

Discussion Guide to the Novels of Virginia Hamilton

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Discussion Guide to the Novels of Virginia Hamilton

Including:

Bluish

Second Cousins

Arilla Sun Down

A White Romance

Justice and Her Brothers

Dustland

The Gathering

Cousins

Plain City

The Mystery of Drear House

Introduction to Virginia Hamilton

Virginia Hamilton is the talented and multi-faceted author of thirty-five books for children and young adults. Her books come in all forms—fiction (inventive and thought-provoking novels and illustrated stories, both realistic and fantasy); nonfiction (multicultural biographies and Black American history; folklore (collections — tellings and recastings — of folk tales, myths, creation stories, legends, invented fantasies, and true stories handed down in her family); and prose with the rhythm and cadence of poetry. "I care deeply about the language I create for books," Hamilton has said. "I call myself a wordkeeper, or a keeper of words. I enjoy words and looking at them on all sides . . . Words are magnificent . . . They form rhythms of living in meaningful prose . . . It is the force of my desire, my wish to make myself understood, that powers these words" (from interview with Kelly Sagert).

Awards and Achievements

For the care that Hamilton puts into her work and her words — her stories and the language that "tells" them, her daring and insightful ideas, her inventive plots and casts of characters — she has been awarded copiously. In 1975, she became the first Black American to win the esteemed John Newbery Award for her novel *M. C. Higgins the Great*. In 1972, she became the first American Black female to win a Newbery Honor Award for her novel *Planet of Junior Brown*, and she has won two other Newbery Honor Awards, for the novel *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* in 1983 and for her collection of creation stories, *In the Beginning*, in 1989. *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* also won the Coretta Scott King Award in 1983. Her collection of Black American folk tales, *The People Could Fly* (1985) and her collection *Her Stories* (1995) also won this award. Hamilton received the Hans Christian Andersen Award (International Board of Books for Youth, 1992) and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award (American Library Association, 1995), both for the entire body of her work. And she is the first author of children's books to receive a MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant (1995) for outstanding creative talent and innovative work. Visit Virginia Hamilton's web site at www.virginiahamilton.com.

Interests and Emphases

Family and place are important in Hamilton's books, even more important than race, which is very important. Hamilton's own ethnic roots are what fuel all her stories. "I'm American Black," she says,

"American Afro-Indian [Patawatami]-Euro-Creole American" (email correspondence, 25 October 1998). Filling these books are large, extended, and loving black families. Hamilton lived in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and often her books take place in small Midwestern towns. Sometimes the child characters are monocultural in background; sometimes they are mixed, as are Hamilton and her own children. (Hamilton was married to Jewish-American poet Arnold Adoff and they had two grown children: Leigh, an opera singer, and Jaime, a musician and children's book writer.) Virginia Hamilton's vision is a multicultural one; her books are threaded with ideas of children growing up in a culturally diverse world. They might be growing up in a "parallel" American culture, Hamilton's term for the underrepresented ethnicities — different but equal, in importance, to other groups. Or they might be coming to terms with two facets of heritage. At times they are simply going about their lives as members of a particular group who are learning about or living their own cultural traditions. Because Hamilton is Black American, she focuses on her own particular culture. But her characters often emerge from different backgrounds — in terms of race, region, ethnicity, economic status. And her stories show them living together or learning to live together and to respect one another's ways of thinking. She focuses quite often on "outsider" children — children who are different in some way from other children. They might be different in terms of color, or color differences might be blended with gender, class, or cultural conflicts that children are experiencing. They might be searching for an ethnic identity or a way of "fitting" into a small town with fixed attitudes about racial mixing, out of wedlock children, or a parent with mental problems or an unconventional livelihood. Or they might be wrestling with an interest, talent, preoccupation, or disability that sets them apart from other children or other family members.

Talents and Aims

Hamilton's talent is that with each book she challenges herself to a new way of telling the story - of envisioning it and revealing it for readers. "I take risks," says Hamilton, "and it's scary; but that's the only way I know how to go on surprising my public and surpassing myself" (interview with Sagert). Hamilton teaches a great deal about writing through her storytelling; often her child characters are writers, and they show readers of all ages a great deal about the creative process. Nearly always they are explorers - learners inside and outside of school. Often they are readers too. They are learning to love stories as Hamilton wants child readers of her own books to do.

"I want children to *enjoy* my books," says Hamilton. "I write stories. I want them to enjoy what I've written. Learn to love words and language. Learn about the past and drought, rain, the future environment. All those things . . . it is all there for them to see for themselves. I really think if you leave children alone to experience what they are reading or are being read, they will have a fine time. I always did. The Story Lady in my library simply read to us. And wow! I've never forgotten it" (email correspondence with Virginia Hamilton; 28 April 1999).

As for children's books in the classroom, "I would like to have teachers read and students read the book and talk about it," says Hamilton. "I know it's very difficult to know what writers mean, but I think the bottom line is what kids get out of it and how they relate to it, and I don't think that needs to be taught. To read books is to learn the process of storytelling, or what stories are and that stories make life logical" (interview with Nina Mikkelsen 1994).

