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VIRGINIA HAMILTON

**PORTRAIT OF THE AUTHOR
AS A WORKING WRITER**

Now the portrait of an author has always been awesome, although the gilt fleur-de-lis motif which framed past portraits is replaced these days by the institutional sleekness of polished chrome. Picture, if you wish, the author posed with profile prominent, with eyes seeming to look inward and backward at the same time, and seated in her Meis chair in the manner of a modern-day Whistler's mother. She appears superbly matter-of-fact. Still young, the calm expression of her face bespeaks the functional competence of the suburban matron.

A portrait is only as good as the artist who created it. For an accurate portrait, the artist must have experienced something of life and must translate his own experience into the interpretation of the author.

A close look at the portrait reveals what we were unable to see from a distance; from afar, the chrome frame had bewitched and beguiled us. Up close, we see that the author has lines of stress and strain on the forehead, around the mouth and under the eyes. Her hands, which had seemed to rest delicately in her lap, actually claw at the fabric of her culotte.

The author is tired. The author drinks too much coffee, gets too little sleep and is overweight. No longer a delicate mystery shrouded in possibilities, students open doors for her and old gentlemen tip their hats. Such is the coming of Over Thirty for a born lady writer. The portrait is disappointing

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to the author when she stands in front of it, but it is undeniably true. Still, she wishes that somehow the portrait might show all the years of living and partly living that went into it; that the portrait could say more than its simplistic statement of time's passage. There is more to it, she feels—oh, much more—and so she decides to write it out. That's always her way, to write it down. Thus she holds on to time and makes it solid. She gives time quality and thereby denies its quantity.

Time is of quality: I do not have the time, I tell you. A grand time was had by all. Remember the time?

I remember the time I stood uncertain on the backward edge of the Beat Generation wondering what forward motion I should attempt. The generations of Pepsi people, of hippies, of peace and freedom and of black and beautiful were out of range beyond me and others like me who, although a bit lost, anticipated what was to come by our urge to be on the move.

Maybe that's why I felt compelled to strike out on my own for the Big Apple of Manhattan, that institution for reformed wastrels. I knew a few things even then. I knew that I would be a writer, I knew that I had to learn my craft away from all the kind people who wanted to help and did help but maybe hadn't realized there came a time when help was not what was needed. I knew a poem by Langston Hughes: "my soul grows deep like the rivers" the poem sings. Deep. Yes, that's what I was looking for.

When I lived in the East Village of New York City, it was known as the Lower East Side. There were no life styles such as Puerto Rican, hippy and head. There were the teachers from the newly defunct Black Mountain College; resident Poles, Yugoslavs and Czechs; a Shakespearean theater group and eastern European Jews in black greatcoats and wide-brim hats. There existed little communication between the groups or between the groups and myself. No police cars cruised through the streets at ten-minute intervals. No plainclothesmen searched for runaway teenyboppers and no

troubled fathers exhausted the known crash pads hunting for lost sons.

We of the Lower East Side isolated ourselves from one another and insulated ourselves for that which we thought was worth the loneliness: independence, self-knowledge and self-expression and safety from intrusion of a chaotic world. If there was a time at all when we came closer together, it was on that day of the week when we publicly acknowledged our debt to the rivers. On Sunday, we all made it over to the river, either the East, which was never my favorite, or the Hudson, the kind of river I especially took to heart.

People in cities always go down to their rivers. They pay tribute in a way that at first was inexplicable to me. But as time passed, I began to comprehend the tribute and the need. I moved across town to Greenwich Village and closer to my favorite river. I could spend days writing and get nowhere. But if I went down to the river to sit awhile, I could come back home feeling as though I had partaken of a healing potion.

Eventually, my writing grew better as the experience of myself alone and cut off from all things familiar deepened inside me. Soon I could spend a day writing and, by evening, rather than incoherency I had created a kind of unity of thought. I hadn't learned to write a whole story yet, but there were themes that continued throughout. I knew enough to take hold of those themes and separate them from the rest by cutting the rest away. Then, rewriting those themes, I concentrated on sentences. And if a sentence did not follow what had gone before, it too was cut away.

