Miriam Riverlea, "Entry on: Poppy or the Snake? (Who's Got Game?, 3) by Pascal Lemaitre, Slade Morrison, Toni Morrison", peer-reviewed by Elizabeth Hale and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1168. Entry version as of November 21, 2026.

Pascal Lemaitre , Slade Morrison , Toni Morrison

Poppy or the Snake? (Who's Got Game?, 3)

United States of America (2003)

TAGS: Aesop Aesop's Fables Snakes





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Poppy or the Snake? (Who's Got Game?, 3)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2003
First Edition Details	Toni Morrison and Slade Morrison, *Who's Got Game? Poppy or the Snake?* Ill. Pascal Lemaitre, New York: Scribner, 2003, unpaginated.
ISBN	9780743222495
Genre	Comics (Graphic works), Folk tales, Humorous comics, Mythological comics
Target Audience	Children (recommended for)
Author of the Entry	Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Elizabeth Hale, University of New England, ehale@une.edu.au Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Pascal Lemaitre , b. 1967
(Illustrator)

Freelance author and artist Pascal Lemaitre is based in Belgium. He attended La Cambre, the Belgian school of Visual Arts. He is the author of two children's books, *Emily the Giraffe* (1993, first published in French as *Elvire la giraffe* in 1991) and *Zelda's Secret* (1994), and has illustrated books with numerous children's writers including Toni and Slade Morrison, Kate McMullan and Michaela Muntean. In 2015, the museum *Tomi Ungerer* curated an exhibit of his work. He has also illustrated works for adults, and his editorial work has featured in numerous international publications, including *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *Le Monde*.

Sources:

Official website (accessed: December 30, 2020).

encyclopedia.com (accessed: December 30, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com



Slade Morrison , 1965 - 2010
(Author)

Slade Morrison was an American artist, abstract painter and musician. The second son of writer and academic Toni Morrison and architect Harold Morrison, he collaborated with his mother on the *Who's Got Game?* trio of comic book adaptations of Aesop's *Fables*, as well as a

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range of other children's picture books. They were working on a book of ghost stories when he died of pancreatic cancer, aged 45.

Source:

Pip Cummings, *'I didn't want to come back': Toni Morrison on life, death and Desdemona*, smh.com.au, published August 7, 2015 (accessed: December 30, 2020).

Bio prepared by Miriam Riverlea, University of New England, mriverlea@gmail.com



Toni Morrison by Christopher Drexel. Retrieved from flickr.com, public domain (accessed: February 2, 2022).

Toni Morrison , 1931 - 2019
(Author)

Toni Morrison was a well-known American writer, editor and academic renowned for exploring the African American experience, particularly from a feminist perspective. She was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. Her parents instilled in her a love of reading, music, folklore and a respect for black culture. She was a gifted and hardworking student who studied Latin in high school. She gained a BA from Howard University, majoring in English with a minor in classics, and an MA from Cornell. After a period of academic teaching she became a fiction editor at Random House in New York, the first black woman to hold the position.

She began publishing her own writing in the 1970s and 1980s. Her first book, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is the story of a black girl obsessed by white standards of beauty. Her best known work, *Beloved* (1987), which was awarded the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, is based on the story of mulatto slave Margaret Garner, who killed her two year old daughter rather than have her return to slavery. The story has been compared to the myth of *Medea*, and in 1998 was adapted into a feature film co-produced by and starring Oprah Winfrey, and in 2005

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Morrison composed the libretto for the opera *Margaret Garner*. In 1993 Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first African American woman to receive the honour.

Morrison wrote an extensive list of novels, short stories, plays and non fiction publications. With her son Slade, she published a number of children's books. She has received a raft of international honours and recognitions for her work. In 2012 Barak Obama presented her with a US Presidential Medal of Freedom. She died in 2019, aged 88.

Sources:

britannica.com (accessed: December 30, 2020).

womenshistory.org (accessed: December 30, 2020).

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Additional information

Adaptations

Audiobook of the series published in 2007,audible.com.au (accessed: December 30, 2020).

Summary

Poppy or the Snake is set in the American Deep South. The little boy, Nate, has been spending the summer holidays with his grandfather Poppy, fishing, swimming, and picking blackberries. One night after summer Nate confesses that he doesn't want to return to school. His grades are bad, his Dad calls him lazy, and his Mom says he can't concentrate. In response, Poppy pulls out a pair of shiny boots, which he calls his remembering boots, that help him to pay attention. Nate is confused, and Poppy sits down at the table to tell his favourite grandson a story of something that happened to him.

One night Poppy goes out fishing, and when he returns to his truck he discovers that a snake is wedged under his back wheel. The creature is still alive, and angry, and it says "Is you going to leave me here to die like a dog?" Poppy is apologetic, and as the snake rants and rails, he promises to carefully move the truck. Then he hesitates; he is afraid of what the poisonous snake will do to him when it is released. The snake assures him that he will not bite, "you ain't my enemy baby, you my saviour, see?" But Poppy continues to worry, and asks the snake to agree, promise and swear, to which to snake replies: "I agree man. And I promise and I swear, I will never even think of biting you."

