

# Book Beat

by Dolan Hubbard

Faculty Member

Toni Morrison, "Song of Solomon" (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1977), \$8.95, 377 pages or Signet Paper Back, \$2.50

"Song of Solomon has played to nothing but rave reviews. This saga of four generations of black life in America has received a chorus of praise from "Time" and "Newsweek", has been reviewed on the front page of the New York "Times Book Review", and was the main selection of the Book-of-the-month Club (the first by a black novelist since Richard Wright's "Native Son" in 1940). Ralph Ellison's "The Invisible Man (1952), a masterpiece by which ever standard one elects to use, was voted the most distinguished novel of the previous twenty-five years in a 1965 poll of two hundred writers and critics conducted by the New York Herald Tribune's Book Week. "Song of Solomon", I feel, certainly has the credentials to be considered in as favorable a light. In it one sees strands and hears echoes of "The Bible, Dostoevsky, Kafka, Faulkner, Heller, and Lessing. Its themes, though not restricted to the twentieth century, reflect several of its prominent themes: alienation, isolation, the absurd, and the schizophrenic nature of our times. But above all, it is a story about man's timeless search for his soul.

"Song of Solomon" is one of those rare books that readily lends itself to be tasted, swallowed, chewed and digested--its vocabulary can be handled by the average competent eighth grader. Like all good literature, its comments on la condition humaine range from the elemental to the esoteric; however, one is not constantly bludgeoned into remembering didactic messages. Toni Morrison's charac-

ters are too busy being themselves. She recognizes that people are most human when they are themselves. Her characters are the personification of blackness, the embodiment of the black life style. Her significance lies in her fidelity to that life style and her deft evocation of its nuances and subtleties. She is certainly not myopic in her artistic vision for it encompasses not only a private heritage, but a national one as well.

"Song of Solomon (like Roots) heralds the arrival of a new epoch in Black American LETTERS. One of its endearing qualities is its positive stance towards Black American culture. It is a love affair that positively recognizes the resiliency and durability the black life style as well as the richness, diversity, and beauty of black America's pungent, compressed, and highly colorful use of language.

In "Song of Solomon", we enter the world of the Macon Dead family, a "Fall of the House of Usher" type family. Macon is the richest black man in a midwestern town, a solidly middle-class citizen who married the only daughter of the only Black doctor the town ever had. Their union produced three children, two girls and one son, Macon Dead, Jr. (Known as Milkman.)

Milkman is our eyes and ears. The story begins on the day of his birth, February 18, 1931. (He is the first black baby allowed to be born at Mercy-- popularly called "No Mercy"--Hospital by the town's black citizens). On the day of his birth the lonely insurance man, Robert Smith, poised in blue silk wings, attempts to fly from the steeple of the hospital, a black Icarus looking homeward. This scene portends things to come, for Milkman will go from crawling to walking to running to flying.

Much of the action takes place on Not Doctor Street, so

named by the blacks in spite of the white townfather's efforts not to 'officially' recognize their Catfish Row type community, reminiscent of Porgy and Bess.

Milkman's reward for becoming a teenager is conscription into his father's principal business-- a slum landlord. Milkman is assigned to collect rent payments. The freedom he gains by being out and about more than compensates for some of the saltier aspects that come with the job. Additionally, he completes his high school education. Thankful to be released from his death-haunted house with his strange, silent sisters and his immovably inert mother, who wants him to be a doctor, he begins the beginners search for self. His love and combat with his friend Guitar, - their relationship culminating in a Cain and Abel pas de deux-- propel him further outward and away from his family. Paradoxically he is drawn closer to his family through his unconscious apprenticeship with the matriarchial leader of the local pariahs: Pilate, his aunt he later discovered; her daughter, Reba; and her granddaughter, Hagar. Milkman has an exotic and almost spellbinding love affair with his love-blind cousin Hagar.

Among other things, Pilate is a bootlegger, mystic, earth-mother plus she wears a brass box on one ear. Its contents serve as catalyst in catapulting Milkman on the road to revelation and to self-discovery. The fact that Pilate has no navel further sets her apart ("a stomach blind as a knee, something God never made").