Hamilton's stories are filled with events, patterns, cultural references, puzzles, surprises, meanings — and above all mysteries — as life itself is. Her stories help readers make sense of the world, especially when they talk with others about the books and the ideas in them or when they simply stop to listen in on our own thoughts and to ask, What am I noticing? What do I find puzzling or surprising? What do I like about the book or the characters? What patterns am I discovering? Hamilton's books have always been novels of developing consciousness — stories in which characters are learning more about themselves, others, and the world — and they invite readers to learn more about themselves as the stories unfold. Stories help

children to understand the world better, says Hamilton. Children today are growing up in a multicultural world. But the diversity and variety in this world does not mean that different cultural groups understand one another or that they "care to know and learn about each other." Adults need to teach about multiculturalism, says Hamilton: "It is important that the new millennium's children know how to think about the world they see" (Hamilton 1999). All of Hamilton's books help children to understand the world better — and none more so than her twentieth novel — *Bluish* .

Bluish

As a fifth grader in a new school, Dreenie is an outsider feeling a little lost and lonely as she learns new rules and begins to make friends with a girl named Tuli. But it is another girl in her classroom who soon begins to fascinate her. The new girl is sick; she must ride in a wheelchair and soon she becomes an obsession for Dreenie because she fits her own outsider mood. Unusual because of the knitted hats she wears — and a little frightening because of her color — the girl is also lucky, in Dreenie's view: she has a puppy — and she gets to bring it to school.

But as Dreenie soon discovers, the girl is not so lucky: her illness makes her throw up in school; it causes her constant moodiness, and it might even take her life. Dreenie keeps a journal in which she writes about Natalie, the pale, sick girl whom she calls "Bluish." Dreenie's entries are interwoven with the chapters of the novel itself so that as Dreenie tells one story — her story of *Bluish* — Hamilton is telling many other stories. Separate chapters focus on Dreenie, Tuli, Dreenie's home life with her parents and her little sister Willie, the school project that Dreenie, Tuli, Natalie, and another friend Paula are working on — and Dreenie's visits to Tuli and Natalie's homes at Christmastime. The journal helps Dreenie sort out her thoughts about Natalie/*Bluish*. Eventually she gives the journal to *Bluish* as a gift. Then she starts another journal, a gift for her friend Tuli. Someday she will write a journal just for herself, she adds as the book ends.

You might like to make journal "stories" for yourself or as a gift to someone you are thinking about and observing, as Dreenie is observing *Bluish*. Then you will be experiencing the book more fully. Think about the things — or people — you know about. Tell about a person and the way that person talks and does things with you and others. Show what the person's world is like. Think about the way that Virginia Hamilton creates her characters and their worlds as you begin. "I get a whole image," says Hamilton, "and I find the words to project the image to the reader" (interview with Mikkelsen, 1994). In other words, Hamilton starts out with a picture and finds words to describe what she sees. "I envision," she says. "I see scenes when first creating a new fiction. I hear words, people talking in the vision." She may have no idea what one of these visions means. She simply sits down and begins typing, "following the process of imagining," leaving herself "open to any thought, feeling, any vision or idea or rememory that fits the image." In other words, she uses what she needs "from anywhere to make a story" (interview with Sagert).

After Hamilton discovers her characters, "the characters create the society in which they live . . . and so I have uncovered that world" (interview with Mikkelsen, 1995). "You fill in all this around the person — the history, time, and the places" (interview with Mikkelsen, 1995), adds Hamilton. To create a character's world, she brings part of her own world into her books. She has lived in Spain and owned an island home off the coast of Puerto Rico; she knows many Spanish words and phrases. So she can "see" and bring to life a character like Tuli who loves to speak Spanish and to create her own Spanish language forms. Tuli's fascination for Spanish words helps to develop her as a realistic character, with interests and preferences of her own. These "parts" of Virginia Hamilton's own world also give readers interesting things to think about. Is Tuli Spanish? Is someone in her family Spanish? Hamilton doesn't tell, leaving a little mystery about Tuli for readers to ponder.

Reading fiction means learning about the world. Fiction helps us to know more about people, places, ideas, and ways of living and thinking. We do not read fiction just to find out what happens, at least not in a

Virginia Hamilton book. We read to get to know more people, "visit" more places, and understand more about different people and places. Of course what happens is important too. Hamilton's books are rich tapestries — a picture with threads weaving together in five different ways, and thinking about these "ways" makes us more responsive readers. There are:

- *Events* (actions, talk, and stories that characters tell to one another; what happens)
- *Patterns* (little details woven through the story that fill out the big picture of the events)
- *Cultural backgrounds* (understandings about how characters and their families "fit" into a larger world)
- *Puzzles, mysteries, secrets, surprises* (what the author holds back — or might never tell us; what puzzles or surprises us — or the characters, as the story moves along or ends)
- *Meanings* (what readers come to see about the story or the story patterns — or what the characters themselves discover).

Events in *Bluish* : Dreenie moves between home and school, coming to know her classmates, taking part in her group project, taking care of her little sister, spending time with Tuli, and most of all, wondering about Bluish. Dreenie is curious about Natalie (Bluish), and she comes to know her better as time passes. She, Tuli, and Bluish become best friends.

