

Mildred D. Taylor on Writing



"I do not know how old I was when the daydreams became more than that, and I decided to write them down, but by the time I entered high school, I was confident that I would one day be a writer."

—Mildred D. Taylor

Even as a child, Mildred D. Taylor was determined to become a writer. She wanted to tell the stories of her childhood as they really happened, the stories her father had shared with her and her sister. But just wanting to be a writer isn't enough: It takes hard work and practice. Mildred Taylor knew this. To make her goal even more difficult, Taylor did not write easily or quickly. "I had never particularly liked to write, nor was I exceptionally good at it," she said in an interview. "But I had always been taught that I could achieve anything I set my mind to do," she added.

So Taylor struggled to get her ideas on paper and remain true to the pride she felt for her family and heritage. She did not fool

herself that it would be easy. “Many times what I considered my best work was not good enough,” she recalled. All during elementary school, junior high, and high school she kept at it. One day in high school she had a breakthrough when she wrote a story about her family. She used the first-person point of view. In a first-person story, the narrator, who is one of the characters, explains the events of the story through his or her own eyes, using the pronouns *I* and *me*. “Without realizing it,” Taylor commented later, “I was telling the story in much the same language as when it was told to me. I was using the language of the family storytellers.”

Reread some of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. You will notice how the story is told in the first person, through Cassie’s eyes. For example, Cassie says, “At the end of the examination day, I shot out of Miss Crocker’s class and hurried into the yard. I was eager to get to the crossroads to meet Lillian Jean; I had promised myself to first take care of the examinations and then . . .” We see only what Cassie wants us to see. For example, we don’t yet know what Cassie is going to do after the examinations because she doesn’t tell us.

Finding her own voice and style

Taylor had yet to realize how important the breakthrough of using the first-person perspective was to her career. It took a long time for Taylor to understand that she had to use the language of the storytellers when she wrote. She was still struggling to find

her *voice*, her own special way of writing. “Having read only fiction by white writers,” she said, “I wanted to write like them, like the great writers we had studied in class—[Ernest] Hemingway, [Charles] Dickens, [Jane] Austen, and the like.”

It took years for Taylor to unlock her unique voice and style. It happened almost by chance! One day, Taylor decided to enter a contest given by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. It was close to the deadline: She had only a few days before her entry was due. Since she didn't have time to write something new, Taylor looked through the stories she had already written to find one that might fit. She pulled out a story based on a tale her father had told her. Originally, Taylor had written the story from a boy's point of view, but the story was dull and artificial. Then she tried writing the story from the grandmother's point of view, but that was flat and unconvincing, too. Then Taylor rewrote the story in the first person through Cassie's eyes. Everything came together! “I'm not sure where she came from,” Taylor said, “but suddenly she was there: Cassie Logan, the storyteller. . . . The storytelling tradition had always been in the first person. It was my heritage and I went with it.” All weekend long, Taylor rewrote the story. She sent it in and waited.

A few months later, Taylor found out that she had won the contest! The story was published as “Song of the Trees.” Taylor had discovered her voice and style.

Attention, all writers!

Taylor's struggle to become a writer shows the importance of searching for your own style and voice. Her hard work and determination prove the importance of the old saying, "Be true to yourself."

You Be the Author!



- **In literature as in life:** *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* is based on a real-life story that Taylor heard from her father. Think of a real-life story from your family. It might be a story that an older relative told you or an event that you experienced yourself. Create a narrator, someone like Cassie Logan. Then, tell the story from the first-person point of view, as Taylor did. Use the pronouns *I* and *me*. Since you are writing fiction, you can change the facts to make the story more logical, funny, or emotional, for example. Share your story by reading it to your family or e-mailing it to a friend.
- **Fire!** After the fire is out, Cassie looks at the fields. “Near the slope where once cotton stalks had stood, their brown bolls popping with tiny puffs of cotton, the land was charred, desolate, black, still steaming from the night.” The fire is a terrible event, indeed. Write an article for the local newspaper about the big fire. Explain how it started, how it ended, and how much of Papa’s crops were destroyed.
- **My special place:** Cassie likes to spend time in her family’s woods. What special place do you like? Describe a place that’s important to you. It might be your room, the seashore, or the park, for example. Using details that appeal to all five senses,

just like Taylor does, describe how the place looks, smells, and sounds. Tell about the way things in the place feel, too.

- **Tell it in poetry:** Mildred Taylor chose to tell the story of Cassie and her family as a novel. How would the story have changed if it had been told as a poem? Retell *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* as a ballad. A ballad is a story told in song form. Ballads have a strong rhythmic beat, like songs. If you want, include a refrain (a repeated word or phrase). Refrains are usually placed after groups of four or six lines. When you have finished your ballad, recite it to your classmates or family.

- **All's well that ends well?:** At the end of the novel, Cassie cries "for T.J. and the land." What does this mean? Does *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* have a happy ending or a sad one? Rewrite the novel's ending to make it clearly happy or sad. Make sure that your ending makes sense with the events in the book. You can share your ending by reading it to a small group of classmates.

Activities



- **Origin of the title:** The book's title comes from a traditional slave song, called a spiritual. The words are

*Roll of thunder
hear my cry
Over the water
bye and bye
Ole man comin'
down the line
Whip in hand to
beat me down
But I ain't
gonna let him
Turn me 'round*

Explain how this song fits the book's meaning. Then, share a song that has special meaning to you and your family. You can sing or play the song for a small group of classmates.

