

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

IDENTITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND FANTASY IN *BEATRICE AND CROC HARRY*:

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB CONVERSATION WITH LAWRENCE HILL*

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INTRODUCTION

When Lawrence Hill's *Beatrice and Croc Harry*—his first book for young readers in which he ventures into fantasy, drawing from the oral African storytelling patterns and ethics—was published in January 2022, it appeared as a perfect subject for the monthly book meetings of The Ottawa Black Book Club. Excited by the richness of the book, the Nigerian Canadian writer Olunosen Louisa Ibhaze quickly set in motion the process of hosting Hill as a special guest writer at the club's monthly meetings. It was not difficult getting members of the book club to agree with the choice of Hill and his refreshing new book for the August meeting.

Established in 2019, The Ottawa Black Book Club is a collective of readers and writers interested in liberating the powers of books and engaging their authors in ways

that inspire deep reflections on the ideas that informed their writing. The Ottawa Black Book Club meets on the last Saturday of every month. Its objectives are to create a safe space for multicultural booklovers interested in *melanating*, decolonizing, and diversifying bookshelves, and also shaping African and black narratives through reading books by authors of African and black descent. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst that led to the book club going virtual and opening its doors to a global membership with its roots still in the city of Ottawa. The monthly meetings have offered a platform to have great conversations with authors who are happy to speak about the key issues and black experiences they write about.

Held virtually on a summer afternoon in August, the conversation with Hill was lively. Participants explored issues of race and identity underlying *Beatrice and Croc Harry*, as well as its rootedness in Afrofuturism. The conversation afforded Hill the opportunity to shed light on his complex identity as a thinker writing the black Canadian story in a white background while focusing on identity, social justice, and fantasy in *Beatrice and Croc Harry*. Present that afternoon were the regular members of the book club, with a guest appearance by Nduka Otiono, co-author of this contribution. Hill's popularity with members of The Ottawa Black Book Club was driven in part by his rich oeuvre, which includes his acclaimed novel *The Book of Negroes*, published in 2007, at a point in his career when he felt he needed to intervene in black history. But more specifically, members of the book club were keen to hear from him about his exploration of identity, race, friendship, social justice, and colourism, amongst many other poignant themes in *Beatrice and Croc Harry*.

Hill's background, dating to 1992, when he began his career as a novelist with the publication of *Some Great Thing*, also appealed to members of the book club. *Some Great Thing* follows the story of Mahatma Grafton, who, disillusioned after four years of college, goes back to his hometown of Winnipeg to work as a reporter for a local newspaper. His investigations bring him in contact with all kinds of people, from immigrants to activists, and he finds himself becoming deeply involved in civil rights movements, race, and social activism. The novel also dramatizes the intricacies of the inner workings of a newspaper's editorial desk. *Some Great Thing* is in many ways a *roman-à-clef*, with many autobiographical riffs on Hill's own life and family. Its structure is somewhat loose, but its themes are well-intentioned.

Hill is no newcomer to activism. In 1979 he volunteered for Crossroads International, a Canadian organization that supports programs for women and girls. He has since volunteered in countries such as Niger, Cameroon, and Mali. In 2010, Hill founded the Aminata Fund, named after the main character of his most famous novel, which was put in place as part of Crossroads International's volunteer efforts in Africa.

Hill's parents, American immigrants to the small town of Newmarket, Ontario, Canada, were very visible in the Canadian black and mixed community of the 1960s and 1970s. Hill's father, Dr. Daniel Grafton Hill, was a prominent sociologist, civil servant, and activist who served as the Ombudsman of Ontario and later became the

director of the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Daniel Hill founded the Ontario Black History society and, in 1981, published his seminal work *The Freedom Seekers: Blacks in Early Canada*. This trail of authorship, achievement, and community visibility occurs in the family. Daniel Hill's own father and grandfather (Lawrence Hill's grandfather and great-grandfather) were university-educated ministers of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Hill's mother, Donna Mae Bender, who comes from a white Republican family in Illinois, graduated from Oberlin College and was working as a secretary for a US Senator and as a civil rights activist in Washington, DC when she met her husband. They married in 1953 and moved to Canada, where Donna Hill began to expand her involvement in civil rights through her work with the City of Toronto's Labour Committee for Human Rights, lobbying the Ontario government for the enactment of anti-discrimination laws. In 1980 she published *A Black Man's Toronto, 1914-1980: The Reminiscences of Harry Gairey*.