Patterns in *Bluish* : Little details about each of the girls help us to know them better and to see why they are friends. They care about one another, help one another; they compliment one another: Dreenie is caring and concerned; Tuli is dramatic and funny; Bluish is courageous and persevering. Their Christmas presents to one another are important for showing us how they care for one another and how well they know one another's personalities.

Cultural backgrounds in *Bluish* : Each girl lives in New York City, but each comes from a different neighborhood and income level. Each also has come from a different ethnic background and family situation. Dreenie emerges from a monocultural (Black American) family; Tuli seems to be at least part-African American; Natalie's father is black; her mother is Jewish American. Color does not arise in the story as a conflict; Dreenie simply thinks about it when she describes her friends the day she visits Natalie's home. Everyone — the three friends and their parents — is a slightly different skin-tone, from chocolate (Dreenie's own color), to honey (Tuli's color), to creamy and brown (Bluish's mom and dad). Puzzles, mysteries, secrets, surprises in *Bluish* : Dreenie is surprised to learn that some of her classmates call Natalie "Blewish" to designate her cultural background (Black + Jewish). She calls Natalie "Bluish" to designate her skin color (a pale, almost sickly color resulting from her chemotherapy). We never learn for certain whether Bluish conquers this illness (Hamilton leaves this a mystery too),

Meanings in *Bluish*: By the end of the story we begin to see that each girl is making the other stronger, and their friendship may be the very "medicine" that Bluish needs to survive. In this story, children are growing up in a multicultural world, learning about one another's ways of thinking and living — but seeing one another as human.

They are each growing stronger too, as the story moves along. Females who grow into strong, compassionate, human beings is a favorite theme of Hamilton's. Her female characters do not start off as fearless, heroic creatures who fight off dragons and conquer the world. Their "dragons" are often within: they have many fears to conquer and the stories are all about how they do so.

Arilla Sun Down

One of Virginia Hamilton's most interesting female characters is Arilla Adams. An outsider in her own

family, she is the light-skinned younger sister of a domineering, aggressive older brother who sees himself as Amerind — or Black Indian — like his father, rather than Black American like their mother.

Jack Sun Run takes his name very seriously and dubs Arilla the Moon. But her "place" in the family as passive, shadowy, fearful, youngest one who-knows-nothing soon shifts and expands when Sun is struck down in an ice storm and she must save him and the horses they have been riding. Then her name must change from Arilla to Arilla Sun Down to accompany her new and responsible role. Later she must do even more: she must return to Cliffville, where they used to live and bring her father back from the place he often goes to reconnect with his native roots. She not only brings him back but does something her brother has never done. Always the curious one, she opens his trunk filled with Native artifacts and convinces her father that he does not need to remain divided in heritage or ethnic memories. He can have both identities if he opens up his present life to the past and allows his family celebrate and remember his past with him.

"Rememory" is a word Hamilton uses to signify little details of the past that we lose with time but that we can recapture through imagination if we know, remember, and recreate the past in our stories. In this book, because Arilla is telling a story of her own childhood for a school assignment, she begins a journey into "rememory" time.

Responsive reading

Many of Virginia Hamilton's novels are collections of events — in the past and present — through which main characters move, as they sort out problems and respond to the conflicts that face them. In *Arilla Sun Down*, there are four important events in the present time of her seventh grade year:

- Her 12th birthday party (September),
- A middle-of-the-night trip to the skating rink (late October),
- An ice storm when she and her brother go horseback riding (November),
- A bus trip she makes back to Cliffville to bring back her Dad (later in November).

There are also four important events in the past that she brings back to life in a "rememory" time of her own:

- A winter night when she and her dad went sledding and Old James, her father's Indian friend, helped revive her when she was nearly frozen (she was five years old);
- A summer day when her brother tied her to a tree, she escaped, ran away, was stung by bees, and Old James and his wife came to her rescue (she was younger than five);
- A day in February, when Old James had died and she and her family went to his home (she was a little older than five);
- A Fourth of July celebration in her town (she was eleven).

Try finding these events and noticing in which chapters they appear. Then talk about the way that Hamilton weaves these two times, past and present, throughout the book and the way she "braids" them into a story that Arilla is remembering and creating for a classroom assignment and that Hamilton is remembering and creating for this very novel.

One of the most interesting surprises of this novel occurs on the very last page, when Arilla says she could turn her mother into a dancer in a story or even place her on a horse. The fact is we have already seen her mother as a dancing teacher in the earliest scenes of the book and we have seen her on horseback in later scenes! In other words, the entire book *Arilla Sun Down* might be what Arilla eventually produced — or thought of producing — as a novel, after writing her classroom assignment on autobiography.

Hamilton's careful structuring of the book reveals Arilla's own journey to becoming both a creative artist and a wordkeeper of ethnic heritage. (Wordkeeper is Old James' secret name for Arilla and Hamilton's name for her own chosen life-role.) *Arilla Sun Down* is Hamilton's most "telling" book about her own creative process.

