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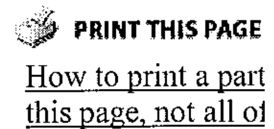

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Love
by Toni Morrison

Please be aware that this discussion guide may contain spoilers!

Love tells the story of Bill Cosey and the women who love him, fight over him, make him miserable, and finally drive him to his grave. As the novel begins, Mr. Cosey has long-since died under suspicious circumstances, but his memory and his presence live on inspiring a deep and lasting hatred between his granddaughter Christine and his widow Heed. As youngsters, Christine and Heed were best friends until the day Mr. Cosey decided he would take Heed, at the tender age of eleven, for his wife. From that moment, bitterness and envy drove the friends apart, and now they live together in an enmity so deep and so rancorous that it seems only the death of one or both will free them from it. Mr. Cosey's will—a handwritten note scrawled on a menu in 1965—is in dispute, as is the ownership of the house Heed claims to own and in which Christine is allowed to live. The struggle to verify or nullify that note drives the women to new depths, and when a street-smart young woman named Junior arrives to help Heed write a family history, Christine rightly senses a deception, and their dispute takes on a deadly urgency.

But *Love* is about much more than a disputed will and divided affections. It is about love itself, in all its glorious and ruinous incarnations, from compassion to lust, and it is about family, history, race, gender, and all the ways these forces shape and often distort an individual's life. *Love* is also about what to make of a man like Bill Cosey, a man who created a resort where black people were treated with respect and could debate "death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it," a man who took families off the plantation and gave them jobs, but also a man who married an eleven-year-old child and then fell in love with a prostitute named Celestial. He is a rich, complex character, hard to understand, hard to condemn, hard to condone.

Written with the grace, insight, and power that have characterized her work from *The Bluest Eye* to *Beloved* and *Paradise*, *Love* is a brilliant cautionary tale in the inimitable voice of one of the world's literary masters.

Discussion Questions

1. Why has Toni Morrison chosen *Love* as the title for her novel? In what ways is the book about love? What kinds of love affect and afflict its characters? What does the novel, taken as a whole, suggest about the nature of love?

2. The main narrative of *Love* is framed by and interspersed with L's italicized reflections. Why does Morrison use this framing device? How does it affect the way the book is read? Is L's interpretation of events the most reliable one? From what vantage point does she speak?

3. L claims she needs "something better" than an "old folks' tale to draw on. . . . Like a story that shows how brazen women can take a good man down" [p. 10]. Is that what *Love* is mainly about? Is Cosey brought down by brazen women? Why would L think so?

4. Throughout the novel, Romen struggles to find his real self. When he refuses to join his friends in gang-raping a woman at a party, he does not understand at first why his heart bursts for "a wounded creature" and wonders, "What made him do it? Or rather, who? . . . But he knew who it was. It was the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiseled one" [p. 49]. Where else in the novel is Romen torn between lust and compassion? Which finally wins out in him?

5. L says that Mr. Cosey in the way he ran his hotel "wanted a playground for folk who felt the way he did, who studied ways to contradict history" [p. 103]. How does Mr. Cosey "contradict history"? What history, specifically, does he contradict? What makes his hotel so attractive to blacks in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s? Why does his hotel ultimately fail?

6. Junior tells Heed that she'd "swallow lye before I'd live with my folks." Heed recognizes the feeling, "We're both out here, alone. With fire ants for family" [p. 127]. Why is family, in the novel, so often a source of misery?

7. When the Administrator at the Correctional institute pressures Junior for a sexual favor, she pushes him off the balcony. What are the short-and long-term consequences of this act for Junior? Why is she treated like a criminal for protecting herself?

8. How does the burgeoning civil rights movement affect the characters in the novel? What role does it play in May's madness and in the decline of Mr. Cosey's hotel?

9. Sandler thinks to himself that everyone forgave Cosey everything. "Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her. What was she supposed to do? Run away? Where? Was there someplace Cosey or Wilbur Johnson couldn't reach"? [p. 147]. In what ways are Heed and the other women in the novel trapped not only by racism but by the power men wield over them? Which seems to be the more oppressive force?

