The Book of Negroes
by Lawrence Hill

SEPTEMBER 2014
DISCUSSION GUIDE
Welcome Book Club members!

When the Amnesty Book Club was first launched, the Book Club team members had in mind what the ideal book club selection would be. It would:

- Be a fascinating story, wide in scope and peopled by a complex and amazing array of characters
- Engage both the mind and the emotions
- Have a strong human rights component
- Provoke thoughtful and wide-ranging discussion.

We have been very fortunate in this, our first year, to have had great guest readers who have made great book recommendations which have all met these criteria.

Over the summer it’s been challenging to get a guest reader, so we decided to listen to a number of our book club members. They have been sending in suggestions for books they want us to read together and we have chosen *The Book of Negroes* by Lawrence Hill for our September book.

This book captures a little known piece of history, while laying bare the cruel practice of slavery. The range of issues it raises includes not only slavery but human trafficking, violence against women, racial discrimination, hypocrisy, greed and more.

The action we have chosen to focus on is how, more than 200 years after the story told in *The Book of Negroes*, women in West Africa are still having their rights violated, this time through forced evictions.

Our October book will be *Ru* by Kim Thúy, as recommended by guest reader Claire Cameron. The discussion guide will be sent to you in early October.

Thank you for taking part in the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with questions, suggestions or comments. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

*The Book Club Team*

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**About Amnesty International**

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than three million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person’s voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 1H9.
About this month’s author
Lawrence Hill

Lawrence Hill is the author of nine books, including The Book of Negroes, winner of many prestigious awards including The Commonwealth Writers’ Prize, the Rogers Writers’ Trust Fiction Prize, and both the English and French Canadian versions of CBC Radio’s Canada Reads.

He travelled across Canada to deliver the 2013 Massey Lectures, based on his new non-fiction book Blood: The Stuff of Life (House of Anansi Press). His other books include the novels Any Known Blood and Some Great Thing. In his non-fiction he has written:

- The Deserter’s Tale: The Story of an Ordinary Soldier who Walked Away from the War in Iraq (with Joshua Key)
- Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada
- Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Negro Women’s Association

Lawrence is currently finishing a new novel and has co-written the adaptation for a six-part television miniseries of The Book of Negroes. The miniseries was filmed in South Africa and Nova Scotia and will air this winter on CBC in Canada and on BET in the USA.

He volunteers with Crossroads International, Book Clubs for Inmates and the Black Loyalist Heritage Society, and lives with his wife and five children in Hamilton, Ontario.


September 2014 Book:
The Book of Negroes

Interview with
Lawrence Hill

Amnesty International Book Club: What prompted you to write The Book of Negroes?

Lawrence Hill: I was motivated to write a novel that would give the reader a chance to look beyond the stereotypes of slavery – chains, and faceless victims – and see a woman, in all of her mundane and worldly struggles. I also was excited to dramatize the story of the Black Loyalists of Nova Scotia and to dramatize two fascinating but mostly forgotten elements of Black history in North America: 1) that 3,000 African-Americans had fled New York City at the tail end of the Revolutionary War and, after having their names entered into the historic British naval ledger known as “The Book of Negroes”, had sailed to Nova Scotia. And 2) That after ten years of living with the broken promises of the British in Nova Scotia, 1,200 of the Black Loyalists sailed in 15 ships leaving Halifax harbour on January 15, 1792 and went to found the colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone. This constituted the first massive exodus of peoples of African heritage who were leaving the Americas to return to the mother continent.

AI-BC: The acknowledgements in the novel show that you did a tremendous amount of research for it. How long did it take you to frame and write the novel?

LH: I thought about the novel for ten or so years before setting pen to paper – during which time I wrote my first five books. But the active time of work on the novel, in terms of researching, writing and revising took five years.

AI-BC: You chose a girl/woman to be the lead character in the novel. Why did you choose to tell the story from a woman’s point of view? What were the challenges in doing that?

LH: At first I was terrified: would I be able to write credibly in the voice of a girl and a woman? But I never contemplated writing the novel from a boy’s
or man’s point of view. I wanted to write a work of fiction that stood on the shoulders of the slave narrative tradition, and that told the story of someone who would have to lose a great deal, all the while continuing to be a midwife to other women who kept on having their own babies. A woman’s face, voice and situation presented itself to me from my very first thoughts about the novel, so I chose to follow my creative instincts.

