

Acceptance Speech for the 1997 Alan Award

Mildred D. Taylor

Many years ago when I first started writing the stories told by my family about our family history and about neighbors and friends and the community in which my family lived, I envisioned presenting an aspect of American history which during my own childhood was not presented in the history books. I envisioned presenting 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. I wanted readers to know this family, based upon my own, and I wanted them to feel akin to them and to walk in their shoes. The presentation at the National Council of Teachers of English Convention of the 1997 ALAN Award signifies to me that perhaps I have achieved some of these goals I set so long ago, and I sincerely thank you for this great recognition.

Writing the books based upon stories told by my family has been a long journey from my childhood to receiving the ALAN Award, but I have always tried to stay on course. From *Song of the Trees* to *The Well* I have attempted to present a true picture of life in America as older members of my family remember it, and as I remember it in the days before the civil rights movement. In all of the books I have recounted not only the joy of growing up in a large and supportive family, but my own feelings of being faced with segregation and bigotry. Writing these feelings was never easy, but when my first books were published, those feelings and the history I presented were understood. Yes, people would say. We remember how it was.

Today, however, younger generations have no experience of that time when signs over restrooms doors, signs over water fountains, in restaurant windows and hotels said: WHITE ONLY, COLORED NOT ALLOWED. Today's generation of children, as well as many of their parents and teachers, have not had to endure such indignities or even worse aspects of racism that once pervaded America, and I am grateful for that. But, unfortunately, as we all know racism still exists and is growing.

In the writing of my books I have tried to present not only a history of my family, but the effects of racism, not only to the victims of racism but also to the racists themselves. I have recounted events that were painful to write and painful to be read, but I had hoped they brought more understanding. Now, however, there are those who think that perhaps my recounting are too painful, and there are those who seek to remove books such as mine from school reading lists. There are some who say the books should be removed because the "N" word is used. There are some who say such events as described in my books and books by others did not happen. There are those who do not want to remember the past or who do not want their children to know the past and who would whitewash history, and these sentiments are not only from whites.

In Texas recently a Hispanic father went to the school board and asked that *The Well* be removed from school reading lists because the "N" word was used. In Orange County, California a black mother objected to her son reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* in a class where he was the only African-American, and the school's solution to her objection was to seat her son in the hall while the book was being read. In a Northern state, a black church questioned a book like *Roll of Thunder* being presented in the schools to its children.

I am hurt that any child would ever be hurt by my words. As a parent I understand not wanting a child to hear painful words, but as a parent I do not understand not wanting a child to learn about a history that is part of America, a history about a family representing millions of families that are strong and loving and who remain united and strong, despite the obstacles they face.

In the writing of my most recent work, titled *The Land*, I have found myself hesitating about using words that would have been spoken in the late 1800s because of my concern about our "politically correct" society. But just as I have had to be honest with myself in the telling of all my stories, I realize I must be true to the feelings

of the people about whom I write and true to the stories told. My stories might not be "politically correct," so there will be those who will be offended, but as we all know, racism is offensive.

It is not polite, and it is full of pain.

It is through you and through your great efforts that, if my books or books like mine are presented in the classroom, the children will be prepared for what they read. Before reading any of my books to my own eight-year-old, I talk to her about what life was like when I was a child and when her grandparents and great-grandparents were children; and we continue to talk as the story unfolds. I want only the best for my child in her learning of the past and of her heritage, just as we all want the best for all the children. I thank you for recognizing my books as a contribution to children. I shall always treasure your faith in my work, and shall always treasure the 1997 ALAN Award.

Mildred Taylor is the author of many award winning novels for young readers including the Newbery Award winning Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, The Road to Memphis, Let the Circle Be Unbroken, and her latest The Friendship. She was the recipient of the 1997 ALAN Award.