10. What destroys the friendship between Heed and Christine and turns them into the bitterest of enemies? What enables them to reconcile at the end of the novel?

11. Why is Mr. Cosey so drawn to the prostitute Celestial? Why would he want to leave everything to her?

12. In the novel's climactic scene, Christine tells Heed, "It's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder." Heed responds, "Who you mean 'we'? Black people? Women? You mean me and you?" [p. 185]. Who does she mean? Is it true that blacks, or women, or Christine and Heed, have been sold and then freed, only to resell themselves?

13. Near the end of the novel, L says of Cosey, "You could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man. Depends on what you hold dear—the what or the why. I tend to mix them" [p. 200]. What kind of man is Cosey finally? What are his good and bad traits? Has he brought more happiness or suffering into the world? How disturbing is it that he marries an eleven-year-old girl?

14. What does *Love*, as a whole, suggest about the relationship between history, family, race, and gender? How are the individuals in the novel affected by these larger forces? What does the novel reveal about the particular historical moment in which it is set?

Recommended Reading
James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*; Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*; Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*; Robert Morgan, *Gap Creek*; Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*; Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*; Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*; Richard Wright, *Black Boy*.

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The Truest Eye

Oprah.com | From the November 2003 issue of O, *The Oprah Magazine*

The legendary Toni Morrison sits down with Pam Houston to discuss the beginning (Ohio), the middle (her revolutionary first novels), and her latest (the magisterial Love).

We feel lucky if, during the course of our lives, we have a chance to sit and talk with one of our heroes. But when our hero not only lives up to but surpasses our expectations, we feel something closer to chosen, even blessed. Such were my feelings on a humid summer morning at Toni Morrison's apartment in lower Manhattan, where we began an extraordinary conversation that would—to my delight and surprise—last all day.

Toni Morrison on:

- *Love*
- Writing
- The Greater Good

On Love

Ms. Morrison is a person who gives you her full attention; who wants, even in the context of an interview, to have a conversation; who is entirely self-possessed without being the least bit self-obsessed; who is at every minute teaching, and at every minute eager to learn. She exudes a comfortable elegance, from the work of art that is her hair—masses of neat, identical dreadlocks, every color between black and white, pulled away from her face and braided into a kind of inverted fountain that falls down her back—to the delicate green and gold sandals. The occasion was the publication of her eighth novel, *Love*, which, like many of her other novels (*Paradise*, *Jazz*, *Beloved*, *Sula*) bears a one-word title. *Love* is built—"like a crystal," Ms. Morrison says—around two women, Christine and Heed, best childhood friends, whose relationship disintegrated because of the internal pressures of desegregation and the sexual shenanigans of one powerful man named Bill Cosey. Christine and Heed are old women when the novel begins, living in stalemated silence on separate floors of a dilapidated seaside resort when a young female con artist named Junior upends their lives.

"The idea of a wanton woman is something I have inserted into almost all of my books," Ms. Morrison said. "An outlaw figure who is disallowed in the community because of her imagination or activity or status—that kind of anarchic figure has always fascinated me. And the benefits they bring with them, in spite of the fact that they are either dismissed or upbraided—something about their presence is constructive in the long run. Sula, for instance, was someone the other characters missed terribly when she was gone, even though she was the pariah. In *Love*, Junior is a poor, rootless, free-floating young woman—a survivor, a manipulator, a hungry person—but she does create a space where people can come with their better selves."

She said she was alarmed when she realized the title of this book might be *Love*, but the fact of her alarm was so interesting to her, it kept her from dismissing the idea.

"It is easily the most empty cliché, the most useless word, and at the same time the most powerful human emotion—because hatred is involved in it, too. I thought if I removed the word from nearly every other place in the manuscript, it could become an earned word. If I could give the word, in my very modest way, its girth and its meaning and its terrible price and its clarity at the moment when that is all there is time for, then the title does work for me."