AI-BC: The Book of Negroes has become a television mini-series which you co-wrote. What were the challenges in adapting the story to a new and different medium?

LH: There were many challenges. One challenge was to find a way to condense and also to revise and even re-imagine the story, so that it could be dramatized effectively on television. Another challenge was to deal with the violence, the horrors and even the nudity depicted in the novel. A little bit of violence goes a long way on television, and we did not want to overwhelm or assault the viewers with too much. On the other hand, it was mandatory to respect the core of the novel, and to show the unrelenting hardship of Aminata’s life. A third challenge was to re-envisage the trajectory of the secondary characters. No secondary character gets to follow Aminata for too long in the novel, but we felt that it was necessary to give Aminata opportunities to hang onto some of her relationships for a little longer than she could in the novel, and we also had to find another way to imagine the end game for Aminata’s husband Chekura. He dies off stage in the novel, but you can’t have an important character dying offstage on television.

AI-BC: What are you working on now and when can we expect the next work from Lawrence Hill?

LH: Last fall, I brought out a non-fiction book called Blood: the Stuff of Life; which formed the basis of the 2013 Massey Lectures which I delivered across Canada. Currently, I am working on a new novel. It has been too long! I hope to finish up the current draft at the end of September, and then we will be into edits. If all goes well, it should be out in a year or two.
1. When Aminata is on the slave ship, surrounded by horror, she repeats to herself, “Be a djeli (storyteller)”. How does this help her survive mentally and physically? What part does storytelling play in the novel?

2. Thomas Wolfe wrote that “You can’t go home again”. Throughout the novel, Aminata longs for “home”. How does the meaning of home change during the novel? How do Aminata’s feelings toward home change? What did Wolfe mean by his statement?

3. *The Book of Negroes* is written by a man, yet is told from a woman’s point of view. How successful was Lawrence Hill in capturing the essence of a woman? Can you think of anything he might have missed?

4. Aminata is only eleven when she is kidnapped and sold into slavery. What part does her youth play in helping her to survive, compared to others who are driven mad by their condition?

5. On the slave ship, Chekura and many other slaves ask Aminata to say their names out loud, because it is important to them that “Someone knows my name.” Why would they want someone to know their names? What does “a name” mean in slave circumstances? In other circumstances?

6. Some people objected to the title of this book and it was published in the United States, Australia and New Zealand under the title *Someone Knows My Name*. How do you feel about this objection? Should the title have been changed?

7. Aminata has a complex relationship with the abolitionists. “The abolitionists call me their equal and say that we all conspire to end tyranny against mankind...then why – I begin to ask. But they don’t let me finish...I can’t be expected to grasp the details in their complexity. We need a human face for our fight, and here you are. A woman. An African.” (page 80.) How do you feel about the abolitionists appropriating Aminata to further their cause? Are the abolitionists using Aminata as a pawn to further their political goals? Do they value her as an equal? Was it wrong for Aminata to agree to work with them?

8. Lindo says to Aminata, “I am not a white man. I am a Jew, and that is very different. You and I are both outsiders”. What does he mean by that? How are their situations different? The same? Who else is an outsider in the novel?

9. In what ways is this novel relevant to North American society today? What is the legacy of slavery?

10. This novel covers a wide sweep of history and takes place on three continents. Yet primarily it is the story of one individual. Can you think of any other works of fiction that cover that wide a scope yet focus on the personal?

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Discussion questions from Amnesty International’s campaign team

1. In the novel, King Jimmy pressures John Clarkson to pay him for the use of Temne lands. King Jimmy’s men did not accept the terms under which the British claimed they had purchased African land. Can you think of other contemporary examples of disputed land ‘purchases’?

2. “I hated myself for doing nothing to help the captives escape their wretched confines. I tried to tell myself I was powerless to free them, but in truth, the mere sight of them made me feel complicit and guilty.” (page 305) What are some contemporary examples of powerlessness in the face of injustice? How does Aminata manage her guilt? What resources does she have to help her stand up to injustice?

3. “I wouldn’t wish beauty on any woman who has not her own freedom and who chooses not the hands that claim her.” (page 11) How does this comment reflect the challenges of women in society today?
In *The Book of Negroes*, Aminata has a burning desire to be free, to be the author of her own fortune. She pursues that dream even when it means leaving the “security” of slavery for an unpredictable and harsh life of poverty and hard work. Millions around the world today still share her predicament.

