SOFTWARE & TECH

The People Could Fly Virginia Hamilton

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Introduction: A Tapestry of Flight and Freedom

In the realm of children's literature and African American folklore, few collections resonate as deeply as **The People Could Fly** by Virginia Hamilton. First published in 1985, this anthology of twenty-four folktales weaves together the rich oral traditions of Black Americans, blending sorrow, humor, magic, and resilience. The title story—the most celebrated—tells of enslaved Africans who, by whispering ancient words, remember the power to soar into the sky, escaping the brutality of bondage. Hamilton's masterful retelling transforms these tales into timeless artifacts of cultural memory. This article explores the significance of the collection, its narrative artistry, its historical context, and why **The People Could Fly** remains essential reading for all ages.

The Enduring Legacy of Virginia Hamilton

Virginia Hamilton (1934–2002) was a pioneering author whose work fundamentally reshaped American children's literature. She was the first African American writer to win the Newbery Medal (for *M. C. Higgins, the Great*) and the first children's author to receive the MacArthur Fellowship "Genius Grant." Hamilton's deep respect for African American oral traditions is evident in **The People Could Fly**. She meticulously researched folktales from the diaspora—animal trickster stories, ghost tales, slave narratives, and supernatural fables—and rendered them in a voice that honors the original storytellers while remaining accessible to modern readers.

Her collection is often compared to the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Joel Chandler Harris, but Hamilton's approach is distinct. Where Harris's Uncle Remus stories, despite their cultural significance, were framed within a problematic racial context, Hamilton presents tales from a framework of empowerment and heritage. She names the communities that created these stories and gives them dignity. **The People Could Fly**is not just a book; it is an act of reclamation.

What Makes "The People Could Fly" So Powerful?

The title story, often anthologized separately, is a poignant allegory of liberation. In Hamilton's telling, enslaved Africans are cruelly beaten by an overseer. An old man named Toby whispers the magic words "Kum yali, kum buba tambe," and the people begin to rise into the air, flying back to Africa—or to freedom. Those who cannot remember the words remain, but they carry the story forward. This tale functions on multiple levels: as a literal fantasy, a metaphor for cultural memory, and a tribute to the resilience of an oppressed people.

Hamilton's language in the story is spare yet lyrical. She does not dwell on graphic violence but conveys the horror of slavery through the prisoners' silence and desperation. The flight itself is described with quiet awe—not as a superhero feat but as a return to an innate human ability stolen by slavery. This subtlety makes the story accessible to children while offering profound depth for adult readers.

Structure and Storytelling: A Masterclass in Oral Tradition

The collection is organized into four thematic parts: “Animal Tales,” “Tales of the Supernatural,” “Tales of Freedom,” and “Tales of the Real, Extravagant, and Foolish.” Each section flows naturally, giving readers a sense of the diversity within African American folklore. Hamilton provides brief introductions to each story, explaining its origins or cultural meaning without over-explaining the magic.

Animal Tales: Wit and Survival

Stories like “Bruh Alligator and Bruh Deer” and “The Beautiful Girl” showcase trickster figures who outsmart stronger adversaries. These tales echo the African tradition of Anansi the Spider but adapted to the American South. Hamilton preserves the dialect and rhythm—using phrases like “Bruh” for brother—while ensuring clarity. The animals are not just stand-ins for people; they are characters with complex motivations. For example, Bruh Alligator is greedy, but also vulnerable. This complexity teaches children that wit often triumphs over brute force, a lesson deeply relevant to communities facing oppression.

Supernatural Tales: Ghosts and Guidance

In tales such as “The Ghosts of the Old Plantation” and “The Red Ribbon,” Hamilton explores the intersection of the living and the dead. These stories often serve as warnings or as guideposts for moral behavior. A notable entry is “The Peculiar Such Thing,” about a man who can shape-shift into a horse and terrorizes a village until a clever woman defeats him. Here, horror is balanced with humor, and the supernatural never feels gratuitous. Hamilton uses the ghostly to speak about social justice—how the past haunts the present, and how courage is needed to lay restless spirits to rest.

