

## Someone Knows My Name

### Reading Group Guide

[Lawrence Hill on \*Someone Knows My Name\*](#) | [Discussion Questions](#) | [Readings of Interest on the Web](#)

### Lawrence Hill on *Someone Knows My Name*

Years before I began writing *Someone Knows My Name*, I came across two startling discoveries in a scholarly work. I read that thousands of African Americans fled slavery to serve the British, who promised to liberate them in return for service during the American Revolution. When the British lost the war, they sent those African Americans who could show that they had served the British for at least one year to Canada. Three thousand names were entered into a 150-page military ledger known as the "Book of Negroes," and, in the last half of 1783, the former slaves set sail to Nova Scotia.

Ten years later, many of these same former slaves were so disgruntled with the hardships they encountered in Canada—slavery, indentured servitude, anti-black race riots, and segregation—that in 1792 they accepted an offer from the British government and sailed to Africa in a flotilla of fifteen ships, to form the colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone. This was the first back-to-Africa exodus in the history of the Americas, and it turns out that a number of the adults swept up in this migration had actually been born in Africa.

As I began to write *Someone Knows My Name*, I imagined the life of an old woman on one of those vessels carrying liberated African Americans from Halifax to Freetown. What would she look like? Where had she been born in Africa? How had she been stolen into slavery, where had she lived in South Carolina, and how on earth did she find herself, in late life, sailing back to Africa from Canada? *Someone Knows My Name* is my attempt to give this fascinating but little-known story a human face. I gave the protagonist, Aminata Diallo, my eldest daughter's middle name. It is the story of a heroic woman in the eighteenth century, and I felt that the best way to lift her off the page was to love her like I love my own daughter. And indeed I loved Aminata from the moment I first started imagining her face, hearing her voice, seeing the way she walked with a platter balanced on her head.

My daughter, Geneviève Aminata Hill, was eleven years old when I started to write this story. The same age as my character when she is kidnapped by slave traders. What if this had happened to my own child? Aminata, the character, grew up under my tutelage. She learned to walk and then to read and to navigate her way in the world, and now this fictional creation of mine is all grown up and gone from the house. She belongs to the world of readers now, and I hope she will be well loved.

## Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the title *Someone Knows My Name*?
2. What is your opinion about Hill's suggestion that Aminata's very youthfulness at the time of her abduction enables her emotional survival, even as some of the adults in her world show signs of crumbling?
3. The section of the book set in the sea islands of South Carolina depicts eighteenth-century indigo plantations where African American slaves and overseers are left largely to their own devices during the "sick season"—a good half of the year. To what degree does this cultural and social isolation allow for an interesting development and interaction of African American characters in the novel?
4. Aminata suffers some horrifying cruelties at the hands of her captors, but her relationships with her masters aren't always what you'd expect. How does Aminata's story reveal the complex ways that people react to unnatural, unequal relationships?
5. During the course of the story, Aminata marries and has a family. Although she is separated from them, she is reunited from time to time with her husband and one of her children. What does the work tell us about the nature of love and loyalty?
6. Aminata struggles to learn and master all sorts of systems of communicating in the new world: black English, white English, and Gullah, as well as understanding the uses of European money and maps. How do her various coping mechanisms shed light on her character?
7. Aminata longs for her home. What is the meaning of home in the novel, and how does the meaning change as the novel progresses?
8. What does the novel tell us about survival? Which characters fare best and why?
9. As Aminata moves from slavery to freedom, she finds that freedom is sometimes an empty promise. At what points in the novel did you feel this was true? Did it change how you thought about the meaning of freedom?
10. Aminata is a woman of extraordinary abilities—she is skillful with languages, literate, a speedy learner, a born negotiator. Why did Hill choose this story to be told by such a remarkable woman? What effect do her abilities have on the shaping of the story?
11. What do you think would be the challenges involved in writing a realistically painful novel that still offers enough light and hope to maintain the reader's interest and spirit?
12. What lessons does Aminata's tale hold for us in today's world?

## Readings of Interest on the Web

On this [BBC site](#), read "Africa and the Transatlantic Slave Trade," an article by Dr. Hakim Adi, author and reader in the History of Africa and the African Diaspora at Middlesex University, London.

Most of the more than 1,200 images in [this collection](#) date from the period of slavery. "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record" traces the experience of those who were sold into slavery in Africa and transported to the Americas, as well as that of their descendants.

Read about [Olaudah Equiano](#) (1746-1797), who was sold into slavery at age eleven, eventually gained his freedom, and in 1789 wrote what was to become one of the most widely read slave autobiographies. Click "Equiano's Autobiography" for the text.

[The U.S. Library of Congress](#) presents its digital collection "African-American Odyssey," which features more than 240 items relating to African American history, from the early days of slavery through the twentieth century: important and rare books, government documents, manuscripts, maps, musical scores, plays, films, and recordings.

[The Northwestern University Library of Illinois](#) offers digital copies of 113 authentic, antique maps of Africa and accompanying text dating from the mid-sixteenth century to the early twentieth century.

["Black Loyalists: Our History, Our People"](#) offers a wealth of historical detail in the form of personal accounts of Black Loyalists, letters, and other documents and proclamations, including the text of the original Book of Negroes. Click "Documents" on the main page.