Growing up in the white suburb of Don Mills, Lawrence Hill was greatly influenced by his intellectual and activism-conscious parents' multiracial marriage and approach to life. Thus, when he quit his job as a reporter to become a full-time writer, his first novel also mirrored his personal experiences up to that point. After graduating with a degree in Economics from Laval University in Quebec City and moving to the United States for a Master's degree in writing at Johns Hopkins University, Hill worked for a while as a full-time newspaper reporter for *The Globe and Mail* and *The Winnipeg Free Press*. His protagonist in *Some Great Thing* experienced all the whirlwinds of Hill's early journalistic life and a bit of his family's activism. In the world of writing where young writers are constantly admonished to "write what you know," it is not especially surprising that Hill paid heed to this advice. He would always start his works from a place of "knowing," which explains how the subject of his first published work of fiction in 1979, a short story titled "My Side of the Fence," closely replicates his experience of working in Niger for Crossroads International.

By the time Hill set his sight on writing *The Book of Negroes*, he had greatly matured as a writer and had published four more books since his first, three of which were nonfiction variously focusing on the history of Afro-Canadians (in *Trials and Triumphs: The Story of African-Canadians*), early women organizing in Canada (in *Women of Vision: The Story of the Canadian Negro Women's Association*), and a personal memoir of being multiracial in Canada (*Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*). As always, these three nonfiction books had first developed from his life as a black Canadian, from his mother's activism, and from being the child of black and white parents.

Hill's rich experience and willingness to research, a habit that he must have developed from his reporting days, underlined his seriousness in the vocation of writing and gave his books substantial intellectual rigour. His travels—at some point in his career he lived in Paris for several years—also broadened and authenticated his vision and voice.

Hill's second novel, *Any Known Blood*, is a historical epic spanning over a century and half and following a trail of history between the United States and Canada. The novel is the story of five generations of black men in a black Canadian family at the crossroads of history and a self-searching journey from the present day. Its prose is perfectly pitched and humorous, but its subject matter is as serious as any treatment of black history in the American continent. Going from slavery in nineteenth-century Virginia to contemporary Canada, the story ultimately shows how Canadian and American histories are irrevocably intertwined. Up the Atlantic, from the eastern seaboard of the United States, there has always been a long history of movements to and from the two countries. Like Hill's parents, many Canadians today trace their history to their more famous neighbour to the south. *Any Known Blood* and *The Book of Negroes* examined this Canadian/American connection in detail; it is in the latter book that Hill created its most touching literary incarnation.

446 Hill has stated that he was inspired to write *The Book of Negroes* because he was fascinated by the fact that some of the American slaves who had come to Canada to seek freedom actually returned to Africa, facilitated by the Canadian church in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1792. About 1,200 people were shipped back to Africa. When Hill encountered the British colonial document called "The Book of Negroes," which recorded the names of about three thousand former black slaves who had fought on the side of the British during the American Revolutionary War of Independence and who were later taken to Canada to avoid re-enslavement in the United States after the end of the war, he knew he had an important story on his hands. Published to almost universal acclaim in 2007, *The Book of Negroes* follows an African female slave named Aminata, who was kidnapped from her village in present-day Mali and sold into slavery as a child by slave raiders to Europeans who came in ships to Africa during the transatlantic slave trade. This part of the novel has some similarities to Alex Haley's *Roots*, but this is where it ends. Aminata's experience is peculiar, for she becomes part of the few thousand black people represented in *The Book of Negroes*. These black people were shipped to Canada and subsequently to Freetown in the then newly established Sierra Leone, where Aminata discovered that her dream of returning to Africa had been built on the wrong assumptions of homecoming. Served by the provocative aspects of American and Canadian histories, Hill found his best expression as a novelist. Aminata's travails are real, harrowing, and treated with empathy and a remarkable understanding of how history shapes the makings of modern racial identity. *The Book of Negroes* justifiably became an international bestseller. It also won a slew of awards, including the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2008 and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, one of Canada's top three literary awards, in 2007. The book was later adapted into an engaging six-part TV miniseries in 2015, for which Hill co-wrote the screenplay.

Hill's non-fiction works include *Blood*, *The Stuff of Life*, and the memoir *Black Berry*, *Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*. He is a professor of creative writing at the University of Guelph, and his volunteer work has included the Black

Loyalist Heritage Society, book clubs for inmates, the Ontario Black History Society, and Walls to Bridges, a non-profit group offering university courses to incarcerated Canadians. According to his publicist, Hill is writing screenplays for TV miniseries in development and a novel about the African American soldiers who helped build the Alaska Highway in northern British Columbia and Yukon during World War Two. He is a member of the Order of Canada and a winner of the Reuters Writers Trust Fiction Prize.

In the following conversation, we use the generic term “The Ottawa Black Book Club” in place of the names of different individual members of the book club asking Hill questions. This is to preserve the collective interest and spirit of the members as they sought to understand Hill’s interrogation of the Black experience in Canada, with his book *Beatrice and Croc Harry* as a case study.

