

Mildred D. Taylor

*U*X*L Junior DIScovering Authors*, 2003

Born: September 13, 1943 in Jackson, Mississippi, United States

Nationality: American

- *Song of the Trees*, illustrated by Jerry Pinkney, Dial, 1975.
- *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Dial, 1976, Penguin, 1996.
- *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, Dial, 1981.
- *The Friendship*, illustrated by Max Ginsburg, Dial, 1987.
- *The Gold Cadillac*, illustrated by Michael Hays, Dial, 1987.
- *The Road to Memphis*, Dial, 1990.
- *Mississippi Bridge*, illustrated by Ginsberg, Dial, 1990.
- *The Well: David's Story*, Dial, 1995.

ADAPTATIONS

- *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* was recorded by Newbery Awards Records, 1978, and adapted as a three-part television miniseries of the same title, American Broadcasting Companies, Inc. (ABC-TV), 1978.

Writer. English and history teacher with the Peace Corps, Tuba City, AZ, 1965, and Yirgalem, Ethiopia, 1965-67, Peace Corps recruiter, 1967-68, Peace Corps instructor in Maine, 1968; University of Colorado, Boulder, study skills coordinator, 1969-71; proofreader and editor in Los Angeles, CA, 1971-73; affiliated with International House, Providence, RI, 1977-78, and with Community Free School, Coloardo, 1979-81.

First prize (African-American category), Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1973, outstanding book of the year citation, 1975, and Jane Addams Honor citation, 1976, all for notable book citation, American Library Association, 1976, National Book Award (finalist), honor book citation, Jane Addams Honor citation, and Newbery Medal, all 1977, and Buxtehuder Bulle Award, 1985, all for outstanding book of the year citation, 1981, Jane Addams Honor citation, 1982, American Book Award nomination, 1982, and Coretta Scott King Award, 1982, all for Coretta Scott King Award, and Award for fiction, both 1988, both for notable book citation, 1987, and Christopher Award, 1988, both for Children's Book Council, 1988, for "a body of work that has examined significant social issues in out readers"; Coretta Scott King Award, 1990, for Christopher Award, 1990, for Jane Ad Peace Council, 1996, for

Family: Born September 13, 1943, in Jackson, MS; daughter of Wilbert Lee and D Errol Zea-Daly, August, 1972 (divorced, 1975); children: one daughter. **Education:** University of Colorado, M.A., 1969.

Inspired in large part by the oral history of her family, Mildred D. Taylor has written a series of novels that help redefine literary representations of black family life. Many of Taylor's works are set in the rural South of the 1930s, where racial discrimination, segregation, and fear were part of the everyday experience of many black families. Taylor brings a unique perspective to her work; although born in Mississippi, she spent most of her youth in Ohio. "I grew to know the South—to feel the South—through the yearly trips we took there and through the stories told.... In those days, before the civil rights movement, I remember the South and how it was. I remember the racism, the segregation.... But I also remember the other South—the South of family and community," Taylor relates in her 1988 *Boston Globe-Horn Book* acceptance speech.

When and where was she born?

SCROLL DOWN TO THE SECTION CALLED FAMILY

- What was she inspired by?
- What is the setting of most of her books?
- What things were part of black families everyday experiences?

Here!

Taylor's ability to mix the events of everyday life with volatile issues and complex characters has gained the author both wide critical acclaim and popular appeal. "Mildred's words flow smoothly, effortlessly ... and they abound in richness, harmony, and rhythm.... Her ability to bring her characters to life and to involve her readers is remarkable," sums up Phyllis J. Fogelman in *Horn Book*. "This woman was born to write."

Taylor's exposure to segregation and discrimination began at an early age. In an essay for *Something about the Author Autobiography Series* (SAAS), the author recounts that she "was born in a segregated city, in a segregated state, in a segregated America." Three weeks after Taylor's birth, her father, angry over a number of ugly racial incidents, decided to seek a new life for his family in the North. The Taylors eventually relocated to Toledo, Ohio, where aunts, uncles, and family and friends helped make the transition easier. Taylor tells SAAS: "As aunts and uncles were able to buy or buy their own houses, we continued to do many things together as a family."

What signs did the family see when they returned to the South to visit?

