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**READING LAURELL K.
HAMILTON**

CANDACE R. BENEFIEL

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PREFACE

Reading Laurell K. Hamilton is an informative guide to Laurell K. Hamilton's fiction, ranging from her first published novel, the fantasy *Nightseer* (1992), through the latest of her bestselling vampire series, *Bullet* (2010). The guide offers an insight into the mythologies of the alternative worlds Hamilton has created, and looks at her interpretation of contemporary issues through her fantasy fiction as well as how she is moving into an even more widely read arena of popular culture, as her novels are translated into a graphic novel/comic book format. It aims to make Hamilton's large body of work appear as a cohesive whole and place her in the context of the urban fantasy genre she has helped to shape. Discussion questions are provided to focus readings and to draw readers into thoughtful exploration of themes and ideas.

The opening chapter of the guide gives an outline of Hamilton's life and writing career, as well as some of the early influences and life events that impacted her writing. Using interviews, and her own autobiographical web essay and blog, it discusses the familial and other forces that have shaped her. Recent essays on her writing process and introductions to pieces by others discussing her work also serve to illuminate the personality and presence of this prolific popular author.

"The Author and the Genre" examines the various genres in which her main series—the "Anita Blake Vampire Hunter" novels—fall, and how they blend these into a new interpretation of the urban fantasy genre. Hamilton's novels in some way defy categorization, and this has led to confusion over where in the realm of popular fiction she should be placed. Are her vampire novels horror, mystery, romance, urban fantasy, or all of the above? This quandary has not only made her work difficult to shelve in bookstores (where should she be slotted in to be most

easily found?) but has also led to some conflict with reader expectations. The chapter also gives an overview of the development of the figure of the vampire in literature, which serves to place Hamilton's work in the over 200-year history of that most durable of supernatural figures. This is followed by summaries of Hamilton's many works, emphasizing the storytelling that has made Hamilton into a bestselling author for almost 20 years. While particular attention is given to Hamilton's two main series, "Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter," and "Merry Gentry," her early non-series novels, and her infrequent forays into short fiction are also discussed.

"Today's Issues in Laurell K. Hamilton's Work" examines the contemporary relevance of Hamilton's fiction. Despite the settings of her works in parallel worlds filled with preternatural creatures and alternative cultures, the themes of race, gender, sexuality, and prejudice have much to say about the issues of diversity in contemporary American society. The chapter addresses Hamilton's use of fantasy elements within a realistically portrayed American setting to convey her view of some of the conflicts and discrimination inherent in a widely diverse society. Her view of the woman seeking to succeed in a violent and sexist profession, and the boundaries of sexuality are also discussed.

The chapter on "Pop Culture and the Author" explores Hamilton's engagement with contemporary American popular culture as it appears in her fictional worlds, particularly in the juxtaposition of the fantastic against a backdrop of Americana. This section also considers the ongoing translation of Hamilton's prose fiction into graphic novel format. "The Author on the Internet" provides an overview of the considerable presence of Hamilton online, from her official web page and blog to the many fan pages and creations that are available to her readers. It discusses Hamilton's views on fanfiction, and shows the fans' reactions to Hamilton's attempts to control her fictional worlds in the hands of others.

Hamilton's relationship with critics and fans is the focus of "Laurell K. Hamilton and the Media." It discusses how Hamilton has been critically received, and the growing interest in her work which is seen as providing texts worthy of study and scholarly analysis. Initially viewed as a minor writer of genre fiction, Hamilton's continuing popularity and large following have begun to bring her to more critical attention, even though her books are not widely reviewed in the press.

The chapter "What Do I Read Next?" provides a lengthy list of similarly themed novels and series. The vampire/urban fantasy novel is currently enjoying unprecedented popularity with readers, and the availability of material with these themes is enough to keep the interested

reader well-supplied. “Resources” gives a complete bibliography of Hamilton’s work, with listings of available book reviews for as many publications as possible; it also contains a list of related articles.

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A WRITER'S LIFE

Laurell K. Hamilton was born on February 19, 1963 in Heber Springs, Arkansas. Sources give her mother's name variously as Susie Klein or Suzie Kline. Briefly and unhappily married, her mother relocated to Sims, Indiana shortly after her daughter's birth and her abandonment by Laurell's father. Sims at that time was a very small town with a population of about 100, and Klein had returned there to move in with Laura Gentry, her mother, a woman who became a major influence on Hamilton's life and development.

