

Toni Morrison talks to Google about creativity

HILLEL ITALIE - AP National Writer - Associated Press

Novelist Toni Morrison, speaking Wednesday to dozens of Google employees holding laptops and smartphones, shared her vision for how she would turn the search engine leader into a literary character.

"It's like a big, metal, claw-y machine in 'Transformers,'" she said, to much laughter, during a lunchtime gathering at Google's Manhattan offices. "When they're threatened, they turn into a little radio, they turn into a little car. And then after you pass them by they come up again.

"They can be anything and everything."

The 82-year-old Nobel laureate was the latest, and most literary in memory, of a long line of famous guests from Stephen Colbert to Lady Gaga who since 2005 have dropped in on Google Inc. in New York and the home offices in Mountain View, Calif. After her talk, she stayed on to take questions online, part of Google's "Hangout" series.

Morrison, battling the flu and sniffing through much of the afternoon, was promoting the paperback edition of her novel "Home," published last year. But she also chatted about technology, teaching and creativity.

Most of the attendees were young enough to be her grandchildren, and she clearly enjoyed startling them with candid talk about what she likes in literature (please don't bore her with stories about dating) and about how to use sex in fiction. The first lesson: Forget "boobs and butts."

"When you write about physical attraction, someone falling in love, or making love, it's just so relentlessly boring," she said.

"So why don't you do something different? When I wrote 'Beloved' I had these guys watching Sethe (the main character) in a cornfield making love to this guy. You can't see her, they can see the tops of the corn, and then the language goes on. ... It's all about corn. And I had a guy say I'll never see corn the same way."

Unlike Philip Roth, who announced recently he was done with fiction, Morrison has no plan to quit. She is working on a new novel but acknowledges she's having a hard time. The problem isn't the narrative itself but the time in which she's set the story — the present, an era she's still trying to understand.

Morrison, an early endorser of Amazon.com's Kindle reading device and the author of prize winners including "Song of Solomon," said she's not a Luddite and does keep up with the Internet, enough so that she much prefers the nonfiction she reads on blogs to fiction. And she credited the Internet as an information resource.

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"It shortens research enormously, months of time you would normally spend in libraries, just trying to read books," she said.

She cited an example from her most recent novel, set in the 1950s.

"I was looking for documentation for who could not rent or buy property in Seattle," she said. "And I knew black people couldn't, but I didn't have any real examples. But via Google I went through stuff and found these lease arrangements."

But the digital age can still catch her off guard. When on-stage interviewer Torrence Boone, a Google managing director, casually mentioned that their discussion would be replayed on the Internet, Morrison sounded as if caught in the act.

"You heard me say all that stuff about corn and stuff?" she asked.

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