The Book of Negroes
by Lawrence Hill

Stunning, wrenching and inspiring, the fourth novel by Canadian novelist Hill (Any Known Blood) spans the life of Aminata Diallo, born in Bayo, West Africa, in 1745. The novel opens in 1802, as Aminata is wooed in London to the cause of British abolitionists, and begins reflecting on her life. Kidnapped at the age of 11 by British slavers, Aminata survives the Middle Passage and is reunited in South Carolina with Chekura, a boy from a village near hers. Her story gets entwined with his, and with those of her owners: nasty indigo producer Robinson Appleby and, later, Jewish duty inspector Solomon Lindo. During her long life of struggle, she does what she can to free herself and others from slavery, including learning to read and teaching others to, and befriending anyone who can help her, black or white. Hill handles the pacing and tension masterfully, particularly during the beginnings of the American revolution, when the British promise to free Blacks who fight for the British: Aminata’s related, eventful travels to Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone follow. In depicting a woman who survives history’s most trying conditions through force of intelligence and personality, Hill’s book is a harrowing, breathtaking tour de force.
Lawrence Hill is an award-winning Canadian novelist and memoirist. He is best known for the 2001 memoir Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada and the 2007 novel The Book of Negroes.

Hill, the son of social scientist and public servant Daniel G. Hill and social activist Donna Hill and the brother of singer-songwriter Dan Hill, grew up in the Don Mills neighbourhood of Toronto. He currently lives in Hamilton, Ontario with his wife and five children.

In 1968, he signed the “Writers and Editors War Tax Protest” pledge, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War. In 2007, Hill collaborated with former US-Army soldier (now deserter) Joshua Key to write Key’s account of the Iraq War. His book The Deserter’s Tale, the story of an ordinary soldier who walked away from the war in Iraq is the result of their interviews and meetings.

Lawrence Hill has a deep interest in the advancement of women and girls in Africa. He is an honorary patron with Canadian Crossroads International, and he volunteered overseas with Crossroads three times -- to Niger, Mali and Cameroon in the 1970s and 80s. This experience has had a profound impact on Hill as a person and as a writer. His first published work of fiction, a short story My Side of the Fence, recounted his experiences with Crossroads in Niger.
Discussion Questions

1. What is your opinion about Hill’s suggestion that Aminata’s very youthfulness at the time of her abduction enables her emotional survival, even as some of the adults in her world show signs of crumbling?
2. The section of the book set in the sea islands of South Carolina depicts eighteenth-century indigo plantations where African American slaves and overseers are left largely to their own devices during the "sick season"—a good half of the year. To what degree does this cultural and social isolation allow for an interesting development and interaction of African American characters in the novel?
3. Aminata suffers some horrifying cruelties at the hands of her captors, but her relationships with her masters aren’t always what you’d expect. How does Aminata’s story reveal the complex ways that people react to unnatural, unequal relationships?
4. During the course of the story, Aminata marries and has a family. Although she is separated from them, she is reunited from time to time with her husband and one of her children. What does the work tell us about the nature of love and loyalty?
5. Aminata struggles to learn and master all sorts of systems of communicating in the new world: black English, white English, and Gullah, as well as understanding the uses of European money and maps. How do her various coping mechanisms shed light on her character?
6. Aminata longs for her home. What is the meaning of home in the novel, and how does the meaning change as the novel progresses?
7. What does the novel tell us about survival? Which characters fare best and why?
8. As Aminata moves from slavery to freedom, she finds that freedom is sometimes an empty promise. At what points in the novel did you feel this was true? Did it change how you thought about the meaning of freedom?
9. Aminata is a woman of extraordinary abilities—she is skillful with languages, literate, a speedy learner, a born negotiator. Why did Hill choose this story to be told by such a remarkable woman? What effect do her abilities have on the shaping of the story?
10. What do you think would be the challenges involved in writing a realistically painful novel that still offers enough light and hope to maintain the reader’s interest and spirit?
11. What lessons does Aminata’s tale hold for us in today’s world?