One tradition the Taylors maintained after their move was that of taking long car trips back to the South. These trips were often bittersweet experiences, largely because the family had to deal once again with the realities of segregation. "Each trip down reminded us that the South into which we had been born ... still remained," Taylor notes in her essay. "As soon as we crossed over the Ohio River into Kentucky, lest we forget, the signs reminded us that they remained. On the restrooms of gasoline stations were the signs: WHITE ONLY, COLORED NOT ALLOWED. Over water fountains were the signs: WHITE ONLY. In restaurant windows, in motel windows, there were always the signs: WHITE ONLY, COLORED NOT ALLOWED. Every sign we saw proclaimed our second-class citizenship."

Despite the difficulties of these trips—which often required traveling in a caravan with other family members for protection from police and white locals—Taylor was still able to enjoy part of the experience. "Life was good then," she recalls in her 1977 Newbery Medal acceptance speech. "Running barefoot in the heat of the summer sun, my skin darkening to a soft, umber hue; chasing butterflies in the day, fireflies at night; riding an old mule named Jack and a beautiful mare named Lady; even picking a puff of cotton or two—there seemed no better world." Taylor was also entranced by the stories her relatives told about the family's past. Some of the stories were funny, some sad, but all featured the distinctive personalities of Taylor's ancestors. As Taylor grew older, however, her understanding of the stories changed: "I do not remember how old I was when the stories became more than tales of faraway people, but rather, reality. I do not remember when the twenty-four hour picnic was no longer a picnic, the adventure no longer an adventure. I only remember that one summer I suddenly felt a climbing nausea as we crossed the Ohio River into Kentucky."

What did she feel crossing into Kentucky?

What did her father tell her?

One of the things that helped Taylor understand and cope with the more difficult aspects of her childhood was the love and support of her father, who tried to instill in Taylor and her sister Wilma an understanding of both the past and their role in the future. "He wanted us to appreciate the good of the South as well as to be thankful for the privileges and freedoms of our life in the North," Taylor notes for SAAS. "He said that without understanding the loss of liberty in the South, we couldn't appreciate the liberty of the North." He also encouraged his daughters to strive to be the best people possible. In her Newbery speech, Taylor remembers that she was "blessed with a special father, a man who had unyielding faith in himself and his abilities.... A highly principled, complex man ... he impressed upon my sister and me that we were somebody, that we were important, and could do or be anything we set our minds to do or be.... He was more concerned about how we carried ourselves, how we respected ourselves and others, and how we pursued the principles upon which he hoped we would build our lives."

How did she feel being the only black student in the school?

When the author was ten years old, her family moved into a newly integrated neighborhood in Toledo, Ohio; as a result, Taylor was the only black child in her class. She felt burdened by the realization that her actions would be judged—by whites unfamiliar with blacks—as representative of her entire race. "I remember the pressure of being 'the only one,'" she remarks for SAAS. "I felt that what I did reflected not only upon me, but upon my family and upon my race." Taylor was also uncomfortable because her understanding of black history contrasted sharply with that presented in textbooks. In her Newbery speech, Taylor comments that such publications contained only a "lackluster history of Black people ... a history of

a docile, subservient people happy with their fate who did little or nothing to shatter the chains that bound them, both before and after slavery." Taylor's efforts to tell her classmates what she knew about black history were met with general disbelief. "Most of the students thought I was making the stories up," she reminisces in *SAAS*. "Some even laughed at me. I couldn't explain things to them. Even the teacher seemed not to believe me. They all believed what was in the history book."

STOP HERE! STOP HERE! STOP HERE!

By the time Taylor entered high school, the civil rights movement had begun to gain momentum. A number of incidents—including the murder of a young black boy named Emmett Till, the Montgomery bus boycott, and the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*—had raised awareness of racial discrimination to new levels. Despite the publicity surrounding these and other incidents, Taylor felt somewhat removed from the problem. "I was in Toledo after all, in the North, and though there certainly was discrimination, certainly prejudice, and certainly open violation of civil rights, I had seldom felt open hostility," she writes in her essay. One incident, however, helped draw Taylor into the fray. In 1957, a black senior was chosen as homecoming queen at Taylor's high school. The student body reaction ranged from happiness (especially on the part of minority students) to anger which exploded into violence. The author recollects: "Though things returned to normal ... those days of my freshman year hammered home to all of us that racism was not only part of the South, but of the North as well."

