

# **A White Romance Short Guide**

## **A White Romance by Virginia Hamilton**

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## Overview

This is a story about the painful relationships of four young people in high school. The principal character is a black girl, Talley, who befriends a white girl, Didi. They meet through the school's running team. Brought up strictly, Talley has had no experience with sex or drugs. Didi is familiar with both—she spends most all of her time with Roady, her drug addict boyfriend.

When Talley visits them in Roady's apartment, she encounters David, a charismatic, white, drug pusher. Unsuspecting Talley becomes romantically involved with him. She is overwhelmed by this relationship, its physical aspects, its emotional turbulence, and its moral dilemmas. In the end, Talley is still infatuated with David, but she has recognized him for what he is and has accepted a date with Victor, her black admirer.



## About the Author

Virginia Hamilton is a writer, teacher, and lecturer whose long list of honored publications and wide variety of literary genres—fiction, folklore, mythology, biography, science fiction—attest to her dedication and talent. However, Hamilton has said, "Writing has to be a part-time occupation. More than any other serious profession, it feeds and grows from living and living is what a writer must do full-time. Living full-time takes more energy and discipline than any writing I know of." Hamilton credits her parents, White Romance 4283 ents, Kenneth (a musician) and Etta Belle Perry Hamilton, for her storytelling ability. Born on March 12, 1936, in the small, southern Ohio town of Yellow Springs, she was the youngest of their five children and was spoiled and petted by her siblings, parents, and teachers. Hamilton attended the schools in Yellow Springs, graduating from high school with honors. She had wanted to be a writer from a young age and was surprised, yet pleased, to receive a full scholarship to study creative writing and literature at Antioch College. Her education also included course work at Ohio State University and studying American literature and the novel at the New School for Social Research in New York.

When she left Antioch College, Hamilton spent a number of years in New York trying to publish for adults. At the suggestion of a friend, she reworked a story she had written in college and submitted it to a publisher's children's department. (Until then, she did not know there were children's departments in publishing.) Zeely was the result, and she has been successfully writing for young people since then.

Author of over twenty-five children's books, Hamilton has been the recipient of many major U.S. and international awards in the field. She has received the Mystery Writers of America Edgar Allan Poe Award (1969) for *The House of Dies Drear*; Coretta Scott King Award for *Sweet Whispers*, *Brother Rush* (1983) and *The People Could Fly* (1986); three Newbery Honor book awards; the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award (1974, 1983, 1988), the Children's Rights Workshop Other award (1986), two certificates of honor by the International Board of Books for the Young People, and the Regina Medal for her continued distinguished contribution to children's literature.

Her *M. C. Higgins, the Great* is the only book to receive all three of the most prestigious awards: Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award. In 1992, Hamilton was the winner of the Hans Christian Andersen Award, the highest international distinction given to creators of children's books; and in 1993, she was selected to make the coveted May Arbutnot Lecture. The Virginia Hamilton Lectureship on Minority Experiences in Children's Literature at Kent State University was established in her honor.

After a number of years in New York, Hamilton returned to Yellow Springs, where her grandfather settled after escaping from slavery through the underground railroad. The author now lives "in a great modern house smack in the middle of a cornfield, the last remaining section of that farm belonging to my family." She has been married since 1960 to well-known poet and anthologist Arnold Adoff. Both were writers-in-residence at

Queens College of the City University of New York for 1987 and 1988. The couple has one daughter, Leigh, and one son, Jaime.



## Setting

The novel is set in contemporary times, in several locations within an American large city. Talley lives in an apartment in The Neighborhood, an area with numerous closed factories and stores. Although druggies and prostitutes hang out on the street corners, it is not the worst, most dangerous area. Many of its residents are poor and unemployed, but proud that they have been able to maintain their homes. Roady's dirty, run-down, cold apartment building is in the high-crime east side. This ghetto area is mostly inhabited by the elderly, who cannot move out, and gangs who prey upon them. The story's characters attend Colonel Glenn High School located in The Neighborhood. Formerly an allblack school with a capacity of three thousand students, Colonel Glenn School was recently designated a magnet school; and for the first time, whites from the suburbs attend the inner city school.

# Social Sensitivity

Parents and teachers should note that *A White Romance* does present some intense sexual scenes as well as graphic depiction of violence in the concert scene. Although some may find the book genuinely shocking, it deals with important issues and may be used as a catalyst for parents and teachers to discuss these issues with their children.

## Literary Qualities

*A White Romance* is not one of Hamilton's honored books, but it is a powerful story that authentically confronts real issues. She presents a well-developed plot, realistic narrative, natural characters, and descriptive scenes. This provocative novel conveys its message better than any simple explanation of facts could. As told through Talley's first-person stream-of-consciousness narration, the story is not a happy one.

It is a vivid, insightful portrayal of painful teen-aged relationships. At times the text is difficult to understand because *A White Romance* is written in a mixture of teen-age slang and black English. However, the language is appropriate to the characters and the story would not be depicted as realistically in any other.

