

Questions and Answers: Julie Rubini, author of *Virginia Hamilton: America's Storyteller*

What inspired you to write about Virginia Hamilton?

I knew of Virginia Hamilton and her work through our work at Claire's Day, the children's book festival we established in honor of our late daughter. I attended the Virginia Hamilton Conference on Multicultural Literature for Children at Kent State numerous times to meet authors and illustrators participating to extend a personal invitation to participate in Claire's Day. Jaime Adoff has participated, and I came to know Arnold [Adoff] as well. When given the opportunity to propose subjects to Ohio University Press for the Biographies for Young Readers series, Virginia came to mind. There had never been a biography of this depth for middle grade readers, and as they are her primary audience, I thought it was time.

What most surprised you in your research about her life and work?

Oh my goodness, so I loved delving further into her life and work through the process. I loved learning about her life journey, especially her childhood in Yellow Springs and her romance with Arnold. As a writer, I loved learning about her process in her office with the 100-year-old hedgerow outside her window. I guess what I was most surprised by was the number of speeches she had written and delivered over her lifetime. Arnold and Kacy Cook did a fabulous job of unearthing her speech scripts and compiling them in their book, *Speeches, Essays and Conversations*. It served as a wonderful collective source for primary documents. Her speeches had a common thread of reflecting on her life, the weight of the responsibility of an honored writer to provide incredible stories for her audience, and a glimpse into her personal, daily life. And I loved that frogs and jaguars were her favorite creatures.

Why do you believe her work remains relevant now and into the future?

I believe her work remains relevant now and into the future because of her ability to write stories that drew upon what she knew, remembered and imagined. She used these experiences and wove them into her tales that reflected her African American experience. I love how, in her obituary in the *New York Times*, that the author wrote of Virginia's first published work, *Zeely*, that "it wasn't that race was absent, but that it was so completely, unremarkably present."

As her illustrators for several of her works, and dear friends, Leo and Diane Dillon offered, "Virginia brought magic, fantasy and fairy tales to children who were rarely included in these worlds."

I had the opportunity to speak with Newbery award winning author Kwame Alexander while here in Toledo just over a year ago. I told Kwame about my work in sharing her story prior to the presentation, as I was in the process of writing the biography. He was intrigued and enthused about the project.

After his speech, an audience member asked about the importance of diversity in literature for young people. Kwame noted that it is indeed something that we most always work toward, but he also suggested that we ought to look to our bookshelves in our libraries, for there are works from the past that our children should be reading too.

I felt like that was a personal nod to Virginia and her stories. It is my hope through sharing her life journey and her work, that educators will look to their shelves and encourage children to read her stories, and once hooked, as I was, that child will go on to read all of her works. Thank you!