



Virginia Hamilton

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I see my books and the language I use in them as empowering me to give utterance to the dreams, the wishes, of African Americans. I see the imaginative use of language and ideas as a way to illuminate a human condition. . . I've attempted to mark the history and traditions of African Americans, a parallel culture people, through my writing, while bringing readers strong stories and memorable characters living nearly the best they know how. I want the readers, both adults and children, to care about who the characters are. I want readers to feel, to understand, and to empathize.

— Virginia Hamilton

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Quick Facts

- * 1936-2002
- * Of mixed African-American and Native-American identity
- * Children's book author

Biography

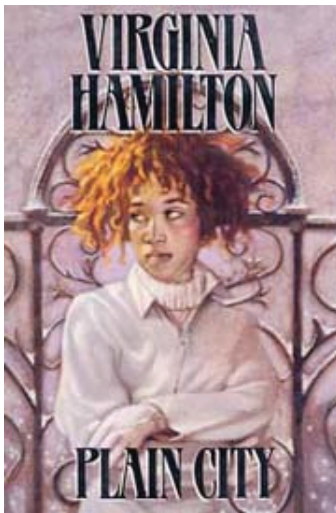
From the time Virginia Hamilton was a child, she was exposed to storytelling. Born in 1936 on a small farm in Yellow Springs, Ohio, to a musician/farmer and a housewife, Hamilton grew up listening to stories of freedom and hard work. By her own account, Hamilton was a born writer, stating, “ I started writing as a kid; it was always something I was going to do” [1]. Receiving a full scholarship to Antioch College, she transferred after three years, went to Ohio State University, and continued her studies in writing in New York. She married in 1960 and worked at various jobs - to make ends meet while she finished school including singing, accounting, and being a museum receptionist. Her vocation to write was always with her, and finally, in 1967, she moved back to Yellow Springs to write and raise a family. She died on February 19, 2002.

This page was researched and submitted by Tyrone Daniels, Nicole Lesser, Tiffany Mcwhorter, and Cherie Zanders.



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Biography continued



Virginia Hamilton has been called the “Toni Morrison of children’s literature.” Her efforts to promote her positive view of personal strength, pride, and childhood in her stories compare strongly to those ideas promoted by Morrison. The experiences she had while growing up on a farm influenced what she would write about. For example, in her book, *The Bells of Christmas*, she tells the tale of a family preparing for Christmas and for the future. Set in the 1800’s, the story speaks of how each family member contributes to the giving and sharing that makes the family a family. Hamilton says that, “In *The Bells of Christmas*, I have incorporated life as it was described to me . . . It is a compilation of the stories that I heard as I was growing up about my family and the other African-American families in the area.”

The themes of inclusion and exclusion in American society also feature prominently in Hamilton's work, due in part to her own mixed African American and Native American heritage. For example, in *Plain City*, an African American girl who lives in her family's house on the edge of town refers to herself as being an “outside child” in an “outside” family. This shows Hamilton's emphasis on showing how racism affects certain characters. Hamilton depicts the characters in her novels as having pride themselves, no matter what “insiders” thought. This is a common theme in the children's books she writes. Several other of her children's novels, such as *Zeely* and *The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl*, “communicate ideological discourses of race, gender, and age to the implied reader.”

When asked in an interview if she feels “compelled to write (about) what's going on in the world,” she answered, “I write whatever comes into my head. Whatever appeals to me at the time. Whatever I feel like doing. Whatever is in my head. I really don't set out to influence or affect people the way a politician does. I'm more mellow than that. One person can do what one person can do.”



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Biography continued

Hamilton won several awards for her excellent work, including the Edgar Allen Poe award for *The House of Dies Drear* and the John Newbery Medal and the National Book Award in 1974 for *M.C. Higgins, the Great*. *The Planet of Junior Brown* is also a Newberry Honor Book. Hamilton proved time and time again her excellence in entertaining audiences of all ages, especially children. While accepting the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal in 1995, she stated, “. . .It is the goal of my imagination to make the perfect book; but of course, I never have, never can. And yet the wish, the dream stays with me and sees me through difficult books.”



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