Eventually, also, I knew the writing of Carson McCullers pretty well. I learned from her what a good sentence was. "In the town there were two mutes and they were always together," she had written. For a working writer, such a sentence is profoundly exciting. It stays in the mind for years.

Having learned in the Village that my writing had progressed thematically, I no longer needed to stop the process of time and my own experience. I had lived a rather solitary

existence. I often went for days without talking to anyone. Working half days as a cost accountant in order to eat occasionally, I hid myself within columns of figures and made no friends.

However, it was time now to step into the flow of the city and to wet my feet in the stream of city people. I moved out of the Village and uptown, closer to my people and still near the Hudson River. My river changes uptown. It has Riverside Park along its steep banks and the park is beautiful, full of children and dogs. All sorts of people rest, lounge, read their papers, sunbathe and sing. They all needed the river in some way as I did.

My writing grew better as I grew older inside. I came to understand that the river's flow was the flow of freedom inside us all. We wonder about it in this way: What do you suppose is beyond the bridge there—a town, another park? What sort of place is Bear Mountain—are there really brown bears? I think I'll walk awhile and see what's beyond that bend in the river.

So it is that the river is the mind of people, ever flowing to some other where. Whenever any of us grow deep like the rivers it is because we have learned to allow our minds to flow free as rivers flow. And so the reason rivers figure so largely in my writing and ever will. But it was years before I realized that the Hudson River was not the river which had nourished me. From the time I discovered my need to move, it must have been another river that had caused the need. I am talking about the Ohio River, sixty miles from the place I was born and the river so necessary, so symbolic for my people.

The Ohio River needs no orchestration to explain it. It needs no fury of words nor purple narrative for an image of it. It is simply grand the way an Ohio sky is grand for those of us who are related to it through the quality of time and memory. Wherever we go, we carry the quality—that piece of sky, that particular reach of land and that river—with us.

Having lived ten and more years in New York, I discovered that my mind had never left Ohio. And so I returned to

the river and the country. I could write. I had done it. I had pulled past and present, memory and experience together and grown deep like the river. Time now for the author to become a working writer and, indeed, I have. Whatever else I do—buy groceries, raise my children, take care of my husband, plant crocuses—I write each morning and every night. I think, I dream writing, and writing is who I am. How much time I spend at it, who I write for, why I wrote and what next I will write, fall in the realm of propaganda. The fact is that I must write and writing is work, hard and exacting. The best job I've ever had.

The portrait of the Author is complete. Know that I don't mind if it reveals the lines of stress and time. It is my own picture as I created it. I am the artist, the author and the working writer, and we are doing what we set out to do.

I write of the black experience. You've heard the phrase often enough, perhaps understood it, wondered about it or even dismissed it as a kind of subversive nationalism. You may not have thought of children's books using that term or of my books in particular. But the black experience is the fact of my writing from my first book, *Zeely*, through the third, *The Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu*.

I attempt in each book to take hold of one single theme of the black experience and present it as clearly as I can. I don't mean to make the writing of fiction sound cold or calculating—it isn't at all. In the beginning, an idea takes hold of the writer in a special way which demands the getting it down on paper. From there, using whatever skill or craft he has learned, the writer develops the idea into a theme which becomes the basis of the plot.

A professor at Antioch College once gave me some advice. He told me I would go far if I would concentrate on using conventional forms of structure and simple language in my writing. "Your stories are wild enough without your inventing a new novel form." I took his advice. More and more I reach for the unconventional theme while depending on the solid base of tried and true structure and easy language.

The black experience in America is deep like the rivers of this country. At times through our history it became submerged only to emerge again and again. Each time it emerges, it seems strong, more explicit and insistent.

There are themes in my writing that are strains through the whole of black history. The strain of the wanderer, like the theme of Jahdu; the strain of the fleeing slave or the persecuted moving and searching for a better place becomes the theme of the Night Traveller in *Zeely*. And the black man hiding his true self, ever acting so that those who betray him will never touch him. Thus we have such a man in the actor son of Mr. Pluto in *The House of Dies Drear*:

“We wear the mask that grins and lies,” he says, speaking from the Dunbar poem.

