

SEEING BLACK

He lived most of his life **in the shadow of his famous activist father** and his even more famous **pop star brother**. He was a journalist and a political speech writer, and wrote overlooked novels about being mixed-race and Canadian. Then came ***The Book of Negroes***, which led to an **audience with the Queen** and broke the publishing industry's rule that black novelists don't sell. **The sudden rise of Lawrence Hill**

BY **KATHERINE ASHENBURG** | PHOTOGRAPH BY **NIGEL DICKSON**



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living in a mostly white world, Lawrence Hill had days when he worried that he was ugly. “I had frizzy hair, big ears, a big nose and plump lips,” he has written. “When I looked in the mirror, I felt horror and disgust.” Those days are gone. Now 52 years old, he lives comfortably in his light brown skin and long ago made his peace with being black.

Black, as Hill has said on more than one occasion, was in some ways a choice, because while his father was black, his mother is white. It was the choice that lay behind a quarter-century of work, as he honed his craft and produced two novels and four books of non-fiction, all but one concerned with the black experience. Ultimately, that decision led to his third novel, *The Book of Negroes*, which was published in 2007. The story of an African girl sold into slavery in the 18th century, who journeys from South Carolina to Nova Scotia in search of freedom and back to Africa in search of her homeland, became the biggest-selling novel ever by a black Canadian writer, and one of the best-selling novels by any Canadian. As of this fall, *The Book of Negroes* has sold more than 350,000 copies in Canada. It won the Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize, the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and CBC Radio’s Canada Reads award. The book has been published in the U.K., the U.S., Norway, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa. In the wake of *The Book of Negroes’* popularity, HarperCollins has taken the unusual step of reissuing Hill’s two earlier novels and has released a lavishly illustrated edition of *The Book of Negroes* for the Christmas market. Clement Virgo and Damon D’Oliveira, a pair of Canadian film producers, have bought the movie rights to the novel, with Virgo directing.

After decades of toiling in semi-obscurity, Hill has become an overnight success and given the lie to two publishing myths: that a book not on the Giller Prize short list is doomed to fail; and that novels about blacks are a tough sell in Canada.

HILL, KNOWN TO HIS FRIENDS AS LARRY, lives with his second wife, Miranda, and their blended family of five children in a Tudor house in the leafy Hamilton neighbourhood of Westdale. His house is close to his office, above an independent bookstore; close to McMaster, whose library he uses frequently; and surrounded by Hamilton’s abundant parks and trails. Hill runs through those green spaces three or four times a week.

He has been running since he was a teen, when he firmly believed that if he kept at it he would go on to win the Olympic medal in the 5,000-metre event. He was bitter when he finally had to accept that he didn’t have the requisite lung capacity. It was his first inkling that sheer determination and hard work were necessary

but not sufficient—a lesson he would keep in mind while he learned how to write fiction.

Hill grew up in Don Mills, which, he says, “had a way of squishing the black out of you, by dint of sheer neglect.” He felt like he was living in exile. His father, Daniel Hill, died in 2003, and his mother, Donna, still lives in their Don Mills house, among Danish modern furniture and books about the black experience in North America. The TV room is papered with family photographs, beginning with Larry’s great-grandfather, whose parents had known slavery, posing for the camera in frock coat and vest.

Larry’s mother was born Donna Bender, the daughter of a Republican journalist. Raised in Illinois, she was so fired up by her Congregational church’s commitment to social justice that she declared at 20 she thought she could marry only a black or a Jew. “What white man would share the intensity of my convictions about civil rights?” she explained.

The man she married, Daniel Grafton Hill III, came from a family of doctors, dentists and ministers in the African Methodist Episcopal church. They met in Washington, D.C., and Daniel Hill was drawn to the cute, smart white girl with the big vocabulary (he thought it would improve his). The groom’s father performed the wedding, in 1953, in the chapel of Howard University, where he was dean of theology. In a wedding photograph of Daniel’s and Donna’s mothers, Mrs. Hill, large and joyful, wearing dramatic gauntlet-like gloves, is apparently about to engulf the smaller, withdrawn-looking Mrs. Bender.

