

Any Known Blood

BY LAWRENCE HILL
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BY CECE SCOTT

A multi-generational saga spanning 167 years and 500-plus tightly-packed pages, about a black family that migrates back and forth across the Canada-U.S. border, may at first glance appear a intimidatingly ponderous prospect.

Any Known Blood is, thankfully, anything but. Oakville's Lawrence Hill masterfully threads the history of the

National Bestsellers

HARDCOVER FICTION

- [6] 65 *Fall On Your Knees*, Ann-Maree MacDonald (Knopf Canada).
- [1] 15 *London*, Edward Rutherford (Crown).
- [2] 6 *Unnatural Exposure*, Patricia Cornwell (Putnam).
- [5] 9 *Deception On His Mind*, Elizabeth George (Bantam).
- [4] 27 *The Partner*, John Grisham (Doubleday).
- [10] 8 *Special Delivery*, Danielle Steel (Delacorte).
- [9] 154 *The Celestine Prophecy*, James Redfield (Warner Books).
- [3] 3 *Cimarron Rose*, James Lee Burke (Little, Brown).

five generations of men named Langston Cane into an engaging commentary of changing times.

The personable tone is set through the modern-day voice of Langston Cane the Fifth, as narrator. This Langston has a deep-rooted feeling that he does not live up to the greatness of his Cane ancestors. Through a set of timely circumstances, Langston rewrites a cabinet minister's speech that quickly leaks to the public, complete with insiders' dope about the government's plan to gut its human rights laws.

It so happens that even as he is being fired from his cozy government job, Langston is been wondering about his great-great-grandfather — who, family legend has it, met his demise with John Brown at Harper's Ferry while trying to strike a blow against slavery. So today's Langston sets out to write that history, in Canada and the States, in hope of validating his own place within it.

Hill is admirably qualified to take on this daunting narrative. His first, 1992 novel *Some Great Thing* was well received, and he has also published two non-fiction books about the history of blacks in Canada. Hill's depth, skill

and objectivity come to the fore in the new novel, allowing him to weave a story of prejudice, segregation and slavery without slamming it into a sermon.

And what a history it is. An apartment rental is refused to Langston Cane the Fourth, because he is a black man married to a white woman; hospital medical services are refused suffering blacks; prejudice is rampant.

Yet Hill takes pains to view his tale from all sides. Langston Cane the First, for example, rejects his responsibilities to his wife, Matilda, and their three children. The distaste we feel toward him — as Matilda dies in squalor, as two of his children are abducted by slave traders, as he complains about not caring "a great deal for black people in Oakville" — establishes credibility for a story taken full circle.

It's not heavy wading. Colorful dialogue and rich flashes of subtle humor abound. We make friends with YoYo, the West African kebab street vendor, whose comprehension of the English language, "all offense intended," brings laughter to the pages. Other characters also leap boldly to life —

Old Aberdeen Williams, his wildness matured to wisdom, is a constant through several generations; Aunt Mill, with buried secrets from her wayward youth; Ruth, a free Negro, who helped young Langston Cane the First escape slavery to come to Canada.

Phrases like "my soul walked out the back door," "manipulate me like a washing machine and pick my pocket in the spin cycle," "kinked hair that shot from his head like an exclamation," and "sadness sprang from her like a smell," push the polished narrative along.

Any Known Blood took Hill five years to research; his labors are rewarded with the kind of revelatory events we should have been taught in school. The "safety haven" role Oakville played for fugitive slaves in the 1850s; a 1930 Ku Klux Klan cross burning in said haven; the involvement of Canadians in John Brown's 1859 doomed attack

on a U.S. arsenal in Virginia — all and more stones of our heritage.

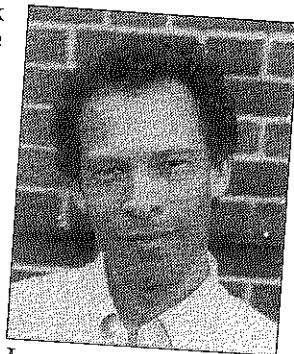
In fact, in the telling these events, such as the burning on Langston the conflict is resolved wanted to more fully ex-

emotions through Al his white fia hid in Lang ment. Even fat book, s drama begs ink.

But by the fast-paced Langston Fifth's trium turn home, revel in the what Cane — haps, his cre-

out to do. Which is to scorch ble mark in his family hist very act of telling it.

Cece Scott is fiction contest ed *Blood & Aphorisms (B&A)* liter magazine.



LAWRENCE HILL

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