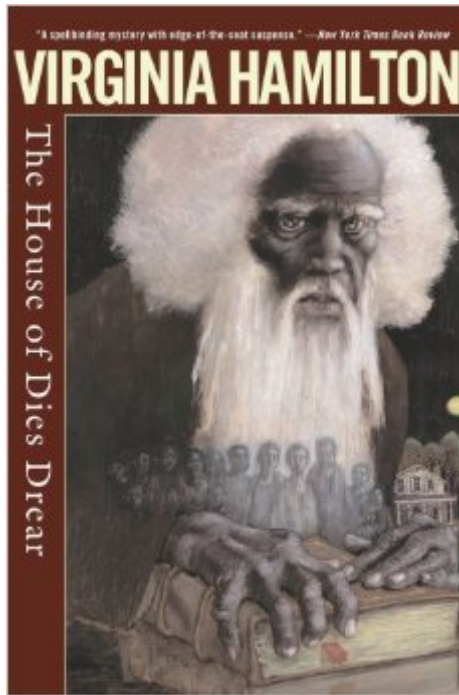


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The House Of Dies Drear



Synopsis

The house held secrets, Thomas knew, even before he first saw it looming gray and massive on its ledge of rock. It had a century-old legend -- two fugitive slaves had been killed by bounty hunters after leaving its passageways, and Dies Drear himself, the abolitionist who had made the house into a station on the Underground Railroad, had been murdered there. The ghosts of the three were said to walk its rooms....

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Customer Reviews

Virginia Hamilton does a superb job of combining historical facts with mystery. This book is about a boy who moves in to a house that used to be part of the Under Ground Railroad. When Dies Drear, the original owner of the old house, sends 3 slaves on a mission back to slavery to give slaves money to help them escape to freedom the legend begins. 2 of the three slaves were killed, and one fled to the north, the ghosts of the 2 slaves were said to have murdered Dies Drear the very same week. When Thomas's family moves in, Thomas finds out that there is an exquisite network of tunnels that run all through the house... he also finds out that the ghosts of Dies Drear and the 2 slaves are said to haunt the old, gloomy house. When strange things start happening, Thomas begins to beleive that there really are ghosts. Then, one night, while Thomas and his father are determined to find out who-or what is creating these strange happenings,, the mystery starts to unravel. This book got directly to the point, and kept me hooked. I couldn't stop reading this book, it is one of the best books I have ever read, and I would recommend it to anyone-whether you get scared easily, or love horror novels!

I first read *The House of Dies Drear* more than 35 years ago, when I was in fifth or sixth grade. Finding a used copy of it recently I decided to revisit it, not so much out of nostalgia but instead as an attempt to (finally) understand it. And, as I had back in grade school, I failed to do so. A brief synopsis: Thirteen-year-old Thomas Small and his family move from North Carolina to a small town in Ohio, where they take up residence in an historic house once owned by the famed abolitionist and Underground Railroad conductor Dies Drear. Thomas hopes to encounter ghosts, and for a time it seems he does; exploring hidden tunnels and caves that surround the house, he is pursued by what he believes are unseen specters and plagued by the devilish (in Thomas's eyes) caretaker Mr. Pluto. Thomas and his family also struggle for acceptance by the neighborhood children and the community as a whole. In the end, much of the mysterious behavior and events are explained by the revelation that the neighboring Darrow family, convinced that Drear left behind a buried treasure, have been attempting to circumvent Pluto and drive off the Smalls so it can continue its hunt for the fortune. But the Smalls, now in league with Pluto, his son Mayhew, and the little girl Pesty, confound the Darrows' plans by playing an elaborate practical joke on them. The book is either a masterpiece or a rather pedestrian work of fiction, and I still can't say which it is. In some conventional ways, it seems to be the latter. Author Virginia Hamilton, an award-winning and nationally-recognized writer, to my ear has a literary voice that is a bit odd, stilted, and off-putting, and her perspective jumps from character to character suddenly and unevenly. The character of Thomas Small, the book's 13-year-old protagonist, is also very uneven and inconsistent. By turns he seems mature and fanciful, overconfident to the point of cockiness and then fearful and jumping at shadows. Perhaps this is an accurate picture of a typical precocious boy on the verge of adolescence. But if so, then there's nothing at all distinctive about Thomas, nothing to interest us in him as a character. (Compare, if you will, Thomas to Meg Murry, Charles Wallace Murry, and Calvin O'Keefe in *A Wrinkle in Time* to see the former's deficiencies.) Then there's the house itself. It is a major feature of the novel, or at least it's supposed to be; after all, the book is named for it. But we get fairly brief, almost incidental, physical descriptions of it, and not much of the book's action takes place within the house itself. Far more revealing are the passages describing Dies Drear's hidden cave and its contents. The house, which I expected to be a sort of character, instead turns out to be something of a nonentity. (Again, compare the Drear house to Shirley Jackson's *Hill House* to see how a building can be realized as a character, which--unlike Jackson--Hamilton fails to do. Even the house in Patricia Clapp's excellent *Jane-Emily*, although serving a less important plot role than Drear's, is a better-realized and more atmospheric place.) All of these facts lead to what would seem to be a

rather weak book. But this is just the tip of the iceberg. The biggest issues lie with the plot, along with what Hamilton assumes her readers to know and hides from her readers, intentionally or otherwise. I have read in many reviews of the novel that the Small family is African-American, and the 1980s television production casts them as such. Perhaps this is so; apparently Hamilton, who was herself black, wrote stories with African-American protagonists. But nothing in the text demonstrates to me conclusively that this is the case. In fact, Hamilton seems to have been--textually, at least, and even contextually--extremely cagey about this. But wait! you say. At one point Thomas and his father play the roles of slaves, or rather, the ghosts of slaves. Yes, but a great deal is made, very pointedly, of the fact that everyone is heavily decked out, by a professional actor, with stage makeup.