It’s likely she was worried about what the future held for her daughter. What it held, soon after the wedding, was a move to Toronto. At a time when even the cafeterias for U.S. federal employees were segregated, Canada promised a more enlightened existence for the Hills. Their youthful gamble paid off, as Daniel became the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, the co-founder of the Ontario Black History Society and the province’s ombudsman. The Hills had three children: Daniel Grafton Hill IV, born in 1954, who would go on to become a pop star with his 1977 ballad “Sometimes When We Touch”; Lawrence, two and a half years later, in 1957; and Karen, in 1958, who is now an aspiring writer.

Larry inherited his mother’s long nose, rosebud mouth and watchful expression, but, as he writes in his non-fiction book *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*, “I just don’t see myself as being the same race as she is. In fact, I’m not even in the same ballpark.” At age eight, on the way to his paternal grandparents’ 50th wedding anniversary in D.C., he remembers looking at his fair-skinned mother in the car and wishing, “Couldn’t she have looked at least a little darker, a little less white? Perhaps like a southern Italian? If only she were darker—I wasn’t actually wishing her to be black, just less white—then I might have an easier time fitting in with my cousins down south.” His father’s family, on the other hand, always felt “like an extension of my own body and psyche.” As a boy, he would take the bus to visit them in D.C. and North Carolina.

When he wasn’t training as a runner, the teenage Larry loved playing squash. “It was fast and intense,” he remembers, “and let me smash out all of my aggressions on a pliant rubber ball.” On summer evenings, he and a friend would borrow his parents’ car and drive 12 kilometres from Don Mills to the manicured squash courts of Upper Canada College. On summer nights, there was no one around to check your credentials. Once, when Larry asked one of his black American cousins if he liked squash, he was taken aback when the cousin sputtered, “Larry! That’s a white folks’ game!” But he learned to negotiate the separate worlds of white

folks and black folks, moving between his elite boys' high school, University of Toronto Schools, and black family festivities, between studying Latin and playing squash and hero-worshipping Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali and the black Olympic sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith.

Hill wrote his first story at 14, on his mother's L.C. Smith typewriter. He loved the physicality of typing—smacking the keys smartly, slamming the arm at the end of every line—almost as much as the writing. His story was about a black man and his white girlfriend in racist North Carolina who are forced to flee into the woods. It echoed his parents' marriage and forecast his own two marriages to white women, but Donna Hill thought it was terrible and Larry tore it up. He went on writing, discarding and rewriting, and the protagonists were always black.

While his mother was blunt and outspoken, his father hid his intensity under a gracious and diplomatic public persona. His overall message to his son, Larry says, was, "Work your ass off, but make it look like you're playing it cool." In many ways, Daniel Hill was a bewitching parent, mesmerizing his children with bedtime stories, in which he acted out all the characters. As the kids grew older, the stories often sprang from his difficult time in the segregated army of the Second World War. Along with them came stirring anecdotes about black history, insistent reminders to be better than everybody else. At the same time, as his son Dan says, he could be "the king of mixed messages," criticizing the incompetence of other black people, and worrying that a son's hair was too kinky and prescribing a bedtime tuque to straighten it.

Like his father, Larry is fiercely driven on the inside, considerate and genial on the surface. Those who know him well notice an occasional impatience with people who are not as quick as he is. His brother says this is a trait Larry shares with their mother: "If you say something that isn't intelligent, they give you this look. I'll ask Larry something about the goddamn book business and I get that fucking look."

As a teenager, Larry retreated emotionally, never telling his father that he had been voted class president at UTS. When he graduated, he announced that he was going to UBC, in Vancouver—as far from Don Mills as he could get without leaving the country. By the time Larry left, his brother was locked in conflict with his father over his musical career; Daniel Hill expected his sons to be doctors, lawyers or engineers, not artists.