Yet without her accumulated and sundry skills, Milkman never would have seen the light of day. He is the last male in the Macon Dead family, a fact that disturbs him not in the least.

To learn and validate the truth about Pilate's brass box, Milkman is drawn to the

South, the ancestral home of his father's people. His original lure was the prospect of retrieving some lost gold. His journey on the open road slingshots him from the mid-west to Pennsylvania to Virginia to the Virginia tidewater basin. Each new adventure and each new kilometer not only brings him closer to his ancestral kin but they bring him closer towards who and what he is. Slung free of the urban centers with their conceptions of civilization, Milkman becomes drastically less pretentious. His odyssey, in effect, becomes Black America's search for identity and man's timeless search for the human soul.

One of the philosophical centers in the novel occurs in an exchange between Milkman and Circe, an old woman who provides him with invaluable information about his relatives got their names: "Milkman thought about this mixed woman's great-granddaughter, Hagar, and said, "Yes. I know what you mean."

But a good woman. I cried like a baby when I lost her. Like a baby. PoorSing." "What?" He wondered if she lisped.

"I cried like a baby when I--" "No. I mean, what did you call her?" "sing. Her name was Sing." "Sing?" Sing Dead.

Where'd she get a name like that?"

"Where'd you get a name like yours? White people name Negroes like race horses." (p. 243)

The old woman's straight out, matter-of-fact comment on life, a masterful stroke on the part of the artist, reminds the reader of Black America's shared sense of the absurd.

Toni Morrison, 47, a Howard University graduate, earned her Masters Degree from Cornell. She has taught at Howard. Currently, she is a senior editor at Random House. Her previous novels are "The Bluest Eye" (1970) and "Sula" (1974)

## Newspaper Techniques Explained

By Viveca L. Thomason  
Assignment Editor

What do the terms layout, copy, cropping, and dummies have in common? They all deal with the production of a newspaper. These terms and techniques were introduced and explained to a group of students of various majors in a Journalish workshop at Winston-Salem State University. It was conducted by Mr. John W. Templeton, the executive editor for the Salem Chronicle.

Mr. Templeton addressed the audience first by saying, "How many black newspapers are there between Maryland and Georgia?" The answer is, about fifty. "And what makes these fifty black or any other newspapers successful? Articles which contain three main components of news." The first half of the lecture was devoted to the components which are interest, utility, and significance. It was pointed out that each good article should develop these components. "Interest," he added "involves whether or not the audience cares to read the article; utility concerns the article's usefulness, and significance centers around the meaning the article has for the audience."

The second half of the workshop focused on the design of the newspaper. Mr. Templeton pointed out the four focus points of the newspaper page. "Pictures," he added, "should add decoration as well as interest to a story." He gave the group pointers on how and where to put pictures on the paper to present an attractive page.

Mr. Templeton holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Journalism, graduating cum laude from Howard University. He has worked with the Afro-American newspapers as a reporter and copy editor, the Washington Post and in radio and television. This year, he won the Frank L. Stanley Award of The National Newspaper Publishers Association. He was adjunct professor at Virginia State College, research associate for the Southeastern Black Press Institute at UNC, and now serves on the advisory board for North Carolina Institute for Open Journalism.

## Hut Shining Bright

By Viveca Thomason

The Alumni Hut can be seen glistening in the bright sunlight on these cool autumn days thanks to Sears manager Mr. John Clark. Mr. Clark is a member of the Board of Trustees at Winston-Salem

State University and is a member of the development committee of the Board. Mr. Clark donated sixty or more gallons of white paint for the Alumni Hut at the request of Chancellor Covington for the homecoming festivities.

## ROTC cont. from page 4

Army.

The criteria for this highly competitive distinction is as follows: a. Demonstrate outstanding leadership and moral character, b. Have a high aptitude for an interest in the military, c. be in the upper third of their ROTC class, and d. Be in the upper half of their

academic class.

Each student cadet has the opportunity to enter active duty after commissioning or they may join a Reserve or National Guard component.

Cadets selected for the honors are: Cecil B. Cates, Willie C. Jordan, and Jerry M. Powers.