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An Interview with Lawrence Hill

You've described *Any Known Blood* as a loving but fictional tribute to your family. When did you first know that you would write it?

Just before my first child, Geneviève, was born in 1990, I felt that I should hurry up and interview my father about his life and our family history before I ran out of time. My father's health was already declining, as he had a painful terminal disease. Thankfully, he held up over the interviews, which I taped over the summer and completed just a few days before my daughter's birth. I knew as I was interviewing my father that I would mine, reshape and fictionalize at least some of the material for a novel.

What made you decide to develop the stories as fiction rather than non-fiction?

Never for a minute did I think about writing a family history. It was a novel from the first moment of conception, because I am primarily a novelist. I like the freedom of creating stories and characters, and I treasure the latitude novelists have to bend history and reshape the “facts” to tell a good story. I have written books of non-fiction, and I hope to write more. I am proud of them, too, and have worked very hard on them. But fiction is where my heart lies.

What was your family's reaction to their story being turned into a novel?

Long before I first published a book, my parents used up all of their anxieties about having children who were artists instead of professionals. My father believed that the only way for a black male to transcend racism was to become a successful professional. By the time I started writing, however, Dad had come around to accepting that his children would make up their own minds about following their passions, and so my father and mother always supported my novel writing. They were positive about *Any Known Blood*, but wary of how they and other family members were depicted, even fictionally. Certain stories from the lives of my parents and grandparents did enter into the story, but not without going through the creative meat grinder.

Although my father understood that this book was a novel, he was troubled by the depiction of a fictional sister—the character Mill—as a prostitute during the Second World War. “Larry,” he said, “I know it’s a novel, but did you have to make her a prostitute?”

“As a matter of fact, I did,” I said, and that was the end of the conversation.

What aspects of the life of the fictional Langston Cane II mirror those of your great-grandfather, Daniel Grafton Hill I?

Daniel Grafton Hill I was the son of Richard Hill and Demias Crew, who were slaves in Maryland until Richard bought freedom for himself, his wife and their eight children in the late 1850s. Daniel was born in 1860—the last of nine children—and raised in Washington County in ▶

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An Interview with Lawrence Hill *(continued)*

western Maryland. His mother died when he was just one, and his father did not have the means to raise all the children. I don't know what became of the other eight siblings, but Daniel was sent to live with Maryland Quakers. He studied at Storer College in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and then at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. He went on to become a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and to serve as minister at the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church on Druid Hill Avenue—the same church that is featured in *Any Known Blood*. Like Daniel Hill I, my character, Langston Cane II, is orphaned as a boy and raised by white Quakers before being sent back into his community to study and become a church minister. But those are the only similarities. I don't know much about the life of Daniel Hill I, and I was happy to invent a life for Langston Cane II.

What are some of the inherent difficulties involved in writing a work of fiction that incorporates real people and events?

The difficulty is respecting the broad lines of history, stamping the fresh face of fiction over the past, and being creative and lively at the same time. Historians will be happy to jump all over you if you get your facts wrong, but readers will drop your book in the trash can if you can't captivate them. Somehow, one has to mine history and then jack it up with dramatic tension, and make it worth reading. I believe

that fiction, well done, is a fabulous way to introduce readers to history. I love speaking to students of all ages and trying to infect them with the history bug. I love telling them stories about the trials and triumphs of blacks in Canada. Part of my job as a novelist is to write the colour—and by that I mean human drama and struggle—back into history.

Oakville, Ontario, was in fact a relatively minor player in the Underground Railroad. What made you choose it as one of your backdrops?

I'm a bit of a nut for museums and local histories, and am always curious to see how people examine and represent the past in their own backyards. When I moved to Oakville in 1990, I found that the Oakville museum had a black history exhibit, with information about a local schooner captain named Robert Wilson who had ferried fugitive slaves across Lake Ontario in the 1850s. The idea caught my imagination immediately. I found a black resident named Alvin Duncan, who was already an old man. He was born in Oakville, and so were his parents, and his grandparents had arrived there as fugitive slaves.

Alvin was a gold mine of information. For decades, he had collected newspaper clippings and photographs about the history of blacks in Oakville. He had great stories to tell, such as being turned away from an air force recruiting station during the Second World War because a medical examination had ostensibly revealed that his heart was located on the wrong side of his chest. Alvin was the first to tell me about the Ku Klux Klan coming to Oakville to try ►

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to protest the pending marriage between a black man and a white woman. My conversations with Alvin influenced the shape of *Any Known Blood* and inspired the creation of the character Aberdeen Williams.

How did your parents’ active involvement in Canada’s human rights movement influence your novel?

Like Dorothy Perkins in *Any Known Blood*, my mother worked for the Toronto Labour Committee for Human Rights and conducted tests to prove that employers, landlords and restaurant owners were discriminating against black people. While my mother was in the community gathering proof that discrimination existed, my father was working on his Ph.D. at the University of Toronto. He subsequently became the first director, and later the chairperson, of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Both of my parents wrote books about the history of blacks in Canada, and their other significant contribution was to co-found, with some friends, the Ontario Black History Society in 1978. Aspects of their early life in Toronto—such as the barriers they encountered renting apartments because they were a mixed-race couple—transformed into fictionalized scenes in the novel.

How have your experiences working in Africa affected you and your writing?

I have travelled five times to Africa, three times as a volunteer with Canadian Crossroads

International. In the 1970s and 1980s, I spent about two months each in Niger, Cameroon and Mali. These trips changed my life completely and opened up a creative vein that I have mined ever since. My first published short story, called “My Side of the Fence,” was set in Niger. Every one of my three novels to date has had scenes set in West Africa. My latest novel, *The Book of Negroes*, begins in Africa—in the country now known as Mali—in the mid-1700s, and returns to Africa as the story unfolds. Almost all of my work touches in some way on fundamental and universal questions of identity and belonging. And all of these questions take me back, in one way or another, to Africa.

Do you feel that your work and that of other black writers has made a difference to Canadians’ awareness of black history?

It is human history that interests me, and understanding it—including the things that black people have done and the ways that they have been treated. It reflects back on all of us. It is important for writers to explore history through their works and important for all of us to understand how our leaders have behaved toward our citizens—Japanese Canadians, Black Canadians and others who have faced discrimination—and to see the ways in which racism has limited and diminished our country.

With your interest in the past, have you been inspired by any particular historic figure?

I suppose that Muhammad Ali was the ►

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first public figure to influence how I saw myself and how I saw the world. As a person and a writer, I like to imagine that I am standing on the shoulders of all the people who have gone before me on this earth. I try to leave behind the worst of their thoughts and actions, and to be inspired by the best. Ali inspired me because he rose above his profession to state—with his own beautiful language—why he would not fight in Vietnam. Long before it was remotely popular to do so, he galvanized and inspired the anti-war movement in the United States. Muhammad Ali became my first hero. If I can accomplish with my writing a tiny fraction of the things Ali did to make this world a better place, I will be proud of my work.