Hamilton's young people are genuine, three-dimensional characters.

Through her honest, compassionate storytelling, she makes them come alive and the reader empathizes with their problems. Her gift with language is also evident in the pictures she paints of the scenes. An especially effective example is her vivid description of the rock concert's wild images and sounds.





## Themes and Characters

Several issues are explored simultaneously in this story: transition to adulthood, multicultural acceptance, friendship, drug use, and teen-age sexuality. Through her relationships and experiences with Didi, Roady, David, and Victor, Talley develops a better understanding of others and herself and strengthens her values. Talley, a runner who is petite, lean, and lithe, is proud of her accomplishments. She was considered to be a good student and daughter until she became involved with David. When she started dating him, running, schoolwork, and time with her father came second.

In writing *A White Romance*, Hamilton included three white characters.

Didi Adair, Talley's best friend, is a tall, beautiful blonde who also loves running. She is "school smart," but not "street smart." Didi is obsessively in love with Roady Dean Lewis, a "metal rocker," whose family pays him to live away from home. Roady cares only about Didi, music, drinking, and drugs.

The two of them spend most of their days and nights together. David Emory is Roady's landlord and drug dealer.

David is rich and handsome, and loves to use his charisma to gain and maintain power over others.

There are two other important characters. Victor Davis, a big athlete, is fond of Talley and is determined to rid the school of David. "Poppy" is Hale Barbour, Talley's father, a single parent. He is a traditionalist who makes his living as a night watchman for three closed factories.



## Topics for Discussion

1. What does "a white romance" mean? Who made up the term? Why?
2. Why do you think the author chose to portray Talley as black and her new friends as whites? Does this approach enhance her story? How?
3. Talley and Didi are runners. Do you think this is an essential element in the story? Why or why not?
4. Describe Talley's relationship with her father and with Didi's mother.
5. Point out some events that give you insight into Talley's character.

How does she change over the course of the story?

6. Are there similarities between any of the characters and people you know? What are they? What are some differences?
7. What is the significance of the rock concert?
8. Teen-age sexuality is one issue this book addresses. How do you feel about young people reading or seeing graphic and intimate scenes?

9. Aspects of drug use are included in this story. What is your opinion of the author's treatment of this problem?

Is it realistic or not? What makes you think so?

10. Discuss the use of language in this book. Find examples of words or phrases that are not standard English.

Tell what each means and why it is used.

11. Does Hamilton evade the real issues involving interracial romances by making David Emory a loathsome drug dealer?

## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the author's background and other works. Write about what she means when she says that one of her purposes in writing is "to portray the essence of a people who are a parallel cultural community in America."
2. Read some of Hamilton's folklore and nonfiction. Write about the research required for each.
3. Look up various types of magnet schools. Describe one that you would like to attend.
4. Investigate illegal drugs. Select specific ones and find out how and where they originate, what effect they have, and how prevalent they are in our culture now.
5. Write a fictional, first-person account of your discovery that your good friend is a drug pusher.
6. Find the statistics on teen-age sexual activity in your state or area. Compile a chart showing rates for teen-age pregnancy, communicable diseases, and drug-addicted babies.



## For Further Reference

De Montreville, Doris and E. D. Crawford, eds. "Virginia Hamilton." In *Fourth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978: 162-164. This autobiographical sketch gives a picture of the author as a happy child, an overachieving student, and a dedicated writer.

Farrell, K. "Virginia Hamilton's Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush and the Case for a Radical Existential Criticism."

*Contemporary Literature* (Summer 1990): 161-176. This article takes issue with underlying, contradictory messages in Hamilton's text.

Hamilton, Virginia. "Ah, Sweet Rememory!" *Horn Book* (December 1981): 633-640. In this article, Hamilton relates personal memories of her family and how she has used these recollections in some of her stories.

———. "The Booklist Interview." *Booklist* (February 1, 1992): 1020-1021.

Through the interviewer's questions and the author's answers, one gains insight into Hamilton's writing style and focus.

———. "Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Acceptance." *Horn Book* (February 1984): 24-28. In this speech, the author describes her personal thoughts and feelings during the writing of *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush*.

———. "Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Acceptance." *Horn Book* (March / April 1989): 183-185. In accepting the nonfiction award for her biography of Anthony Burns, the author gives background for the writing of it.

———. "Coretta Scott King Award Acceptance." *Horn Book* (November/December 1986): 683-687. This speech, in which Hamilton gives the background of *The People Could Fly: Black American Folktales*, is a declaration for the value of family folklore, parents telling children about daily episodes from their past.

———. "Planting Seeds." *Horn Book* (November/December 1992): 674-680. In this article, Hamilton tells about her experiences with writing three types of literature: fiction, nonfiction, and collections.

## Related Titles

A Little Love is a teen-age romance novel about ordinary people who are hungry for love. In this book, the main character is Sheema, who is supported through her difficulties at home and at school by her boyfriend, Forrest. Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush and Arilla Sun Down are two other first-person narrations by young, black, female protagonists with family problems.

# Copyright Information

## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996