BOOK REVIEW:
SULA, BY TONI MORRISON

Sula is the kind of book that takes life underneath your fingertips: it feels like sun on your skin, dust in the heat, and old photographs, relics of times that are no more. Through this masterpiece, Toni Morrison delivers a portrait of the black community, angry like a clenched fist, but also of women, uncompromising and strong, craving for freedom.

Set in the 20s, the story takes place in the Bottom, a black community in Ohio. Nel and Sula are two completely different girls, even though inseparable. Nel comes from a home of watchfulness; her family, very religious, believes deeply in social conventions. Sula’s home is quite the opposite: pulsing with larger-than-life people and activity, she is raised by her mother and grandmother, both seen by the town as eccentric and loose. Best friends during their childhood, Nel and Sula start growing apart after a tragic accident, until they get separated by the different paths they embraced: Nel chooses to get married after high school and have kids, settling in the conventional role of wife and mother. Sula, on the other hand, leaves the Bottom to go to college and live a life as wide as her mind, disregarding all social conventions. She comes back ten years later and becomes the target of the entire town, everybody regarding her as the very personification of evil.

Written in 1973 by Nobel Prize-winning Toni Morrison, Sula is about ambiguity and the opposition of good and evil, right and wrong. It questions social conventions: are they a guidance to live a well-balanced life, or an obstacle restraining one’s desires and abilities? The sexuality of women is also depicted in a new light, more liberated. Through the character of Sula, who could be described as pariah, Toni Morrison portrays eccentricity, sensuality and recklessness, in a delicious and subtle way. The secondary characters are also rich and colourful: a strong and tough one-legged grandmother; the dweys, three boys all named Dewey inseperable from one-another; Shadrack, a World War I veteran gone a bit crazy...

I personally really enjoyed this book: it was rich and adventurous, its main character reckless and wild and sensual, while still exposing social issues in the black community and as a woman. It also explored other themes in a more subtle way: for example the condition of WW1 veterans. I was quite shocked by the difficulty and the toughness of the characters’ lives: there was no place for kindness or sensibility in a world where setting your son on fire to end his pain seems like the best option. On a scale from 1 to 5, I would give Sula a 4, because it definitely is beautifully written, and I have a soft spot for extravagant and adventurous characters. However the reading level required to understand this book is difficult, and I would recommend it to people who are quite comfortable with english.