, 42 x 42 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

On Literature and the Silence of Goodness

An Interview with Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison is in her eighties now, but she has a relentless drive. At this point in her career, the burning ambition has little to do with unmet goals. The Nobel laureate has written eleven novels, two plays, and many nonfiction pieces. Her body of work, including the novel Beloved, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, is part of the canon. But Morrison, who spoke by phone with me in her distinctive low, whispery voice from her home in New York's Hudson Valley, said she just can't be happy without a project. Her creative impulse and her desire for artistic freedom are as strong as ever. "When I'm writing, nobody's telling me what to do," said Morrison, who still scratches out the first drafts of her novels with pencils on yellow legal pads. The topic of our phone talk, and also the title of her lecture was "Literature and the Silence of Goodness," an ethics lecture sponsored by University of California, Santa Cruz in 2014.

Morrison believes an "obsession" with evil has crept into literature over the past century or so while the forces of good have been driven to the sidelines and compelled to bite their tongues. During my interview with her, she also went into some detail about her early career as a Random House editor, a position that allowed her to champion several noted African American women writers, including Angela Davis.

—Dan White

Dan White: My first question is how did evil get this enormous promotion in our stories over the past century? Why did goodness get dragged off to the side?

Toni Morrison: I don't think it's always been that way. There was always a hero who won. As awful as things could happen in a Dickens novel, it ended up with the survival and triumph of high morality or the people who deserved to triumph. Something happened—I'm not entirely sure about this, but I think it's after World War I—[with] the writers, the novelists at any rate, and certainly some of the war poets . . . perhaps they understood themselves as attacking evil, but they ended up theatricalizing it, and the good people were fairly stupid, or unlucky, or what have you, but there are references in literature to the silencing of goodness in Melville and Faulkner.

As a matter of fact the one book that Faulkner did, *A Fable*, which had a moment of goodness when they laid down their arms and embraced one another, you know, the