

Lawrence Hill Discusses *Some Great Thing*

You were for a time a newspaper reporter yourself. How did your experience play into the writing of *Some Great Thing*?

I could never have written *Some Great Thing* without having worked as a reporter in Winnipeg. The characters and their flight paths are of my invention; it is truly a work of fiction. But working in a newsroom and pursuing stories daily for two years in Winnipeg offered experiences—sad and hilarious, personal and professional—that made it possible for me to imagine the novel. After I had been away from the world of journalism for a year or two, I had enough emotional distance to look back and begin to concoct *Some Great Thing*.

Are you as cynical about the media as the satire in your novel makes you sound?

I had terrific fun cooking up the novel, and it did me a lot of good to poke fun at some of the inanities I discovered, or dreamed up, while working as a newspaper reporter. I enjoyed writing playfully and satirically, but I do not generally feel cynical about the media. I met many fantastic journalists and believe that they do a great service to our country and to the world. I still devour newspapers and magazines, and occasionally write freelance pieces for them. ►

About the book

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Arguably journalistic writing and creative writing have different ways of trying to get at “the truth.” Why does writing fiction speak to you?

Imagining a story, and starting from scratch, is such an immeasurably pleasurable process. I get to create an entire world in my own head. Writing fiction helps me process life, making sense of it, tearing it all apart and putting it back together in a way that satisfies my heart and soul.

You’ve said that while working as a reporter, you felt compelled to do something more with your life. This has a familiar ring. How much of you will the reader see in the book’s central character, Mahatma Grafton?

Mahatma was urged by his father to do “some great thing” in life, and my own father certainly did the same. I stepped into the world of newspapers feeling somewhat cynical, as does Mahatma. And we both moved from that initial cynicism into a place of personal engagement with journalism. The novel does reflect my voice and its construction reveals the way my mind operates, so in the deepest sense it is autobiographical.

It is somehow poignant that Mahatma’s aging father, Ben, saves all those boxes of clippings about family and about black history. Are you such a saver yourself, or do you have family members who are?

My paternal grandmother and my father never threw out a letter or a piece of paper in their lives. Old report card? Letter received from a relative twenty years ago? Don't discard family history, my father would say. Preserve it for future generations. Like my ancestors, I can't get rid of personal papers. They represent my own life and the lives of my loved ones. If I lose the papers, don't I risk losing a definition of the life I have sculpted? I can't bear to be hemmed in by boxes and junk, however. Fortunately I have been able to donate dozens of boxes of my own papers to the University of Toronto Archives, which will organize and keep them and make them available to researchers in the future.

Several threads run through this novel: the world of the media, the English-French language issue in Quebec, the history of Black Canadians, and particularly black railroad porters, in the province. Were all of these in your mind from the outset, or did some weave their way in as you wrote?

I wanted to write a novel about a black journalist who begins to discover himself and his own cultural interests, history and identity, as a byproduct of covering a political and social contest pitting English- and French-speaking Canadians against one another. So, yes, I had these various threads in mind from the beginning, but I had no idea how I would weave them all together. I just had to jump in and start writing, and I chose to do so without spending too much time plotting out the novel, which might have run the risk of choking off spontaneous, energetic writing. The first draft came out messy and ►

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unorganized, but at least it appeared to be a living, breathing, animated beast.

Judge Melvyn Hill is a particularly fascinating character—a black man who has worked hard and risen to a respected position, but who is unhappy in his personal life and often shows bad judgment in his professional life. Why did you mould him as such a sad and conflicted personality?

Conflicted personalities are interesting to observe, and to write about. Melvyn Hill strives to create a world for himself in which he can operate with dignity, but his obsession with success makes him intolerant and judgmental. Still, he is alienated and lonely and I wanted the reader to care about him and feel for him, despite his failings.

Paul Quarrington described your book as “filled with wonderful people.” Who is your favourite character in the novel, and why?

If I had thought to put Paul in the book, he would probably have become my first choice. But my favourite character in *Some Great Thing* is Yoyo, for his complete astonishment at the silly, inexplicable ways that we live in rich, developed nations. I like the way his being a foreign visitor to Manitoba offers the reader a fresh lens through which to see Canada and its foibles.

As well as offering a large cast of characters, *Some Great Thing* has lots going on. Can you share some insight into your writing process for a novel with a number of subplots?

I was worried that I would never finish it—or if I did, that I’d never make it interesting—if I wrote the novel with the same painstaking technique that I had used to draft short stories (some of which I thought were stilted and lifeless). I decided to loosen up and just “let it rip,” without stopping to think about writing. There’s a moment early in the novel when the older, jaded reporter, Eddy, advises Mahatma to stop thinking and just write in order to finish a news story before the deadline. I tried to do that. To not think too much, or intellectualize the process, but just to get comfortable, write quickly and let it all boil up wildly on first draft. So that’s what I did. Later, I rewrote madly, chopping out more than half of an energetic but unwieldy six-hundred-page draft.

Some Great Thing is filled with dark humour. Did you set out to write comedy, or did the characters and situations draw this out?

I did not set out to write comedy, but I did want the story to be lively and engaging. It seemed that the more and the faster I wrote, the more humorous it became. It was a natural development. The very process of writing brought the humour out of me, and encouraged me to throw it down on the page. ►

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Do you think your novel could have been set in the United States, or do you feel that it's purely Canadian in its way of exploring racial, cultural and linguistic friction?

The first time I sent the novel in draft form to a prospective agent, I was turned down and encouraged to consider setting the story in a more interesting place than Winnipeg. The argument went that if I set it in Toronto or New York, it would no longer be seen as a regional novel. To me, this was hokum. It suggested that a novel is “regional” if it is set in Winnipeg, but of global, universal reach if it is set in a big metropolis. But Winnipeg is pretty well the only city in Canada where this novel could unfold. The novel gives Winnipeg a communist mayor in the 1980s. What Canadian city, other than Winnipeg, could have had a communist mayor at that time? And the particular French-English conflict that provides the socio-political backdrop for Mahatma Grafton's growth on the job could only have taken place in Manitoba.

I do not like to think of *Some Great Thing* as a regional novel. I prefer to think of it as a novel set in a specific time and place—Winnipeg, in the 1980s, during a crisis over the constitutional rights of French Canadians in English Canada—that will, if it works successfully as fiction, appeal to a wide swath of readers. I love novels that are anchored in specific times and situations. This doesn't make them regional. It makes them real.