

**My Name is Phillis Wheatley: A Story of Slavery and  
Freedom  
and  
My Name is Henry Bibb: A Story of Slavery and Freedom  
Afua Cooper  
Kids Can Press, Toronto, 2009**

It is not surprising that authors are drawn to stories about the power of the written word. Especially amongst those who write fiction for young adults, there seems to be a passion to inspire readers through examples of how literacy empowers us to learn, communicate and overcome barriers. Afua Cooper, a Jamaican-born Canadian historian, author and poet, recently entered the forum of children's literature with two such works.

Last year she released two historical novels for the young adult audience, *My Name is Henry Bibb: A Story of Slavery and Freedom* and *My Name is Phillis Wheatley: A Story of Slavery and Freedom*. Both are published by Kids Can Press. Each is a fictionalized account of the early-life experiences of a child raised in slavery who would achieve public prominence through their use of language, albeit in quite different ways.

Henry Bibb was a 19<sup>th</sup> century African American orator and writer. After many attempts to escape slavery in Kentucky, he made his way to Michigan and eventually Canada. He wrote a popular autobiography about his experiences as a slave and founded a newspaper, the *Voice of the Fugitive*. Born in 1753, Phillis Wheatley was abducted from her home in West Africa as a child and brought to Boston. Ill and near death upon arrival, she was bought as a domestic servant for the sympathetic Mrs. Wheatley. Whereas Henry risked his life to learn to read and write while living in cruel physical conditions, Phillis' interest in literature was nurtured and promoted by the Wheatley family. She would become the first Black woman in American history to publish a book: a collection of poetry. Henry achieved recognition as an escaped slave who used the written word to advocate for abolitionism; Phillis rose to fame as a published poet while still a slave.

Although Phillis is the quieter of the two characters, her story is in some ways the more moving. Cooper writes with sensitivity of the tension she imagines Phillis must have felt between loving her owners and knowing they could never accept her as equal, as well as the lonely dichotomy of being considered too good to associate with other slaves, and yet still be a slave herself. This is illustrated poignantly in passages such as these:

“The only thing that does not make you White, Phillis, is your skin,” my mistress remarked with pride and a little disappointment. I had felt flattered by my mistress's words, until their full meaning hit me like a stone. (p. 88)

Loneliness would be the price I had to pay for becoming a learned woman. The Wheatleys poured their knowledge into me, and my enforced separation from my fellows began. (p. 76)

Loneliness was not new. It had been a part of me since I was dragged from Africa. But, over time, it had subsided and lodged itself in a small place inside me. Now it rose and threatened to crush me....I, who had written elegies for many of Boston's dead, was now struck mute on the passing of my mistress, the woman who gave me my voice. (p. 136)

Such tension even exists in the title of this story, rather ironically, for she arrives in Boston as Penda Wane but upon purchase is given the last name of her owners. As a first name they select that of the slave ship which brought her from Africa. Her name is no longer her own, representing, quite literally, a loss of freedom. Cooper's Phillis revels in the act of writing and the acclaim she receives from a mostly white high society audience, but finds her authorship is doubted due to her youth and the colour of her skin. She remains dependent on the patronage of her owners despite her success.

Henry's struggle against oppression was a harsher and less ambiguous one. He was born into slavery, his mother a slave and his father a white state senator. Hired out by his Master at the age of nine, Henry was forced to leave his mother and brothers to work for various slave holders, none of them kind. He frequently attempts to escape but is caught and returned each time. He eventually marries. Upon learning his wife is pregnant Henry again becomes determined to free himself and his family. His story is inspiring not only because he overcame great hardship to then advocate for others, but also for his indefatigable, if often frustrated, efforts to reunite his family.

Phillis Wheatley and Henry Bibb were foundational contributors to African- American and African-Canadian literature respectively. In her novels, Cooper expands upon the known facts about these figures, to depict them as young adults finding their way. The first-person narrative personalizes these stories and they are written in a smart, but accessible style. With her expertise as an historian and poet, one can trust that these novels include valuable lessons about the past while capturing the essence of the main characters. It has been written that Cooper was inspired to write children's literature by her own childhood experiences discovering stories in public libraries. It seems fitting then that her work may in turn inspire today's young readers.

[www.afuacooper.com](http://www.afuacooper.com)  
[www.kidscanpress.com](http://www.kidscanpress.com)

Biography: Afua Cooper holds a Ph.D. in Canadian history and the African Diaspora and is a recognized authority on the history of Black peoples in Canada. Her best known book is the award-winning *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Slavery in Canada and the Burning of Old Montréal* (HarperCollins, 2006). She has also written five books of poetry, the latest of which is *Copper Woman and Other Poems* (Natural Heritage Press, 2006).



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**Book Reviews**

**Peter Meyler, Cindy Newton, Sarina Ryan**