The first international Convention which defined slavery and the slave trade and committed governments to abolishing slavery was adopted by the League of Nations (predecessor of the United Nations) in 1926.¹

The Slavery Convention’s definition of slavery was broadened to include forced or compulsory labour in 1930.

The International Labour Organization estimates that almost 21 million people are currently victims of forced labour.

The 2013 Global Slavery Index reported there are approximately 29 million people held in modern slavery.²

**Slavery in 2014**

Modern slavery takes many forms, and is known by many names: slavery, forced labour or human trafficking.

- ‘Slavery’ refers to the condition of treating another person as if they were property – something to be bought, sold, traded or even destroyed.
- ‘Forced labour’ is a related but not identical concept, referring to work taken without consent, by threats or coercion.

¹ [www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx](http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx)
‘Human trafficking’ is another related concept, referring to the process through which people are brought, through deception, threats or coercion, into slavery, forced labour or other forms of severe exploitation.

Whatever term is used, the significant characteristic of all forms of modern slavery is that it involves one person depriving another person of their freedom:

- freedom to leave one job for another
- freedom to leave one workplace for another
- freedom to control their own body, for their own personal or commercial benefit.

**Forced evictions**

As a child, Aminata Diallo is forcibly taken from her home in West Africa and sent into a hostile world where she has to fight to be recognized for who she is - a strong self-assured and highly intelligent woman. Despite the wrongs she suffers time and again, she perseveres in seeking rights and justice for those who are believed to have no rights and no right to justice. She refuses to give up the belief that all humans must be treated equally. Aminata is not prepared to make compromises.

Women in West Africa today continue to display Aminata’s determination to fight for freedom, equality and control in their lives as they face off against seemingly insurmountable powers which deny them their basic human rights and dignity.

In Nigeria, despite massive oil reserves and recent plans for rapid socio-economic development, about 60 percent of the Nigerian population lives at, or below the poverty line. The average income is US$1 per day. The problems facing this group include:

- widespread poverty
- rapid urbanization
- exponential population growth
- lack of enforcement of legal instruments
- high levels of crime and corruption.

This toxic mix increases the vulnerability of Nigerians – particularly women and children – to various forms of modern slavery, including forced labour and sexual exploitation. (Source: Global Slavery)

Amnesty International has documented other serious human rights abuses in Nigeria, including forced evictions and illegal demolitions. Tens of thousands of Nigerians have been torn from their homes as a result of mass demolitions undertaken by Nigerian authorities.

Like international laws which prohibit slavery, there are international laws which protect the right to adequate housing. These laws require states to provide an effective remedy to those whose right to adequate housing has been violated. Poverty is not an excuse to violate human rights.

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3 www.globalslaveryindex.org
The rights of residents of Badia East in Lagos, Nigeria were violated when they were wrenched from their homes without notice or access to a remedy. On February 23, 2013 the Lagos state government sent bulldozers into Badia East and demolished at least 266 structures that served as homes and businesses. Overnight thousands of people lost their homes and means of livelihood. The rights of those who lived in the community were ignored by the Nigerian government in its effort to undertake an urban renewal project.

Badia East is an informal settlement and ‘slum’. Those living in the community did not have documents to show they were entitled to live there, but some had been staying on that land for 40 years. The residents who were forcibly evicted were to be beneficiaries of a World Bank funded project intended to increase access to basic services for the wider Badia community.

The demolitions in Badia East constituted a forced eviction which violates the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), a treaty to which Nigeria is a party.

**Please take action**

During a research mission to Badia East, Amnesty International met 55 year old Bimbo Omowole Osobe, one of those who lost her home. She has lived in Badia East since 1973, in a concrete block house which she inherited from an uncle, with her four children and 10 tenants. She also operated two shops and sold mineral drinks and water. Her shops were also demolished, leaving her without a livelihood. As a result, she was forced to send her children away to live in other communities. They were all in school before the demolition, but afterwards they could not go to school.

Bimbo Omowole Osobe was left to sleep out in the open, on the ground, under a net. When it rained she had to stand up and wait for the rain to stop.

