



Toni Morrison talks to Oprah at benefit for Chicago libraries

Crain's

October 20, 2010

Toni Morrison settled in to a comfy chair Wednesday evening and talked with Oprah Winfrey about her craft, critics and latest writing project. They could have been sitting in her living room but for the 750- plus guests gathered before them at the UIC Forum to see Ms. Morrison awarded the Carl Sandburg Literary Award.

The fundraiser was sponsored by the Chicago Public Library Foundation and Chicago Public Library. Chicago author Eula Biss also was honored. The evening drew a high-profile crowd and raised \$1.1 million in gross funds for Chicago libraries.

Attendees included Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley and Mesirow Financial Holdings CEO James Tyree; library foundation founder Cindy Pritzker; Johnson Publishing CEO Desiree Rogers; Cubs owner Tom Ricketts; Neal Zucker, CEO of Corporate Cleaning window washers; Magellan Development Group's Robin Loewenberg Berger, and N'Digo publisher Hermene Hartman.

After accepting her prize and applause, Ms. Morrison sat down and then was joined by Ms. Winfrey, who teased the author for not making a speech.

"I was waiting in back with my shoes off because I thought you were going to talk," Ms. Winfrey said. The talk-show host has featured four of Ms. Morrison's books in her TV book club. During a 20-minute Q&A, Ms. Morrison said her next book — she's written 120 pages so far — is set in the 1950s.

"It's a period I thought I knew well. You think of Doris Day, post-war GI Bill, happy, happy happy," Ms. Morrison said. "But it was a time of (U.S. Sen. Joseph) McCarthy, the Korean War — 65,000 died. There was outrageous violence. Emmett Till died."

On writing, she says she listens to the characters talk to her. Ms. Winfrey raised her eyebrows — "The characters talk to you?" — and smiled.

"Yes," said Ms. Morrison, winner of Nobel and Pulitzer prizes. And when forceful characters take over the story, she reminds them, "I'm the author." (The audience ate it up.)

Ms. Winfrey asked the "Beloved" author her thoughts on critics who say she focuses too much on "identity politics" — race and gender. "Are you tired of that?" Ms. Winfrey asked.

Ms. Morrison said it used to be that books were written with white readers in mind. "I didn't want to write for that audience (specifically), but I didn't want to be parochial either," she said.

Instead, she focuses on stories that are "culturally specific and universal."

Russian writers aren't writing with girls in Ohio in mind, she said, but the books are still interesting to that reader. "My books identify racial aspects, but they are not limited to it."

A low buzz of interest and approval swept the room.

"Her connection to Russian writers was really interesting," noted film producer Gigi Pritzker, who attended with her mother, Cindy.

Ms. Morrison's "A Mercy" is the Fall 2010 "One Book, One Chicago" city book club selection. A couple of other outtakes from the discussion:

Ms. Winfrey: Critics didn't like your work initially. What kept you going?

Ms. Morrison: Arrogance. I knew the difference between good and bad, and I knew they were wrong.

Ms. Winfrey: "Song of Solomon" was your breakout book. Why was America ready for that?

Ms. Morrison: Because it was about men. It was a male-centered book. It was interesting to enter the head of a man...Stepping into a man's space was hard for me.