In Chapter 1, Arilla tells about Old James teaching her to become a wordkeeper - or one who remembers the stories of one's heritage, in order to hand them down as a family and cultural storyteller. In Chapter 6, she tells about remembering things in flashes and then using all her mental energy to expand these flashes out of the past. In Chapter 7, she thinks about how she turns real life stories into fiction. In Chapter 12, she changes life by creating a story-scene of what she might wish to happen or what she might like to imagine into existence.

As a responsive writer, you might want to try some of these storytelling strategies yourself. Then you will have a better sense of how Virginia Hamilton — and Arilla — are shaping this novel for you as a reader. In doing so, you will become a more responsive reader.

The Justice Cycle: Justice and Her Brothers; Dustland; The Gathering

Like Arilla, Justice Douglass, in this trilogy of novels, has an aggressive older brother who tends to overshadow her. Actually she has two older brothers, but only one of them — Thomas — is troublesome, not only for Justice but especially for his twin brother, Levi, whom he likes to control. (All of the Douglass children have telepathic gifts, but Thomas uses his to gain power because of his strong sibling jealousies.) Also like Arilla, Justice is the youngest sister and an outsider in her own family because of her age and vulnerability. But just as Arilla is gifted in imagination, creativity, and curiosity, Justice is gifted as an explorer and as a patient and nurturing leader.

Justice is well-named: always she "sees" even-handedly and brings high intelligence to whatever task she has to undertake, whether it is dealing with Thomas's impatience and temperamental personality or his need to outshine her. Her telepathic gifts help herself and her "brothers" (Dorian, a neighbor, joins them in their adventures) through many trials as they use their abilities to see — and catapult themselves into — distant worlds and to "speak" into one another's minds as they do so.

In these novels, four children in a small Midwestern (Ohio) town form a "unit" of time travel, when eleven-year-old Justice discovers she has received a special gift. The power of the "Watcher," a force of extrasensory genetic strength or light, is filling her with the imagination, curiosity, and insight to explore an unknown future world. And she takes her three male partners with her. In unity there will be greater strength — greater power of concentration of purpose and greater fused energy. Sitting in a circle, their hands clasped, their backs against an ancient Buckeye tree, the Watcher power takes them to Dustland — Earth in the future, a place where nuclear disaster, drought, and deforested land has turned the world into a place without water, sunlight, or plant life. Only mutant survivors roam the land, searching for an end to their suffering. Many of these mutant people have escaped from Sona, a domed city, a synthetic world where machines have replaced humans and conformity to a totally regulated life is the norm. Anyone who rebels is whisked off to Dustland by a powerful force of ill will, the "Mal." One of these rebels is Miacis, a large, blind, female, dog-like creature who eventually becomes a fifth member of the Unit. At a crucial moment, she works with Justice to retrieve Thomas when, in his drive for power, he breaks away from the others. His drive for individual power, as opposed to cooperative social action, becomes an important *pattern* that weaves through these books and emphasizes the meaning of the unity needed to save the Earth. When he goes his own way, he jeopardizes their mission, which is to bring the Watcher "gift" of foresight to the machine, Colossus, in Sona — or to those of the future. Watcher power also means time for knowledge to grow about saving the Earth, before it is too later. (The arid, lifeless condition of Dustland is a warning of what is to come.)

Justice soon realizes that only through unit strength can her species survive in the future. Unity means equality, no one member oppressing another to gain power. She also sees that answers about the future are all around us now, if we only pause to notice. What could we be doing now about global devastation and ethnic quarrels that turn into mass destruction?

Major *events* of this cycle include the Great Snake Race of the first novel, a game created by Thomas with cultural associations, mysteries, and *puzzles* for Justice - and readers - to ponder. Is race the color of a group of people? Is it a contest to see how many snakes they can collect? Is it a competition to see which snake move faster? Is there power in numbers - or in individual strength? Can humans "race" snakes? Should one "creature" have power over another? Should one creature limit the freedom of another (place a creature into a game, turn race into a race, make skin-color a game)? And if race does become a game, what is the best answer for the members of an imperiled race? Individuals of a unit (family, community, cultural group) joined together for greater strength - or for those in the group to break away for their own power-seeking pleasure?

In the second book, the children encounter Miadis and various other Dustland people living in small group survival "packs." The Dustlanders evoke memories and images of slaves, runaway slaves, and slave chasers (the "Mal"), and their collective memories call up cultural *meanings* and *puzzles* for Justice and her brothers - and for readers. Can members of small, imperiled cultural groups ever "fly" (achieve full human potential), when so many social roles and responsibilities are weighing them down? What can we do to save a people? Or can we?

In the third book, the children learn the history of Dustland from the dream-memory pictures of the Dustlanders. And they begin to see that critical thinking, as opposed to aggression, force, or violence, produces action in the world to change it and that the "dust" of dustland is a mixture of slavery and environmental blight. Those of Dustland thirst for freedom and choke on drought. The last humans built Sona to help reclaim Earth in a future time, when all on earth had been lost to environmental carelessness. And they built the giant computerized machine Colossus to help solve problems of survival, after the last gifted humans left the earth because they failed to save it. (The Douglass children, gifted in foresight, are spiritual descendants of the famous black abolitionist Frederick Douglass.)

