



# Commissioner's Book Club: **Beloved**

## Discussion guide

### Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#) (PDF, 108KB).

### **Author Bio**

Toni Morrison is the author of eleven novels and three essay collections. She received the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize and in 1993 the Nobel Prize in Literature. She died in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

### **Summary**

Set after the Civil War, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* centres on Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman haunted by her past and the ghost of her child. Sethe's life is disrupted when Paul D, a fellow survivor of the Sweet Home plantation, enters her life, stirring memories of their shared experiences. Through fragmented narratives, Morrison delves into themes of memory, motherhood and the legacy of violence. The novel's central conflict revolves around Sethe's attempts to reconcile her past and protect her family from its horrors.

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<sup>1</sup> [Penguin Random House Canada 2025](#)

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*The novel challenges readers to confront the legacy of oppression, particularly through Sethe’s devastating choices. In many ways, this story is about intergenerational trauma and how the scars of oppression are borne not only by those who directly experience it, but also their descendants and communities.*

*At the same time, the novel emphasizes the power of community and collective healing as integral to dignity and justice.*

*“Beloved” is vital reading to understand the context, experience and legacy of slavery, but it also transcends the historical setting. It is a heart-rending reminder of the universal rights to equality and freedom—both their fragility and their power—and as a reader, it is difficult to ignore how these themes remain all too relevant.*

*- Commissioner Govender*

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## Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Human rights are the idea that we deserve certain things just because we are human. Everyone is born with the right to a life of equality, dignity and respect.

Human rights are a way of meeting our responsibilities to each other. They help us treat each other fairly and show us what it means to respect each other.

Many human rights are protected by law. These laws tell us how governments must treat people and how organizations and people must treat each other.

British Columbia’s [Human Rights Code](#) is a provincial law designed to safeguard individuals from discrimination in areas such as employment, housing and services. It protects against discrimination on the basis of characteristics such as race, color, ancestry, ethnicity, Indigeneity, religion, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, family status and physical and mental disability.

### Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:



1. What is the significance of the supernatural in the novel?
  - The ghostly presence of Beloved symbolizes the haunting legacy of slavery and unresolved grief.
2. How does Morrison's use of non-linear storytelling affect the reader's experience?
  - The structure mirrors the characters' fractured lives, deepening the emotional impact.
3. Why does Sethe kill her daughter, and how does the community react?
  - Sethe kills her daughter to save her from slavery. The community initially ostracizes her, reflecting societal judgment on extreme acts of resistance.
4. What role does memory play in the narrative?
  - Memory is central, serving both as a source of pain and a means of understanding and reconciliation.
5. What does Beloved want from Sethe and the others?
  - Beloved seeks acknowledgment, love and reconciliation—embodying the past's demand to be remembered.
6. What did you learn about slavery from the novel?
  - How might the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* address injustices similar to those in the novel?
  - The Charter protects our rights to equality and prohibits discrimination. It also protects against arbitrary detention and the right to life, liberty and security of the person. Slavery laws would not be able to be passed in Canada today because of Charter protections.
7. Why is *Beloved* considered essential reading for understanding the complexities of human rights today?
  - By humanizing the experiences of the enslaved and highlighting the psychological aftermath, *Beloved* offers profound insights into the importance of dignity, freedom and reparative justice in human rights.
8. How do the themes of *Beloved* resonate with contemporary social and cultural issues?
  - The novel's exploration of systemic oppression, intergenerational trauma and the struggle for identity parallels modern discussions on racial injustice, historical memory and mental health advocacy.
  - What legacies of intergenerational trauma are central to Canadian history and Canada today?
9. How does the community's role evolve in the story?
  - Initially judgmental, the community ultimately becomes a source of support, highlighting collective healing.