THE CONVERSATION

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THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Hi, Lawrence, it’s good to have you as a special guest writer at our monthly meeting. Your presence excites us.

HILL: Thank you so much, Louisa. It is fabulous that you created this book club, and I have to compliment you on your hat, which looks to me like a Sunday morning church hat. But you’re wearing it on a Saturday morning.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Thank you. I saw the recent Dove advert where people were being discriminated over their grey hair so I am keeping my grey and advocating for that. I first came across *The Book of Negroes* on my first visit to Canada in 2011. I remember reading that book and saying to myself, one day I would like to meet this author and talk to him about his great writing. Everything has come full circle today. I also read *Any Known Blood* last year. The style of writing in your new book, *Beatrice and Croc Harry*, is very different from your other books. Also, Beatrice’s relationship with Harry is also unusual, even testy. Why a crocodile? Why not a dog or some other harmless animal?

HILL: Thank you so much, Louisa. I guess I will begin by saying that I am glad you find the writing style different. Surely you don’t want to see me writing the same book twice! We have to stretch and grow as artists I have to grow and work in new directions. I have been writing and publishing books now for thirty years, and it seems that we all have our obsessions. I think my lifelong obsession, when it comes to writing, seems to be about people who are displaced, people who belong to the black diaspora, who, for one reason or another, have been booted out or forcibly removed or have migrated for one reason or another and are searching for themselves, searching for home and searching for their identities. It is a natural obsession for me to have grown into, having grown up in a white suburb of Toronto in the 1960s with a black father and a white mother, both of whom were immigrants from the United States. I had to work as a young person to develop a firm, strong and proud sense of black

identity. I think that led me to a life of writing.

Beatrice and Croc Harry is yet another way for me to examine issues of pride, self-love, the search for home, forcible and violent dislocation, of what it means to be removed forcibly from one's home and to have one's memory erased. And of course, for me, that speaks metaphorically about the black experience, the concept of memory, erasure, and kind of violent removal from one place to another. So, to answer your question specifically, Louisa, I chose the crocodile, because every story needs an antagonist and every protagonist needs a challenge. If Beatrice just has a pleasant dog, there's no story. She needs somebody who poses a threat, somebody whose relationship has a possibility of being a little dangerous, but perhaps very rewarding, too. I suppose it could have been a lion or grizzly bear, but it definitely has to be a predator. She has an obligation to convert this predatory relationship into one of a very deep friendship. This is unfair, but it's been the case of so many black folks over the course of the centuries.

448 THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: My favourite character here is Horace. I love this character because he just wanted to be heard and respected. Reading the book, what struck me most was the importance of every experience because everybody had a story. I started out not liking Harry, but when I got to the end, I warmed up to him. His character embodies contradictions. Why?

HILL: It seems that we're all full of contradictions. This crocodile has a terrible history, which he doesn't really fully understand yet. He also comes from a very violent and terrible history, which was erased from his memory, but which he is beginning to recover, just as Beatrice is recovering hers. Their responsibility in the novel is to go on this road trip together and try to discover who they are and where they are from, more like finding their stories together.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Why is Harry hypervocal?

HILL: Well, I grew up in a household with a lot of conversation. My parents were both writers of black history. My father had been a black soldier in the Second World War in the American Army, but he was also a sociologist with a PhD. In the course of a single sentence, he could slide from the vocabulary of a professor teaching a sociology class right into that of a black soldier from down south Louisiana. He could slide in a sentence, read across the entire register of human expression, and move from one form of speaking English into another, which I found really exciting as a child. My father used to make up words too, so I learned all sorts of invented words from him at bedtime. Bedtime was a magical time of storytelling, sometimes with fancy words with four or five syllables, and other times with entirely made-up words. So, I was looking to resurrect the joy of language that I experienced as a child at bedtime. I wanted readers and children to feel how fun and silly and playful language can be. So, it seemed to me just appropriate to give a crocodile a massive vocabulary.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: There's also the issue of colourism in the book. When I moved to Canada, I realized that the experience of blackness is different for those of us born and raised on the continent of Africa than those born and raised in

Canada. When I was back home in Nigeria, I was just Louisa from the Esan ethnic group from Edo State, but when I moved to Canada, I realized for the first time, “Oh, I am black!” Beatrice’s experience of racial discrimination is glaring. Why?

HILL: Yes, Beatrice was moving towards human civilization, but, unfortunately, the very first human beings she encounters as she is trying to find her way back home turned out to be people who are very hateful and who have nothing but racial malice in their hearts. She encounters some soldiers who have evil intent. I found that touching and sad, but somehow appropriate for my story that this girl who’s trying to find her way home, who doesn’t even know what her last name is, just realizes that she’s black. Why would she be thinking about that if there are no other human beings around to sort of reinforce that concept of who she is? It seemed right for the story that the first encounter she should have with the human race would be that of hatred.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I often question the definition of race. The popular definition is political and not biological. This brings me to Beatrice: if she is living amid animals, why is it important that she’s black? Why are they talking about the fact that she is brown and then her hair? Like when Killjoy asked her to run a comb through it. This brings up the politics of black hair. What is it about blackness that is so political?

