

Educating Rita

How it was, growing up black, horse-mad, and more or less allergic to your aunt in the still-wild West.

Rita Williams's first memory is of lying on an elk hide in a field of snow, "entertained by the roiling Colorado sky against the mountains, the racing thunderheads piling up on top of each other, lit from within, like mounds of freshly sheared wool." Her first place of worship was a little wooden library in the high-altitude town of Steamboat

Springs, where she devoured hundreds of books even though no one in the stories looked like her—a horse-loving Western black girl who didn't have a horse. Williams's high-spirited memoir, *If the Creek Don't Rise: My Life Out West with the Last Black Widow of the Civil War* (Harcourt), chronicles her first 18 years, most of them locked in a power struggle with her irascible, irresistible aunt Daisy, who became Rita's guardian after her father ran off with another woman and her mother died of asphyxiation in a poorly ventilated Denver rooming house.

Daisy believed white people were crazy ("Who in the Sam Hell come up with the idea to set up at night in the colored folks' yard dressed in

From top: Daisy Anderson, Rita's aunt in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, 1961; Rita at 5.



a bed sheet and set a match to Jesus' crucifix?"), and yet she insisted that Rita's future depended on convincing them of her worth. Her love for Rita was both fierce and abusive, one minute trading her own janitorial services for Rita's tuition at a prep school, the next minute spitting into her face. But Daisy gets more than she bargained for with her talented niece. Rita finds other role models in Portia Mansfield and Kingo Perry, who give her permission not to tailor herself to the whims of each person she meets, and together with her dog, Jiggs, she takes comfort in her mountain home, where "in the field outside our door, tender young greens gleamed under a Milky Way so bright the geese had to tuck their heads under their wings to sleep." —PAM HOUSTON

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