Justice and her brothers must come to terms with overwhelming, even frightening, talents or "gifts" of clairvoyance and telepathy. How do you deal with power when it is yours is the ultimate *puzzle* of the novel. You accept it, Justice begins to see, as she learns to move "in tune with her unusual energy" at the end of the last book, and you help others to engage in movements for social justice that will save the earth before it is too late.

The power of the Watcher is imagination allied with intelligence, or focused energy; care for the earth's creatures; and concern - all bringing about vision. Each of the children brings an important gift for this mission. Thomas is inventive; Levi cares about others; Dorian has intuitive intelligence; Justice has imagination, concern, and balanced energy. Taken together, the children learn to ask questions like, What matters in the world? What's wrong? How might things be different? What if . . . ?

A White Romance

Talley Barbour is one of the few Hamilton female characters who does not seem to be an outsider - at least not at first glance. White students come to Talley's "insider" setting. As a black student at Colonel Glenn High School, which has been recently turned into an integrated magnet, she is not bussed across town. Talley is a talented runner for school events, and soon she has made friends with Didi Adair, a white student, also a runner, and Didi's boyfriend, Roady, a drug addict. Talley, an only child, comes from a single parent family, and she has no knowledge of the mother her father never married. But her father, a night watchman for three plants and a hard-working, stalwart member of the black community of the large,

industrial city in Ohio, where the story takes place, is devoted to her well-being.

Soon readers learn, however, that Talley is becoming an outsider to other black students in her school because of her friendship with Didi and Roady - and later with David Emory, Roady's drug dealer, all of whom are white. Talley is a romantic, and her obsession with what she decides is Didi's and Roady's "white romance" keeps her an innocent outsider to the realities of a real romance. Her outsider condition becomes heightened when she and David become "romantically" involved and she enters into her own night (hidden, black-white) romance, which her father, a strict segregationist, would forbid. David is not only white and a drug dealer, he is controlling, arrogant, and destructive in his relationships.

The novel moves through a sequence of subtly interlaced *events* :

- Talley visiting Didi at Roady's apartment and encountering David for the first time
- Talley thinking back on school events, in particular the day that Roady and Didi had what Talley envisions as a "white romance" at Didi's locker (but what the school officials see in a very different light)
- Talley and Victor at school where Victor - black athlete and all around responsible school-citizen - shows his devotion to Talley at all times
- Talley and David in Roady's kitchen, having their first sexual encounter
- Talley, David, Didi, and Roady at a heavy metal rock concert where Talley at last begins to see her outsider condition as the debilitating force that it is.

Weaving through all these events are *patterns* of slavery days. Talley romanticizes the old plantation image of lilies, long flowing dresses, and big white houses; but in doing so, she places herself in a very precarious "slave" position. Once she becomes the slave to her own "pretty" pictures of a white/night romance, she becomes the slave that the master can use for his convenience. In one scene, David kisses Didi at the same moment that he embraces Talley. (David provides Roady for Didi and drugs for Roady, just as the plantation master provided the big house and the slave cabin for mistress and slave.)

Later readers learn that David chose Talley for his girlfriend because her reputation as stalwart citizen gave him a good "cover" from the authorities. And the rock concert - with its packed, suffocating atmosphere, Talley's arms pinned down, her isolated state as sole black person, her powerless position, her vomiting from the stale, sickening air, and David's impatience at this point - is a powerful metaphor for the slave ship.

Culturally, Talley, Didi, David, and Roady are all outsiders of both the black and the white, mainstream status quo. Didi is the child of white, immigrant parents now divorced. David is the white outlaw, the hated drug dealer - corrupted and corrupting. Roady is the disabled addict, son of wealthy but dysfunctional parents. And Talley has forsaken the ideals and values of her own ethnic group by aligning herself with David and by keeping her eyes closed to his drug dealing for so long.

Hamilton gives many clues along the way that David is a dealer, but Talley refuses to pick up on any of them. By the time Victor confronts her with the hard facts, readers will have noted many suspicious details. The *puzzle* is why does it take her so long to see or to admit that she sees? And why doesn't Didi tell her at the beginning that David is a dealer? Why does Victor instead tell her? (What does Victor know Talley will do with this information? What does he want her to do with it?) Finally, what are we to make of David? Is he all-bad (why does Hamilton interject song lyrics that link him with the devil)? Or does he have some redeeming traits? Is he a flawed character who seems intriguingly human? (Does he at times really seem to care for Talley, Roady, and Didi? And do they at times seem to care for him?)

The power that David holds over everyone in the story, except Victor, is what emerges as a central

meaning of the book. But it may be the power that they all hold for one another as friends that emerges as an even deeper meaning. As friends, these characters are insiders of a family they create for themselves. They understand everything about one another; they care about one another; they sustain one another.

Ultimately it is working-class Victor who replaces affluent David in this quartet of friends, and his words about the black condition (that it is always a difficult one, always a struggle) enable white, upper-class Roady to see at last that he has hope. He doesn't have to give up. He can keep going. He can endure. "I think you'll find in all my books," says Hamilton, "that even though there may not be a total family, there is always the longing for one" (Mikkelsen, 1994).

