

Catching Up with

Author Jane Hamilton

BY LISA M. SCHMELZ

It would be hard to find Waterford, Wisconsin, on a map of the world that wasn't powered by Google Earth. A tiny town in southern Wisconsin, this village of about 4,000 is a decidedly picturesque place, but in a nothing-much-ever-happens-here sort of way. But it is here, in this humble hamlet, that Wisconsin author Jane Hamilton wrote "A Map of the World," a heartbreaking drama about a rural American family that became an international bestseller.



Ultimately, two of Hamilton's six novels would go on to be book club selections for the matron saint of publishing, Oprah Winfrey. In 1996, millions of Winfrey viewers read Hamilton's "The Book of Ruth." In 1999, Hamilton was blessed again with the literary jackpot, when "A Map of the World" was tapped as an Oprah Book Club pick. But pre-Oprah, Hamilton was a writer desperately in need of a room of her own. So this farmer's wife and mother of two now-grown children left her home in the Village of Rochester in search of a place to write. She didn't have to go far. A few miles down the road, a vacant Waterford storefront had everything she needed: Peace, quiet and electrical outlets all for just \$300 a month. Where a toy store once stood, one of America's most acclaimed writers stepped in.

"I was between a travel agent and a hairdresser," she recalls of her office digs. "I had these big Batik curtains in the front. Nobody really knew what was going on. They'd come in and say 'Jane, I am so busy. Could you go to McDonald's and get me a Big Mac?'" But it was great to have a dedicated space to write. I worked in my bedroom for a long time before that."

Today, Hamilton is still writing but not taking lunch orders from the travel agent or hairdresser.

"We remodeled," she says. "I have an office at home now."

Home for Hamilton is the Rochester apple orchard where her husband, Robert Willard, is a third-generation farmer. As much as she loves her frequent travels to New York where she "gorges on everything that needs to be gorged," this Oak Park, Illinois, native is always happy to return to Wisconsin. As a young girl, Hamilton's family found tranquility in her great-grandfather's home on Lake Elizabeth in Twin Lakes. It was the first home built on its shores, Hamilton says, and a place she never tired of visiting. After

attending a farm camp in Delavan, she became even more smitten with country life.

"When I was a girl, my goal in life, because of the farm camp, was to marry a farmer and live near my ancestral home. Wherever I lived, I would write about that place. But I feel fortunate that it's Wisconsin because I get to live here. I feel so lucky to be surrounded by the natural world, and to live on a farm where the seasons are so deeply felt, and I think that aspect deeply influences my writing."

JANE HAMILTON'S BEST OF WISCONSIN:

BEST PLACE TO WATCH THE SUNSET: Lake Elizabeth. We still have a family home there. It's a family corporation, 19 cousins, it's very complicated.

BEST PLACE TO PEOPLE-WATCH: The Dane County Farmers' Market, where my husband had a stall for 40 years. That's our social outlet in Wisconsin.

BEST PLACE FOR FRIDAY FISH FRY: I'm such a bad Wisconsinite. I don't do Friday fish fry. But the Pizza Farm is an hour east of Redwing, Minnesota. It's magical. It's this farm, and every Tuesday night, you can go and they have these huge brick hearth ovens they bake pizza in. You bring everything to eat from, your plates and napkins. The pizzas are amazing.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Pizza Farm Hamilton raves about is a farm run by Ted Fisher and Robbi Bannen in Western Wisconsin, a few miles east of Lake Pepin and The Great River Road. Pizza night is on Tuesdays from 4:30 p.m. to 8 p.m. For more information, call (715) 448-4802.