On Writing

Ms. Morrison has perfect elocution and speaks more precisely, more articulately than anyone I have spoken to in my life. She is soft-spoken and regal, except for the odd moment when she erupts into raucous laughter and throws herself sideways into an overstuffed chair. Her humor and authenticity put me so at ease, it was hard to remember I was in the presence of a Nobel Prize winner.

Ever since Ms. Morrison began her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1965, writing has always been her place of clarity, an "unsullied place of envisioning and imagining," a place where she has been totally free. When I ask her how she silenced the naysaying voices that sit on the shoulders of so many young writers, she laughs again.

"I guess I was just that arrogant. Nobody was going to judge me, because they didn't know what I knew. No African-American writer had ever done what I did—none of the writers I knew, even the ones I admired—which was to write without the White Gaze. My writing wasn't about them."

"Things were going very fast in 1965, so I decided I wanted to write a novel that was not a warning but was just literature, and I wanted to put at the center of that story the most helpless creature in the world—a little black girl who doesn't know anything, who has never been center stage. I wanted it to be about a real girl, and how that girl hurts, and how we are all complicitous in that hurt. I didn't care what white people thought, because they didn't know anything about this. This was the age of 'black is beautiful,' and, well, yeah, that is certainly the case; however, let us not forget why that became a necessary statement.

"This was brand-new space, and once I got there, it was like the whole world opened up, and I was never going to give that up. I felt original. I hate to admit that because it sounds so self-regarding, I didn't feel like an original human being, but the work was original. You know that feeling—that if you don't write it, it will never be written? You think, Eudora Welty can't do it, only you.

On The Greater Good

Whether she's talking about fiction or society, Ms. Morrison's agenda never strays from the greater good, the common good, and how by honoring our own intricacies, as she so relentlessly honors the intricacies of her characters, we might—in these uncertain and dangerous times—bring about a gentler world.

"I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.'

"This is the time for every artist in every genre to do what he or she does loudly and consistently. It doesn't matter to me what your position is. You've got to keep asserting the complexity and the originality of life, and the multiplicity of it, and the facets of it. This is about being a complex human being in the world, not about finding a villain. This is no time for anything else than the best that you've got."

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bio.
TRUE STORY.

QUICK FACTS

NAME: Toni Morrison
OCCUPATION: Writer
BIRTH DATE: February 18, 1931 (Age: 80)
EDUCATION: Howard University, Cornell University
PLACE OF BIRTH: Lorain, Ohio
ZODIAC SIGN: Aquarius

BEST KNOWN FOR

Toni Morrisonis a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist. Among her best known novels are The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and Beloved.

Toni Morrison biography

SYNOPSIS

Toni Morrison (b. February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio) is a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, editor, and professor. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed black characters. Among her best known novels are The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and Beloved. She has won nearly every book prize possible, and has been awarded honorary degrees.

EARLY CAREER

Writer, editor. Born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She was the second oldest of four children born to Ramah and George Wofford. Her father worked several jobs at once to support the family.

Living in an integrated neighborhood, Morrison did not become fully aware of racial divisions until she was in her teens. "When I was in first grade, nobody thought I was inferior. I was the only black in the class and the only child who could read," she later told a reporter from *The New York Times*. Dedicated to her studies, Morrison took Latin in school, and read many great works of European literature. She graduated from Lorain High School with honors in 1949.

At Howard University, Morrison continued to pursue her interest in literature. She majored in English, and chose the classics for her minor. After graduating from Howard in 1953, Morrison continued her education at Cornell University. She wrote her thesis on the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, and completed her master's degree in 1955. She then moved to Texas to teach English at Texas Southern University.

In 1957, Morrison returned to Howard University to teach English. There she met Harold Morrison, an architect originally from Jamaica. The couple got married in 1958 and welcomed their first child, son Harold, in 1961. After the birth of her son, Morrison joined a writers group that met on campus. She began working on her first novel with the group, which started out as a short story.

