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Morrison explores many brutal shades of slavery

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FICTION

"A Mercy" by **Toni Morrison**. Alfred A. Knopf, \$23.95, 176 pages

It happens about 40 pages in. That's when you release your hunched shoulders, your furrowed brow, your exhausting efforts to mine each word for meaning. You understand, of course, that any novel by Nobel Prize-winning author **Toni Morrison** can be a challenging -- no, demanding -- read. But this one is so brief, under 200 pages: "How demanding could it be?" you wonder, your hubris making you forgetful.

If you've read **Morrison** before, you know you have to trust her. In her new novel, "A Mercy," it takes a couple of short, compelling chapters to fully conjure this trust, to make you relax into the arms of the master and let her have her way with you.

And your trust is richly rewarded -- with a lean, lyrical novel that serves as a kind of companion to "Beloved," which won **Morrison** the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and was recently selected by The New York Times -- with votes from hundreds of prominent writers, critics and editors -- as "the single best work of American fiction published in the last 25 years."

Set in the late 1600s, when slavery was still in its infancy and America was little more than a cobbling of colonies, "A Mercy" is a loose prelude to "Beloved." In this New World, before America's racial hierarchies were set in stone, the country is literally being built on the involuntary labor of indentured servants, women and men, black, white and Native American.

Dutch-born farmer and trader Jacob Vaark is the kind of man who stops a galloping journey through wild, lawless Virginia "to free the bloody hindleg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break." Despite his tendency toward such kindnesses, Jacob acquires his wife, Rebekka, through a paid arrangement with her parents, who can no longer afford her upkeep. She is his ideal mate: "an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing." In placing his advertisement, "he had been willing to accept a bag of bones or an ugly maiden," but Rebekka is "plump, comely and capable." She is soon "unleavened," however, by the deaths of three infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of their 5-year-old.

Partly as a gift for his grieving wife, Jacob accepts a slave girl as payment for a debt, though he claims to abhor trading in flesh. Guided by "a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays," Jacob is struck by the sight of the little slave girl in "a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes." When the girl's mother kneels and begs him to take the child, Jacob cannot resist. "From his own childhood he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers. Even if bartered, given away, apprenticed, sold, swapped, seduced, tricked for food, labored for shelter or stolen, they were less doomed under adult control."

With this guiding philosophy, Jacob assembles a crew of orphaned women to mind his land during his long and necessary absences as a trader in fur, lumber and, eventually, the most profitable commodity of all: slaves.

In addition to the little slave girl, Florens, who grows up to be a "love-disabled" young woman, there is Lina, a Native American survivor "purchased outright and deliberately" to help on the farm. And there is Sorrow, another of Jacob's rescues. This curly-haired girl, Lina complains, "dragged misery like a tail," even in the best of times.

Despite sometimes-conflicting desires, these women, including Rebekka, form a tight-knit family of misfits with Jacob as their master. But when Jacob dies of pox, the truth is revealed: "they were not a family -- not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all."

As Rebekka takes to what may be her own deathbed, Florens is sent on an urgent and dangerous mission to find the magical blacksmith, the free, never-enslaved, African healer who may be able to save the Mistress, and therefore save them all. Yet this is the same man whose open-mouthed kisses have turned Florens into "a love-broken girl on the loose."

As they wait for Florens to deliver the blacksmith, Lina keeps an uneasy vigil over Rebekka. "Don't die, Miss. Don't," she prays, fearful that the Mistress' death would make the "three unmastered women"--belonging to no one -- "wild game for anyone."

In her sickbed, Rebekka floats in and out of consciousness, asking the questions that become the central drama of the novel: "How long will it take will he be there will she get lost will someone assault her will she return will he and is it already too late?"

Morrison gives each woman her say, and each woman's voice is distinct, and haunting. The author's writing here is not the thicket of lush language that marked her midcareer novels "Tar Baby," "Jazz" and "Beloved." In "A Mercy" -- as in "Love," her underappreciated 2003 tour de force -- **Morrison** returns to the impressive economy of language that distinguished her earliest books, "The Bluest Eye" and "Sula." Yet somehow this novel is more elliptical and sprawling -- which is to say, more poetic.

Like the landscape that its characters inhabit, "A Mercy" is a brutal, nuanced story. It is rife with loss and despair, hope and love, enslavement in various shades, and, yes, finally, mercy.

Valerie Boyd is the author of "Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston" and the forthcoming "Spirits in the Dark: The Untold Story of Black Women in Hollywood." She teaches journalism at the University of Georgia.

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