

# Library group discusses Morrison classic 'Beloved'

BY T. KEVIN WALKER  
THE CHRONICLE

During an hour-long retrospective of her stellar career, talk-show queen Oprah Winfrey discussed fame, money and her "blackness" with veteran journalist Mike Wallace on 60 Minutes last Wednesday.

The entertainment mogul also spoke briefly about her much-hyped - and panned - film "Beloved." The slavery epic, which opened last November, garnered mixed reviews from critics, short lines at box offices and drew blanks in the minds of Academy Award voters (the film received just one nomination for costume design).

Winfrey told Wallace that she didn't know why the movie failed. "I think about that all the time," she said.

Ironically, thinking is exactly what many moviegoers said they had to do to much of while watching "Beloved." Many are still confused by Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and were just

sion of the tale among a small group of women Monday night at the Carver School Road Branch Library.

Lois Leggett, the library's supervisor, said she came up with the idea for the discussion after she heard people complain that the book and movie left them with headaches.

"I read the book when it first came out (in 1987) and I found it to be a very complex book," Leggett said. "When I found out that Oprah was doing a movie about it, I thought that it would clarify the book."

Sylvia Sprinkle-Hamlin, the deputy director of Forsyth County libraries, attended the discussion. Sprinkle-Hamlin said that of all the books she has read by Morrison, "Beloved" was the most difficult.

"I think she is a great writer, (but) most of her books you do have to read them twice," she said.

Ingram began the discussion by admitting that it even took her two-and-a-half readings before she truly understood Morrison's book. She wasn't able to find the time to see Winfrey's nearly three-hour-long movie during its theatrical run, but she says she will probably get the video when it comes into stores on April 6.

As Ingram read from her personal critique of the novel, the women in the audience shook their heads slowly as they heard bits of information that enabled them to finally make events in the book and movie connect.

Though a multi-layered work of true literature with many complex themes, simplistically, "Beloved" is the tale of a slave, Sethe, who flees a plantation in Sweet Home, Ky., after becoming the victim of a sexual assault at the hands of several young white men.

Sethe escapes to Ohio to join her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and her three children.

She has her fourth child, Denver, en route.

When Sethe's master tracks her to Ohio to return the family to slavery, she kills one of her children, an unnamed daughter, with

an axe to save her from that fate. She is in the process of killing the others when she is stopped.

The murdered child haunts Sethe's house from then on: leaving hand prints in food and causing the house to illuminate in eerie colors. But more than 16 years later, the murdered child, Beloved, named for the single word on her headstone, reappears in the form of a fully grown, flesh and blood specter.

Beloved reeks havoc on the lives of Sethe, Denver and Paul D., Sethe's love interest until she is finally exorcised by a group of women praying outside of Sethe's house.

Confused? You are definitely not alone.

Ingram cleared up a couple of things that had many people scratching their heads.

When Beloved comes back to life she springs from a river. Ingram said the water symbolizes the birth canal since in fact the dead child was being reborn in a way.

When Sethe first sees Beloved she also has an unusual reaction: she loses control of her bladder. In Winfrey's movie this scene caused more laughter than deep thought.

But Ingram theorized Sethe's reaction was symbolic of a woman's water-breaking just before she is about to give birth.

Ingram cleared similar loose ends as anxious audience members began to make connections of their own.

But more than anything, the discussion got the women thinking about a host of topics, from the black experience to popular music.

Sprinkle-Hamlin - who loved the movie and said that the actresses in it were just a good as Gwyneth Paltrow's Oscar-winning performance in "Shakespeare in Love" - said that with all the "shot'em up" movies of today, people just weren't ready for Winfrey's movie.

"With all these fly-by-night movies, we don't like to do that much thinking," Sprinkle-Hamlin said.



Winston-Salem State University Professor Elwanda Ingram leads a discussion of Toni Morrison's classic slave epic "Beloved."

Another group member, Luci Vaughn, said she was disappointed to see more white faces in the movie theater than black ones.

"Most of the black people who went to see the movie, I think they went to see Oprah, not because they were interested in the book," Vaughn said.

Her comment then led to a discussion of why Morrison has such a large "non-black" following.

Ingram offered an answer. She said that people in general would probably prefer lighter stories for their night-time or weekend readings.

"She does not write pop fiction. This is not Terry McMillian writing," she said, as she stood before a table filled with Morrison titles.

At least two of the women had not read the book or seen the movie. They said they were lured to the discussion by all the hoopla.

One of them said that if she had come to the discussion before the movie came out, they definitely would have shelled out the six

bucks to go see it.

The group came to a consensus that "Beloved" is a story that revolves around strong black women, including Morrison and Winfrey. They also agreed that, perhaps, no other author comes close to Morrison and her thought-provoking style.

But Vaughn said she has spot-

ted Morrison-like qualities in an unlikely place: the world of hip hop.

She said Grammy winner Lauryn Hill's music is nearly as "deep" as Morrison's stimulating novels.

"She and that Erykah Badu... those are some deep sistas," she said.



A display of Toni Morrison's books greeted visitors for a discussion of her classic "Beloved."

downright baffled by Winfrey's screen adaptation of the book.

"It (the novel) has been called a ghost story...a work of art, and it's all of that," said Elwanda Ingram, an English professor at Winston-Salem State University.

In order to clear up some of the confusion, Ingram lead a discus-



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