

LAWRENCE HILL: CHANGING THE WORLD ONE WORD AT A TIME

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There are few people that wield as much power as a storyteller does. Warriors of pen and paper, storytellers have the power to change the course of history. Lawrence Hill is one such storyteller. His words have inspired and educated many people about the history of black Canadians and Americans, and motivated them to become active in the fight to end racism.

Of course, no passionate activist is created in a vacuum. Born in Newmarket, Ontario, in 1957 of a marriage between a white woman and a black man, Lawrence Hill was likely inspired by his parents. Donna M. Hill and Daniel G. Hill were both human rights activists. Hill's father was the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, and his mother worked with the Toronto Labour Committee for Human Rights. Apart from his mother's fair skin and his father's curls, Lawrence Hill also inherited their passion for equality 1.

Lawrence Hill is not one to sit still. Throughout the course of his writing career, he has published ten novels, both fiction and nonfiction, most of which explore the themes of racial identity, segregation, and the history of slavery. Perhaps his most acclaimed novel, and my personal favourite, is his 2007 novel, *The Book of Negroes* 2.

The Book of Negroes is a story of triumph, but also of loss. It continually reminds me that most stories of slavery and racism do not end in happiness, but in heartbreak. This novel follows the main character, Aminata Diallo, as she is taken from Africa into slavery, escapes to Canada, journeys back to Africa and then to England to help abolitionists end the slave trade. However, even when she is free, Aminata is still hurt by the deep social divide between the black and the white.

The Book of Negroes is proof that Lawrence Hill is acutely aware of the difference between *knowing* and *understanding*. It does not take a well-educated person to know that slavery was horrible. To *understand* this, on the other hand, is much more difficult. Lawrence Hill creates characters in his writing that readers cannot only relate to, but also characters that readers can live through. When someone loses a child in Hill's books, or is attacked by the Klu Klux Klan, it is not just the character's loss, but also the reader's. Painting pictures with his words, Hill shows his readers that slavery and racism can beat even the strongest person black and blue - both physically and emotionally.

As a Canadian, I often tout the fact that many slaves found their freedom in my country. However, we Canadians often choose to ignore the fact that although slavery was formally abolished in 1833, racial tensions continued to hurt the black community long after that. In his writing, Lawrence Hill highlights the relationship between the black and white communities in British North America. The abolition of slavery was only the beginning of a long healing process between black and white Canadians.

Lawrence Hill has shown the shortcomings of modern society when it comes to racial tensions. His works are a reminder that it is now up to my generation to bring to completion a long process of reconciliation between the black and white communities in Canada.

Is this impossible? No. Difficult? Yes.

Luckily, Lawrence Hill has encrypted some instructions to us. In his books, efforts to end slavery and racism are never successfully approached by one race alone. It is always through the voices of black and white together that true change occurs. It is up to my generation to take this advice.

Using the power of his quill, Lawrence Hill continues to do his part when it comes to ending racism. Though genetically only half black, he is fully involved in the fight to end racism. Hill's generation is one of many past generations of both black and white Canadians that has made it their life's labour to erase skin colour from our social passports. Now it's my generation's turn.

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