

Children of the Fire Short Guide

Children of the Fire by Harriette Gillem Robinet

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Overview

Published in 1991, *Children of the Fire* takes place in early October of 1871 during the devastating fire that destroyed most of Chicago, Illinois. An African-American child, Hallelujah, lives through the great Chicago fire with courage and resourcefulness.

Robinet portrays Hallelujah as an independent girl that desires adventure. Hallelujah succeeds in getting permission from her adoptive parents to see the next city fire, which turns out to be the biggest one in history. During the fire, Hallelujah meets not only wealthy and poor people, but people of many cultures and color, growing deeply from her experience.

About the Author

Born July 4, 1931, in Washington, D.C., to teachers Richard Avitus and Martha Gray, Harriette Gillem Robinet became familiar with slavery during her childhood summers in Arlington, Virginia. Her maternal grandfather served as a slave under General Robert E. Lee until age thirteen, while her father's family served as slaves to Jesuit priests in Maryland. This childhood experience paved the way for the author's interest in slavery and historical fiction.

In 1953, Robinet graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the College of New Rochelle in New York. The author then earned her master of science (1957) and doctorate (1963) degrees in microbiology from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. From 1953-1954, Robinet worked in Children's Hospital, Washington, D.C., as a bacteriologist before serving at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., as a medical bacteriologist and as a research bacteriologist. Later, she worked as a biology instructor at Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana, and as a civilian food bacteriologist for the United States Army Quartermaster Corps.

In August 6, 1960, the author married McLouis Joseph Robinet (pronounced robi-nay), a health physicist. The couple raised six children: Stephen, Philip, Rita, Jonathan, Marsha, and Linda, including one son with cerebral palsy.

Influenced by her family's slavery and her disabled son's challenges, Robinet began writing books about children's struggles and victories over physical and emotional difficulties. Her first book, *Jay and the Marigold*, describes an eight-year-old boy who, like her son, deals with cerebral palsy.

The author's second book, *Ride the Red Cycle*, portrays a disabled child seeking individuality and self-respect.

According to the biography on Robinet's website, she believes history gives perspective on life today. She also suggests that historians have deliberately changed or ignored the stories of African Americans. To combat this, Robinet writes historical fiction, portraying amiable children and adults, with their needs and struggles, during pivotal times in American history.

Four of the author's books have received the Notable Social Studies Books for Young Children Award from the National Council for the Social Studies. *Children of the Fire* won an award in 1991 from the Friends of American Writers; *Washington City Is Burning* won the 1997 Carl Sandburg Award; and *The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans* won the 1998 Midland Authors Award. The author received the Society of Midland Authors Award for Children's Literature in 1998. *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* won the 1999 Scott O'Dell Historical Fiction Award for the Year's Best Fiction, as well as the Kentucky Bluegrass Award for Grades 3-5 in 2000-2001.

In a telephone interview on February 1, 2001, Robinet expressed that *Children of the Fire* arose from her desire to write historical fiction. After reading an article on how to write historical fiction, she pondered what to write. On October 8, 1981, she turned on the radio and heard that the date marked the 110th anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire. It sparked her interest and she began her research that day. Ten years later, on October 8, 1991, after multiple rejections from other publishers, Atheneum published Robinet's first historical fiction novel: *Children of the Fire*.

An active member of Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Robinet lives in Oak Park, Illinois, with her husband. They have four grandchildren.

Setting

The novel starts on a warm and windy Sunday. Robinet sets the imagery quickly as she describes the howling wind haunting the city of Chicago. Dogs tuck in their tails and cats pace the streets with raised fur. Hallelujah, an eleven-year-old fidgety orphan, wants her adoptive mother, Miss Tilly, to explain why Hallelujah must carry a heavy pot of potatoes and cabbage to their Irish immigrant neighbors. Hallelujah does not want information, for she knows the answer. She wants Miss Tilly to sympathize with her so that she can get what she wants—an adventure.