In 1969, Hamilton's mother was killed in a car wreck caused by another driver running a stop sign. Speaking to Sharman Stein of the *Chicago Tribune*, Hamilton described the incident, commenting that after the family was notified, she remembers walking through the streets to an uncle's house with her grandmother, who was hysterically "wailing and keening." It was left to the six-year-old to explain to the neighbors who saw them that, "My mommy died on the way home from work." Subsequently, Hamilton's uncle took her to see the destroyed car, allowing her to climb inside and touch the bloodstains. "No one protected me from that," she told Stein. "I did not flinch. I remember all the details." The scene is almost exactly reproduced in several of the Anita Blake novels, as that heroine recalls her mother's death and the impact it had on her psyche.

The trauma was a defining moment for Hamilton. She took away from it the lesson that adults could not protect her from disaster; that "the false sense of safety that all children have, the idea that their parents

can protect them from everything” had been taken away from her early. In 1996, she told the *Chicago Tribune*, “You can’t arm yourself against a quirk of fate. We are a dice roll away from disaster for no reason. I find that very hard to accept. The world is so harsh that I prefer to see it through a patina of fantasy and horror, where the monsters are not as savage or grim as the monsters in real life” (*Chicago Tribune*, October 31, 1996).

After this traumatic incident, Hamilton and Gentry became a family of two, and as Hamilton told Dave Dorr in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the death, her grandmother’s role in raising her, and growing up with no male in the home were “the three things that made me who I am” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, February 22, 1996).

Laura Gentry, herself divorced from an abusive husband, had been the mainstay of her extended family even before Klein’s death; and her support in reading to young Laurell, as well as telling her Ozark folk stories, shaped Hamilton’s interests in the paranormal.

Growing up with her grandmother was not easy. Mrs. Gentry, interviewed by the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, commented that she wept when the school bus came “because all Laurie had was just an old grandmother to come home to.” And Hamilton herself has said she was the only one in first grade with no parents or siblings—no one to attend “mother-daughter” or “father-daughter” gatherings with her—a relatively unusual circumstance in those days. On the other hand, growing up with her grandmother taught her to be self-reliant and “as independent as an old widow woman” (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 10, 2001).

In a 2001 article, as her Anita Blake series moved from paperback originals into hardcover publication, Hamilton commented that she felt a little guilty. “I was raised poor,” she said. “Outside of schoolbooks, I was out of college for several years before I could own a hardback book. I just didn’t have the money. So I actually felt a little bad. Now, my fans that have bought all the paperbacks, they’re going to have to shell out for a hardback.”

One of her first introductions to the horror genre was a collection of Robert E. Howard short stories, *Pigeons from Hell*, which she discovered at age 13. Most of the stories in the volume had originally appeared in *Weird Tales*, an influential pulp magazine of horror and dark fantasy that had its heyday in the 1930s and 40s. The collection included works influenced by H. P. Lovecraft, Western horror stories, and one, “In the Forest of Villefere,” featuring a werewolf. It was a revelation to Hamilton. She became fascinated by heroic fantasy and the stories of monsters, barbarian swordsmen, and action, deciding not only did she want to become a writer, but she wanted to write specifically in that genre. On her website, she also mentions discovering Edgar Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, and Andre

Norton in the school library at about the same age. From their writings she learned about language and atmosphere in storytelling; and in Norton, she was pleased to discover that women could write the kind of fiction she wanted to write. She also comments that at age 14, a teacher told her of being frightened by the first of Hamilton's vampire tales. Hamilton says, "For a shy 14-year-old there was nothing better that she could have said. I'd scared a grown-up" (Hamilton, 2010).

Not too surprisingly, Hamilton also credits Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*, and Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*—both bestselling vampire novels of the mid-1970s—as profound and important influences. While King's book is very much a retelling of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, transplanted to New England and given a more populist slant, Rice's book is credited with changing the direction of the vampire novel, giving the genre a new focus on the vampire as the protagonist of his tale—not just as the monster to be hunted, staked, and destroyed. In her later work Hamilton would recapitulate this change. She begins her Anita Blake series with a heroine who specializes in executing vampires, only to come, through continued close association, to see them as human beings after all, albeit ones with decidedly different abilities, culture, and mindsets.

In her high school library, she ran across Anthony Masters' *The Natural History of the Vampire*, checking it out so often she memorized parts of it. This work, which traces the folkloric origins and tales of the vampire through some material on the vampire in literature and film, was a shaping influence on Hamilton's *Anita Blake* series.

As she grew up, Hamilton remembers watching old horror movies—especially vampire movies—on television while visiting relatives. As with so many of the fantasy and horror writers of her generation, viewing the horror classics of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s on late night television, hosted by local announcers in ghoulish get-ups, made an indelible impression.