Morrison decided to leave Howard in 1963. After spending the summer traveling with her family in Europe, she returned to the United States with her son. Her husband, however, had decided to move back to Jamaica. At the time, Morrison was pregnant with their second child. She moved back home to live with her family in Ohio before the birth of son Slade in 1964. The following year, she moved with her sons to Syracuse, New York, where she worked for a textbook publisher as a senior editor. Morrison later went to work for Random House, where she edited works for such authors as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones.

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY STAR

Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. It told the story of a young African-American girl who believes her incredibly difficult life would be better if only she had blue eyes. The book received warm reviews, but it didn't sell well. Morrison continued to explore the African-American experience in its many forms and time periods in her work. Her next novel, *Sula* (1973), explores good and evil through the friendship of two women who grew up together. The work was nominated for the American Book Award.

Song of Solomon (1977) became the first work by an African-American author to be a featured selection in the book-of-the-month club since *Native Son* by Richard Wright. It follows the journey of Milkman Dead as he searches the South for his roots. Morrison received a number of accolades for this work.

A rising literary star, Morrison was appointed to the National Council on the Arts in 1980. The following year, *Tar Baby* was published. The novel drew some inspiration from folktales, and it received a decidedly mixed reaction from critics. Her next work, however, proved to be one of her greatest masterpieces. *Beloved* (1987) explores love and the supernatural. The main character, a former slave, is haunted by her decision to kill her children rather than see them become slaves. Three of her children survived, but her infant daughter died at her hand. For this spellbinding work, Morrison won several literary awards, including the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The book was turned into a movie in 1998, and starred Oprah

Winfrey.

BRANCHING OUT

Morrison became a professor at Princeton University in 1989, and continued to produce great works. In recognition of her contributions to her field, she received the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature, making her the first African-American to be selected for the award. The next year, her novel *Jazz* was published, a story which explored marital love and betrayal.

At Princeton, Morrison established a special workshop for writers and performers known as the Princeton Atelier in 1994. The program was designed to help students create original works in a variety of artistic fields. Outside of her academic work, Morrison continued to write new works of fiction. Her next novel, *Paradise* (1998), which focused on a fictional African-American town called Ruby, earned mixed reviews.

In 1999, Morrison branched out to children's literature. She worked with her son Slade on *The Big Box*, *The Book of Mean People* (2002) and *The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (2003). She has also explored other genres, writing the play *Dreaming Emmett* in the mid-1980s and the lyrics for "Four Songs" with composer Andre Previn in 1994 and "Sweet Talk" with composer Richard Danielpour in 1997.

Her next novel, *Love* (2003), divides its narrative between the past and present. Bill Cosey, a wealthy entrepreneur and owner of the Cosey Hotel and Resort, is the center figure in the work. The flashbacks explore his life, while his death casts a long shadow on the present part of the story. A critic for *Publisher's Weekly* praised the work, stating that "Morrison has crafted a gorgeous, stately novel whose mysteries are gradually unearthed."

RECENT WORK

In 2006, Morrison announced she was retiring from her post at Princeton. That year, *The New York Times Book Review* named *Beloved* the best novel of the past 25 years. She has continued to explore new art forms, writing the libretto for *Margaret Garner*, an American opera that explores the tragedy of slavery through the true life story of one woman's experiences. The opera debuted at the New York City Opera in 2007.

Morrison traveled back to the early days of slavery in the United States for her next novel, *A Mercy*. Once again, a woman who is both a slave and a mother must make a terrible choice regarding her child. As a critic from the *Washington Post* described it, the novel is "a fusion of mystery, history and longing."

A champion for the arts, Morrison spoke out about censorship in October 2009 after one of her books was banned at a Michigan high school. She served as editor for *Burn This Book*, a collection of essays on censorship and the power of the written word, which was published that same year. She told a crowd gathered for the launch of the Free Speech Leadership Council about the importance of fighting censorship. "The thought that leads me to contemplate with dread the erasure of other voices, of unwritten novels, poems whispered or swallowed for fear of being overheard by the wrong people, outlawed languages flourishing underground, essayists' questions challenging authority never being posed, unstaged plays, canceled films&mdashthat thought is a nightmare. As though a whole universe is being described in invisible ink," Morrison said.