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HILL: I agree with you, and any right-thinking person would agree that racial identity is entirely an invented sociological construct. It is an arbitrary way to define and divide people, to implement hierarchies among human beings. It has no connection to biology. Even though it is an invented social construct, it is entirely real in the lives of people when their identity is reinforced for reasons positive or negative or for reasons violent or peaceful. What was interesting for me about this story is that I have had a lifelong fascination with the evolution of the concept of identity, specifically black identity. How do we see ourselves? Who are we? How do we gather? How is our identity constructed internally and externally? This has been something that has always fascinated me, and it comes up over and over again and hopefully in different ways in my books and in this book. I thought it would be interesting to explore the acquisition of the development of racial identity by having Beatrice awaken in a forest with zero memory. She is suffering from complete amnesia as a result of the violence that has been perpetrated upon her. So, she wakes up alone with no other human beings in a forest that is so large that it seems inescapable. It is a fantasy that I found very appealing and seems connected to the real human experience. So, the reader gets to watch her begin to acquire a positive sense of self love and identity in what I thought was a really interesting way to present to children the idea of the acquisition of self-love in the development of racial identity, because they get to watch Beatrice go from zero to relatively well formed in terms of how she sees herself. She is a child and is beginning to grapple with these things with no help from the outside world because she is all alone. So, you asked, what is political about blackness? Well, everything is political about blackness because it is a politically and socially constructed fictitious thing. It is just a narrative that attempts to define people along lines that are

scientifically invalid. And still, we know in our lived experience that it has an effect on us, especially in a place such as Canada or the United States. This book was an excellent chance for me to try to explore these very complex issues in ways that a 9- to 14-year-old could begin to grapple with.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: When I came to Canada years ago, I was not taught these things that you are sharing with us. Yes, we knew people were enslaved, but you really give clearer pictures in your books about their progress. For example, the story of segregation and marginalization with Beatrice and all the challenges she faces, the first humans she met were the army who did not like her. This is literarily similar to the immigrant's experience, when we face challenges that we were not prepared for. Were parts of this book inspired by family events?

HILL: Yes, there was an event that provoked my decision to write this book. I was working on another book at the time, a book about the thousands of African American soldiers who found themselves in the far north of Canada during World War II to build the Alaska Highway. It is a story of black people in the Arctic that is not very well known, but I wish to popularize it. So, I was working on that book some years ago, but I was really in a lot of pain. My mother had just passed away and I underestimated how much that would sadden me. Somehow, I was having trouble focusing on that work because the grief was too intense. So after a month or two of not making progress on the writing, I thought, well, what do I have in my heart? What can I write now? And how could I write my way out of my own grief? And this is a book that presented itself to me.

The idea to write a children's book was a decision that sprang from my soul. It was a need to express myself in an overly exuberant way with lots of silly, made-up words. And to bring back the joy that I felt as a child at bedtime and the joy that I felt as a parent telling my young children bedtime stories. I wrote the book also because something wanted to leap out of my heart, and I had to listen and obey.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I am curious to know why Croc Harry was always picking on Beatrice.

HILL: Well, when you have a main character like Beatrice in a story, you have to give her challenges; if she has no challenges, there's no story. A story is about people working out their problems. If you wake up in the morning and have a fabulous breakfast and the best hot chocolate you ever drank, well, that's nice, but there's no story there. The story happens when people are in trouble and they're trying to work their way out of trouble. This is why we read, because we are interested in learning and following and caring about a character who is in trouble. One of the instruments I used to create some sort of turbulence in Beatrice's life is unusual relationships. I am interested in relationships that shouldn't happen because that is part of the magic of human experiences, relationships that come out of nowhere, that don't seem right, but somehow still are beautiful. So, I thought since I am really going to be fully imaginative and write a fantasy, what better way to explore the unusual than to have a little girl become a very close friend with a 69-teethed hypervocal crocodile? It seemed

like a nice way to explore some of the ironies and unexpected natures of the way people connect because although Harry is a crocodile, in my heart, you know, I am thinking of him as a person with human characteristics. So, I wanted to explore that unusual relationship because I thought it would be interesting for me and entertaining for the reader.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I saw the story as a representation of the society, because as you read, you discover there are a lot of hidden messages and many intersecting factors. Intersecting factors like, first you describe her as a short girl and Horace leaping over her one time. How insulting! Two, she is black. Three, she has an afro. Four, she is lost and the first time anybody ever said to her that she was beautiful was when she met Fuzzy. There's also the issue of race, then there's the issue of social justice with the speckled rabbits. The discrimination against the speckled rabbits just made no sense.

