

Meet Virginia Hamilton



*In The House of Dies Drear I tried
to pay back all those wonderful
relatives who
gave me so much in the past.*

—Virginia Hamilton

Virginia Hamilton has won many awards and honors as a writer of fiction and nonfiction and a reteller of folktales. She is the first author to receive the Newbery Medal and the National Book Award for the same book—her 1974 novel for young people *M.C. Higgins, the Great*. The Newbery Medal is awarded annually to the author of the most distinguished children's book of the year.

Hamilton was born on March 12, 1936, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, a town similar to the one she created for Thomas Small and his family in *The House of Dies Drear*. Like many other writers, she credits her family for inspiring her creativity. Hamilton remembers the family stories that were passed from person to person. She says:

I grew up within the warmth of loving aunts and uncles, all reluctant farmers but great storytellers. I remember the tales best of all. My own father . . . was the finest of the storytellers besides being an exceptional mandolinist. Mother, too,

could take a slice of fiction floating around the family and polish it into a saga.

Hamilton grew up quite aware of her African American heritage. She knew that many of the old houses in her hometown had once been safe havens for enslaved people escaping from the South to the North and to Canada. Her own ancestors escaped slavery in the 1800s.

Hamilton has been interested in writing since she was a young girl. She notes, "I learned to think and to manage feelings in terms of stories."

She began writing seriously at Antioch College in her hometown in Ohio. She attended the school on a scholarship, majored in writing, and composed her first short stories. Before finishing college, she moved to New York City, where she continued writing and worked different jobs to support herself.

In 1960 Hamilton married Arnold Adoff, a poet. As newlyweds, the couple traveled to Spain and to northern Africa. Visiting Africa had been a long-time dream of Hamilton's, and the country made a strong impression on her. This trip would eventually influence her first novel, *Zeely*, which was published in 1967.

After fifteen years in New York City, Hamilton returned to her home state of Ohio. Today she lives with her husband on land that belonged to her family. Hamilton has two grown children who live in New York. She writes full time, always trying to improve her work and reach out to young people. She is particularly drawn to creating young African American characters who have a great deal of drive and inner strength. Of Hamilton's writing, Ethel L. Heins wrote in the review journal *Horn Book*:

Few writers of fiction for young people are as daring, inventive, and challenging to read—or to review—as Virginia Hamilton. Frankly making demands on her readers, she nevertheless expresses herself in a style essentially simple and concise.

which has hidden doors and secret passages. The house, almost a character itself, reflects some of the qualities of the novel's characters and the tangled web of problems within the Smalls' new community. It also echoes with memories of enslaved people escaping to freedom and an eccentric man who devoted his life to their cause. As one critic put it:

The story itself has a curious, almost-architectural resemblance to the house it describes: large, dark, rambling, rather frightening, and leading off in strange directions.

In addition to exploring the house, Thomas explores his new community and the

lives of his ancestors. Like many of Hamilton's other characters, Thomas is a sensitive, complex person with a great deal of strength.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The House of Dies Drear is set in the 1960s in a small Ohio town. More than one hundred years earlier, the town was a stopping point for enslaved people traveling north on the Underground Railroad to Canada.

The free state of Ohio was important to the Underground Railroad system. As many as 60,000 enslaved people passed through the state between 1812 and 1850.

Did You Know?

Slavery was introduced in the North American colonies in the 1600s. By the next century, a system of farming called the plantation system began to prosper in the Southern colonies. Plantation owners needed inexpensive labor to raise their crops of tobacco, rice, sugarcane, and cotton. Men and women were imported, against their will, from Africa and the Caribbean islands.

Many Northerners felt that slavery was wrong, and Northern lawmakers passed laws that made slavery illegal in their states. These states became known as free states. Canada, too, declared that it would no longer allow slavery. Southerners, who considered slaves their property, passed laws against helping enslaved people escape to free states. In 1793 the U.S. Congress passed the first of the fugitive slave laws that made helping runaways a crime. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required Northerners to return escaped slaves to their holders. To escape the federal laws, the fugitives had to go

beyond the northern free states and on to Canada or Mexico. Tensions between the free states and the slave states had been growing. As settlers on the frontier asked that their territories be admitted to the Union as states, a decision had to be made about whether to allow slavery in each new state. When Missouri applied for statehood, a long and angry debate took place in Congress. The conflict was resolved in 1820 with the Missouri Compromise, which allowed Missouri admission as a slave state but banned slavery north of the 36th parallel.

Many Northerners wanted to end slavery throughout the United States, not just in the North. Southern planters argued that doing away with slavery would cause the plantation system, the backbone of the Southern economy, to collapse. It was this disagreement that caused Southern states to eventually break from the United States and form their own government. This action in turn led to the Civil War, which began in 1861.