In addition to her many novels, Morrison has written several works of non-fiction. One of her most recent works is a collection of her non-fiction writings entitled *What Moves at the Margin*, published in 2008. Whether through fiction or non-fiction, however, Morrison will continue to be a vital force in the American literary landscape.

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Toni Morrison on Writing

"You revel in the smoke that the words send up."

By Richard Nordquist, About.com Guide

Though best known for her fiction, Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison is also a notable essayist[1] and reviewer. Some of her most enduring nonfiction has been collected by Carolyn Denard in *What Moves at the Margin*, published in 2008 by the University Press of Mississippi.

Toni Morrison

From her early days as an editor at Random House through her many years as a teacher of English at Princeton, Morrison has shown an abiding interest in the writer[2]'s craft. Here, in excerpts from a number of interviews, Morrison offers her thoughts on the practice and the process of writing[3].

- **You teach writing at Princeton. Can writing can be taught?**
  I think some aspects of writing can be taught. Obviously, you can't expect to teach vision or talent. But you can help with comfort. . . .

  I don't want to hear whining about how it's so difficult. Oh, I don't tolerate any of that because most of the people who've ever written are under enormous duress, myself being one them. So whining about how they can't get it is ridiculous. What I can do very well is what I used to do, which is edit[4]. I can follow their train of thought, see where their language is going, suggest other avenues. I can do that, and I can do that very well.
  (Interview with Zia Jaffrey, "The Salon Interview With Toni Morrison,"[5] Salon.com, February 1998)

- **Where do you find your inspiration?**
  Sometimes ideas arrive through reading contradictory things in history books or newspapers; sometimes it's a response or reaction to current events. But that only explains where some of the themes come from. I can't explain inspiration. A writer is either compelled to write or not. And if I waited for inspiration I wouldn't really be a writer.
  ("Toni Morrison," *Time* magazine, January 21, 1998)

- **How do you work? What are the rituals for getting started?**
  Well, I try to write when I'm not teaching, which means fall and most of the summer. I do get up very early, embarrassingly early, before there is light, and I write with pencil, yellow pads, words, scratchings out, but, you know, long before that, I've spent a couple of years, probably eighteen months, just thinking about these people, the circumstances, the whole architecture of the book, and I sort of feel so intimately connected with the place and the people and the events that when language does arrive, I'm pretty much ready.
  (Interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, "Conversation: Toni Morrison," The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, PBS, March 9, 1998)

- **Who do you write for?**
  I want to write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people--people who can't be faked, people who don't need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria.
  (quoted in "Toni Morrison," VG: Voices from the Gaps,[6] February 2007)

- **What do you mean when you refer to the "music" of prose?**
  You rely on a sentence to say more than the denotation[7] and the connotation[8]; you revel in the smoke that the words send up.
  (Interview with Rosie Blau, "Lunch with the FT: Toni Morrison," *Financial Times*, November 8, 2008)

- **My 15-year-old daughter lives to write. What advice do you have for aspiring writers?**
  (Darren Wethers, St. Louis, Missouri)
  The work is the work itself. If she writes a lot, that's good. If she revises a lot, that's even better. She should not only write about what she knows but about what she doesn't know. It extends the imagination.
  ("Toni Morrison Will Now Take Your Questions," *Time* magazine, May 19, 2008)

- **How much effort do you put into revising your work?**
  I love that part; that's the best part, revision[9]. I do it even after the books are bound! Thinking about it before you write it is delicious. Writing it all out for the first time is painful because so much of the writing isn't very good. I didn't know in the beginning that I could go back and make it better; so I minded very much writing badly. But now I don't mind at all because there's that wonderful time in the future when I will make it better, when I can see better what I should have said and how to change it. I love that part!
  (Interview with Jane Bakerman, "The Seams Can't Show: An Interview With Toni Morrison," *Black American Literature Forum*, Summer 1978)