A visit to Toledo by then-senator John F. Kennedy further stimulated Taylor's interest in civil rights. Elected to report on the senator's visit, Taylor was impressed by both Kennedy's charisma and his interest in the civil rights movement. "I loved the promise of the future he offered, and hearing him I very much intended to be a part of it," she notes in *SAAS*. Inspired by Kennedy's speech, Taylor began making plans for her own future, plans that included faraway places and people. "Before John F. Kennedy, I had never known I could achieve this (travel and live and teach in Africa)," she records in *SAAS*, "It was something I intended to do, but until John F. Kennedy it was only a dream."

Part of Taylor's plans included college. When not preparing for classes, she wrote stories (some of which were later submitted to various writing contests). In many ways, Taylor found writing difficult. At first, she tried to pattern her efforts after writers that she admired, such as Charles Dickens and Jane Austen: "I was trying to emulate a literary form that left my work stiff and unconvincing. It was an unnatural style for me," she comments in *SAAS*. Taylor wrote her first novel at age nineteen; told using a first-person narrator, "Dark People, Dark World" explores the retreat of a young, blind, white man into Chicago's black ghetto. Although a publishing house expressed some interest in the work in a shorter, edited format, Taylor abandoned the project, largely because she was "very naive and full of artistic self-righteousness."

During Taylor's senior year at the University of Toledo, she was invited to join the Peace Corps. While Taylor was elated over the prospect of going to Ethiopia to teach, her family was unsettled by the prospect. Taylor's father was worried about the distance and potential danger; Taylor's mother, although resigned to her daughter's decision, was sad about the amount of time she would be gone. Eventually, Taylor's enthusiasm overrode her parents' concerns. During her Peace Corps service, Taylor taught English as a second language on a Navajo reservation in Arizona and later traveled to Ethiopia, where she taught at a rural school which was the largest in the province.

Taylor enrolled in the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of Colorado after her stint with the Peace Corps. Inspired by another graduate student, she became involved with the Black Student Alliance and other organizations established by the Alliance, such as the Black Education Program. "In addition to putting together plans to force the university into meeting our demands for black enrollment and black programs, we studied black culture, black history and black politics," Taylor notes in her essay. At one point, Taylor was approached by *Life* magazine about writing an article describing the Black Studies movement. Unfortunately, the magazine felt that the final product did not capture the spirit of the organization and the article was never published; Taylor's ensuing disappointment made her question the direction her life was taking. She writes in her essay: "I began to question whether or not individual goals must be suppressed to the will of the group in order for the group's goals to flourish." Eventually, Taylor returned to Ethiopia to regroup.

After returning from Africa, Taylor moved to Los Angeles. There, she worked at a number of temporary jobs to help make ends meet, all the while applying for positions more in keeping with her work experience and education. At one point, Taylor was offered a job as a reporter for CBS; after much self-analysis, she turned the position down in favor of concentrating on her writing. Taylor's first success in the latter area came about when she entered a contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Much to her surprise, Taylor's revision of an old manuscript won in the African-American category.

The revised manuscript formed the basis for *Song of the Trees*, Taylor's first book featuring the Logan family. Based on an actual incident and narrated by eight-year-old Cassie Logan, *Song of the Trees* highlights the conflict between a group of money-hungry white men and Papa Logan over some trees on Logan's land. In a standoff, Logan forces the interlopers out by threatening to blow up both himself and the remaining trees. A reviewer for the *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* calls the novel's style "fairly brisk, verging on the poetic," adding that "the plot is nicely constructed." "The simple story has been written with great conviction and strength," concurs a *Horn Book* reviewer, "Cassie's descriptions of the trees add a poetic touch."

Taylor's next book, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, continues the story of the Logan family. Covering a brief time period between 1933 and 1934, the book explores how discrimination can be an everyday occurrence. While Papa is away working on the railroad, the rest of the family struggles with the cruelty and bigotry of their farming community. The Logan children are targeted for splashing by the driver of the whites-only school bus, while at school they receive the cast-off, ragged school texts that white students will no longer use. Mama Logan loses her teaching job after she defies school district officials by including a discussion of slavery in a history lesson. After an incident in which several black men are set on fire, the Logans help orchestrate a boycott of the suspected culprit's store. This act sets off a series of events, including a foreclosure threat on the Logan's land and a suspicious fire. "The events and settings of the powerful novel are presented with such verisimilitude and the characters are so carefully drawn that one might assume the book to be autobiographical, if the author were not so young," concludes a *Bookbird* reviewer.

