

An Interview with Lawrence Hill

When did you first come across the ledger called the *Book of Negroes*, and did you know immediately that you would write about it?

I first heard about the Book of Negroes in 1980 when I read *The Black Loyalists*, a scholarly book by Canadian historian James Walker. Even before I wrote my first novel, *Some Great Thing*, which was published in 1992, I knew that one day I would write the fictional story of a woman who had to have her name entered into the Book of Negroes. It wasn't until I began to research and write the novel in 2002, however, that I examined reproductions of the actual ledger. The research and writing took about five years.

How did you know when you'd researched "enough"? Did you ever feel overwhelmed by the weight of the history you were trying to capture in the novel?

Completely. I had to assimilate and then play with the history in so many locations—Mali, the South Carolina sea islands, Charleston, Manhattan, Nova Scotia, Sierra Leone and London. It felt as though I was writing several novels in one.

Research is captivating, but it also serves itself up as the quintessential avoidance strategy. "How did your work go on the novel today?" "Fine, I spent eight hours in the University of Toronto library." Eventually, you have to put down all the books ►

About the book

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An Interview with Lawrence Hill *(continued)*

and start mining your own soul for the story that waits within. The novel was more far-reaching in its first drafts. I chose to pare it back, whittling out hundreds of pages as I strove to make the story more manageable and engaging for the reader.

What was your most surprising finding?

The first discovery I made remains the most striking. In 1792, twelve hundred Black Loyalists set out in a flotilla of fifteen ships to sail from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Freetown, Sierra Leone. A number of the adults on board were not just travelling to Africa—it turns out that they had been born on that continent, so they were literally travelling back to Africa. This back-to-Africa exodus took place more than a century before the famed Jamaican Marcus Garvey urged blacks in the Diaspora to return to the motherland. It took place decades before former American slaves founded Liberia. The first massive back-to-Africa exodus in world history set off from the shores of Halifax, but to date, few Canadians know it.

Do you find that Canadians are surprised, or even unwilling to accept, that our history involves poor treatment of the Black Loyalists?

Canadians have had little exposure to aspects of the black experience that—unlike, say, the Underground Railroad—reflect badly on our country and history. Although

the British saved the Black Loyalists in New York, they betrayed them in Nova Scotia. In the early and mid-1780s in communities such as Shelburne and Birchtown, Nova Scotia, blacks faced outright segregation, were forced to work for wages inferior to those earned by whites for the same work, were kept (in many instances) in slavery or as indentured servants, were largely denied the farming land that they had been promised in exchange for serving the British during the Revolutionary War and were attacked physically during Canada's first anti-black race riot. It is a disgraceful time in Canadian history, and—outside academic circles and certain black communities—Canadians have largely avoided discussing the matter. I didn't write *The Book of Negroes* to wag a finger or to apportion blame. I wrote it because it is an astonishing and revealing story that readers deserve to know. It forms but a small piece of the history dramatized in *The Book of Negroes*. I carved out this work of fiction to celebrate one woman's journey and to chart her miraculous survival, both physical and emotional.

Why did you choose to make your central character a woman? And do you find it a challenge to write scenes, such as the birthing one, from her perspective?

The Book of Negroes is a woman's story and it was from the moment of conception. As a dramatist, I locate stories in the lives of the people who have the most to lose. Her own role as a mother is at risk in this story, yet Aminata has to do what she must to survive, and carry on catching other women's ►

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babies. On one hand, it was an immense challenge to write the life story of an African woman in the 1700s. On the other hand, it was liberating and riveting to create a character whom I could never be. I have always felt more comfortable writing about people who bear no resemblance to me.

I find the texture of her life fascinating. In the novel, one African who is stolen from her homeland becomes bitter to the point of turning murderous. Another African is so traumatized by the dislocation of slavery that he loses the ability to speak. Aminata somehow manages to keep going and to do so with love in her heart. This is what interests me most about her character. She can't stop all the evil in the world, but she will not stoop to it.

Some passages are heartbreaking to read. Which ones were the hardest to write?

I found it difficult to satisfy myself when writing the scenes in which Aminata is kidnapped in the country now known as Mali and forced to walk three months overland to the slave vessel waiting off the coast of Sierra Leone. How was I to convey the horror of an eleven-year-old who is torn from everything and everyone she knows? In the twenty-first century, you would have to be abducted by hostile extraterrestrials to know the horror that Aminata faces when she is sent overseas into slavery in the Americas. The challenge was to write about Aminata's feelings without melodrama. Definitely, writing about the

childhood abduction and the middle passage were among the hardest of my tasks and brought on their fair share of nightmares.

With your writing of this novel complete, does a part of you miss Aminata?

I loved Aminata from the moment that 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. I named Aminata after Geneviève and tried to love my protagonist the way I love my daughter. What if this had happened to my own child? How would she have carried on, after losing her parents, her religion and her language, and after being cast into an alien world that saw her as little more than a work animal? So 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 is no longer mine. She belongs to the world of readers now. Sure, I miss her.



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