The books I have written can be seen as a reflection of my past experience. I have brought myself up to the present and into the eye of the future. What will be the themes of my future writings? There are two books which I am working on and they are as different from one another as from the three already written. They do not attempt to cover the whole of the black experience; rather, they each take a theme out of it, as did my other three books. Perhaps some day when I’ve written my last book, there will stand the whole of the black experience in white America as I see it. Actually, I never write thinking in these terms. It’s only when working out a book that I realize how hugely logical is the writer’s unconscious life.

Examining the first of the two themes I’m working on, we have the failure of a black, quite obese junior high school youth to develop any area of successful contact with the white world that determines the limitations of his life. By the time we first meet the boy, who is called Junior Brown, his unique intelligence and his mental isolation are already apparent. He spends his anguished days trying to cope with the monstrous fantasy that has come to live in the home of his deranged piano teacher, Miss Peebs. The youth, Junior Brown, tries desperately to save the sanity of Miss Peebs by

entering her fantasy and dealing with the apparition who lives there. Junior Brown and Miss Peebs both live in the same isolation caused by the same conditions and Junior instinctively knows that by saving her he may save himself.

The second book concerns the boy, M. C. Higgins, whose country of hills and mountains along the Ohio River is being destroyed by strip mining. As the earth is poisoned by the mindless force invisible behind the invading mining machines, so too are the hill people annihilated. I am speaking mainly of a spiritual annihilation. These people do not prevail over the condition of their lives, which causes an atrophy of the spirit. They endure—the emptiness, the oppression, the dull sameness. They endure it. That is, all save M. C. who lives by means of his courage, and his strength and daring. There are boys like M. C. who when they become men are legends, and there are legends—pure fictional men—who have become real to us. We know Wild Bill Hickok and Billy the Kid, Nat Turner and Crispus Attucks, all who once lived. We have C. C. Rider, Long John and Staggalee, whose lives are far more fiction than fact. Finally, we have the extraordinary legend of John Henry, not the song, but the legend which states that when John Henry was born, he spat in the fire and asked his mother why everyone including the dog had been fed and not he. Not waiting for a reply, he ordered his mother to prepare him an enormous, sumptuous meal. His mother prepared the food but John Henry did not eat it. He rose from his pallet. He turned his back on his mother and stalked out of the house never to return.

Nothing erases the legend of the man-made man, the natural man from our memory. Such men hold an essential life style in common. They do not need to prevail as we do. I suppose that is why I created my own M. C. Higgins. He, the same as the others of his kind, will not prevail or endure either. He is content to survive when he understands that the aim of his life is to live it in terms that only he can define. And so he lives it up and if he is like Nat Turner, may destroy himself in the process. If he is a John Henry he will burst his

heart proving he is a man. In any event he will live not just some life he was born into but his own life, never loving it and never hating it either.

What sort of world is it I create, where the people seem imbued with an isolation of the spirit? Old Mr. Pluto, alone for years in his cave. Zeely, separated by her very height; and little Jahdu, a lone traveler born of no woman but in an oven. You might well ask, what is it I'm getting at. Not actually knowing, I sense that finding out is the reason I persist. I sense also that finding out is far less important than the quest and the pleasure of writing along the way.

I've attempted here to make the writer and writing more understandable. Those of us who write have a deep love of language and a need to make reading an extraordinary experience for children. In my own young days, I knew the excitement of coming across a book which touched and changed me. Now I experience while writing the shock of finding out that I might have a good story working. It hits me as though I had been asleep and awoke with a start. Always when that happens, I am reminded of my childhood when, skimming a book with only mild interest, I would start suddenly alert and begin reading in earnest.

For children, reading is the discovery of new worlds of color and texture. For me, writing for children is the creation of worlds of darkness and light. There is an essential line between us, a line of thought and ultimately of communication. Each book must speak: "This is what I have to say," in the hope that each reader will answer: "That is what I wanted to know."

Thank you.