Larry never returned to Don Mills. After two years at UBC, he transferred to Université Laval, in Quebec City, where he majored in economics. While preparing to go to Cameroon (one of three

trips he made to Africa, working for a volunteer organization called Canadian Crossroads International), he met and fell in love with another volunteer, Joanne Savoie. After graduation from Laval, he got a job as a reporter for the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and he and Savoie moved to Winnipeg.

On his way to becoming an economist, he realized that he really wanted to write fiction. He had grown up reading the black American writers of the '50s and '60s—Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison—and he loved the sweep, the immediacy and the narrative thrust of their books. If he hadn't been raised in Canada, Hill isn't sure he would have needed to write novels himself. American blacks understood their dramatic history and knew who they were. "Canada had so little experience with blacks," he says. "Everything was murky and ill-defined—a great breeding ground for writers."

First, Hill had to figure out how to support himself. In Canada, as in most countries, only a very few literary fiction writers—Margaret Atwood, Michael Ondaatje and a handful of others—support themselves exclusively by their book sales. The average advance on royalties for a work of fiction by a mid-career writer is in the neighbourhood of \$15,000 to \$20,000, for years of work, and very few writers ever earn more than their advance. The average salary Canadian writers earn from their writing is \$13,500 a year, and fiction writers (especially literary fiction, as opposed to genre fiction) fare worse than non-fiction writers.

At 27, Hill had worked for the *Free Press* for three years, loving the adrenaline rush of a daily newspaper ("Reporting is the crack cocaine of writing"). But he knew he couldn't combine journalism with fiction. Always the hard-headed pragmatist, he resigned from the *Free Press*, married Savoie and moved with her to Spain for a year to work on his fiction. They returned to Toronto in 1986, and he has rarely worked as a journalist since. It couldn't have been easy to give up the name recognition (or minor fame) that journalism brings. His friend Oakland Ross, a novelist and journalist, believes Hill could do it because of his strong, self-sufficient ego. "Larry was willing to operate in the shadows for years and years," Ross says. "For a writer, the most important quality is perseverance, and Larry has really persevered."

Hill subsidized his fiction by writing political speeches for Queen's Park through the Peterson, Rae and Harris years. "It was pretty well worthless to society," he says, "but it wasn't illegal and it paid well"—\$2,000 to \$3,000 a speech, in the time it would take to write a \$300 article for *The Globe and Mail*. "I'm not proud of it," he says, "but I was good at it." Bureaucrats from various ministries

The Hills in 1976: Dan, Donna, Daniel, Karen and Lawrence





Royal treatment: Hill met the Queen after he won the Commonwealth prize for *The Book of Negroes*

hired him on a piecemeal basis, and he'd write a few speeches, then drop out and work on his fiction until he ran through the money, at which point he'd return to speech writing.

By this time, he was a family man. His daughters Geneviève and Caroline were born in 1990 and 1992, his son Andrew in 1994. To stretch their savings, he and Savoie bought a townhouse in Oakville, far cheaper than its Toronto equivalent.

Hill's first novel, *Some Great Thing*, which was published in 1992, centres on a black newspaper reporter in Winnipeg with a curmudgeonly activist father. It's a comic romp through a typically dysfunctional newsroom, the kind of book Kingsley Amis or David Lodge might have written at the start of their careers, had they been half-black and Canadian. The advance, from Turnstone Press, a small, well-regarded Winnipeg publisher, was \$200, and the book sold a few thousand copies.

His second novel, *Any Known Blood*, appeared five years later. Far more ambitious, it tells the story of the Underground Railroad as it affects five generations of an Oakville family with more than a passing resemblance to his own. The hero, who again has a troubled relationship with his powerhouse of a father, is a failed government speech writer. In its well-oiled plot, serious things happen, but emotions are not dwelt on for long. Hill had learned about the seditious use of humour from his father's storytelling, and he exploits it in his first two novels. The publication of *Any Known Blood* was a step up in his career, with a major publisher, HarperCollins, and a bigger advance, \$10,000. But up until a year ago, sales were underwhelming: about 8,000 copies in 10 years.

