



THE
STORYTELLER

Lawrence
Hill

Author **To celebrated author Lawrence Hill,
great tales are the key to understanding
who we are**

by
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Author Lawrence Hill believes that we look to our stories to understand ourselves—especially in times of crisis.

Born in 1957 and raised in a mixed race family within the predominantly white suburb of Don Mills in the '60s, Hill struggled to define himself. It was the need to cope with and understand his background that led him to explore writing. "I had to work to develop a sense of who I was," says the author, who grew up with a black father and white mother who immigrated to Toronto from Washington, DC. It's not surprising to him that both he and his brother, singer and songwriter Dan Hill, became artists as a means of grappling with their experiences of identity and belonging.

The family's contributions are profound, with the late Daniel Grafton Hill serving as the first director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission and Ombudsman of Ontario, while mother Donna fought for the enactment of anti-discrimination legislation in Ontario. "I was lucky to have parents who were passionate about the things they did," he says. "They taught me to not stop looking until you've found something that lights a flame in your soul."

His first passion was running, with a childhood dream to win the Olympic gold medal in the 5,000 metre event. Hill's track coach and mentor, David Steen, also worked as a reporter for the *Toronto Star*, and introduced the teen to the excitement of a daily newspaper. But at only 15, his Olympic dreams were dashed when he realized he lacked the requisite lung capacity. "That failure was a great thing for me," says Hill, now the author of 10 books, "because out of it was born a decision to redirect all those energies into writing."

It also taught him the value of doing something for its own sake. "You shouldn't be writing because you long to have a bestseller," says Hill, "You should be writing because the process makes you feel fully alive and engaged with the things that you care about." And it was that desire to fully comprehend Canada's black history that inspired the memoirist and best-selling author to write about Africa.

In 1979, he made his first of several trips to West Africa as a volunteer with Crossroads International, an organization he supports to this day. What proved most striking to him was the way ordinary people who had next to nothing still made room in their lives for laughter. "It taught me to embrace more exuberantly the life that I had around me in Canada." Hill graduated with a BA in Economics from Laval University and later received his MA from John Hopkins University. He worked as a journalist for *The Globe and Mail* and the *Winnipeg Free Press*, and eventually found his legs as a fiction writer while living abroad in Spain.

It was 2007's *The Book of Negroes* that catapulted the award-winning author to international recognition, becoming one of the best-selling novels ever by a Canadian writer. Having discovered the basis for the incredible story on his parents' bookshelf years before, Hill was astonished it hadn't already been the subject of a novel or a film. "I'm hoping the book inspires people to think more deeply and to imagine more fully what a life of slavery might have looked like."

With the Order of Canada and the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal among his distinguished honours, it was the Commonwealth Writer's Prize that offered the opportunity to publish his work internationally and in numerous translations.

As Lawrence Hill is inducted into Canada's Walk of Fame, he continues to be celebrated for his contributions to the fabric of culture in Canada. Earning this recognition drives him to keep provoking and challenging with his work. He is currently writing the screenplay adaptation of his novel, *The Illegal*, and working on a new novel.

"I'd like to be remembered as somebody who brought a new awareness and a new imagination of our history to Canadians," says Hill as he reflects on his legacy. "If we can pay attention to the stories that have either not already been told or not yet entered our public consciousness, we will be a richer nation."