Freedom Tales: Hope and Memory

The most emotionally resonant section is “Tales of Freedom,” which contains the title story alongside others like “The Two Old Women” and “Carrying the Running-Aways.” These stories address slavery directly, but they do so with an emphasis on resilience and escape. In “Carrying the Running-Aways,” a young boy helps fugitive slaves find safe houses, using a code of secret words. The boy is not a superhero; he is an ordinary child doing extraordinary things. Hamilton breathes life into the Underground Railroad by centering the courage of those who risked everything.

Real, Extravagant, and Foolish Tales: Laughter and Lessons

Not every story carries a heavy theme. Hamilton includes humorous tales like “The Most Commonest Thing” and “The Wonderful Structure of a Man.” In these, characters make foolish mistakes—like a man who trades his legs away—and learn hard lessons. The humor is gentle, and the moral is clear: greed and vanity lead to trouble. This variety ensures the collection never feels didactic or monotonous. It mirrors the real function of folklore: to entertain, teach, and connect generations.

Artistic Choices: Language, Rhythm, and Illustrations

Hamilton’s prose is deceptively simple. She uses repetition, alliteration, and rhythmic phrasing that echoes the oral tradition. For instance, the opening of “The People Could Fly” repeats the phrase “They flew. They flew. They flew.” to emphasize the wonder. She also employs code-switching—using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in dialogue while maintaining Standard English for narration. This technique validates the speech of the original storytellers without alienating readers unfamiliar with the dialect.

The illustrations by Leo and Diane Dillon are equally vital. Their black-and-white scratchboard art captures the texture of the tales—animals with human expressions, ghostly figures, and the soaring silhouettes of the flying people. The Dillons won the Caldecott Honor for their work on the book, and their images add a layer of emotional depth. For example, in the title story, the flying figures are shown almost as shadows against a moonlit sky, suggesting both mystery and liberation.

Cultural and Educational Significance

The People Could Fly has been a staple in classrooms for decades. Teachers use it to introduce students to African American history, folklore, and narrative analysis. The collection aligns with Common Core standards for analyzing how characters respond to challenges, as well as understanding cultural context in literature.

Teaching Themes of Resistance and Resilience

The stories are excellent vehicles for discussing slavery without overwhelming young learners. Rather than focusing solely on suffering, Hamilton emphasizes agency: enslaved people found ways to resist, rebel, and hold onto their humanity. The flying tale, in particular, is a powerful metaphor for the persistence of hope. Educators can ask students: **What does flying represent today? What magic words might we ourselves carry?**

Preserving Oral History

Hamilton's work is a vital archival project. African American folktales were often dismissed as "just stories" by mainstream culture. By recording them in a prestigious collection, Hamilton ensured they would be studied and cherished. She includes notes at the end of the book that trace the origins of each tale, connecting them to African sources and to versions from the Caribbean and the South. This scholarly rigor makes the book valuable for historians and folklorists as well.

Why "The People Could Fly" Still Matters Today

In an era of renewed conversations about racial justice, cultural erasure, and the power of storytelling, **The People Could Fly** is more relevant than ever. The story of flying away from oppression resonates with immigrants, refugees, and anyone who has felt trapped. Moreover, the collection serves as a counter-narrative to stereotypes about Black history: it is not solely a story of victimhood but one of creativity, humor, and transcendence.

Virginia Hamilton once said, "I write to give voice to those who had none." In *The People Could Fly*, she gives voice to ancestors who soared. The book reminds us that stories can be wings—lifting us out of despair and into possibility.

How to Engage with the Collection

For readers new to the book, here are a few ways to deepen your experience:

- Read aloud: The rhythm of Hamilton's language comes alive when spoken. Gather a group of children or friends and take turns narrating.
- Pair with music: Listen to African American spirituals like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" while reading—the themes of flight and deliverance intertwine beautifully.
- Compare versions: Look up other retellings of "The People Could Fly" by different authors to see how Hamilton's version is distinct.
- Write your own tale: Use the structure of a folktale—a problem, a trickster, a magical transformation—to create a story about freedom in your own life.

Conclusion: The Forever Flight

The People Could Fly by Virginia Hamilton is far more than a children's book. It is a monument to the imagination of a people who, even when shackled to the earth, remembered that they once knew how to fly. Hamilton's careful craftsmanship ensures that the stories will continue to inspire generations who need to hear that liberation, whether literal or metaphorical, is possible. The magic words may be ancient, but their power is everlasting. Pick up this collection, open it, and let yourself be lifted.

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