Black stories, fictional and non-fictional, held Hill's imagination. His most significant piece of non-fiction, *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, is a series of essays, several autobiographical, that appeared in August 2001. It had a promising launch, with an excerpt in *Maclean's*, but quickly died in the wake of 9/11, selling only a few thousand copies.

In January 2007, Hill was preparing to celebrate his 50th birthday and the publication of *The Book of Negroes*, his first novel in 10 years. He had been writing professionally for more than two decades,

but even among people who followed the CanLit scene closely, many would not have recognized his name.

THE STORY FOR THE BOOK OF NEGROES HAD BEEN SHIFTING and bubbling within Hill for 15 years, since he discovered the existence of the real Book of Negroes, a list of the blacks who resettled in Nova Scotia in the aftermath of the American Revolution. He'd first read about it in a history in his parents' home library and knew that he would write about one of those blacks someday. He also knew that he didn't yet have the skill to tell the story properly, nor the necessary empathy: he didn't want to write a simplistic story of bad slavers and good Africans, so he was going to have to understand at least some of the cowardly sins of his characters, both black and white. Being Lawrence Hill, he was willing to bide his time.

One of the chief things that terrified him about writing *The Book of Negroes* was what he calls "its hard edge of tragedy," a darkness that precluded comedy. Without it, he worried about keeping the reader's interest, and returned again and again to the image of his father sitting on the edge of his bed, spinning his stories. Iris Tupholme, his editor at HarperCollins, encouraged him to forgo the humour. He had one chance to tell this tough, painful story, she said, and it shouldn't be lightened. As a result, he stretched himself in a different way.

As he worked, the scale of the book grew, until it spanned the long life of its narrator, Aminata Diallo, and included sections in South Carolina, New York City, Nova Scotia, Africa and finally London, England. The geographical breadth of the story sometimes made Hill feel that he was writing five separate novels, but it was the emotional depths that daunted him most. At points, Aminata's story was so painful he wasn't sure he could continue. The first 70 or so pages, which tell the story of her enslavement and the deaths of her parents, were distressing enough that he had constant nightmares: "I was like an actor with a bad role."

Meanwhile, his family and financial life were changing. He and Savoie had separated in 1998 and shared custody of their children.

Hill's father pushed him to **be better than everybody else.** He would **criticize the incompetence of other black people** and worry that **his son's hair was too kinky,** prescribing a bedtime tuque to straighten it

Hill **had been warned** that the Queen pressed a button **when she wanted her guest to leave.** Like Scheherazade, he tried to delay his exit by **regaling her** with his most intriguing stories

While writing speeches for the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, he met a communications writer named Miranda Hawkins; they married in 2005, and her daughters, Eve and Beatrice, joined the household. Also in 2005, Miranda convinced him to stop writing speeches, live off grants and her salary, and finish *The Book of Negroes* uninterrupted by other work.

Maybe the incantatory power of the book's language owes something to that last, undistracted stretch. Lightning saws through clouds, stars blink like towns full of nervous men. The slave ship, Hill writes, "was an animal in the water. It rocked from side to side like a donkey trying to shake off a bundle, climbing on the waves like a monkey gone mad. The animal had an endless appetite and consumed us all: men, women and babies." Of course, only Tolstoy or Flaubert could sustain that level for an entire 470-page book, and the first 150 pages are more wonderful than those that follow, but it is never less than a fascinating, well-told story. Most important, it is the debut of a formerly good but now superb writer.

During the years of writing and rewriting, Hill claims he never allowed himself to hope for great success. "I felt that *The Book of Negroes* was a beautiful project welling up inside me, but I was wired emotionally to keep my expectations in check." Tupholme's instincts were better: "We knew we had something special."

