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Book Review - Goodness and the Literary Imagination: Harvard's 95th Ingersoll Lecture with Essays on Morrison's Moral and Religious Vision

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Off the SHELF

Goodness and the Literary Imagination: Harvard's 95th Ingersoll Lecture with Essays on Morrison's Moral and Religious Vision by Toni Morrison; with essays edited by David Carrasco, Stephanie Paulsell, and Mara Willard (University of Virginia Press, 2019: ISBN 9780813943626, \$19.29)

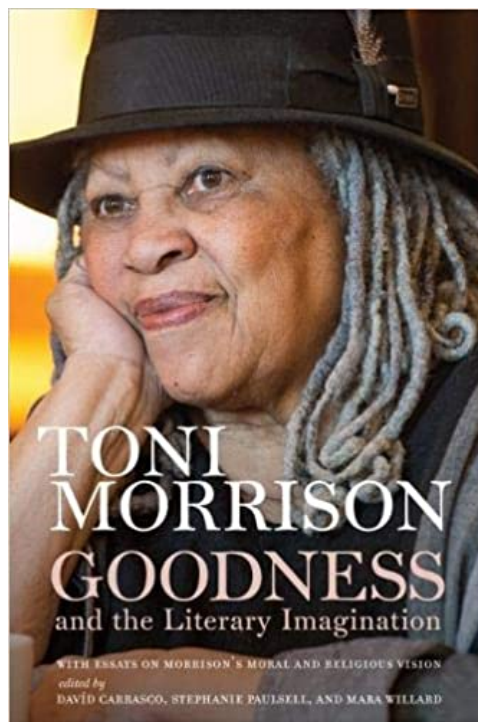
Goodness and the Literary Imagination is a collection of essays written by Harvard scholars inspired by Toni Morrison's keynote speech at Harvard's Ingersoll Lecture of 2012. The visit sparked a seminar, *Have Mercy: The Religious Dimensions of the Writings of Toni Morrison*, that would explore Morrison's works; seminar discussions surrounded slavery, the effects of slavery, and religion.

Morrison's Ingersoll Lecture encouraged listeners, and now readers, to question the definition of goodness and where to find it—concluding that to know goodness, one must also know the opposite, evil. Morrison shared with her audience each life facet of characters from her novels. While goodness never wins, Morrison gives goodness a voice and reminds us to have mercy—a theme woven through her novels in the religious aspect and said when no other words will suffice to fill a void.

Authors of the included essays sift through Toni Morrison's previous works in search of examples of goodness and glean much more. Including the theme of the semester-long working group, the authors also expand on

themes such as loss and desperation, and unconditional love and unyielding faith.

Contributing author Matthew Potts points out that most of Morrison's novels contain the evil that we find alluring. While Morrison states that evil is worshipped, Potts focuses on the recurring evil of abuse to children by their mothers. As a Christian theology scholar, Potts also writes of the similarities between the abuse and maltreatment of Morrison's fictional



characters and the abandonment and maltreatment of Jesus of Nazareth as God's love. The title of his chapter, "Demons and Dominion," refers to Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, in which themes of love, rejection, power, and suffering surface. According to Potts, "love is a hard thing; it operates in a hard world and under conditions of bondage, it cannot fully escape, and so it might...take the form of abuse and abandonment at times."

Gerald "Jay" Williams's essay, "Unsung No More," focuses on the double meaning of one word, "mercy": more

than a filler, it's a prayer, a plea. Williams tells readers that the heaviness of love knows no limits; he then summarizes that allowing goodness speak is an avenue to begin healing and to look forward to a new day.

Goodness and the Literary Imagination could serve as a supplemental text in any higher education course looking to recreate the

environment of the Harvard seminar, *Have Mercy*.

This book could also serve as a foundation for enlightenment and abundant discussions; the

essays may also serve as a precursor for high school students reading a Morrison novel.

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