Plain City

Like Talley Barbour of *A White Romance*, Buhlaire Sims, in *Plain City*, has a parent she knows nothing about. This time, however, it is a father who is missing from the young girl's life. Buhlaire, at thirteen, is younger than Talley but less innocent about boys. She is not a romantic about sexual relationships. She does not dream scenes, as Talley does, which signal fear of the sexual act. She is both sensitive and savvy.

Early in the novel, she dumps a container of chocolate milk down Grady Terrell's mouth in the school lunchroom because he has been following and teasing her, calling her "Mellow Yellow" because of her color. (Buhlaire is light skinned or part-white, although at this point, she is only vaguely aware of her father's mixed race ethnicity.) Grady likes Buhlaire but doesn't yet know how to show his attraction, except through counterproductive ways. Buhlaire's behavior is equally counterproductive. Soon she finds herself in the principal's office discussing her troubles.

One *event* sets off another in this carefully structured novel. The principal lets Buhlaire know that her father is not the war victim she imagines; he is alive and has returned to Plain City at this very moment. Setting off for home, she begins thinking about her life as a Water House child, as she calls herself. (She lives in one of the houses built on stilts that her mother, Bluezy, a singer and fan dancer, has purchased for rental purposes. Her Aunt Digna and Digna's brothers, Sam and Buford, live nearby, and her mother's sister, Babe, lives next door.) Once home, she learns that her mother is performing that evening at Delmore's, a nightclub on the outskirts of Plain City, and that her aunts and uncles are taking her to hear her mother sing.

Bluezy has sent Buhlaire a beautiful blue velvet outfit to wear that night because she intends to invite her onstage that night to sing a duet. A wonderfully successful performance behind her, Buhlaire discovers the next day that her mother has left her once again. Cursing at her Aunt Digna results in a slap that sends Buhlaire out into a snowy day - and a whiteout - with Grady following her, where they encounter Junior Sims, a homeless person with mental problems and troubles with drug addiction

Junior takes Buhlaire and Grady to his "community" inside an underpass, a eye-opening experience for Buhlaire (Junior proves to be both caring and unstable.) After this, Grady takes her to meet his father, who runs a center for homeless people in Plain City, and later she has another altercation with her family for keeping the facts of her father's life from her. Then she leaves once more to meet her father, give him \$300 of her hard-earned money, and run away with him. But ultimately, fear prevents her from going - fear of being dirty and hungry as he constantly is.

Running through all these events is a *pattern* of color - in particular, variations of "whiteness." As a mixed-race child, Buhlaire is both black and white - but neither really. Culturally, she is an outsider of both black and white communities because of her mixed heritage. "She's completely outside," says Hamilton. "I describe her as always living in shade because where she lives along the river is in a forest of sycamore trees that disappears in the shade if you are passing by. . . She wears a white winter jumpsuit. . . She has

blond, russet curls; she's an interracial child" (interview with Mikkelsen, 1994).

The *mystery* for Buhlaire is her own "back-time," stolen from her by her family who has deceived her about her father and by her father who has crept into her house and taken her souvenirs and pictures for himself. The *surprise* for her is that her father is alive; the *secrets* are his drug problems, his mental confusion and her mother's relationship with his brother Sam. The *puzzle* for her is why her mother lives as she does - estranged from her husband and unmarried to Sam. But all of this eventually gets sorted out for Buhlaire and the reader, who may be wondering as the book ends if she will become a singer like her mother or a songwriter, because she seems to like doing both.

Throughout the novel, Buhlaire is discovering who she is. She is also discovering more about the concept of race. Race impinges on her thoughts constantly and is part of her coming to terms with the personal, social, and cultural issues or *meanings* of her life. She wears white on the outside; inside she is her mother's daughter. And more and more as the book ends, even though she loves her father and cares about his well-being, she is also becoming Sam's daughter too. During a spring flood, she spends the day with her uncle, ferrying people back and forth to the town on his boat and discovering a sense of community and responsibility and singing a little song to herself about her own future: "Still water runs deep. You can't stop running water. Brown, running water."

The Dies Drear Books

Virginia Hamilton has explained that she writes sequels to her novels if she doesn't think the first book is "finished." In 1987, she produced *The Mystery of Drear House*, a sequel to one of her earliest and most popular books, *The House of Dies Drear*, because something was missing, and it continued to bother her. What was it? The mother in the Darrow family, she finally discovered. And so when she wrote the sequel, she made the mother an important character (Mikkelsen, 1995).

As a Black American with Native American ancestral roots also, Hamilton often incorporates four important traits of ethnic fiction in her books:

- A child to adult continuum - the Darrow mother is important to Hamilton because family is important; children don't exist in isolation: they are surrounded by family and extended family members of all ages who take an active part in the story
- A frame story structure - characters tell stories to one another within the larger "main" story; story is a cultural way of knowing
- Folk tale or folklore embeddings - the stories characters tell might be folk tales, legends, true stories, or even stories they are imagining; the oral tradition is strong
- The Great Mother-as-Storyteller tradition - women, especially mothers and grandmothers, tell stories for the transmission of culture knowledge

In the first Drear book, *The House of Dies Drear*, thirteen-year-old Thomas Small has just moved with his family from the South to a strange old house in Ohio with tunnels of the Underground Railroad hidden within its walls. There he hears the legend of the house: two slaves were killed by bounty hunters the day that the owner of the house, Dies Drear, was murdered. But there were three slaves in the chase. What happened to the third slave? And who was he, one of the Darrows of Mohegan descent, simply searching for lost treasure? Or one of Mr. Pluto's ancestors, who hunted heritage and history as an answer to the puzzle of his own racial identity and who grew to love the Dies Drear house as his own.