After high school, she attended Marion College, a small evangelical college which changed its name in 1988 to Indiana Wesleyan University, taking degrees in biology and English. As she recounts on her web page, her experiences in the writing program there were discouraging, with the head of the writing program trying to "cure" her of writing horror, and eventually dismissing her from the writing program for being a "corrupting influence" on other students. In fact, she feels that she was admitted into the writing program to begin with based on the desire of the head of the program to root out what was seen in that environment as an unacceptable interest in the macabre. She was told at the end of her sophomore year that she would never succeed as a writer—a crushing rejection. Barred from the writing program, Hamilton finished her English major with literature courses and went on to take a biology

degree as well. The grounding in anatomy and physiology would see use in her later writing, in which her heroine, Anita, is cited as holding a degree in preternatural biological studies. Hamilton has commented that she is frequently asked if she has sent that writing professor copies of any of her bestselling novels, and says, “No, because she didn’t believe I couldn’t succeed as a writer, she feared I could. She feared I would go out and do exactly what I have done, corrupt millions.”

Following college and marriage to her college sweetheart, computer scientist Gary Hamilton, the couple moved to Los Angeles, and later to St. Louis. Laurell Hamilton put in an unhappy stint working as an editor at Xerox Corporation, and rose early in the mornings to work on her first novel.

Her first published novel, *Nightseer*, is a fantasy about a young sorcerer and prophet, Keleios, who is seeking revenge for the murder of her mother years before. The heroic fantasy, filled with magic, swords, dragons, demons, and bloodshed, failed to attract a wide audience, garnering mostly lukewarm reviews on its debut in early 1992. Today, *Nightseer* is primarily of interest to Hamilton’s fans as an early look at many of the themes and motifs that inform her subsequent work. A young woman of unusual power and skill, Keleios reads like a prototype Anita Blake: a motherless child who must fight her own demons, as well as external attackers. The love interest in *Nightseer*, an ambiguously evil sorcerer, prefigures her vampire lover, Jean-Claude, as Keleios comes to the realization that she is not purely on the side of goodness and light herself. A sequel to *Nightseer* was rejected by Hamilton’s editor. Another novel, the Star Trek Next Generation tale *Nightshade*, came out late in the same year. *Nightshade*, written within the constraints of an established series, is primarily a murder mystery in which the empathic Deanna Troi (coincidentally another petite, curvaceous brunette) uses feminine insights and a realization of the connection of ecology to planetary harmony to find the roots of a plot that would have senselessly destroyed the last of a planet’s population. Both *Nightseer* and *Nightshade* have seen reissues in recent years, largely on the strength of Hamilton’s name.

The big breakthrough for Hamilton came in 1993, with the publication of the first Anita Blake novel, *Guilty Pleasures*. At the time, genre mixing was not common, but the blend of supernatural thriller, mystery, and romance struck a chord. When *Guilty Pleasures* was accepted for publication by Penguin Putnam, it was as part of a three book deal, and Hamilton was ecstatic. After *Nightseer* failed to take off as a series, the idea that at least three Anita Blake books would see print was a turning point in her career. Hamilton has stated that she always envisioned her

novels as pieces in larger series; she writes with an eye toward multiple books featuring the same major characters as they move through their lives.

Guilty Pleasures introduced the vampire hunter Anita Blake, a young woman who has the rare power of necromancy and takes on monsters as a sideline to her work. Despite being (arguably) human, petite, and physically often overmatched, Anita has managed to build a reputation in the vampire community as “The Executioner,” substituting intelligence, expertise, mental toughness, and a completely cold-blooded ability to do whatever it takes to get her job done. In her world, vampires, werewolves, and other legendary monsters are as real as the night, and a controversial Supreme Court decision, *Addison v. Clark*, has granted vampires the rights of citizenship. And where there are vampires, there need to be those making sure that the undead—citizens or not—are kept from preying too openly on the human population. Anita, whose main job is as an animator (raising zombies, often to answer questions for lawyers and insurance adjustors), also serves as a consultant to the Regional Preternatural Investigative Team, and as such, is often called in to go over crime scenes where there is a suspicion of supernatural involvement.

In the first book of the series, Anita draws the line firmly between human and monster, and she is wary of even looking directly into the eyes of the vampires lest she be “rolled” (have her mind taken over by the mental powers of the vampire). And when one of the more powerful vampires in the city of St. Louis, Jean-Claude expresses romantic interest in her, she declines. After all, a nice girl does not sleep with the dead.

The first several Anita Blake books, including *Guilty Pleasures*, *The Laughing Corpse*, *Circus of the Damned*, *The Lunatic Café*, and *Bloody Bones*, are primarily concerned with procedure. A crime with possible preternatural involvement occurs, and as a member of the Regional Preternatural Investigative Team, Anita is called in. The main action of the books revolves around her investigation of the crime. The rest of the team, which seems to consist of only two or three other detectives, never seems to make much headway on these cases, although the head of the team, Dolph Storr is at least open-minded enough to recognize Anita's expertise and back up her conclusions. Later in the series there is some attempt at expanding his characterization, when his son becomes engaged to a vampire and he is faced not only with accepting one of the “monsters” he has fought into his family, but also with the idea that his son is about to voluntarily die and be turned into a vampire. The other major team member, Zerbrowski, usually serves as comic relief and a focus to give Anita (and the reader) a respite from the very grim reality of the crime scenes where he is usually seen.