Furthermore, Mr. Small is a college teacher; not many college faculty were black in the 1960s, especially in North Carolina, where the Smalls have lived until the opening of this book. This fact suggests to the reader that Mr. Small is white. When the Smalls come home one day to find their house (i.e., Drear House) vandalized, their reaction doesn't seem to be in line with what I'd expect of a black family of the civil rights era who have been thus violated. (Ohio was a major center of Klan activity, after all.) In fact, the vandalizing, perpetrated by the Darrows, similarly has me wondering whether the Darrow clan, too, is white, especially if we grant that the Smalls are black.

When riding around town with his family, Thomas notices the integrated neighborhoods and the houses where anyone might live; but after all, this is a book that deals with a racial theme (more on that later), so Thomas's passing notice and awareness of racial differences between North and South isn't unusual, and therefore it doesn't suggest (and certainly doesn't expressly reveal) his own racial identity. At one point Mr. Small explains to Thomas that a major hiding place for escaping slaves was "the black church." Why does Mr. Small see the need to qualify "church" with "black" when that fact should be obvious (slaves aren't going to hide in the pews of a white church even if it would have them--there's no camouflage), especially to a family that attends such a church (if the church we see the Smalls attend is in fact black)? It seems instead as if Mr. Small is a white man reminding a white child that blacks, too, have churches that are important parts of the black community and culture. This list could go on at some length, but the point is that nothing in the text clearly shows the Smalls to be black (or if there is, I've failed to spot it). Further suggesting a deliberate concealment of an important part of who Thomas is is how Hamilton chooses to begin the book: We first meet Thomas as he is having a dream. This first surreal view of the boy (or "person," since we don't yet know his age) as an actor in his own nightmare, divorced from the "real" Thomas (about whom we know absolutely nothing at this point except for his first name) gives the story an almost Kafkaesque quality. Given this dream-scene beginning, is it unreasonable to suppose that

Hamilton continues to hide important things about her characters throughout the book? (There are also other surreal moments, such as when Thomas witnesses the young girl Pesty riding a horse and guiding it with nothing more than her bare toes, followed by the youth Mac Darrow pulling on the horse's tail and talking to it, which add to the Kafkaesque impression.) Hamilton's failure to identify the race of nearly every character might be excusable on some grounds. Perhaps she is engaging in the racial equivalent of the modern concept of "genderf**king," the practice of altering, parodying, or intermixing traditional gender roles as a means of challenging preconceptions and norms about gender. This would seem a good explanation for a book that would likely draw a white as well as a black audience, putting white children in a black youth's shoes without them even realizing it, except for one or two problems. First, what good is that exercise--how can it lead to a cross-racial identification and break down racial barriers--if the white reader doesn't even know that that's what's happening? (And remember, here I am 35 years later and I STILL can't figure out the Smalls' race). Second, this is a book whose plot is all about race--about slavery and the Underground Railroad. We all of us bring racial identity, background, and often baggage to such a subject. To attempt to ignore that fact is not to challenge the reader; rather, it is to risk incoherence. That, in the end, is my assessment of *The House of Dies Drear*; it lacks coherence, leaving me scratching my head after all these years. And yet, I still remember it after three and a half decades, and I have spent a lot of time and thought writing this review of it. Obviously, whatever its flaws, it has made me think about it a great deal over the years. So maybe Hamilton succeeded in her goal after all, if her goal was to challenge racial assumptions. So, masterpiece or sub-par mystery/ghost story? You be the judge. I welcome comments on my ideas.

This story is about a boy named Thomas and his family, the Smalls, who move into a new house called Dies Drear. This house was used for slaves who wanted to return to slavery or escape from it. Many things happen to them where they point to an old man that is mysterious, but for a good reason, as the bad guy. Strange things happen to them while they are there, and it panics them because they are worried that something might happen to their family. Mr. Small, Thomas's father, and Thomas try to find their way through this big secret that they know is being kept from them. Finally they capture the old mysterious man and they find out that he isn't the bad guy at all, he was just trying to protect Dies Drear, because he didn't know whether he could trust the Smalls or if they were on the other guy's side. He kept the secret of what the winding tunnels under the house held. Together the old man and the Smalls scare off the bad guys, at least for a little while. The old man now knows and trusts that the Smalls will keep the treasure of the tunnels safe, so he doesn't have to protect

them any more. That is how the story ends. I like this book because it has a lot a mysery and history to it, and I thought it was really unique. I am not a book-reader, but I can tell you that this book isn't just for people who like to read books it is definitely for every type of book reader. I hope you decide to read this book, because it is a really great book in my opinion.

The House of Dies Drear is an exellent book! A thriller, Thomas Small is a clever 13-year-old black boy who moves from plain farm lands to the wonderous sopposedly haunted house of the lengerdary Underground Railrod wonder Dies Drear. Thomas is a trouble seeker, and boy does he find it! The 1st few chatpers are a big boring, but after that, it's all uphill! Sevret passageways, a haunted groundskeeper Mr. Pluto, and confusion mixed in with it! It is very interesting and it makes you think! There is a lot of background on the Underground Railroad! I can't WAIT to read the sequal, but hopefully the ending of it will be better. Yes, the ending of this book is very... dissapointing! Basicially, everything works out the way that you would think it would, but then it's all downhill from there! But, it is still an exellent book that I would deffinetly reccomned to anyone that likes to read! I loved it, but it could have had a better ending. It's like a mystery... it starts down low, goes up way high, then kind of drags. But still, a thriller! I LOVED IT!

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