“You know when a woman loses her child, you know how she feels? That is how I can compare what happened that day.”—Bimbo Omowole Osobe

Despite the difficult circumstances, Bimbo became a key member of the community that with support from Amnesty International continues to call for remedies.
for the violations they have suffered. They are calling on the government to give them compensation to allow them to rent or rebuild homes and businesses. They want to continue living in the area where they have already invested so much.

**Legal safeguards**

There are legal and procedural safeguards under international human rights law and standards which protect people and communities from forced evictions. Evictions may be carried out only as a last resort, once all other feasible alternatives have been explored and only after appropriate procedural and legal safeguards are in place. These include:

- genuine consultation with the affected people
- prior adequate and reasonable notice
- adequate alternative housing
- compensation for all losses
- safeguards on how evictions are carried out
- access to legal remedies and procedures, including access to legal aid where necessary.

Forced evictions shatter lives; people not only lose their homes, but also their possessions and jobs. Children are forced out of school and parents are forced out of work.

Following the forced eviction in Badia East, the World Bank intervened with the Lagos state government. The government agreed in April 2013 to provide the affected people with compensation under a Resettlement Action Plan (RAP), in line with the World Bank’s policy on involuntary resettlement and approved by the World Bank. Nine months after the forced eviction the Lagos state government produced a RAP, under which it offered to give affected people limited financial assistance instead of compensation for their losses.

Amnesty International believes the process of preparing the RAP was deeply flawed. Many residents of Badia East remain homeless and without a source of livelihood. There is an ongoing threat that others in Lagos state may also be forcibly evicted. Amnesty International has called on the World Bank to ask the Lagos state government to adequately compensate affected people and to strengthen its own safeguard policies to prevent human rights violations in the projects it funds.

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**TAKE ACTION NOW**

**Call on the Governor of Lagos State to:**

- **Urgently provide adequate alternative housing** to all people from Badia East who were forcibly evicted in February 2013 and are still homeless.
- **Provide adequate and full compensation** to all affected people for all losses whether or not they have land title or building permits.
- **Adopt a state level moratorium on mass evictions** until adequate legal and procedural safeguards are in place to ensure that all evictions comply with international human rights standards and national laws.
- **Introduce a bill** in the Lagos State House of Assembly that explicitly **prohibits forced evictions and sets out safeguards** that must be strictly followed before any eviction is carried out. The bill should be based on the UN Basic Principles and Guidelines on Development-based Evictions and Displacement and comply with international human rights standards.

**Send your letter to:**

Mr. Babatunde Raji Fashola SAN  
Governor of Lagos State  
Governor’s Office  
State Government Secretariat  
Alausa, Ikeja  
Lagos State  
Nigeria

**Salutation:** Your Excellency
Ru by Kim Thúy
Recommended by guest reader Claire Cameron, author of The Bear

Ru tells the story of an unforgettable journey from a palatial residence in Saigon to a crowded and muddy Malaysian refugee camp, and onward to a new life in Quebec. There, the young female narrator feels the embrace of a new community, and revels in the chance to be part of the American Dream. As an adult, the waters become rough again: as a mother of two sons, she must learn to shape her love around the younger boy’s autism. Moving seamlessly from past to present, from history to memory and back again, Ru celebrates life in all its wonder: its moments of beauty and sensuality, brutality and sorrow, comfort and comedy.

Join the conversation!
Now there are two ways you can register your opinions about The Book of Negroes and discuss the issues with others.

One, go back to where you downloaded the Discussion Guide and add your comments in the Discussion Area.

New! We’re on Goodreads
Goodreads is a website where book lovers go to share ideas and recommendations about books. And now, the Amnesty International Book Club has its own group on the site.

To join the conversation and register your views, go to www.goodreads.com. Sign in to your account or sign up for one. (You can also sign in using your Facebook account.)

Once you’re signed in, select “Groups” from the drop-down list under “Explore” at the top of the screen. Click on “Find groups” and type: “Amnesty International Bookclub”.

Click on the group name, then on the button that says “Join Group”. Then choose your group discussion email settings. It’s that simple!

Be one of the first to join and share your opinions about the books we read!

More About These Issues

Amnesty International
If you love your life, move out! Nigeria: Forced Evictions in Badia East, Lagos State. August 2013

At the mercy of the government: Violation of the right to an effective remedy in Badia East, Lagos State, Nigeria. 19 August 2014.

www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AFr44/024/2013/en

Other sources
Slavery Convention:
www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx

Global Slavery:
www.globalslaveryindex.org