Although at times “God Help the Child” feels "plotted,” Morrison has created compelling characters in Bride, Booker and Sweetness.

Compelling characters

Like many of her novels, “God Help the Child” is a haunting and harrowing examination of the enduring impact of slavery and racism on African-Americans. Her decision to focus on skin color (along with child abuse) in her first work of fiction set in the 21st century is particularly interesting.

“It’s just a color,” Booker maintains. “A genetic trait, not a flaw, not a curse, nor a blessing nor a sin.”

Bride acknowledges that his words were rational and, for a time soothing, but at odds with her day-to-day experience — “like sitting in a car under the stunned gaze of little white children who couldn’t be more fascinated if they were at a museum of dinosaurs.”

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Probing questions

Booker, we learn, grew up in a book reading-family shaped by "talk in the flesh and text on paper."

Every Saturday morning, before breakfast, his parents asked their children two questions: What have you learned that is true (and how do you know)? What problem do you have?

And so he understands (and tells Bride) that “no matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity.” That said, he, too, is struggling with a childhood trauma: the murder of Adam, his older brother, by a serial molester. And so, all too often, the answers to his parents’ questions are “1. So far nothing. 2. Despair.”

Booker is a horn player, but the plot hinges on seven sheets of written reflections about Bride that he sends to...
Made for each other

Bride’s “imagination is impeccable the way it cuts and scrapes the bone never touching the marrow where that dirty feeling is thrumming like a fiddle…,” the second page reads. Three pages later, Booker claims, “Trying to understand racist malignancy only feeds it, makes it balloon fat and lofty floating high overhead fearful of sinking to earth where a blade of grass could puncture it…”

Bride and Booker, it’s clear, are made for each other. Happily, Booker will apologize to his brother for using him “to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slave owner could have done it better.”

Bride will “wake up in sunshine from a dreamless sleep.” And each of them will be better prepared to answer his parents’ probing questions: What have you learned that is true (and how do you know)? What problem do you have?

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