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Toni Morrison



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Morrison's book, "A Mercy," examines what might be called a "pre-racial" America, the formative years at the end of the 17th century when our forebears still had a chance of turning their collective backs against slavery. As the 1993 Nobel Prize winner shows in this slight but powerful story, many forces - economic, sociological, psychological - combined to reinforce racism and sexism before they were institutionalized. "A Mercy" is set amid the Bermuda Triangle of trade that fueled the pre-colonial trans-Atlantic economy: Europeans enslaved Africans and took them to the West Indies, where they were traded for rum and molasses, which was delivered to New England. The wealth created then returned to the Old World. In 1676, after a restive slave population incited rebellion in the mid-Atlantic region, new laws were put in place to tighten the gentry's control over blacks, mulattoes and freedmen. The willful exploitation of human capital was fast becoming fundamental to the flow of commerce. In Morrison's novel, this nasty business sits uneasily with Jacob Vaark, an up-from-the-bootstraps entrepreneur of Dutch-English heritage who represents the European immigrant (white, male, ambitious). Vaark, eager to earn his fortune along the Eastern Seaboard, represents the troubled conscience of the nation that's yet to emerge.

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