T., author of young adult fiction, is well recognized and respected for her novels that authentically portray for all readers the pride, family love and support, and rich historical and societal traditions of AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE and people. Additionally, her books sensitively describe the tragedy of racism. Inspired by the rich oral history of her family as shared by her father, T. began her writing career with *Song of the Trees*, a book about life in rural Mississippi as seen through the eyes of Cassie Logan. A vibrant young African American child, Cassie is shown within the context of the Depression era when racism was woven in the fiber of daily life in the South. Thus begins a trilogy of novels, including *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), and *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1981), which focus on Cassie's family and their community. T.'s writings are described as filling a void that bridges all generations' understandings of how we got where we are.

As a young person, T. realized that the family and community contexts in which she was living were not the same world that was being described in history books and that contributed to the misconceptions of other students. She felt this contradiction between what was in the text and what she learned at home presented a "lackluster history devoid of pride or heroic qualities." As she entered high school, T. knew that she wanted to write about the world in which black children were reared—its values, principles, and teachings. She wanted to present the heroic aspects of her people missing from the schoolbooks of her childhood—black men, women, and children of whom young readers could be proud. After attending the University of Toledo, T. served in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia for two years following which she returned to the United States to teach and recruit for the Peace Corps. While attending the University of Colorado to study journalism, T. was active in the black student alliance to create a black studies program. It was not until 1973 that she wrote *Song of the Trees* (1975), incorporating her father's teachings and stories with actual historical incidents. Writing about life in the mid-twentieth century, her books emphasize the importance of this era preceding the civil rights movement through the experiences of the Logan family. "In *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976), I included the teachings of my own childhood, the values and principles by which I and so many other Black children were reared, for I wanted to show a different kind of Black world from the one so often seen. 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 society." (Taylor, 1998)

T.’s characters reflect humor, pathos, and frequently tragedy, but they always mirror a simple heroic dignity throughout their daily life experiences. According to one reviewer, "Her themes—self-respect, integrity, independence, strong family bonds, and love of nature and the land—underscore works that powerfully express the indomitableness of the human spirit in lyrical prose and vivid dialogue." T. portrays the ongoing struggle of her people following the abolition of slavery as they face oppression with endurance and imagination. As the characters remain true to themselves, an emotional story with significant insights into the tapestry of human experiences is woven for young readers of all races. Just as T.’s father modeled for her both awareness of discrimination and wisdom that constrains anger, so her characters represent discernment in destroying the bigotry that manifested itself in both daily petty nuisances and events of horror. T. comments that her books, “one of the first chronicles to
mirror a Black child’s hopes and fears from childhood innocence to awareness to bitterness and disillusionment, will one day be instrumental in teaching children of all colors the tremendous influence that Cassie’s generation—my father’s generation—had in bringing about the great Civil Rights movement of the fifties and sixties. Without understanding that generation and what it and the generations before it endured, children of today and of the future cannot understand or cherish the precious rights of equality which they now possess.”

T.’s unique characters also come to life in her stories that followed the trilogy of books on the Logans. Clear, smooth, and graceful language bring to life characters in The Friendship (1987), The Gold Cadillac (1987), The Road to Memphis (1988), and Mississippi Bridge (1990). Both emotion and humor are found in her descriptions as each of these stories relate poignant incidents concerning relationships and interactions among people in the struggle to overcome racism in the South. Besides outstanding characterizations, T.’s work is also noted for its lush descriptions of nature that help relieve the tensions of this particular era in society.

Awards


Further Works
The Well: David’s Story, 1995

Bibliography

Something about the Author, vol. 70, 1992
Taylor, M. Newbery Medal acceptance speech, Horn Book magazine, August 1977, pp. 401–9

Janelle B. Mathis

Chicago


Harvard


MLA