- **You've talked about how official languages can stifle identity. Do you have any thoughts about the ways that technologies like e-mail and texting are changing how people speak and write?**
  Language changes--and should--because it is as alive as its speakers and writers. It is stifling or bad only when unclear, mediocre, false or wholly devoid of creative imagination. That may apply to some texting and e-mail, but not all.
  (Interview with Christine Smallwood, "Back Talk: Toni Morrison," *The Nation*, November 19, 2008)

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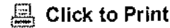
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TIME

Wednesday, May. 07, 2008

10 Questions for Toni Morrison

By Toni Morrison

She's won the Pulitzer and Nobel prizes and recently received the PEN/Borders Literary Service Award. A new collection of her nonfiction, What Moves at the Margin, is out now. Toni Morrison will now take your questions

How did you discover your passion for writing? *—Roderick Yang, Seattle*
My deepest passion was reading. At some point—not early, I was 35 or 36—I realized there was a book that I wanted very much to read that really hadn't been written, and so I sort of played around with it in trying to construct the kind of book I wanted to read.

Out of all the novels you've written, do you have a favorite? *—Sarah Henderson, Loma Linda, Calif.*
No, I always am most deeply impressed with the one that's going on at the moment.

What is your prewriting process like? *—Sarah McLaughlin, Berkeley, Calif.*
Different books arrive in different ways and require different strategies. Most of the books that I have written have been questions that I can't answer. In order to actually put down the first word—I don't really have a plan—I sometimes have a character, but I can't do anything with it until the language arrives.

***Song of Solomon* should be required reading for all African-American boys. How did you know what is in our heads?** *—Ira Levi, Tulsa, Okla.*
That was a leap for me. I really wanted to do that book, about the education of a middle-class black man, about his ancestry, and I couldn't. And then my father died, and it was earthshaking for me. I remember saying to myself, I wonder what my father knew about these men? And I have to tell you, I felt access. I knew I could get there if I thought about him.

Do you think that young black females are dealing with the same self-acceptance issues today as your character was in *The Bluest Eye*? *—Francesca Siad, Calgary, Alta.*
No, not at all. When I wrote the book, the young women who read it liked it [but] were unhappy because I

had sort of exposed an area of shame. Nowadays I find young African-American women much more complete. They seem to have a confidence that they take for granted.

Do you regret referring to Bill Clinton as the first black President? *—Justin Dews, Cambridge, Mass.*
People misunderstood that phrase. I was deploring the way in which President Clinton was being treated, vis-à-vis the sex scandal that was surrounding him. I said he was being treated like a black on the street, already guilty, already a perp. I have no idea what his real instincts are, in terms of race.

Why did you endorse Barack Obama for the presidency? *—Chris Francis Lightbourne, Long Island, N.Y.*
I thought about voting for Hillary at the beginning. I don't care that she is a woman. I need more than that. Neither his race, his gender, her race or her gender was enough. I needed something else, and the something else was his wisdom.

My 15-year-old daughter lives to write. What advice do you have for aspiring writers? *—Darren Wethers, St. Louis, Mo.*
The work is in the work itself. If she writes a lot, that's good. If she revises a lot, that's even better. She should not only write about what she knows but about what she doesn't know. It extends the imagination.

If you had not chosen to share your gift of writing, what else would you have done? *—Michelle Patrick, New York City*
When I started teaching, I was absolutely thrilled. There's nothing more exciting to me than to read books, to talk about books with students—generation after generation—who bring different things to them. I loved that. I would stay there.

Are there any dreams or goals that you have yet to fulfill? *—Janie Crawford, Syracuse, N.Y.*
I have two. Well, three, really. Two involve novels that I'm going to write and haven't written. The third is immortality. [Laughs.] I don't mean my work. I mean me.

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