Familiar scenes create the story and add credibility: Robinet presents a detailed map of Chicago in the introduction. The map illustrates the burned sections of Chicago and includes street names and points of interest, such as the Courthouse. Bold arrows mark Hallelujah's path during the great fire. As the story unfolds, readers can experience history along with Hallelujah.

The author portrays the era's fashion colorfully as she presents the diverse social classes. For example, Hallelujah lives a comfortable life in the South Division, reflected in her attire. She wears a tan skirt that touches her high top shoes. She owns a wood doll named Suzy. At the start of the fire, Hallelujah meets Rachael, a Polish child who lives near the O'Leary barn where the fire started. Rachael wears tattered clothes representative of her poorer background.

She travels barefoot and carries a makeshift corncob doll. At the Courthouse fire, Hallelujah meets Elizabeth, a wealthy North Division girl, wearing a taffeta blue dress like her doll. Elizabeth's doll, Betsy, has painted shoes on its china feet and a painted smile on its china face.

The dialect further characterizes the people of Chicago. For example, "Lordy, Mr. Joseph, what have you did?," "Us needs the money. Us ain't too proud," and "It be roofs over they heads" are phrases spoken by less educated and less fortunate people.

The wealthy people speak articulately and with more formality.

The author develops the atmosphere with appropriate landmarks and timely events.

For example, as Hallelujah's family enjoys the warm Sunday evening on the front porch of their home, a lamplighter ignites the gas lampposts lining the streets. As the novel unfolds, the action takes place at the Chicago Courthouse where Abraham Lincoln's body lay in state a few years earlier.

In addition, Robinet refers to the Underground Railroad, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the War between the States—all issues of the era—to develop Chicago's diverse culture.

Social Sensitivity

In the novel, Robinet handles socially sensitive issues admirably. Using delicate staging, she identifies the issues of adoption, social status, and racial prejudice with insight and candor. For example, racial bias emerges as the main theme of the novel apart from the historical perspective. Through Hallelujah's viewpoint, readers can experience the lack of self-worth and appreciation that arises from racially-biased attitudes.

Readers can see how cultural biases can reinforce these limitations. Furthermore, they can experience how ordinary people can become heroes in transcending these limitations.

Robinet empowers readers to accept all skin colors, social statuses, and family types as authentic. She employs attitude changes in the characters to enable readers to walk away with a deeper perspective of not only history, but also the devastation that can be caused by these social issues.

Literary Qualities

Robinet employs a plain writing style by using unpretentious sentences, words from everyday speech, and clear and direct accounts. She narrates the story in chronological order through the protagonist's perspective. The author's realism depicts slavery and colonization without idealizing or romanticizing it. Combined with the historical facts Robinet offers, these qualities create credibility in a work of fiction.

Robinet shapes her writing style by employing the historical language native to slaves. This vernacular language, combined with the behavior and attitudes of the region, adds depth to her novel. It enables readers to understand the dynamic elements of social diversity. In a similar way, Robinet's aphorisms create brief and clever statements that make wise observations about life. For example, at the story's resolution, the author describes Hallelujah as a "morning child with sunrise in her heart" instead of "evening in her heart."

Throughout *Children of the Fire*, the author uses simple yet powerful imagery.

Robinet gives readers a concrete sensation of Chicago and the historical events that transpired during the fire. Readers will develop an understanding of this historical event and how it affected the lives of Chicago's people.



Themes and Characters

Robinet develops Hallelujah as an impatient and self-centered African-American protagonist. Employing a limited thirdperson point-of-view, the author successfully focuses readers on Hallelujah's thoughts and feelings. Hallelujah wants her way, yet feels self-conscious and doubts her worth.

As Hallelujah leads readers through the adventure, her child-like perspective matures. She becomes aware of her limited thinking and begins to look at people and life in a new way. Hallelujah's transformation allows the author to deal with key issues for young people, including racial discrimination, self-worth, death, and compassion.