In the second book, *The Mystery of Drear House*, the Darrow mother, Mattie, brings together these two strands of cultural heritage. She is black and there may be Indian ancestry in her background. But the burden of so much history and of two warring ancestral spirits within her produces a schizoid splintering.

Mattie's mind is becoming unraveled with the burden of so many stories, particularly with the story of Coyote Girl she has told her son Macky and that he tells Thomas, early in the novel. Coyote Girl, the Indian Maiden - part black, part native - saved slave children with her courage. And Mattie sees her adopted daughter Pesty, as the Historical Orphan or runaway slave child who never ceases her running, just as Coyote in Indian trickster tales never dies.

How should we deal with the past? Hamilton asks in this book. Should we use it, as the Darrows would use the treasure, for ourselves? Or should we preserve it at all costs, even if the past is filling us up to the point of psychic bursting, as it is causing Mattie's mind to become unraveled?

Thomas's father, a history professor, decides finally to create a museum (preservation) but he also creates a larger social use (avoids hoarding). He rewards both Pluto and the Darrows for their part in maintaining the treasure for so long. Soon Pesty Darrow has new clothes and her father is a more sociable and productive member of the community. Walter Small also provides a home for Mr. Pluto in the Dies Drear house that he so loves.

Members of the Small family begin as outsiders in this small Ohio community, not unlike Yellow Springs, Ohio, with its own houses from underground-railroad days. They end with an extended family for Thomas, when Great-grandmother Jeffers comes to live also at the Dies Drear house. Family, place, and race blend seamlessly in the Dies Drear books, as they also do in so many of Virginia Hamilton's books, especially in *Cousins* and *Second Cousins*, her other set of sequels.

Cousins; Second Cousins

After Hamilton finished *Cousins*, she did not think about it or the main character, eleven-year-old Cammy, for eight years. Then recently, at an annual Perry reunion of her mother's family in Yellow Springs, Ohio, Cammy suddenly appeared in Hamilton's mind. She was telling her mother, Maylene, that she had so many first cousins and even third cousins, she was just going to call them all second cousins. And Hamilton's sequel was born. In *Second Cousins*, it is a year later, and Cammy Coleman is twelve. But she is very different from the younger Cammy, who, as the earlier book begins, is very afraid of her grandmother dying, and as it ends, is finally getting a focus on things.

We first meet Cammy, in *Cousins*, when she is visiting her grandmother in a nursing home. Then on the way home, when she gets caught in a rainstorm near Aunt Effie's house, we meet her cousin Patty Ann. In Cammy's eyes, Patty Ann is more wealthy, beautiful, and talented than she is. Cammy is very much the outsider in strict, snobbish Aunt Effie's home. Soon Cammy is wishing that her cousin could vaporize or get beamed up to a blue star - or the moon. When the two cousins get in a spat about the fact that Patty Ann never visits her grandmother, Cammy says that Patty Ann looks like death and as if she is going to a funeral - her own. Patty Ann says that Cammy is just jealous because she didn't get her picture in the paper for making all As. It's Gram Tut that's dying, not her, she adds.

Later at day camp, Cammy's cousin Elodie races down to the Little River, which has a dangerous place in the middle - a blue hole called the "bluety" that seemed bottomless - and her shoe flies off. Slipping into the water to retrieve it, she gets caught in the swift current and carried off. Patty Ann wades into the water and skillfully leads Elodie back to safety, only to be carried off by the current herself, so far out, in fact, that no one can save her. Cammy stands by watching - frozen in fear for her cousins - and later decides she has never seen Patty Ann go down; she was too concerned watching Elodie reach the riverbank. Still later she realizes she has seen the drowning, but her grief and guilt were too great to "see" that she had. Weeks pass and soon Cammy cannot remain in school. She becomes sick with worry that Patty Ann's ghost is haunting her. Aunt Effie is also becoming sick and she begins "haunting" the school, making matters worse for the children who are themselves coping with grief.

Cammy's parents are divorced, but her father returns to help her through this time. One night, Gram Tut comes back from the nursing home to have dinner with the family and to show Cammy how to deal with her fears: she can put a focus on things, take one thing at a time as it comes. The book ends with Cammy saying she "gets" it (how to deal with her fears and live with the uncertainties and randomness of life). Gram Tut's death is not quite as scary now as it was; she is growing up and learning to cope. But she still has a big hole in her, she says, all empty, and a part of her that wants to die too.

Even though there was fairly strong closure to the first book, there was still room, in a second book, for stronger resolution to Cammy's fears about Gram Tut's death and her guilt about Patty Ann's death. Hamilton also leaves as a mystery the story of Cammy's family. Why were her parents divorced? Would they get back together again, as Cammy secretly wishes? What was her father, Morris Coleman, like?

