

## Book of Negroes Discussion Guide

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### Introduction by Lawrence Hill

Years before I began writing *Book of Negroes*, I came across two startling discoveries in a scholarly work. I read that thousands of African Americans fled slavery to serve the British, who promised to liberate them in return for service during the American Revolution. When the British lost the war, they sent those African Americans who could show that they had served the British for at least one year to Canada. Three thousand names were entered into a 150-page military ledger known as the "Book of Negroes," and, in the last half of 1783, the former slaves set sail to Nova Scotia.

Ten years later, many of these same former slaves were so disgruntled with the hardships they encountered in Canada—slavery, indentured servitude, anti-black race riots, and segregation—that in 1792 they accepted an offer from the British government and sailed to Africa in a flotilla of fifteen ships, to form the colony of Freetown in Sierra Leone. This was the first back-to-Africa exodus in the history of the Americas, and it turns out that a number of the adults swept up in this migration had actually been born in Africa.

As I began to write *Book of Negroes*, I imagined the life of an old woman on one of those vessels carrying liberated African Americans from Halifax to Freetown. What would she look like? Where had she been born in Africa? How had she been stolen into slavery, where had she lived in South Carolina, and how on earth did she find herself, in late life, sailing back to Africa from Canada? *Book of Negroes* is my attempt to give this fascinating but little-known story a human face. I gave the protagonist, Aminata Diallo, my eldest daughter's middle name. It is the story of a heroic woman in the eighteenth century, and I felt that the best way to lift her off the page was to love her like I love my own daughter. And indeed I loved Aminata from the moment I first started imagining her face, hearing her voice, seeing the way she walked with a platter balanced on her head.

My daughter, Geneviève Aminata Hill, was eleven years old when I started to write this story. The same age as my character when she is kidnapped by slave traders. What if this had happened to my own child? Aminata, the character, grew up under my tutelage. She learned to walk and then to read and to navigate her way in the world, and now this fictional creation of mine is all grown up and gone from the house. She belongs to the world of readers now, and I hope she will be well loved.

### 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?