Hallelujah's wealthy and pampered Caucasian friend, Elizabeth, is timid and awkward at taking care of herself. She is educated, traveled, and polite. Elizabeth's honesty and thoughtfulness enable Hallelujah and Elizabeth to develop into instant friends.

However, Elizabeth's parents frown on Hallelujah for her skin color, calling her a "nigger." Later, separated from her parents, Elizabeth meets Hallelujah again. Elizabeth questions her parent's unkind reactions, and together Hallelujah and Elizabeth realize how insignificant skin color is between friends. Despite the care Elizabeth receives at Hallelujah's home, Elizabeth's parents refuse to say thank you.

Elizabeth matures to rise above racial discrimination. At the resolution, she returns with her parent's permission to give Hallelujah a green velvet dress, velvet bonnet, and a painted china doll with matching outfit. Elizabeth's character becomes essential in evolving Hallelujah's self-acceptance and in delicately confronting attitudes towards racial discrimination.

"Born into this world through no fault of our own," Hallelujah often says; she questions the value of her skin color and her place in life. This illustrates the theme of self-worth. As Hallelujah experiences the calamity of the fire, she begins to appreciate herself. Others accept her name and see the beauty in it. They take her help and Hallelujah finds that she can contribute positively to the world. She realizes that "Everybody is somebody."

Concurrently, as expected, the fire brings about mass despair and devastation to the citizens of Chicago. These experiences allow Hallelujah to reprioritize her attitudes and to release her self-centered behaviors.

She takes responsibility for her bad behavior and declares: "I used to be mean to people. Well, I'm sorry now. I think differently. I know it's all right to be an orphan, and a Mississippi slave child. This is who I am. So now I want to be helpful and kind."

Throughout the novel, Robinet also uses several less-prominent characters to help create Hallelujah's transformation towards compassion and self-worth. Mary Jane, Hallelujah's biological sister, is five years older.



As an aspiring writer, Mary Jane works hard at a factory and gives the wages to her adoptive parents. With her latest raise, she secretly began keeping fifty cents a week for her writing supplies. When Mary Jane confides in Hallelujah, Hallelujah bribes Mary Jane to do her chores or else she will snitch. Hallelujah's conscience nags her, but not enough to change her behavior. During Hallelujah's transformation, she recognizes her selfishness and acquires compassion for Mary Jane.

Meeting another minor character, Hope, a young woman in an expensive green taffeta dress with soft white gloves, helps Hallelujah sense her worthiness. Hope sees beauty in Hallelujah's name and understands the love Hallelujah's parents must have had to name her after the morning's rising sun. Hallelujah's brief yet intense contact with Hope helps Hallelujah grasp that "an orphan child with brown skin and wooly black hair could still be special."

The author also explores the theme of death throughout the novel. After Hallelujah witnesses many people, including children, burn to death, her character matures.

When she collects water at the lake for her family, someone steals her shoes. Outraged, she realizes that as she did something good, someone stole from her. After anger and then reflection, Hallelujah puts her thoughts into perspective, realizing that children lost their mothers and families perished. While her friend Elizabeth lost her home, Hallelujah only lost her shoes.



Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Hallelujah. How old is she?

Describe her temperament. How does her character evolve?

2. Describe Hallelujah's friend, Elizabeth.

What makes her important to the story? Why?

3. Depict Hallelujah's sister, Mary Jane. How does Mary Jane enhance the conflict that leads to Hallelujah's emergence?

4. Describe how the author uses dialect to diversify the cultures in her novel. How many cultures do you find?

5. Select two important social issues the author conveys through her story. What positive messages does she suggest?

6. Find several examples of imagery that Robinet uses to enable readers to experience the fire firsthand. Do you believe they are effective? If not, how would you change them?

7. Locate dialogue that highlights the racial prejudice of the era. Describe how the story perpetuates and/or transcends these attitudes.

8. Describe the major events of the era that the author mentions, such as the Emancipation Proclamation and President Lincoln's burial. Do these events provide historical credibility? What do you learn from the author's brief references to these events?

