

# The Book of Negroes

## Lawrence Hill

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When I first heard of Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes*, I thought that it was a republishing of the list of Africans leaving New York City at the close of the American Revolution. I later learned that it was actually a novel and a novel that has won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize as the Best Book of 2008. The story, in a word, is breathtaking.

The book spans the life of an African woman. "I am Aminata Diallo, daughter of Mamadu Diallo and Sira Kulibali, born in the village of Bayo, three moons by foot from the Grain Coast in West Africa. I am a Bamana. And a Fula. I am both. ... I suspect that I was born in 1745, or close to it. And I am writing this account. All of it." (p. 4) Her life is vividly portrayed from her beginnings in sub-Saharan Africa, through her enslavement in the Gullah speaking islands of the Carolinas, to her search for a passage back home by way of New York City, Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, and on to her time in England when her "hair has mostly fallen out now, and the remaining strands are grey, still curled, tight to my head, and I don't fuss with them." (p. 5)

Lawrence Hill's research is impeccable and he makes the characters convincingly real. What amazes me most about the writing is the incredible attention to detail paid to the everyday items and events portrayed throughout the novel. This is not a mean feat. The book covers a tremendous time period and deals with a number of cultures and locations, including making tea in West Africa: "Mama and I watched as Papa used the thick, folded leaves from a banana plant to remove the teapot from three burning sticks. He lifted the lid that rose on mysterious hinges and used a whittled stick to scrape honey from a comb into the bubbling tea." (p. 9); preparing indigo vats in Carolina: "The roof was just for shade, and under it were rectangular vats made of cypress. There were six of them, in two rows of three, and they stank of urine. ... Mamed handed me pine needles and a brush. He showed me how to climb into the vats, dip the brush in lye and water and scrub the wood." (p. 131) Also described is the hardscrabble life in Nova Scotia: "My first winter in Nova Scotia, disease streaked through Birchtown. When the land was too frozen to dig, the dead went straight into the bog. The living took the clothes of the dead, and prayed that when their time own time was up, it would come in the warmer months when soft ground would permit a decent burial." (p. 325)

*The Book of Negroes* highlights many events that happened to Africans enslaved in the Americas. These include the omnipresent rape, torture and the destruction of families. Also portrayed are the unrelenting duties that routinely made up a slave's life: "Snake-biting, bee-stinging, bug-crawling, no good dirty work." (p. 132) Hill manages to show the complex intertwining of Africans, African Americans, their white oppressors and their white supporters in North American society. The tension that grew between newly arrived slaves and American born slaves is shown. The animosity of the abolitionists and slave-owners, both using

the Bible as the foundation for their beliefs, was evident. In the midst of this ever changing world is thrown Aminata Diallo.

As a slave girl in the British American colonies, she clings to the memory of her mother's calm and capable voice and her father kneeling in prayer to Allah. But, as for many Africans, past rituals and customs began to fade from their new slave lives. "At home even during Ramadan, when we fasted during daylight for a full moon, praying came easily. But in the toubabu's land I couldn't pray by myself. Praying inside my head felt lonely and futile. As the nights came and went, thoughts of Allah faded." (p. 107) However, in her mind and heart is the desire to return home.

The book is fiction, but the title is based on the list of people of African descent who escaped through New York City as the American rebels were taking over at the close of the American revolutionary war. The original *Book of Negroes* listed the names and details of 3,000 men, women and children who sailed from New York to safe British territories.

*The Book of Negroes* tells an engrossing tale of the life of one small girl whose life encompasses a wealth of experiences. These experiences, although fictional, provide an insight into the often misunderstood world of North American slavery. The typical view of slavery in popular culture has been that of docile slaves working on large southern plantations. This insight into the actual life of Africans during slavery is important if we are to understand our history and the problems, such as racial distrust and poverty, which are the legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.



**Peter Meyler**