HILL: Well, racism makes no sense. Discrimination makes no sense. I was trying to reflect human society, the fact that people were segregated or discriminated against. It made and still makes no sense, but it is still an unfortunate fact of human life and experience. This book reflects human society.

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THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Most of your books are history-based, but this book brought back my younger me. I found that there were so many subjects, political, social, human relationships, that took me back to my younger self because when I was reading the first chapter with the big words, it got me to reflect on so many subjects like discrimination, racism, not being able to work together, and other factors. As human beings, you would think with everything that we have gone through like conflict and civil wars, we will learn from those things and try to work together to build a better world; instead, we fight and discriminate against one another. I got my 9-year-old daughter to listen to the audio sample, and she was so pleased and is looking forward to owning a copy. My family is from Rwanda, and I grew up with my grandmother telling me stories; my mum picked up on that tradition and now I am picking it up with my daughter too, so every night, we tell stories. Stories with characters like crocodiles make sense because I am an African, and we tell animal stories. Did you purposely write this book so it appeals to both younger and older readers alike?

HILL: Thank you so much. It is so nice to hear your thoughts. First of all, even as adults, we often read books and we encounter new words. I don't want to underestimate the intelligence of children by talking down, I also wanted to sort of infect the child with this sense of play of language. Most of the words are defined in the context, not just at the back of the book where there's a glossary but a little dictionary. I wanted to aim high rather than low in terms of stimulating the reader's intelligence. Although it is a book that is formally marketed for 9- to 14-year-old readers, I wrote it because it is the kind of story that I would love to read. I still love to read a beautiful children's story. I know many adults who still would love to read a beautiful story for children, and there's no reason why we can not read both. I just wanted to

write a beautiful story that captures the magic of bedtime feeling where the impossible becomes possible. Like where crocodiles and tarantulas can speak and become friends. I also wanted to explore really deep and serious issues, in a way that is sometimes funny, entertaining, and not too heavy.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: My favourite character is Beatrice because when we start the book, she is rediscovering herself and everything, and this can be good or bad, as life is unpredictable. I found her resilience to fear appealing. At the beginning of the book, she is interrogating herself a lot and definitely convinced she is going to be a meal for Harry. As a mother of a young daughter, I found that this is the best way to tell your child to never be ashamed of who you are, be great, be accepting, be nice, and be kind to others. Was it something that was done purposely?

HILL: Yes, absolutely. I hope that my readers, whether they're 9 years old or 90 years old, would admire the confidence, beauty, resilience, and self-love of this girl. A fact of life is, we do not get to choose our own skins, or parents, or where we come from. I would hope that every child grows up with a sense of self-love, self-affirmation, and acceptance. It took me a while to grow into a place where I can love myself and feel good about who I was and how I looked. I didn't want any child to experience some of the tumult that I experienced growing up.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I love Horace. When you introduced him into the story, he had a slur, and, based on how he speaks, was advised to seek speech therapy, which he confidently declined. Beatrice wondered if she might find answers in her own dreams, which seemed to be filled with two horrible scenes. Then there were thoughts of family, home, and community, and in a flash the singing became screaming, and she was covered in her own blood. If you read the book, further down it goes again to talk about this man trying in some strange way to take control of her, to use her to enter the forest. So, I am looking at this forest, not as a physical forest but as the mind and society. I am looking at this man as colonization and the dreams as when people were forcefully captured and taken from the motherland and brought to the Americas, stripped of their identity, everything that made them, their essence, and then brainwashed with a new religion. Do you think that as people there will ever be a time when we will be totally free? From my knowledge of Sociology, are we, as people, prisoners of our societies?

HILL: I will begin by playfully referring to sociology, because both my parents were sociologists and they, of course, read Emile Durkheim as sociologists. Whenever I misbehaved when I was eight to ten years old, my father would point at me and say "deviant behaviour," and he would start quoting [Émile] Durkheim. But do I think we will be free of societal prejudices? Do I think that we're prisoners of society? I think life is a process, and I don't actually believe that human society will ever be perfect. Even generations to come will have to confront social injustice in some respect in their own lives and will lead their own struggles to right the wrongs and evils of whatever is happening in the world at that time. So, do I believe that we're approaching perfection as human civilization and that maybe our grandchildren will know it?