Second Cousins begins with an event that sets everything else in motion - in chaos theory, what is called the "butterfly effect": a small disturbance that has dramatic effects because of an underlying "web" of interconnected patterns. On the eve of a large, family reunion in Cammy's hometown, she and Elodie are riding bikes and skating, when Elodie falls on gravel and hurts her knee. The accident precludes a visit to the town pool that afternoon; they decide instead to visit Cammy's father's house on Sunberry Road where they meet two newly arrived cousins from Queens, New York, around the same age as Cammy and Elodie, one of whom has important connections to Cammy.

This secret of the book is unfolded in a later chapter called "Weaving Webs." Up to that point, many clues emerge to show readers just who Jahnina Madison is, but several events must occur before Cammy realizes it. Jahnina, called "Fractal" by her cousin GiGi, is a computer whiz. Soon she begins teaching Cammy all about the "web," how to download programs that make "fractals" (endlessly repeating geometrical designs like the fat-bellied, pear shaped figure all in black they see on screen), and how they can email after the reunion.

The "pear-man, repeating his dark shape endlessly in the fractals set" soon becomes another clue for Cammy of what is coming. He produces a strange attraction for both Jahnina and Cammy, who each have the same gray eyes as Morris Coleman. Morris's house and personal computer is as familiar to Jahnina as it would be to Cammy, if she visited her father more often. But she feels a little like an outsider in his house, and she also feels uncomfortable for Jahnina to invite herself so casually into this room. When Morris appears and calls Jahnina "Jah," Cammy is surprised. Then as she hears Jah call Morris "Daddy" - and she realizes that Jahnina (Fractal) is her half-sister - her world collapses.

The novel winds to a close with the reunion in full swing. Gram Tut's stories of the Union Soldiers helping slaves cross the Little River into freedom and of her Patawatami grandmother, Callie Cloud, drowning years before in the same spot as Patty Ann, help Cammy put a focus on her cousin's death. "River is history, flowing," Gram says. "Like holding to a rope line of time, you are its memory." There is no difference between those who are living and not, she later adds. All are together at the reunion - in spirit. And Aunt Effie, sane at last from the healing power of the reunion, helps Cammy to see that she can love what she has - an entire other side of the family she never knew existed - and she be glad she has both parents.

"Get used to it," Jah writes in a note to Cammy, who is sleeping when the girls leave for New York, "there's enuf him for us both." The book ends with Cammy and Elodie planning a trip to New York at Christmas to visit Jahnina and GiGi. "Fractal's my sister," Cammy says proudly. And Hamilton seemed to be leaving open the door to another sequel or a third book about Cammy and "the girls from New York," as Cammy describes these new "second" cousins.

Instead she wrote *Bluish*, a story about three girls - Dreenie, Tuli, and Natalie - all living in New York (Manhattan), which takes place at Christmastime. But certainly the girls from Queens deserve a book of

their own. GiGi is one of Hamilton's liveliest characters and Jahnina is one of her most intriguing outsider females. At this point we know nothing about the first thirteen years of her life. How did she feel coming to this reunion? How does she feel knowing that Morris Coleman will probably marry Maylene again and not her own mother? And what about her mother?

Hamilton has kept Dayna Madison a complete mystery in *Second Cousins*. What is her story? What is it like for Jahnina, living apart from Morris most of the time? What is it like for her growing up in Queens? Why is she living with GiGi's family? Where is her mother now? What is it like being an out of wedlock child? And why does she live in Queens and her mother lives in Detroit? *Second Cousins* is particularly rich in puzzles, secrets, and mysteries (as well as events, patterns, meanings, and cultural history). It is one of Virginia Hamilton's best books, unfolding more and more with each rereading.

Making literature connections

Bluish : Read Ruth Sawyer's *Roller Skates*, set in New York City in the early 1900s. Both books have characters keeping journals and children involved in multicultural friendships.

Arilla Sun Down : Read Hamilton's *Plain City* alongside this book. In each book the mothers are dancers and talented creative artists. But both girls have minds of their own, with own talents and interests. Also read Patricia McKissack's *Run Away Home*, another story of Black American and Black Indian relationships.

The Justice Cycle : Read Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, another science fantasy time travel (also part of a trilogy) in which the theme is children confronting conformity as a mind-controlling force. Compare L'Engle's Aunt Beast with Hamilton's character, Miacis, in these books and with Buhlaire's Aunt Babe in *Plain City*.

A White Romance : Read Mary Lyons' *Letters from a Slave Girl; The Story of Harriet Jacobs* to learn more about how slave women were treated by oppressive masters.

Plain City : Read Nina Bawden's *The Outside Child*, which also tells about a girl being brought up by two maiden aunts. Bawden's book is also about a girl with a half sister as in *Second Cousins*.

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Discussion guide written by Nina Mikkelsen, author of *Virginia Hamilton* (Twayne, 1994) and *Words and Pictures; Lessons in Children's Literature and Literacies* (McGraw Hill, 1999).

- Subjects:

Literature, Literature Appreciation, African American, Women's History and Experience

- Skills:

Social Studies

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