Something special did not immediately translate into big sales. Publishing wisdom holds that a book has to make a splash within its first few weeks, certainly within 90 days, before it is overtaken by new, competing titles. *The Book of Negroes* got good reviews, appeared once at the bottom of the *Toronto Star's* best-seller list and for a few weeks was number one on the *Maclean's* best-seller list. Then sales waned, and by the time the paperback appeared in the fall of 2007, the hardcover had sold only about 8,000 copies. When the Giller Prize short list came out that same fall without *The Book of Negroes* on it, Hill figured it was game over.

Sometime in the late spring of 2008, sales started climbing again. Hill thinks that the book clubs he had visited with his two previous books—"a small but very devoted readership"—began recommending the book to other readers, and the buzz gathered momentum. Tupholme believes that the book took off 18 months after publication because it had a string of good luck. First Hill won the Writers' Trust Prize, then the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. "With every award, we thought, Well, it's had a good run, and that's it. Then something else would happen." By the summer of 2008, the book had hit the *Globe and Mail's* paperback best-seller list, and after 60 weeks, it's still there. (In the U.S., where the book was published in November 2007 to rave reviews, the original title was considered too alienating for African-American readers. Instead, it goes by the blandly inoffensive *Someone Knows My Name*.) It's a remarkable example of a book slowly and gradually finding its audience, and one that parallels Hill's deliberate, painstaking progress as a writer.

In a development that most novelists can only dream of, the earlier novels are enjoying a reflected glow of their own. The second, *Any Known Blood*, also on the *Globe's* Canadian best-seller list, has sold five times more in the past 12 months, since HarperCollins reissued it, than it did in the previous 10 years.

It's fair to say this has been life-altering for Hill. He's done publicity in The Netherlands, Germany, South Africa, Australia, Jamaica, Britain and the U.S. He had his own audience with the Queen, as a result of winning the Commonwealth prize. She told him straight away she had read only a synopsis of the book but quizzed him astutely about the historical background. He had been warned that she has a silver button in her private offices that she presses when the audience is finished, and it became a challenge to delay that. Like Scheherazade, he brought out his most intriguing stories and watched the Queen's hand advance and then retreat from the magic button. Finally, after about 20 minutes, she stood, and his time was up.

Hill moved to Hamilton this summer. "There are a lot of us," he says of their family of five children, now aged 10 to 19, "and this is the first house I've had that is big enough to relax in." Even having a big house hasn't diminished the constant state of chaos that five children create. "Somebody always needs to go to the doctor or to a hockey game in Sarnia or to karate or flute, and it's not predictable."

The novel he's writing now is about an African refugee living illegally in a rich western country. The idea of paperless people, without the supports we take for granted, has fascinated him for a long time, beginning with a character from Cameroon nicknamed Yoyo in his first novel. (Hill has a recurring dream in which he ends up in Brazil and has to start all over; in the dream, he tells himself, "I'll never make it as a novelist here, but I'll learn Portuguese and be a journalist.")

The novel he's planning after that one takes place during the Second World War, when Franklin Roosevelt ordered the building of the Alaska Highway after Pearl Harbor. Thousands of African-American soldiers, many from the Deep South like his hero, were drawn from segregated regiments to work on the highway. No doubt some of Daniel Hill's war stories will find their way into this novel, and Larry will negotiate the dangerous line between comedy and tragedy he loved in his father's dark but funny tales of serving in a segregated army.

And there is money, from royalties, advances and now the film option. Hill won't say how much—only that it's the first relief from financial worry he's had in decades. "The most I can ask, in my heart," he says of the money, "is that it buys me the time to finish the next two books, and then that those books will do the same after that." Maybe someday, as he promised in *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*, he will get around to writing about his mother's family, the unexplored side of his heritage. In the meantime, Lawrence Hill has at least a few stories to tell us. **END**