- **I'm like a . . . :** Papa tells Cassie that the family is like the fig tree that grows in the yard. Papa explains the lesson of the little tree: "We keep doing what we gotta, and we don't give up. We can't." Choose two objects from nature such as a plant, bird, place, or weather condition. Then, explain how they stand for one

or more of your character traits. Draw a picture of the object that best shows your character.

• **Be a secret pal:** For Christmas, Jeremy Simms makes a wooden flute for Stacey. The flute has a sweet sound. There's something very special about a handmade gift like Jeremy's flute. Make a gift for your special friend.

First, think about someone you know who would like to get a handmade gift. The person might be a grandparent, a parent, a brother, a sister, or a neighbor. Then, decide when to give the gift to your "secret pal." You might give the gift for a special occasion such as a birthday, anniversary, or graduation. Or you might want to give the gift just to make someone smile!

Now, match the gift to the person and your abilities. Make something you do well that the person will really enjoy. Here are some ideas:

a scrapbook

a poem or a letter

a coupon book for chores

a flower arrangement

a craft

a beaded friendship pin

an object from clay

a baked good like a cake or a pie

a series of lessons

• **Listen to the past:** In the Author's Note at the beginning of *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, Mildred Taylor explains that her father was a good storyteller.

Everybody has a story to tell. The story might be about the past, the person's family, or life in general. When you listen to someone tell about his or her life, you are helping to create an *oral history*. The history may never be written down, but it can be passed from person to person through the generations. This is what happened in Taylor's family and in Cassie's family.

Ask an older relative, friend, or neighbor to share an oral history of his or her life. Before the interview, list the questions you want to ask. You might like to write down the answers or you might use a video camera or an audiotape recorder. Be sure to ask your storyteller's permission before you begin. Here are some questions you might use:

- Tell me about your family. What games did you play with your family and friends?
- What foods did you eat when you were a child?
- What toys did you have?
- What was your school like? What subjects did you study? What books did you read?

After the interview, send a thank-you letter. You might want to give the person a copy of the tape or video, too.

• **Bake a batch of biscuits:** Cassie and her mother make biscuits together. Everyone likes biscuits because they are easy to make and taste great. There are many different ways to make biscuits. Here's a recipe that is sure to please everyone in your home. Make them with a parent, older brother or sister, or older friend.

Biscuit Ingredients

1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour + about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup extra

1 teaspoon salt

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons baking powder (not baking *soda!*)

4 tablespoons butter, margarine, or solid white shortening

$\frac{2}{3}$ – $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of milk

1. Ask for an adult's help and preheat oven to 450°.
2. Wash your hands.
3. In a big bowl, mix 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup flour, salt, and baking powder.
4. With a fork, mix in the butter, margarine, or shortening.
5. Mix in enough milk so that the dough leaves the sides of the bowl. This should take about 1 minute. (Overmixed biscuits get tough and chewy rather than soft and flaky.)
6. Sprinkle a little flour on a table or wooden board. Roll out the dough, and cut the biscuits with a biscuit cutter. (If you don't have a biscuit cutter, a plastic cup works great.)
7. Place the biscuits on a cookie sheet or other flat pan. Ask an adult to help you put the pan in the oven. Bake the biscuits until they are lightly browned, about 12 to 15 minutes. Eat with butter, jam, or whatever you like!

• **Forest fun:** Cassie likes to walk through the family's woods. From her explorations, Cassie has learned a lot about nature, too. Make a forest rubbing to learn about nature without disturbing it. Choose some tree bark, leaves, pine needles, or large rocks. You will need crayons and white paper. Then, follow these steps:

- Lay your paper against the thing from which you want a rubbing.
- Rub the crayon back and forth until the pattern shows. Be gentle!

Share your rubbings with a friend. See if your friend can guess whether your rubbings are bark, leaves, needles, or rocks. Collect a lot of different rubbings, and label them, too.

- **The perfect gift:** On Christmas morning, the children get wonderful gifts: books! There are two versions of *Aesop's Fables* for the two younger boys, *The Count of Monte Cristo* for Stacey, and *The Three Musketeers* for Cassie. Read one of these books, and explain why it would make a great gift for the character to whom it was given.

- **Goal-setter:** Mama and Cassie talk about Cassie's future. Mama tells Cassie, "We have some choice over what we make of our lives once we're here." Mama hopes that Cassie will make the right choices and have a happy and fulfilling life. What do you want to be when you grow up? Where would you like to live? How do you want to change the world? Talk with a parent or a teacher about your goals. Discuss what you can do now and in the future to make your goals come true.

- **Scrapbook:** Cassie treasures the land, but she also values other parts of her life. She likes spending time with her family, reading books, and being with her friends. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* helps Mildred Taylor remember important events in her family's life. Make a scrapbook about your life. Choose at least

ten special times. These might be the arrival of a new family member, moving to a new home, or a family vacation, for example. Include photographs, drawings, and souvenirs from each event. Glue one souvenir on a page. Then write a caption or paragraph explaining its importance. Be sure to include the date and a brief description of the occasion, too!