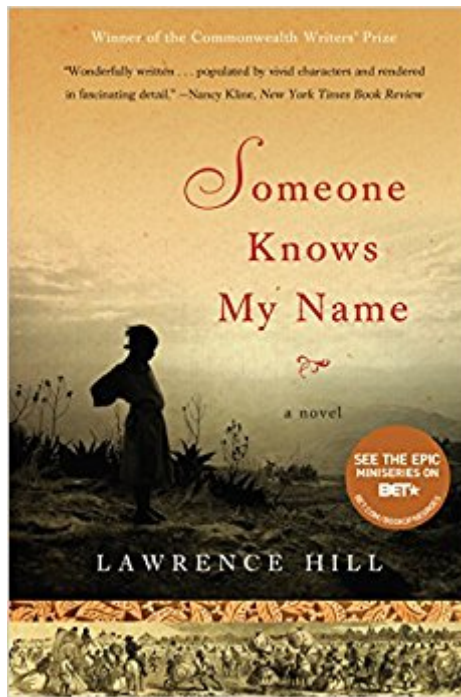


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Someone Knows My Name: A Novel



Synopsis

Winner of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. "Wonderfully written...populated by vivid characters and rendered in fascinating detail." —Nancy Kline, New York Times Book Review Kidnapped from Africa as a child, Aminata Diallo is enslaved in South Carolina but escapes during the chaos of the Revolutionary War. In Manhattan she becomes a scribe for the British, recording the names of blacks who have served the King and earned their freedom in Nova Scotia. But the hardship and prejudice of the new colony prompt her to follow her heart back to Africa, then on to London, where she bears witness to the injustices of slavery and its toll on her life and a whole people. It is a story that no listener, and no reader, will ever forget. Reading group guide included.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The actual Book of Negroes is an amazing historical document (a British military ledger) that contains the names and descriptions of 3,000 men, women, and children who served or were supported by the British during the American Revolutionary War. Lawrence Hill's *The Book of Negroes* is a brilliantly imagined novel based on the document of the same name and the events surrounding the relocation of thousands of Black Loyalists to various British colonies and eventually to Sierra Leone after the conflict. Similar in approach to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Hill's offering spans the lifetime of the fictional Aminata (Meena) Diallo, an African born woman who escaped to freedom. At the beginning of the novel Meena is in London, an old woman who has lived a tumultuous life. At the urging of her abolitionist sponsors, she is asked to pen her story which would be used as evidence depicting the cruelty and inhumanity of the slave trade. Meena, an

intelligent, educated woman, authors her autobiography via vivid flashbacks through time. She writes, "Let me begin with a caveat to any and all who find these pages. Do not trust large bodies of water, and do not cross them. If you, dear reader, have an African hue and find yourself led toward water with vanishing shores, seize your freedom by any means necessary." She continues and details her life as a young child in an African village, her capture and Middle Passage crossing, enslavement while in America, relocation to Nova Scotia, return to Africa (Freetown, Sierra Leone), and partnering with abolitionists in England. However to summarize the book in such a way is a huge understatement - it is steeped in historical facts that educate and enlighten the reader; I was pulled in immediately after reading the opening passages. Before her capture, African spirituality/religion, education (Meena's father taught her to read and write, her mother taught her midwifery), family structure, and culture are illustrated in her interactions with her parents and other villagers. After witnessing her parent's murder at the hands of African slavers, she is coffled and mournfully treks through the African interior for months before arriving exhausted at the coastal slave port. Meena transcribed the inhumanity of the trade, the stifling stench and horrid conditions aboard the slave ship, the rapes and attempted revolts that occurred during the crossing, and the shameful and dehumanizing experience on the auction block. She suffers hardships in America at an indigo producing plantation in South Carolina. She experiences the love and loss of a husband and children. Unwilling to work after the abrupt sale of her son, she is eventually sold to a new owner and escapes to freedom while in New York. Once there, she is employed by the British to record entrants into the infamous "book" and relocates to Nova Scotia. After a decade of struggling against the harsh elements, barren landscape and broken promises regarding land ownership; she and 1,200 other Africans relocate yet again to Africa to establish Freetown in partnership with London-based abolitionists. The author notes in the Afterword where he has taken a few liberties with the timeline and some historical figures; however the vast majority of the book is factual; extracted from history books and inspired by diaries, memoirs, notes, etc. Hill expertly layers the social and political climates of the time against the protagonist's story. This novel is extremely well-written, perfectly paced, and highly recommended as a study aid for students or to anyone who enjoys the historical fiction genre. Reviewed by PhyllisAPOOO BookClubNubian Circle Book Club

Thanks to the storytelling skills of one who has the vision to imagine one female's journey through decades of slavery, revolution and abolitionist fervor, once more the silent rise from the depths to howl their grief, rage and spirit. Born a free Muslim in her village, Aminata Diallo leaves childhood behind, as well as the dead bodies of her father and mother, captured by slave-traders, chained to

others on a months' long trek to the ship that will carry this valuable cargo across the ocean to the American colonies. Bereft, Aminata stands horrified as dead slaves are tossed overboard or leap from despair into the waiting sea. Taught by her mother to "catch babies", the girl delivers two infants during the course of the voyage, but death strikes once again on a shipboard uprising, white men and Africans butchered in a melee of impromptu weapons and deadly "firesticks". The sights and smells of this ordeal remain imprinted on Aminata's soul, the past severed as she is thrust into a new, forbidding world. At an indigo plantation in South Carolina, Aminata learns more harsh lessons of slavery, the humiliation of belonging to someone far more powerful and unpredictable, introduced to cruelty, degradation, love and motherhood, stripped finally of all she holds dear. Brilliant and curious, "Meena" learns to hide her accomplishments behind the façade of obedience. Even in her darkest moments of despair, Meena holds fast to the truth- she was born free and belongs to no one. In such a story, the telling of truth is burdened with outrage: man's inhumane treatment of those they would exploit, the onus of slavery through centuries, the capacity for evil in the pursuit of profit. In Meena, we witness the toll on one human life. Somehow this courageous woman endures, making her way from Africa to South Carolina, New York, Nova Scotia, back to Africa and London. She catches babies from one continent to another, learning the falsity of promises and the impossibility of another voice to tell one's story: "Beware the clever man who makes wrong look right." Educated, well-spoken and determined, Aminata gathers languages to tell her tale to all who may listen, to Africans and abolitionists alike, of the Diaspora from her homeland to many countries, everywhere speaking her truth. What Barry Unsworth did for the Middle Passage in *Sacred Hunger*, Lawrence Hill does for the suffering of slaves, shackled first to one another, then to their owners, even abolition serving the interests of trade before humanity. Aminata Diallo's story is personal, yet speaks for many, the devastating journey of a young girl from a stolen childhood to old age, her spirit undaunted in spite of those who would own or use her. To be reminded of this nightmare is to be reminded of the collective inhumanity of those who rationalize deeds to serve the god of profit; more importantly, Aminata celebrates the extraordinary courage of the human spirit in the face of evil. Luan Gaines/ 2007.

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