No, I don't. But I think the beauty in some respects is in the struggle, it is saying to oneself, here I am on this planet earth, and I want to radiate love, to combat injustice, and stand up for what I know is right. So, I don't think that we're heading toward perfection. But do I think we're prisoners? No, I think that we have agency, and, hopefully, many of us have the opportunity to gain agency to advocate for what we know is right and what our children know is right, too. Interestingly, I think any healthy child grows up knowing instinctively what is right and what is wrong. Children are acutely conscious of social injustice and unfairness, and they speak out about it. I want to encourage children to raise their voices. Children can be heard, and children can also change the world with their voices. And anybody who doubts, that all we have to do is look to the incredible efforts of children around the world today to addressing climate change and global warming. I think that's fascinating. Children are lecturing us, adults, about how to act better on this planet.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Killjoy is an annoying character and I was curious about her. She seems to represent so many people who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. What was your intention with Killjoy's character?

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HILL: Thank you so much for your comments. I wish I were in person because I have a feeling this conversation could linger pleasantly over tea or coffee. I am very interested in Killjoy, and she is deliberately mysterious. I would like to explore Killjoy in, maybe, a sequel. She has also experienced some wrongs in her own life and is a bit edgy, but she also has all this love reflected in the advice she gives. You can say she planted the seed of self-identity and self-acceptance in Beatrice. So, she has an important role in the story. You see this love in the way that she cares for Beatrice. I know lots of people, especially women in my life, on my African American side, aunts and grandmothers and the like, who had all this love, but who also had a big pile of frustrations and disappointments in life that they had to wade through. So, their interactions with me were often a little bit like Killjoy's interactions with Beatrice, sometimes a little hard-edged with a bit of an attitude to them; other times, sort of teeming with love that came out a little grudgingly.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: In writing this book, did you think about the emerging fascination with Afrofuturism, which has encouraged the development of black or African fantasy fiction as represented by some African writers?

HILL: Well, yes, of course. I am thinking about Afrofuturism. This is a work of Afrofuturism. This novel is set in the year 2090 and beyond, and we're in a world where fossil fuels have dried up and people can magically travel through time and space, through a device known as teleporting or teleportation. This is a speculative work of fiction. But I guess I want to emphasize that even though it is speculative, we're in a world where unusual things happen. I felt very much that I was writing about society today. Beatrice experiences the struggles, the personal challenges, the sadness, the pain, the alienation, the self-love, that feels like a contemporary journey that can apply to many people today. That's one of the beauties of Afrofuturism. It can strip away your defenses as a reader and get you really thinking about your own

world in ways that sometimes are really powerful.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: One of the suppression tactics used on enslaved people was by depriving them of knowledge and the ability to read. Is that what you are trying to show by making all the statements regarding the speckled rabbits?

HILL: In creating Matilda, I am trying to recreate the incarnation of prejudice. I am trying to demonstrate in this character the manifestation of negativity and the tendency to discriminate and to segregate. There is also something wrong with Matilda, clearly; she is ill and vulnerable to an attack by the giant.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: So, this means every human is capable of evil?

HILL: Well, I don't think I was trying to say that every human is capable of evil. I suppose it is possible that we are all capable of doing terrible things, as none of us are perfect. None of us are angelic. I don't think I was trying to advance the argument that we're all capable of evil. What I was consciously trying to do was to advance the argument that Beatrice is consciously rejecting and refusing evil, and she's refusing
454 to allow evil to sort of plant itself in her heart and in her brain. So, she's showing some courage and she's trying to understand why this this rabbit, Matilda, has these moments of hatred and why this giant is trying to infect her brain.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: What was it with the oatmeal and why did she pour glue into Croc Harry's mouth; that was so unfair?

HILL: Why unfair? Well, he was trying to eat her. She's got to lash out and it is a predator. I am trying to be playful and to entertain the child and the reader and to write something that's kind of over the top and ludicrous and, hopefully, a little bit funny. You have to give a character a thing to do, as that way they become more interesting as they begin to manifest their character. So rather than just passively telling a reader, this is this person's character, you want to try to illustrate Beatrice's character by giving her things to do. So, she's working on her hair, she's making oatmeal, and she's trying to find a way out of the forest, and she's fighting off the giant. So, she needs things to do in order to allow her character to develop through the story. I just thought it would be an interesting way to begin to manifest her character.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I wished the book had illustrations in it because when you introduced Fuzzy the Tarantula, from the description, I wish I could see her because Fuzzy represented kindness and friendship; she said at a certain point, you have to trust your friends. So, it got me questioning friendships because I remember one time I heard someone say that loyalty has an expiry date. So, what was it about friendship you are trying to show in the relationship between Fuzzy and Beatrice?

