Biography

Mildred Taylor was born in Jackson, Mississippi on September 13, 1943, to Wilbert Lee and Deletha Marie (Davis) Taylor. She later said she "was born in a segregated city in a segregated state in a segregated America." The Taylors had lived in Missisissippi since the time of slavery. However, only three weeks after their daughter's birth, the Taylor family moved to Toledo, Ohio. Mildred Taylor remained there until graduating from the University of Toledo in 1965.

Several outbreaks of racially-motivated violence had occurred in the Jackson area around September 1943, and Taylor's father decided to seek a new life for his family in the North. He chose Toledo because he already had a large network of friends and relatives there. Even after their move, the Taylor family took long car trips to the South, and Mildred's experience of this environment provided the settings for her future novels.

In the South that the Taylors visited, segregation was a tangible reality. However, for Taylor, the South of racism and segregation was also a "South of family and community." Familial strength is an important theme in Taylor's books, and stories about her family (aunts, uncles, and great-grandparents), as told by her father, were a staple of Taylor's childhood. Taylor calls these stories "a different history from the one I learned in school" and credits her father's storytelling with her decision to become a writer.

Taylor's father attempted to instill in Mildred and her sister, Wilma, an awareness of their past and future. When the family moved into a newly integrated Toledo neighborhood, ten-year-old Mildred was the only black child in her class at school and realized that her actions might be judged as representative of her race. She was shocked by the "lackluster" histories of African-Americans which she found in her history textbooks. When she shared her knowledge of black history with the class, however, the students and teacher thought that she was inventing stories.

Despite the fact that she lived in the North, when a black student was chosen as the homecoming queen at Taylor's school during her freshman year (1957) many white students reacted with anger and even violence, reminding Taylor that racism was far from dead.

Taylor attended college at the University of Toledo and spent much of her free time writing, a process she found difficult, but at which she was determined to succeed. At first, she patterned her writing after Charles Dickens and Jane Austen but she soon found emulating their literary styles to be unnatural. Taylor's first novel, written at the age of nineteen, was entitled Dark People, Dark World. Told in the first person, this story of a blind white man in Chicago's black ghetto was never published, though one publisher expressed interest in a shortened version.

After college, Taylor applied for and was selected to join the Peace Corps in Ethiopia. Her father was both proud of his daughter and worried about her being so far away for so long. After graduating with a degree in education from the University of Toledo, Taylor accepted the Peace Corps assignment and taught history in Ethiopia.

Upon returning to the United States in 1967, Taylor worked as a Peace Corps recruiter from 1967-1968 and as a Peace Corps instructor in Maine in 1968. In the fall of 1968, Taylor matriculated at the University of Colorado's Graduate School of Journalism. There, during the era of Black Power, she joined the Black Student Alliance and was instrumental in the creation of a black studies program at the university. After receiving her Master of Journalism, Taylor worked for the Black Education Program as a study skills director.

During her involvement with the BSA, Taylor studied black culture, black history, and black politics. She was approached by Life magazine to write an article about the BSA, but the magazine disagreed with Taylor's portrayal of the organization and never published the article. Disappointed, Taylor returned briefly to Ethiopia.

Taylor moved to Los Angeles after returning to the United States and worked at a number of temporary jobs. She refused a job at CBS as she grew more and more interested in writing. In August 1972, she married Errol Zea-Daly. The two divorced in 1975 and have one daughter.

Taylor's first big break came when she won a contest sponsored by the Council on Interracial Books for Children. Her winning piece, Song of the Trees (1975), was a revision of an old manuscipt based on a family story about trees cut down by money-hungry white men. Taylor had originally planned to tell the story from the point of view of her grandmother, but found it to be more successful when told from the perspective of eight-year-old Cassie Logan.

[Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry](http://www.gradesaver.com/roll-of-thunder-hear-my-cry/) was Taylor's second book about the Logan family. Published in 1976, it won the Newbery Award, which recognizes excellence in books written for children. The book was dedicated to Taylor's father, who the characters of Stacey and David were based on. A television miniseries adaptation starring Morgan Freeman aired on ABC TV in 1978.

Another Logan family book, Let the Circle Be Unbroken (1981), continues the story of the family's struggle during the Great Depression. The fourth Logan family book, [The Road](http://www.gradesaver.com/the-road/) to Memphis (1990), revisits Cassie as a high school senior attending school in Jackson, Mississippi. Both books met with critical acclaim. A related book, Mississippi Bridge (1990), is narrated by Jeremy Simms, a white character from Taylor's earlier books about the Logans. Taylor's latest Logan book, The Well: David's Story (1995) depicts ten-year-old David Logan (Cassie's father).

Taylor wrote two other books, The Friendship and The Gold Cadillac, both published in 1987, which also address the theme of racism. The former narrates the course of a relationship between a white man and a black man in 1930s Mississippi that eventually becomes violent, and the latter is based on the trips Taylor took to the South as a child with her family.

Currently living in Colorado, Taylor received the Jason Award for The Well: David's Story in 1997. She is also a multiple recipient of the Boston Globe Horn Book Award, the Jane Addams Book Award, the Coretta Scott King Award, and the Christopher Award.