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## **The Mind of a Novel: The Heart of the Book**

Virginia Hamilton

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **The Mind of a Novel: The Heart of the Book**

*Virginia Hamilton*

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Good evening. It is a pleasure to be here, to participate in the tenth annual conference of the Children's Literature Association. I feel much at

home. Although this is my first visit to the university, and to this part of the country, I have known about Edmonton and Alberta, probably more so than most Americans. I have a sister born in Calgary. The house in which my parents first set up housekeeping still stands in Calgary. It seems that my parents roamed the northwest of Canada after honeymooning in Nome, Alaska, more than a half-century ago. A sedate, yet unsettled bunch of my mother's Perry clan up-rooted themselves, lock, stock and ambition, from their rather bleak corner of Ohio to homestead in Calgary, my mother among them. Kenneth Hamilton, soon to become my father, was already there, a travelling man, a wanderer, and a gambler, if only in his mind.

The Perrys stayed in Alberta until overwhelming homesickness for that bleak Ohio landscape caused them to return to the village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, my mother among them still, but this time with her husband and new baby, my sister, Nina, in tow. I don't think my father ever forgave Etta Perry Hamilton for dragging him away from his beloved Great White North. For the rest of his life, he told wondrous tales about faraway places with marvelous sounding names: Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Banff, Vancouver. What provocative sounds they were to the child I was. And to hear my father tell it, he practically built the Canadian Pacific Railroad single-handedly and was the last to see the final, extraordinary gathering of an entire Amerindian nation.

But I get ahead of myself. I would like to evoke a long-ago, rather unremarkable time, when there were no grand storytellers about, such as K. J. Hamilton. There was but the Harbinger; we might know him now by the name forerunner, or foreteller. In another era, Harbinger would become the advance representative of a state army or royal party. But in that unremarkable time, he was a skinny, ragged *original*. Indeed, some say Harbinger announced the coming of time and the creation of the world. An unsung herald is what he was; running here and about and around, he told about everything he saw as he saw it. The people heard him and they listened to him. Harbinger's tone of voice was as steady as the drought. His hungry figure was as familiar as that of the lean, laughing

hyena. As he ran, he saw the child; he saw the earthworm and the rooster. He saw the young woman. And he told what he saw this way:

"Let the child wash her hands, and she may one day eat with kings.

"The earthworm does not dance before the rooster; the earthworm will still get eaten, but at least the rooster cannot say he was provoked.

"The young woman is so pretty, but pray, what's the good of us both loving to be ragged and skinny?"

Harbinger ran on until he came to the palace of that unremarkable place. There, he observed the king's daughter being attended to in the shade of a baobab tree. The princess was so lovely, she took Harbinger's breath away. Gasping, he ran to his king.

"Oh, highness," cried Harbinger, "Is it so that all men are equal in your kingdom?"

"It is so," said the king, "All are equal and also to me, their king."

"And do I have the same rights as every man?" asked Harbinger.

"Surely you do," said the king.

"Well, then," Harbinger said, "Your own daughter is beautiful beyond *Beyond*, and I ask you for her hand in marriage."

The king replied, "A skinny Harbinger may marry my daughter only when he passes the test that proves him worthy."

"What test might that be?" asked Harbinger.

"Very simple test," said the king. "According to tradition, he who marries my daughter must first build me a great castle up above the highest baobab tree. And it is the custom that I be the first to help..."

are a spiritual activity; philosophy for the Greek; life itself for the Australian.

I am not advocating a rejection of sophisticated values in favor of primitive animism. I am a minimalist, schooled in the Classical Mediterranean languages, and a collector of ten thousand (or hundred) years of Western thought. I need Mandelstam; Guattari; Schlegel just as much as I need Alderley Edge.

My concern in writing and in life, is that, by developing our emotions, the intellect, we should not lose the other greatness, our capacity to Dream. The rest can be triggered. *Archielex me wak* or *Aljira* (indeed, he meant, He was with a lot to remember).

Not least of the instructions is that to live as a human being is to reach a religious act.

That is why the stories must be told. It is why Eric James had such a casual effect upon one of his class farmers—and so justified his rejection as a chemist, after all.