HILL: Interestingly, two of Beatrice's closest friends are animals that could kill her or cause her great damage, like the crocodile and the tarantula. Of course, in real life, I wouldn't let a tarantula crawl up my arm either, but we have to accept that this is a fantasy. So, I was trying in a playful way to create an unlikely and, I hope, beautiful relationship between this girl and this tarantula. Interestingly, Fuzzy and Croc Harry saved Beatrice's life, and both of them are predators that ironically intervene to save her life at different times and in different ways. I am interested in friendship, and this

story is partly a meditation on love and friendship. So it seemed to me entertaining, rich, and full of potential that two of the characters that Beatrice should become most attached to are predatory in nature. It also speaks to her character of boldness and to the openness of her heart that she has the courage to be open to the possibility of friendship with these dangerous creatures that could possibly harm her.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: There are so many themes and subplots in the book, and I feel like you could have a series on Beatrice or *The Queendom* or any of the characters. I am also curious about the system in the *queendom*: would you do a series or a sequel to cover all characters?

HILL: Well, we can never cover everything. I think we have to accept that writers can only do a little bit. We cannot do everything. Even if I wrote ten books, which I won't, about Beatrice and Harry, you cannot, you cannot cover everything. You have to decide what you will write about and what you will leave to the side, because it is just too much. So, the most I can really think about right now is a sequel, so that might provide other opportunities to explore the story. Maybe that would be another avenue to explore more stories about the characters.

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THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Towards the end of the book, Beatrice mentions her name, a full name. Was that her moment of self-realization?

HILL: The moment Beatrice realizes her last name, while reading about the attack that happened in the church and which led to her expulsion from the human race, is part of her journey. I don't necessarily believe that there's just one moment when everybody's identity comes to into visibility. I think that the evolution of identity and self-concept is a constant thing. It doesn't end when you're 12 or 25 or even 55. And, you know, we're always in a state of evolution in terms of how we see ourselves. And there are so many factors that play into our self-identity and how we understand our positioning in the world. So I wouldn't necessarily call it the self-realization moment, but a moment in which she is propelled into more understanding. And of course, she wants to know her name, she wants to know who she is. The erasure of name is very much part, unfortunately, of the African experience in the Americas. So she wants her name and she's going to get it. If I had to write a sentence, this is a novel about a girl in search of her identity.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: One of the things that stayed with me throughout the book is Beatrice's kind and understanding disposition towards others. Maybe that's because I am coming from a social service background. I found that the novel speaks to the experience of those who are taken away from their homes, background, or country without really having any say in it. And it made me think about children who are in the system. And maybe it was also because at that time I was reading an article in the US about how the system is basically crowded with kids who unfortunately don't have enough foster families. And we are facing the same thing in Canada right now. Foster families are less and less. I am wondering if that is one of the subjects that inspired you, because Beatrice's character puts an emphasis on how humans should be, how we should work on ourselves and be a little more accepting

of others in order for us to have a more positive and healthier environment to live in.

HILL: Thank you, Alyce. Yes, I was inspired by something and it did shape the way that I imagined this book and the way that I came to it. For about fifteen years, I have been volunteering in prisons and federal penitentiaries with book clubs. You know, if a prisoner shows good behaviour, they're allowed to join a book club. They invite me in to spend the day with the inmates and to talk about the book of mine that they've just read in their book club, and also to spend a few hours together having a meal, coffee, or just talking and recognizing their humanity. Also, I am a professor of creative writing at the University of Guelph. So, occasionally, I have taught creative writing to incarcerated women in a federal penitentiary in Ontario. When I go into prisons, I don't ask what people have done. It is none of my business. I am not the judge. I am not the crown prosecutor. It is my business to talk about books and literature. The ones who come to me, who want to be there, are hungry for human conversation, for intellectual stimulation, for some recognition of their humanity.

456 And because I don't know what a person's last name is or what they did to get behind bars, I realize it is an interesting way to get to know somebody because you start to learn about the good things about them long before you might become aware of the bad things about their past. And, in a way, Harry represents that kind of person that I have come to know in prisons, because Harry has done something terrible, something that's almost unforgivable. But that's not how we first meet him. We first meet him with a glimmer of humanity. We first meet him as a kind of a troubled soul who becomes a loyal friend to Beatrice. Ironically, I know he's a crocodile, but we learn a little bit about his humanity before we discover his awful history. And I find that a really interesting way to explore a character, to begin to show something good about them before we unveil the horrific. Yes, my prison experience as a volunteer and as a professor helped influence the way that I created Harry.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I remember how Killjoy describes her love of dance to Beatrice. She says, "I love to dance, to be whole, and to unite my colours." Here, Killjoy seems to be talking about her mental health. So dancing is her therapy. But in most African societies, therapy is viewed as an unnecessary luxury. So, as a writer, how do you think people can be free despite the ugliness of the world?

