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## Children's Books: 'Virginia Hamilton: Five Novels'

The singular vision of Virginia Hamilton allowed young readers to make their own judgments about her characters.



Illustration by Symeon Shimin from 'Five Novels/Zeely'

PHOTO: SPECIAL COLLECTIONS RESEARCH CENTER AT APPALACHIAN STATE UNIVERSITY

By [Meghan Cox Gurdon](#)

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When Virginia Hamilton was 9, she began filling a notebook with what she would later describe as “an accumulation of mysteries” gleaned from the oblique and coded conversation of adults. “What a wealth of grown-up talk graced its pages,” she would recall. “What monstrous, wonderful, snide and vindictive secrets!” Her plan was to return to her notes when she was old enough to understand them. Alas, she mislaid the notebook and never did discover what scintillating revelations it contained.

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### Virginia Hamilton: Five Novels

By Virginia Hamilton  
Library of America  
908 pages



The story of the notebook helps explain why Hamilton (1936-2002) became one of the 20th century's most celebrated writers of children's books. She was an observer, a listener, and someone intensely alive to the currents of feeling and meaning moving around her. That 9-year-old note-taker became an 11-year-old novelist filling, as she put it later, “page after page with vehement prose under the hot summer sun while lying on a slant atop the burning tin roof of the hog barn” in small-town Ohio. She would eventually publish 41 children's

books and become the first black writer to win the Newbery Medal.

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Indeed, between 1969 and 1997, awards committees couldn't seem to stop throwing accolades at Virginia Hamilton. A handsome collection of her writings, "Virginia Hamilton: Five Novels," reminds us why she was so lauded and provides a wonderful excuse, if one were needed, to revisit her striking prose and singular vision. Edited by Julie K. Rubini, the volume holds a selection of Hamilton's most important novels: "Zeely," "The House of Dies Drear," "The Planet of Junior Brown," "M.C. Higgins, the Great," and "Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush." It

also contains 20 first-edition illustrations, a sheaf of the author's speeches, essays and letters, and a biographical chronology and textual notes by Ms. Rubini, who wrote a 2017 biography of Hamilton for young readers.

Hamilton's work entered American culture in the late 1960s, the dawn of the age of the "problem novel," when children's literature was embracing grittier stories in modern settings. Her novels involve difficult themes—poverty, mental illness, the legacy of slavery—but she sidesteps the hard-edged realism that was becoming popular. It was not her intention, she said, to capture the precise vernacular of the present day. Her scope was wider, her ambition more heroic. "What I do write is best described as some essence of the dreams, lies, myths, and disasters of a bunch of my blood relatives whose troubled footprints we are first able to discern on this North American continent some 150 years ago," she said in a 1973 speech. She sought to convey "some essence of language and feeling which I project as the unquenchable spirit of a whole people through imagery, space, and time."

The unquenchable spirit is there in "Zeely" (1967), a coming-of-age story about a young girl, Geeder, who, with her little brother, Toeboy, spends a summer on their uncle's farm. While there, Geeder gets the idea that the regal young woman she sees helping to raise hogs is, in reality, a Watutsi queen. A true Hamilton character in her vitality, and the first to appear in print, Geeder is awash with the half-understood sentiments and longings of early adolescence. Her inner life comes to us through sentences of evocative simplicity. In a crucial scene, Geeder and Toeboy are set to baling piles of catalogs and magazines kept in an outbuilding. "Geeder had an odd feeling whenever she entered the shed," we read. "It was cool and shadowy, always. Both she and Toeboy were barefoot and the earthen floor of the shed felt clean and fresh. The whole place made whispering seem quite natural."

The excellent thing about this passage, apart from the tactile power of the description, is that Hamilton doesn't elaborate on the "odd feeling" that Geeder has. She leaves it with us. Hamilton does this again and again in her work. Rather than explaining her characters, she tells us how they are. The effect is to immerse young readers in the full flow of human complexity. It is in that shed, by the way, that Geeder sees the photo of a royal African woman who appears identical to the woman on the farm.

Hamilton won an Edgar Award for "The House of Dies Drear" (1968), a mystery story set in a sinister mansion once used as a way-station on the Underground Railroad. Eros Keith's illustrations for the book, included here, have the weight of woodcuts and the shadowy breathlessness of nightmare. Winner of a 1972 Newbery Honor, "The Planet of Junior Brown" tells of two troubled boys hiding out in a New York school. "Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush" (1982) is at once a ghost story, a love story and a chronicle of

family dysfunction.

The centerpiece of the collection, though, and of Hamilton's career, is "M.C. Higgins, the Great" (1974), the tale of an Appalachian boy whose mountainside home is menaced by a looming heap of coal-mining waste. The book garnered both a National Book Award and the Newbery Medal. Here again Hamilton's genius travels light, in paragraphs that are marvels of meaningful concision. Notice how adroitly she situates us in M.C.'s rural milieu: "Only a few miles from the Ohio River, they were in country where once—no more than ten years ago—there had been elk and deer. It was still deep country where people liked nothing better than the quiet of staying close to home. Boys M.C.'s age endured school in the steel town of Harenton. Awkward, with twitching hands and no pine needles to touch or branches to hang from. In class, tongue-tied, they thought themselves stupid. Their teachers thought them slow. They endured it all. Until time to go home, to live again, ingenious in the woods."

The stories we find in "Virginia Hamilton: Five Novels" are substantial in themselves, yet they represent only a small portion of what this versatile and dynamic storyteller brought to the realm of children's literature. Drawing from African-American history and folk traditions, Hamilton also wrote origin stories, fairy tales, animal stories, trickster tales, other novels and a measure of nonfiction. Writing was for her, she said, a necessity "more so than sleep." What a gift to American children, and to American letters, that this was so.

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