Synopsis

Florens, a slave girl, lives and works on Jacob Vaark's rural New York farm. Lina, a Native American and fellow labourer on the Vaark farm, is one of a handful of survivors of a smallpox plague that destroyed her tribe. Rebekkah arrives on a ship from England to be married to Vaark, a man she has never seen. The voices of these characters bereft of their roots and struggling to survive in a new and alien environment filled with danger and disease form *A Mercy*.

When smallpox threatens Rebekkah's life in 1692, Florens, now sixteen, is sent to find a black freedman who has some knowledge of herbal medicines. Her journey is dangerous, ultimately proving to be the turning point in her life.

*A Mercy* was nominated one of the 10 best books of 2008 by the *New York Times*

‘Morrison is at the very height of her powers’ *Daily Mail*

‘Toni Morrison writes with a fierce possessive poetry and sympathy that proclaims her as an exciting star in the firmament’ *Guardian*

‘Ms. Morrison’s versatility and technical and emotional range appear to know no bounds’ Margaret Atwood

‘One of the most compelling writers at work today’ *The Times*

‘A beautiful and important book’ *Sunday Times*

Author Biography

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931. She is a Nobel Prize-winning American author, editor, and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and rich detail; among the best known are her novels *The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon,* and *Beloved,* which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988.

Cast of Characters

Florens
A young girl given by her mother into slavery at Jacob Vaark's farm

Lina
Native American and sole survivor of a smallpox outbreak that decimated her people. Friend of Rebekkah and surrogate mother to Florens.

Sorrow
A melancholy young girl found washed ashore and orphaned – taken to the
farm by Jacob as help for his pregnant wife

Rebekkah Vaark
Wife of Jacob, living an isolated life on the New York farm, forges a friendship with Lina

Jacob Vaark
An orphan and owner of the farm where all of the above live

Interview

Link to an interview with Toni Morrison discussing *A Mercy*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7IZvMhQ2LIU

Questions

1. ’We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us.’ How do these words of Lina’s (page 71) underpin many of the themes within *A Mercy*?
2. A mercy can be described as an act of compassion towards one that is powerless. Explore the notion of power in the act of mercy described by the title and then look at the way powerlessness shapes the women's lives.
3. ‘They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation.’ What does family mean to this band of isolated and orphaned people? Why does this family not survive?
4. The book is created out of the voices of many different characters. How do you feel this device adds to the power of the novel? Did you find the voices convincing? Do you think this multi-voiced narrative gives greater depth and meaning to the novel?
5. Motherhood is a significant theme in the novel. Look at each of the main female characters. How are their lives shaped by motherhood?
6. The precarious and isolated life lived on the farm is further besieged by the presence of disease. How does disease strengthen and weaken the bonds between the occupants of the farm?
7. *A Mercy* is a very short novel. Explore the language Morrison uses in the novel. How does it create atmosphere and power? Look at the characters, by giving them each a voice what is Morrison gifting them?
8. *A Mercy* is a novel set in the early days of American history and at the beginning of the slave trade. Do you feel that the novel is exploring issues that are still of import today?

Suggested further reading

Interview with Toni Morrison in the Guardian on publication of *A Mercy*
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/nov/01/toni-morrison

Harvard Book Review
http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hbr/issues/10.2fall08/articles/morrison.shtml

Independent book review
Guardian book review
http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/oct/26/mercy-toni-morrison

**Recommended**

*Beloved* Toni Morrison  
*Moll Flanders* Daniel Defoe  
*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Anne Bronte  
*Oroonoko* Aphra Behn