HILL: What a beautiful question. I don't think I have ever been asked that question before. It is a very beautiful and soulful question. And clearly one of the ways that you feel free is to read. Reading frees the imagination. And for the prisoners that I work with, reading is also a form of freedom, or escape. Reading can take not just a prisoner, but a child, or any other person, into a world where they can just lose themselves and be free as they are encountering a world that's entirely imaginary. And there's something very beautiful and restorative about engaging the human imagination.

I do want to say I completely understand what you are saying about mental health views in many parts of Africa, having lived and worked in Cameroon, Eswatini, Mali, and Niger. But I also feel the need to state my opinion that there is a profound amount of mental illness in North America too; this affects people from time to time in black

communities. I think that it is sad and this troubles me profoundly, that there's such a stigma to acknowledging mental illness, and as a result, many people go untreated. Many people here in Canada are in desperate shapes and in desperate need of help, and mental illness is no less severe an affliction than cancer or a broken leg. It is a serious problem. I think that it is often unrecognized or it is often a taboo in black communities. And I know something about this from my own family experience.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I also want to ask, how important is it for us to be seen? I remember there was a point where Beatrice felt that the hunters couldn't see her. In reality, people choose to see you through different lenses. So, how important is it to be seen and what do you think determines these lenses?

HILL: Well, you know, if somebody knows our name and looks us in the eye and also speaks to us with kindness in their heart, it is a way of recognizing our own humanity. If somebody knows your name, perhaps takes your hand, or doesn't look you in the eye, acknowledges that you are there, it is a way of saying, not just, "I see you like in a physiological way, but I am here with you together on this planet and I feel your humanity." So, having your name understood, having it repeated, having your eyes engaged with these are all essential to the human experience.

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THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Yes, names are very important to us as Africans, because we believe when you say a child's name, you speak the meaning of that name into the child's life. One of the things that I have noticed is that being black is something that you pretty much have to fight to be acknowledged. I travel a lot and I find it annoying when people say, "Oh my God, your English is so good. Where did you learn it?" I guess my answer should be "School, like everybody. What do you mean? Where did I learn it?" Or, some say, "You speak French too?" Why is it so surprising that a black person can speak more than one language? All this is to say that sometimes I find that, as a black person, I have to always explain why I am the way I am, while my counterparts navigate through life without being asked unnecessary questions. What I love about your writing is that you have always put black people within a space where we can see ourselves as the warriors, kings, queens, and the beautiful people that we are, being acknowledged and being celebrated.

HILL: I have a memoir called *Black Berry, Sweet Juice*. It came out about twenty-one years ago, and there is a chapter in it I think might appeal to you and also entertain you. It is called "So What Are You Anyway?" It is a chapter that analyzes the experience of being constantly asked who you are. Just like you, I speak French and Spanish, so I am being constantly asked to defend it, explain my identity. People express surprise that I can do one thing or the another. So we're asked to defend, as you say, our wholeness as people, whereas a typical white Canadian wouldn't necessarily be interrogated the same way about who they are or what they are anyway. So, I wrote a chapter on that subject, so you might find some commonality in it.

THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: I am still wondering if 9- to 14-year-olds will experience this book through similar lenses as we adults. Do you think younger readers will understand that the forest of Agila could be a physical forest or it could be a

state of mind?

HILL: I think that every reader brings their own perspective to a book. It is not just 9- to 14-year-olds versus a person who's in their 40s, 50s, or 60s. We all bring our own experiences to the act of reading. And surely, Louisa, the way that you encounter the book won't be exactly the same as the way Alyce encountered it. You will have your own individual experiences, and it is not a question of being right or wrong. You will take your life into perspective as you encounter a story. So, of course, a 9- to 14-year-old is not likely to encounter the book in the same way as you, but they'll encounter it in their own way. And I hope that will be very beautiful for them, too. I have heard from many students who've read the book, who've written me letters or sent me the art that they wrote which was inspired by the book. It is very touching. The other day a boy of about 9 or 10 wrote to me saying that "My teacher made me read this book, but it is okay anyway. I want to tell you, Mr. Hill, that to write a book like this, you must have a big Godzilla." That was a beautiful thing to say. And it touched me profoundly. I love to hear from children. So, of course, the child won't bring the same life experience, Louisa, that you would bring to the reading. But it doesn't mean that their reading is any less valid and they may come back to it, you know, five or ten years later and read it again and perceive it in a different way.

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THE OTTAWA BLACK BOOK CLUB: Thank you, Lawrence. It's been a fulfilling time with you. We all are grateful.

HILL: Thank you for having me.

NOTE

* Nduka Otiono is a writer and the Director of the Institute of African Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa. Olunosen Louisa Ibhaze is founder of The Ottawa Black Book Club, The Melanin Djali Project Conversations Podcast, and the Simple Esan Girl Initiative. For this publication, we would like to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Ifesinachi Nwadike and Darlington Chibueze Anuonye.

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