In the course of the series, Anita meets and falls for the handsome, emotionally conflicted Richard Zeeman, a junior high science teacher who became infected with lycanthropy from a bad batch of anti-werewolf vaccine. To keep his job he must hide his “illness,” even as his natural physical abilities and intelligence lead him to rise ever higher in the local werewolf hierarchy. Eventually, with Anita’s aid and encouragement, he unseats the corrupt leadership of the pack and takes his place at its head. Yet his loathing of his own nature poisons his relationships, and he cannot accept Anita’s growing ease with “the monsters.” In addition, Anita’s continuing interactions with Jean-Claude complicate matters, as the Master of the City makes claims on the werewolves as his animals to call, and on Anita, whose increasing necromantic powers make her a highly desirable human servant for the powerful and ambitious vampire.

While the Anita Blake series continues with no end in sight, in 2000 Hamilton published the first novel in another series, one which would find her with two bestselling series on her hands. *A Kiss of Shadows* introduced Merry Gentry, otherwise known as Princess Meredith NicEssus, who is the niece of the Queen of the Unseelie Court of the sidhe. With her story, Hamilton set up a new universe, with a new mythos and history. Since she began this series, she has published approximately one novel in each of the series annually, a writing schedule that has proven difficult to keep up. In addition, there were publications of a collection of short stories and two short novels, *Micah* and *Flirt*, that Hamilton somehow sandwiched in between other writing projects. In the Afterword to *Flirt*, an essay in which she discusses how she got the idea for and wrote that novel, she comments, “Sometimes working with two different publishers on two different bestselling series is like trying to date two men at the same time. You can do it, but there are moments when each man wants all the attention and there doesn’t seem to be enough of this writer to go around” (Hamilton, *Flirt*, 169).

Hamilton’s personal life over the past decade has impacted her work, although the degree to which this is true varies in the telling. A blog post on her website from November 17, 2009 details the deterioration of her first marriage, as she and her husband gradually realized they had few interests in common aside from their young daughter. During the time she was writing *Narcissus in Chains* (2001), Hamilton separated from her husband. She has described this in a June, 2006 interview on the website *FlamesRising.com*, as one of the more amicable divorces she has known. She used the interview to refute what she described as a myth among her fan base that elements of the plot in that book, which shows Anita coming to a decisive break with her werewolf lover, Richard Zeeman, and taking up with a new man, the were-leopard Micah

reflected the turmoil in her own life. She began dating younger men, who she says she found more accepting of her than men her age. As she says in the interview, “One of those younger men was Jonathon [Green], a friend I’d had for eight years. We realized that many be we were more than friends. The book was written and off to New York before I admitted to myself that maybe I was falling in love. Somehow I ended up engaged by the time the book came out, and Jonathon went on tour with me. . . . Timing made some of the fans tie Jonathon too closely to the new character Micah, and by stretching my ex-husband to the character Richard.” Since her marriage to Jonathon in 2001, he has been an integral part of her public life, working with her on the Marvel Comics adaptations of her works into graphic novels, managing her presence on YouTube, and generally being an unusually supportive spouse.

The past several years have seen more success for Hamilton, as virtually every novel she publishes hits the bestseller lists, and her work is reaching an even broader audience through the graphic novel adaptations that began in 2007.

In early 2010, Hamilton published a short novel in the Anita Blake series, *Flirt*. As the story was not really novel length, she appended to the tale a lengthy essay on how she came to write *Flirt*, and the process by which a random occurrence turned into fiction. In essence, she recounts how observing a friend flirting with a waiter during a lunch out gave her the germ of an idea, and that germ grew into a novella. She discusses the fact that one of the other people at the table, cartoonist Jennie Breeden, took the same event and turned it into a comic strip. Hamilton sees life through a darker lens and, for her, this same chance encounter became a tale of the dangers of sexual power. Hamilton comments briefly in the essay about how her writing is tied to the music she uses as a soundtrack for each project; and that when working on more than one story at a time, the switch in music keys her mind to the story at hand. *Flirt*, written during a period when she was having difficulty with the Merry Gentry book *Divine Misdemeanors*, gave her a period to productively back away from that novel and let her mind work in a different direction.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did early influences shape Hamilton’s viewpoint?
- In what ways are her major characters, Anita Blake and Merry Gentry, drawn from her own personal life and experiences?
- Are Anita and Merry fictionalized idealizations of Laurell K. Hamilton?