In the next addition to the Logan chronicle, *Let the Circle be Unbroken*, Cassie narrates the story of her farming community and how its people cope with the devastating effects of the Depression. *Circle* examines how hard times can bring out both the best and worst in people. In the novel, white and black sharecroppers band together to give each other food and moral support, while an elderly black woman is ridiculed for memorizing the state constitution in order to vote and a young man is denied justice in a rigged trial. *New York Times Book Review* contributor June Jordan praises the book for its "dramatic tension and virtuoso characterization," while Holly Eley of the *Times Literary Supplement* notes that Taylor "gives us a historical perspective on racial issues which she insists can only be successfully resolved by recognizing the fundamental equality of all human beings."

In *The Road to Memphis*, Cassie is now a high school senior, attending school in Jackson, Mississippi, and dreaming of becoming a lawyer. Cassie's brother Stacey and his friend Moe are also living in Jackson where they have found work in a factory. Away from family and friends for the first time, the trio must deal with certain ugly realities without benefit of familial support. Several racial incidents and the outbreak of World War II put a heavy strain on the three young people, especially Moe, who is forced to flee the city after defending himself in a racially-motivated attack. While allowing that Taylor loses a little narrative power in the novel, Susan Sculler of *School Library Journal* concludes that *Road* "is a dramatic, painful book."

Mississippi Bridge is connected to the Logan stories in that it is told from the viewpoint of Jeremy Simms, a ten-year-old white boy who befriends the Logan family. The novel chronicles Jeremy's reaction to the forcible removal of Grandma Logan and other black passengers from a bus during a severe storm so that white latecomers can ride in comfort. A few minutes later, the bus and its new riders crashes into a creek. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer states that "the ironies and injustices presented in [Taylor's] story will be strongly felt and remembered."

Taylor's latest novel involving the Logan family, *The Well: David's Story* is a tale told by David, Cassie's father. The book focuses on a summer during David's childhood in which there was a drought. The Logan family, who are relatively well-off landowners, own the only well that has not gone dry. They share their water freely with their neighbors, some of whom are resentful—particularly the Simms family, who are white. Conflict arises between the Logan boys and Charlie Simms after Charlie hits David. David's older brother, Hammer, retaliates by beating Charlie. Hammer's reaction to Charlie's aggression may be justified, but according to Mississippi code, both Logan boys must be punished. This particular injustice is also reflected in the interweaving of Grandma Rachel's stories of her time as a slave. Adding to this particular brand of violence, Charlie poisons the well water. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* reviewer Roger Sutton notes: "Taylor knows how to write forcefully yet briefly, and if the angels are entirely on the side of the Logan family, the conflict is compelling and painful." Similarly praising the work, *Horn Book's* Mary M. Burns concludes: "Like all of Taylor's work, this story reverberates in the heart long after the final paragraph is read."

The Friendship presents a racial confrontation between two men in 1930s Mississippi. Tom Bee, a black man, saves the life of John Wallace, a white storekeeper, when the two are young men. In gratitude, John insists that he and Tom always remain friends. Years later, however, John forgets this bond when he shoots Tom for addressing him by his first name in public—an act considered socially unacceptable. A *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* reviewer claims that the novel "elicits a naturally powerful response in depicting cruel injustice," with writing that is "concentrated to heighten that effect."

Taylor turns to rural family life again in *The Gold Cadillac*. Set in the 1950s, the novel chronicles a black family's car trip to the South (a trip much like those Taylor took with her own family). Along the way, Wilma, 'lois, and their parents are confronted with "whites only" signs and suffer harassment from white police officers who are both jealous and suspicious of the family's car and the prosperity it represents. Through these and other ugly encounters, the two sisters are eventually able to better appreciate the greater freedom and opportunity they enjoy in their Ohio hometown. Helen E. Williams, writing in *School Library Journal*, remarks: "Clear language and logical, dramatic sequencing of story events make this story bittersweet for adult readers but important for the social development of beginning readers."

Taylor gives her father much of the credit for her literary success, both because of his storytelling legacy and his refusal to be cowed by racism and segregation. The author accepted her Newbery medal for *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* on behalf of her father, remarking that "without his teachings, without his words, my words would not have been." Taylor adds that she hopes her books about the Logan family "will one day be instrumental in teaching children of all colors the tremendous influence that Cassie's generation ... had in bringing about the great Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties."

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Further Readings

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For More Information

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