The truck is moved, and the snake is free. Poppy prepares to leave, but the snake puts on a tragic performance, pointing out that he is hungry and wounded, and asks to be taken home. Poppy is aghast, but when the creature again challenges his sympathy towards his victim, he acquiesces. Back in his cabin he feeds the snake and tends to its injuries. The following day the snake asks to stay another night, and growing to like his guest more, despite his "sassy mouth", Poppy agrees.

Poppy drives to town to run errands and pick up groceries. When he finally gets home, the snake, curled up in his bed, reproaches him for abandoning him. Poppy replies that he would never to that to a friend. He insists they trust each other "all the way to the grave". The days pass peacefully, but Poppy notices that snake grows restless and

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bored; he needles Poppy about getting a TV or a radio, and sulks when Poppy explains that he likes the peace and quiet.

Poppy is asleep in his bed with the snake close by on the floor, when he is awoken by a sharp pain in his forearm. The snake has bitten him! Incensed, Poppy demands to know why he broke his promise. The snake replies, "as casually as you please, Hey Man. I'm a snake. You knew that." He makes to slither out the door.

The book returns to the frame narrative of Poppy and Nate. Poppy laughs and slaps his knees as Nate, quite shocked, asks his grandfather how he survived. Poppy reveals that he recognised the sophistry of the snake's promise; he swore he would not even think of biting him, not that he would not bite him. On his trip into town, Poppy acquired a snake serum. But as he stresses to Nate, it is not simply the anti-venom that saved him, but his ability to pay attention. Poppy turns up the lamp, and lifts his remembering boots on to the table, fashioned out of the "softest, shiniest snakeskin." No more words as said on the book's final pages, which show Poppy and Nate going out in the dark, getting in the truck, and driving to town, where they join a busker in a jam session, with Poppy on the harmonica.

Analysis

Like the two other books in the Morrison's *Who's Got Game?* series, *Poppy or the Snake* is a reworking of the fables of Aesop, in which the traditional tales are adapted to explore more sophisticated and ambiguous moral territory. This book draws upon Aesop's *The Farmer and the Viper*, in which a farmer finds a snake freezing in the snow, and taking pity on it, puts it inside his jacket to keep warm, whereupon it bites him. As he dies, the farmer realises that it is his own fault, the source of the idiom "to nourish a viper in one's bosom." A second fable, with the similar title *The Country Man and the Snake*, is also a source. In this story, a snake lives near a farm. Its presence is tolerated until the farmer's son treads on the snake and is bitten and killed. In retaliation, the farmer cuts of the snake's tail. Then the snake goes after the man's cattle. When the man asks for forgiveness, the snake refuses on the grounds that their mutual injuries are too great. There are other variations, but the theme of enmity between the aggrieved parties remains a constant.

Poppy or the Snake draws on these narratives to develop a story that explores the themes of guilt, blame, responsibility, the conventions of

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hospitality, and the archetypal nature of human and snake. The traditional moral of one of the Aesopian pretexts, that "injuries may be forgiven, but not forgotten", is upheld through the snake's betrayal, but as in their other retellings, Toni and Slade Morrison invite readers to question the tidiness of this conclusion. Ultimately, the story shows that paying attention, and being prepared, are important life skills. The book also encourages young readers to recognise the subtleties of language and how easy it is to jump to conclusions about what people say and mean. The snake never promises not to bite Poppy, but it is natural to assume that that he did.

Lemaitre's illustrations convey the Deep South setting through the representation of Poppy's humble cabin on the edge of the bayou. There are alligators in the water and armadillos in the forest. The book draws upon the oral storytelling tradition of African American culture. This locates the book within Morrison's oevre, underscored by other intertextual details, such as the presence of a copy of *Tar Baby* (1981) in Poppy's cabin. The frame narrative is presented in typeset text, while Poppy's story is handwritten, helping to convey its more intimate, casual tone. Poppy and his grandson are depicted as black American, and the snake speaks with the vocabulary and inflection of black American slang. The speech bubbles and other features of the comic book format, which varies from pages with a single frame to those which multiple panels, aims to engage young readers. The book also invites re-readings, as the pictures reveal much that is left implicit within the written text. Readers who are familiar with the final twist can revisit the story with the benefit of hindsight. Poppy's facial expressions hint at his distrust of the snake even as he entertains him in his cabin, and the pages which show his trip to town leave space for his acquisition of the serum, though they do not show its acquisition.

The character of the boy Nate is a natural focus for reader identification. His revelations to his grandfather about his ambivalence about school, and the criticisms of his parents, add texture to the narrative. His response to his Poppy's story is not revealed, but the final illustration, which shows him watching with admiration as Poppy plays harmonica, promotes the power of intergenerational bonds, family traditions, and the joy of music and other creative pursuits.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aesop Aesop's Fables Snakes
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adversity Animals Character traits Communication Emotions Expectations Family Friendship Gaining understanding Good deeds Humanity Humour Integrity Intertextuality Isolation/loneliness Judgement Knowledge Learning Memory Morality Old age (Old people) Race Revenge Small town life Socialisation Storytelling Survival Talking animals Truth and lies Values
Further Reading	Ferguson, Rebecca, "Of snakes and men: Toni and Slade Morrison's and Pascal Lemaitre's adaptations of Aesop in *Who's Got Game?*", *MELUS* 36. 2 (2011): 53+.

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