

## About Mildred D. Taylor



"By the time I entered high school, I had a driving compulsion to paint a truer picture of Black people.... I wanted to show a Black family united in love and pride, of which the reader would like to be a part."

—Mildred D. Taylor

**K**ids like you watch television, listen to CDs, and play video games for fun. Mildred D. Taylor's childhood was very different. She grew up enjoying her father's interesting stories about the Taylor family's life in the Mississippi countryside. Wilbert Lee Taylor, Mildred's father, sat by the fireplace in their home. There, he shared the family's past with Mildred, her older sister, Wilma, and their mother, Deletha. From these stories, Mildred Taylor learned that her family had courage, dignity, and self-respect.

Her father's magical storytelling ability made her want to share his talent. "I began to imagine myself as a storyteller, making people laugh at their own foibles [small faults] or nod their heads with pride about some stunning feat of heroism," she remembers.

The road to becoming an award-winning writer wasn't smooth and easy, however.

Mildred Taylor was born on September 13, 1943, in Jackson, Mississippi. Like the Logan family in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, the Taylor family had lived in Mississippi since the days of slavery. That was very long ago, before 1865! However, when Mildred was just a tiny baby, her parents decided to make a new life in the North. The Taylors moved to Toledo, Ohio. They had a large family and many friends there. The family was close and loving.

The Taylors often took the long car trip back to Mississippi. They wanted to visit all their relatives. These trips were not happy all the time because black people and white people were kept apart in many parts of the South. This policy was called segregation. To segregate means to keep apart. Black people and white people could not use the same rest rooms, water fountains, or playgrounds. Blacks and whites had to eat in different parts of restaurants, too. Segregation made it very hard for black people to travel. It was hard on people's hearts and minds.

"Each trip down reminded us that the South into which we had been born . . . still remained," Taylor remembers. "On the rest rooms of gasoline stations were the signs WHITE ONLY, COLORED NOT ALLOWED. [In the past, black people were often called colored, which many people thought was insulting.] 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.” These trips helped shape Taylor’s goal to write about the proud African-American heritage she learned from her family. Her school experiences also helped her decide to become a writer.

When she was ten years old, Mildred Taylor was the only black child in her class. She was upset about the one-sided stories about black Americans in her history books. There was no pride in these stories. When she shared her own facts about black history with the class, however, everyone thought she was making things up. “I couldn’t explain things to them,” she said. “Even the teacher seemed not to believe me. They all believed what was in the history books,” Taylor said. Since she was shy, Taylor did not say anything else. “So I turned to creating stories for myself, instead,” she recalls.

In 1965, Taylor earned her college degree from the University of Toledo. From 1965 to 1967, she taught English and history to children in Africa. Then she studied at the University of Colorado’s journalism school. Taylor worked hard to educate everyone in the university about the African-American experience. All the time, she kept thinking about making her family’s stories her own.

In 1975, she wrote a story her father had told her about some trees that had been cut from the family’s land in Mississippi. Taylor’s story, “Song of the Trees,” won first prize in the Council on Interracial Books for Children contest. A council is a group of people who work together on a project. This council’s job was to bring people of different races together. They knew that Taylor’s story could help black and white people understand one another.

Taylor expanded the story into a short novel, also called *Song of the Trees*. *The New York Times* newspaper named it an Outstanding Book of the Year in 1975. Taylor published *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in 1976. Her career as a writer had begun.

## How *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* Came About



"It is my hope that to the children who read my books, the Logans will provide those heroes missing from the schoolbooks of my childhood, Black men, women, and children of whom they can be proud."

—Mildred D. Taylor

Sometimes, life isn't fair. We call this injustice. Racism is one of the worst injustices. Racism is judging people based on the color of their skin. Racist people think people of their color are better than people of another color. How can you deal with injustice and racism? Mildred Taylor found a way—through her writing. Taylor wrote *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* to depict heroic African Americans. Taylor says, "I wanted to show a family united in love and self-respect, and parents, strong and sensitive, attempting to guide their children successfully, without harming their spirits, through the hazardous maze of living in a discriminatory [treating people unfairly] society."

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* takes place in 1933. Back then, black people and white people were separated by the Jim Crow laws. These laws enforced segregation. Segregation kept black

people and white people apart. Black kids and white kids could not go to the same schools. People of different races couldn't travel in the same train cars, either. They *could* travel in the same buses, but black people had to sit in the back of the bus—until a white person got on. Then a black person had to give up his or her seat for the white person. Parks, cemeteries, and theaters were also marked WHITE or COLORED to prevent any contact between black and white people. The Jim Crow laws were meant to create “separate but equal” places for black and white people. It did not work out this way, however. The places were “separate,” but they were not “equal.”

For example, schools for black students got much less money than schools for white students. As a result, the schools for black students did not have enough textbooks, chalk, and other supplies. Many schools for black students did not have playing fields, school buses, or indoor bathrooms—but schools for white students often did.

Finally, in 1954, the Supreme Court got rid of the Jim Crow laws. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the United States. It has the power to change America's laws, but it doesn't have the power to change people's minds. Many people in the South were not willing to let black and white kids go to the same schools. The situation got so bad that in 1957, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had to send soldiers to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect black kids going to a white school. The battle for equal rights continued.

In 1964, the Supreme Court passed the Civil Rights Act. This act made it against the law to discriminate against people because of their color. When you discriminate against someone, you do not treat them fairly. A year later, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act. This law made it easier for black people to vote. However, prejudice did not fade away at once. People were still “prejudging” others on the basis of their race. Mildred Taylor saw this herself.

Taylor went to school in Ohio. There were no Jim Crow laws there, so people of different races could learn, work, play, and travel side by side. However, when Taylor was a child in the 1950s, she took many trips to visit relatives in Mississippi. On these trips, she saw discrimination. In writing *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Taylor used her own experiences with racism in the South to show what life may have been like for African Americans in the 1930s. She also tied in the stories her father had told about family members living under the Jim Crow laws during that time.

Taylor hopes that one day *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* “will be instrumental in teaching children of all colors the tremendous influence Cassie’s generation had in bringing about the civil rights movement of the fifties and sixties.” She thanks her father for his help. She says, “Without his teachings, without his words, my words would not have been.”