9. Characterize Hope. She appears briefly in the novel but has a large impact on Hallelujah. What impact does she have? What makes her instrumental in evolving Hallelujah's character?

10. Describe how Rachael develops Hallelujah's character. What does Rachael learn from her?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explore Chicago, Illinois. What changes did the city make after the Great Fire of 1871? Identify present-day Chicago's strengths and weaknesses.
2. The people of Chicago rebuilt the city within three years of the fire. To what can the successful rebuilding be attributed? By 1893, as Chicago hosted the World's Fair, the population had grown to two million. What brought people to Chicago after the fire?
3. Research the Underground Railroad used by former slaves to escape the South. How many slaves used it? How did it work? Describe its "conductors."
4. Study the Chicago fire using letters, diaries, and articles written by people who lived through the fire and walked the same Chicago streets. Does Robinet's book portray the significant events accurately? Did she leave out any information? Why?
5. Research horse-drawn carriages used in 1871. Just as automobiles differ in luxury and style, how did horse-drawn carriages differ? How much did they cost?
6. Frequently during a fire, random buildings may escape damage. Learn about fire and its characteristics. How do nature's elements, such as wind, rain, air temperature, etc., support or prevent it? What do firefighters do today to effectively combat fires and prevent calamities similar to Chicago's fire?
7. Describe the physical uniqueness of Chicago in 1871. What did people use to build houses, government buildings, shops, and barns? How did this type of construction affect the fire?
8. Mr. Joseph made shoes. Research the history of shoemaking from the mid- 1800s. What materials and machines did shoemakers use? How has it changed since then?
9. Hallelujah and Mary Jane were orphans. Research the life of an orphan and how it has changed since the 1800s. Describe the improvements as well as the drawbacks.
10. The novel mentions that the Fifth United States Infantry from Fort Leavenworth helped the city. Research the history of the military and talk about when and how African Americans were allowed to serve.
11. During crises and natural disasters, people often work together to support each other. Study this phenomenon and its characteristics.

For Further Reference

"Harriette Gillem Robinet." Telephone interview with Michelle Prebilib, freelance writer, February 1, 2001.

Kirkus Reviews (October 1, 1991): 62-63. A mostly positive review of *Children of the Fire*. Aside from a complaint that "[t]he message sits a bit heavily," the reviewer went on to say that "this child's-eye view of a great event should appeal to readers with a historical bent" "Robinet, Harriette Gillem." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, Volume 42*. Detroit: Gale, 1994. Offers a brief biography of Robinet's life and commentary on some of her work.

Related Titles

Readers interested in historical fiction about major events may enjoy the following titles. In Joann Grote's *The American Revolution*, thirteen-year-old Stephen Lankford and his older brother William get involved in the "Sons of Liberty" revolutionary group in 1773 Boston. *The Great Wheel*, written by Robert Lawson, follows the story of eighteen-year-old Conn after he leaves Ireland and sails to America. He eventually overcomes obstacles to help build the first Ferris wheel for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. Laura Ingalls Wilder writes about the terrible winter of 1880-81, in *The Long Winter*, when Almanzo Wilder takes a dangerous and adventurous trip to secure wheat that will save the village from starvation.

For another account of the famous Chicago fire, *SURVIVAL! Fire (Chicago, 1871)*, authored by Kathleen Duey, Karen Bale and Bill Dodge, offers readers a different perspective of the blaze and its effects. With the Chicago fire wild around him, Nate desperately wants to reach his aunt's boarding house. However, he feels responsible for Julie's safety, also separated from her family.

Readers interested in learning more about the lives of slaves during the mid-nineteenth century should look for *The Underground Railroad* by Raymond Bial. Underground station routes and their managemen come alive in a picture book that combines color photos, discussions of slaves and "con ductor" experiences, and surveys based on written accounts.

Related Web Sites

Harriette Gillem Robinet Web Page <http://www.hgrobinet.com/index.html>.

March 28, 2001. This website provides a brief biography of Robinet and lists her children's books to date, providing jacket art for each work.

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