



The Book of Negroes by Lawrence Hill

About the author:

Lawrence Hill is the son of American immigrants — a black father and a white mother — who came to Canada the day after they married in 1953 in Washington, D.C. On his father's side, Hill's grandfather and great grandfather were university-educated, ordained ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His mother came from a Republican family in Oak Park, Illinois, graduated from Oberlin College and went on to become a civil rights activist in D.C. Growing up in the predominantly white suburb of Don Mills, Ontario in the sixties, Hill was greatly influenced by his parents' work in the human rights movement. Much of Hill's writing touches on issues of identity and belonging.

Hill's first passion was running, and as a boy he dreamed of winning an Olympic gold medal in the 5,000 meters. But despite years of intense training and thousands of kilometers, he never managed to run quite fast enough. As a teenager, he consoled himself by deciding to become a writer instead, and at 14 he wrote his first story on his mother's L.C. Smith typewriter. It was a bad story, and a good beginning.

Hill is now the author of nine books of fiction and non-fiction. Formerly a reporter with *The Globe and Mail* and parliamentary correspondent for *The Winnipeg Free Press*, Hill also speaks French and Spanish. He has lived and worked across Canada, in Baltimore, and in Spain and France. He is an honorary patron of Crossroads International, for which he travelled as a volunteer to the West African countries Niger, Cameroon and Mali, and to which he lends the name of his best-known character for the Aminata Fund, which supports programs for girls and women in Africa. Hill is also a member of the Council of Patrons of the Black Loyalist Heritage Society, and of the Advisory Council of Book Clubs for Inmates and is an honorary patron of Project Bookmark Canada. He has a B.A. in economics from Laval University in Quebec City and an M.A. in writing from Johns Hopkins University in



Baltimore and has received four honorary doctorates from Canadian universities. Hill lives in Hamilton, Ontario and in Woody Point, Newfoundland with his family.

Source: Author's website (<http://lawrencehill.com/>)

About this book:

The Book of Negroes — published in some countries as *Someone Knows My Name* and in French as *Aminata* — won several awards, including The Rogers/Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, both CBC Radio's Canada Reads and Radio Canada's Le Combat des livres, and The Commonwealth Prize for Best Book, which came with a private audience with Queen Elizabeth II. The Book of Negroes television miniseries, which Lawrence Hill co-wrote with director Clement Virgo, was filmed in South Africa and Canada and aired on CBC early 2015.

Abducted as an 11-year-old child from her village in West Africa and forced to walk for months to the sea in a coffle—a string of slaves— Aminata Diallo is sent to live as a slave in South Carolina. But years later, she forges her way to freedom, serving the British in the Revolutionary War and registering her name in the historic “Book of Negroes.” This book, an actual document, provides a short but immensely revealing record of freed Loyalist slaves who requested permission to leave the US for resettlement in Nova Scotia, only to find that the haven they sought was steeped in an oppression all of its own.

Aminata's eventual return to Sierra Leone—passing ships carrying thousands of slaves bound for America—is an engrossing account of an obscure but important chapter in history that saw 1,200 former slaves embark on a harrowing back-to-Africa odyssey. Lawrence Hill is a master at transforming the neglected corners of history into brilliant imaginings, as engaging and revealing as only the best historical fiction can be.

Source: HarperCollins Canada(<http://www.harpercollins.ca/>) & Author's website (<http://lawrencehill.com/>)



Discussion Questions:

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. Aminata longs for her home. What is the meaning of home in the novel, and how does the meaning change as the novel progresses?



7. What does the novel tell us about survival? Which characters fare best and why?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?
11. What lessons does Aminata's tale hold for us in today's world?

Source: LitLovers (<http://www.litlovers.com/>)

Other formats available at Halifax Public Libraries:

- DVD (Adaptation)
- eBook
- French
- Illustrated book