

VIRGINIA HAMILTON



Virginia Hamilton: Speeches, Essays, & Conversations

Edited by Arnold Adoff
and Kacy Cook

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The Liberation Literature of VIRGINIA HAMILTON

In an essay entitled, “The Spirit Spins: A Writer’s Resolution,” MacArthur genius Virginia Hamilton (1934–2002) said that “what my parents did for me without realizing it was to give me the sense that I was free to *create my own mind*.” She, in turn, has done the same for her readers and peers, by leaving behind a body of work that contributes to what she called a “liberation literature.” Arnold Adoff, co-editor of this invaluable collection, met Hamilton in 1958 in New York City. When they married, in 1960, their interracial union was illegal in 28 states. Here he talks about her life and work.

It’s very powerful in that first essay, the way Virginia Hamilton connects the Ohio River to Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and to the Hudson River when she came to New York and then describes the way the Ohio called her back.

Virginia’s grandfather was brought across the Ohio River as a baby in the 1860s. The family story was the woman who brought him was never seen again. Virginia could go across the street and play with her grandfather, who was born a slave. You can’t minimize the power of that.

The theme of the life and mind at liberty comes through in so many of her books and speeches. She talks about how the friendship at the center of *The Planet of Junior Brown* can’t last because it’s founded on lies. Was that kind of honesty a yardstick she used in her own relationships?

She was scrupulously honest, the most honest person I’ve ever known in my life. She was just as honest with me about my work and my life, and wanted the same from me. There was no B.S. Not with our kids either. That doesn’t mean their drawings weren’t on the refrigerator! Leigh became an opera singer; Jaime was in a band before he was a writer. She was always attempting to stretch, and she asked that we stretch.

Virginia talks a lot about poetry in her speeches and essays. Did she think about the sound of words in her own writing?

She was always aware of the sound of words. Most of her books she read to me. When she started to do the folktales for *The People Could Fly*, she didn’t write dialect. She wrote accessible, honest colloquial speech. Whether her characters were black or white or urban or rural, she attempted to stay away from the word du jour that would date her book.

She had a generous perspective on inclusiveness, in her belief that writers have the freedom to explore all cultures.

This is a controversy that’s still raging. Her point is that she had to be allowed to write about mainstream culture, “white” culture, and a nonblack should be allowed to write about other cultures, too. But the verisimilitude had to be there—that was a favorite word of hers. Otherwise you might have writers doing a mediocre exploitive job from either end.

In her Coretta Scott King acceptance speech for *The People Could Fly*, she talks about the importance of “the known, the remembered, and the imagined” in constructing her stories.

That was her triad in terms of the ingredients for process. It was a “Hegelian triad” that she made her own. It’s like raising kids, there are periods of equilibrium and disequilibrium, there’s one extreme and another extreme and some kind of synthesis and balance. What she did was to take what you know and what you can find out, and then what you can imagine, and create beyond what you’ve encountered.



Arnold Adoff

Photo by: Kacy Cook