

## JANE HAMILTON

**Born:** Oak Park, Illinois; July 13, 1957

### PRINCIPAL LONG FICTION

*The Book of Ruth*, 1988 (also known as *The*

*Frogs Are Still Singing*, 1989)

*A Map of the World*, 1994

*The Short History of a Prince*, 1998

*Disobedience*, 2000

*When Madeline Was Young*, 2006

### OTHER LITERARY FORMS

Jane Hamilton is chiefly a novelist, but she honed her skills writing short fiction. *Harper's* magazine published two of her stories, "Aunt Marji's Happy Ending" and "My Own Earth." Her award-winning *The Book of Ruth* had its origins in a ten-page short story to which the author returned and expanded into a novel.

### ACHIEVEMENTS

Jane Hamilton achieved early success with the publication of her first novel. In 1989, *The Book of Ruth* received the Great Lakes College Association New Writers Award, the Banta Award, and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for First Fiction. *The Book of Ruth* and *A Map of the World* were selected for Oprah's Book Club, helping them achieve best-seller status worldwide. Both novels were adapted for film, *A Map of the World* for the cinema in 1999 and *The Book of Ruth* for television in 2004. In 1998, *The Short History of a Prince* received the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize and was short-listed for the Orange Prize. *Disobedience* was named to the *School Library Journal's* list of the best adult books for high school students in 1991.

### BIOGRAPHY

Jane Hamilton was born in 1957 in Oak Park, Illinois, the birthplace also of novelist Carol Shields. Hamilton's father was an engineer and her mother was a theater critic. The fifth and last child in a rambunctious brood, Hamilton was the quiet and introspective daughter who, from an early age, preferred the written word over the spoken. Hamilton's mother and grandmother were writ-

ers, too, so writing seemed to be her heritage. She once observed that she thought it only natural that she would grow up to become a writer.

In 1979, Hamilton earned her B.A. in English at Carleton College in Minnesota and then headed east to New York, where she had secured a position in the children's fiction division of a publishing house. En route to New York she took a detour. A brief stop at an apple orchard in Wisconsin that belonged to a friend's family became a permanent relocation. Hamilton never made it to New York nor did she regret her lost career in publishing. Instead, she became an apple farmer, laboring in the orchards spring through fall and wintering indoors, where she nurtured her writing skills. She applied for but was denied enrollment in the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Undeterred, she continued to submit her short stories for consideration in several publications, but she received rejections. Seeking more formal training in her craft, she spent time at Ragdale in Illinois, a retreat for writers and artists.

In 1982, Hamilton married Robert Willard, one of the owners of the orchard. In 1983, *Harper's* accepted and published two of her short stories, including "Aunt Marji's Happy Ending," launching Hamilton's career as a writer. The couple had a son, Ben, in 1984, the year Hamilton completed the rough draft of what would become *The Book of Ruth*, a novel about the struggles of a poor rural girl whose life rushes toward catastrophe when she marries an emotionally unstable man. The novel was picked up by Ticknor and Fields in 1987, the same year daughter Hannah was born. Published in 1988, the novel received critical and public favor. The next decade proved to be a successful one for Hamilton; she published more novels, and they, too, were embraced by readers and critics.

### ANALYSIS

Critics often compare Jane Hamilton favorably to another midwestern author, Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley, whose novels *A Thousand Acres* and *Moo* are set in farm country and explore human resiliency in the face of great obstacles. Hamilton's novels are set in the Mid-

west, the area where she spent her childhood, attended college, and lived as a full-time writer. Her fiction is populated by rural and small town family members, mothers and fathers, and sons and daughters, who endure life's tragedies with stoicism and frankness, traits often associated with inhabitants of the heartland; Hamilton, though, does not allow her characters to sink into caricature.

Orchards, fields, farmhouses, and main streets provide the backdrop for events that disrupt the quietude of the country environment. The murder of a mother-in-law in *The Book of Ruth*, allegations of child abuse in *A Map of the World*, the closeted life of a gay man in *The Short History of a Prince*, a mother's extramarital affair in *Disobedience*, and a family secret in *When Madeline Was Young* seem drawn from the tabloids, but Hamilton avoids sensationalism. Instead, the challenges and shocks faced by her characters allow her to explore fundamental human values such as forgiveness, reconciliation, acceptance, and loyalty.



Jane Hamilton. (Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images)

Like its predecessor, *A Map of the World* is set in a rural community, but it shifts its focus to the lives of middle-class transplants who are viewed by the locals with suspicion after an accidental drowning occurs on their property. *The Short History of a Prince* is a departure from the first two novels in its third-person point of view, its focus on a male character, and its lighter tone. *Disobedience* examines the impact of a parent's affair upon a family when discovered by a child. *When Madeline Was Young* presents an intriguing blended family in which the father's first wife, the Madeline of the title, who has suffered brain injury, passes as his daughter in his second marriage.

#### THE BOOK OF RUTH

Hamilton's debut novel was a critical success. The book's title alludes to the Old Testament book of the Bible, and biblical passages appear throughout the novel to form a motif, and they are delivered by a preacher in his sermons and reinterpreted ironically by the disbelieving title character, Ruth. The book, too, is named for the story's protagonist; *The Book of Ruth* is Ruth's book. It is the story of her experiences from childhood through her mid-twenties, and it is narrated from her perspective. Additionally, the story tells of the books that provided Ruth a literary education that was denied her in the public school system. Also, a blind neighbor introduces a young Ruth to audio books.

The classic stories Ruth reads, tales of men and women who endure and survive, run parallel to her own story. The suffering protagonists of Victorian tomes are her particular favorites. At one point, Ruth imagines entering Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-1853, serial; 1853, book) to assist the novel's heroine, Esther, with the numerous responsibilities she has in the service of others; ironically, Ruth does not recognize that *she* is the one who requires assistance in the form of rescue. When none arrives, she cheats death and rescues herself.

Ruth grows up marginalized by polite society because she is poor, has a plain physique, and has limited knowledge. Her life was punctuated by abuse from her mother and her husband. Ruth is neglected by relatives who other-