## The Mind of a Novel: The Heart of the Book

Virginia Hamilton

Good evening. It is a pleasure to be here, to participate in the tenth annual conference of the Children's Literature Association. I feel much at home. Although this is my first visit to the university, and to this part of the country, I have known about Edmonton and Alberta, probably more so than most Americans. I have a wife born in Calgary. The house in which my parents first set up housekeeping still stands in Calgary. I know that my parents earned the northwest of Canada after losing money in Nome, Alaska, more than a half-century ago. A widow, yet sister of both of my mother's Perry clan spouses—Theodore, Jack, stock and agriculture, from their father's black corner of Ohio to homestead in Calgary, my mother among them, Kenneth Hamilton, soon to become my father, was already there, a traveling man, a wanderer, and a gambler, if only in his mind.

The Perrys stayed in Alberta until one who longed for Saskatchewan for that black Ohio landscape urged them to return to the village of Yellow Springs, Ohio, my mother among them, but this time with her husband and new baby, my sister, King, as wife. I don't think my father ever forgave Eric Perry Hamilton for dragging her away from his beloved Great White North. For the rest of his life, he told wondrous tales about prairie places with names like sounding names: Winnipeg, Calgary, Edmonton, Banff, Vancouver. What province or towns they were to the child I was. And to hear my father tell it, he practically built the Canadian Pacific Railroad single-handedly and was the last to see the forest, extraordinary predictor of an entire American nation.

But I get ahead of myself. I would like to evoke a long-ago, rather unremarkable time, when there were no grand mysteries about, such as K. J. Hamilton. There was her the Harbinger; we might know you now by the name tomorrow, or foreteller. In fact: yes, Harbinger would

become the advance representative of a state army or royal party. But in that unremarkable time, he was a skinny, ragged, ragged-looking boy, some say Harbinger announced the coming of time and the creation of the world. An unusual herald is what he was; running here and there and around, he told about everything he saw as he saw it. The people heard him and they listened to him. Harbinger's tone of voice was as steady as the drought, his wiry figure was as familiar as that of the lean, laughing hyena. As he ran, he saw the child, he saw the earthworm and the toad. He saw the young woman. And he told what he saw this way.

"Let the child watch the lion's, and the way one day cut with kings."

"The earthworm does not dance before his rooster; earthworm will still get eaten."

*"I write for children . . . partly because of the fond memories I keep from my own childhood . . ."*

but at least his mother cannot say he was prophetic.

"The young woman is so pretty, her prey, she's the good of us both loving her ragged and skinny!"

Harbinger ran on until he came to the palace of that unremarkable place. There, he observed the king's daughter being attended to in the shade of a laurel tree. The princess was so lovely, she took Harbinger's breath away. Groping, he ran to his king.

"Oh, highness," cried Harbinger, "it be so that all men are dead in your kingdom!"

"To so?" said the king. "All are equal and also to me, their king?"

"And do I have the same rights as every man?" asked Harbinger.

"Surely you do," said the king.

"Well, then," Harbinger said, "your own daughter is beautiful beyond beyond, and I ask you for the hand in marriage."

The king replied, "A skinny Harbinger my marry, my daughter only when he

peers the rest that proves him worthy."

"What rest might that be?" asked

Harbinger.

"Very simple rest," said the king. "According to tradition, he who marries my daughter must first build me a great castle up above the highest laurel tree. And it is the custom that I be the first to help you at your task," said the king.

"To build a castle in the sky?" exclaimed poor Harbinger. He ran very fast then, around and about. As he ran, he saw a way.

"I will need building materials," he told the king, "stone and silver, wood, and gold."

"I will supply them, certainly," said the king. "But you must build the castle off the ground, my tower high above the laurel and nowhere else. And according to custom, I will be the first to help."

"Good," said Harbinger. "I can do it." He grinned. "I am ready to build the greatest castle the world has ever seen." He bowed, then, looked the king dead in the eye. "According to custom," Harbinger said, "I will build the castle first in the sky—is soon as you, my king, first lay the foundation!"

The tale is what is known as an escape story, of course, in which our hero gets himself out of an impossible task by imposing an equally impossible condition. But perhaps it was not so impossible. They say the king did lay the foundation. The Harbinger gave him the idea. And Harbinger did build the castle, using only his wits and his hands, shaping the air as he spoke. For old, ragged and skinny Harbinger was born with the gift of imagination.

After Harbinger came many new ideas, so they say, and we, much like him, are ever willing to see our minds' eyes to build castles in the sky. Opening the mind, having the ability to imagine, to associate ideas, to be startled by language into heightened awareness are at the heart of the creative process.

I've often said that I write for children or young people, partly because of the fond memories I keep from my own

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