

Mildred Taylor Draws On Experience, Emotions As Material For Her Novels

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IN 1961, Scott High School's senior class voted Mildred Taylor most likely to become a writer. No one was surprised when the prophecy came true.

What was surprising was her choice of subjects: black families living in the South in the 30s and 40s. They found this unusual from a "prim and proper northern girl," the award-winning author told an audience of about 250 during a meeting of the Toledo Area Council of the International Reading Association last week at SeaGate Centre.

"In order to understand my writing, you have to understand my life, and me," said Ms. Taylor, who now writes from her home in Boulder, Colo.

Raised in Toledo, where her mother still lives, the 43-year-old author's roots go back to her birthplace in Jackson, Miss. Her parents moved her and her older sister north when Ms. Taylor was 3 months old. But tales of southern living told by her father, Wilbert L. Taylor, and her uncles made an impression on the author and became the basis for her books.

"Song of the Trees," "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry," and "Let The Circle Be Unbroken," chronicle the Logans, a fictional black family living in Mississippi during the 1930s. Her latest book, "The Gold Cadillac" takes place in Toledo, as well as Mississippi.

"Mississippi will always be in my blood," said Ms. Taylor. "Toledo was good for us, but my family could not forget the South."

STORIES of the South told by her ancestors differed from those outlined in her history books, she said, adding that her school books presented blacks as docile people, satisfied with life in the south, where segregation ruled.

Ms. Taylor said she tried to interpret her family's stories for her classmates in the predominantly white former Monroe School; she tried to tell the class of the other history — the one not told in history books. "But the words didn't come out right," she said. "All they believed was what the history books said."

"I needed to write those stories. I needed to show the strength of the men like my father."



— Blade Photo by Jack Ackerman

Mildred Taylor was raised in Toledo, but her roots go back to Mississippi, where she was born.

After graduating from Scott High School, Ms. Taylor attended the University of Toledo, where she majored in English and history. She started entering writing contests and — at 19 — completed her first novel, written in the first person using a white man's voice, a tactic she thought would gain the book more attention.

A New York publishing house liked the work and told her they would publish it if she shortened it to a novella, she said. But she didn't want to cut it, and instead, in 1965, put the book and her writing aside to join the Peace Corps, spending two years in Ethiopia teaching English.

When she returned, she enrolled at the University of Colorado, where she received a master's degree in journalism. She decided against a career in that field because she couldn't stand the deadline pressures, she said.

While a student in Colorado in

1968, Ms. Taylor was a member of the black student alliance, and was instrumental in developing a black studies program there.

"After two years I decided I had to write again," she said. So, in 1971, she moved to California, took a temporary job, and spent all her free time at the typewriter.

AFTER three years of rejections from countless publishers, Ms. Taylor said she entered a contest sponsored by the Council of Interracial Books for Children in 1974. It was at this time that the character of Cassie Logan came to life. Ms. Taylor added the character to a rewritten manuscript and won first prize in the African-American category of the contest with "Song of the Trees." The character would appear in her next three books.

On a visit to Toledo to share the news of her success, she listened to her father tell yet another story of the South. This story would be

the basis for "Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry," winner of the Newberry Award in 1977.

A third book about the Logan family was published in 1981, and was the last of Ms. Taylor's books until this year.

"It's been very difficult to write because the books draw on my emotions so much," she said. The death in 1976 of her father, who was one of her greatest literary resources, left a lasting scar, she said.

HER current book, "The Gold Cadillac," (Dial Books, 1987) chronicles Ms. Taylor's own journey to the south as a child in her father's 1950 Cadillac, taking the family from their home on Dorr Street to Mississippi.

She said it was on this trip, and others, that she learned about segregation laws and racism — a frightening experience for a young child.

Ms. Taylor said she sent the book's artist pictures of her former home and neighborhood in Toledo, as well as the car. Since she rarely sees the illustrations before they appear in the book, she said she was surprised to see an exact likeness of her house on Dorr Street, which is no longer standing, and the family car in the book.

"I've lived in Chicago; Providence, R.I.; Los Angeles; and Ethiopia, but some of the best years of my life were spent here in Toledo. Toledo is my hometown," she said.

But, she added that she has made Colorado her home because she loves the mountains, and it is where she likes to do her writing.

A new book, "The Friendship," featuring the Logans and based on another family story, will be released in the fall. Ms. Taylor said she is also working on two more books about the Logan family and is planning other books about her work in Ethiopia and with black studies.

"There are times when I want to give up writing," she said. "But I continue to write because I want to continue my father's legacy. He and the other members of my family gave me a history that is not yet written in the history books, and I strongly believe I have to pass on that history and pride."