



From writing to bloodletting

A conversation with Dr Lawrence Hill

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recently sat down with award-winning author Dr Lawrence Hill to discuss how medicine has influenced his writing across his works.

SARAH: My confession is that I've been on a Lawrence Hill book-reading binge lately. One thing I've noticed is that the theme of medicine appears frequently in your writing. Do you have any background in medicine?

LAWRENCE: Not only do I have no medical background, I have no scientific background. I took math and science in high school and a bit of math in university, but that's it. Still, medical issues crop up in just about everything I write.

SARAH: Why do you incorporate medicine into your writing?

LAWRENCE: I suppose because I am obsessed with medical issues. I say that playfully, but also truthfully. I am fascinated by how the body works, all the things that can go wrong with it, and how all that drama could be put to good use in fiction or in creative nonfiction.

SARAH: The accuracy of the medical details in your books is quite astounding. How do you do this with no medical background?

LAWRENCE: Before I became a novelist and writer of nonfiction, I was a journalist. That's how I began my career. Journalists are generalists. We know a little bit about many things. As a reporter, I had to gather information quickly. I would have to learn about something new and file the story the same day. I wouldn't have time to read a doctoral dissertation on the issue, ingest it all, and file the story by 6 PM. Instead, I would skim all the written stuff I could get my hands on quickly, and then call the experts for guidances.

SARAH: Like family medicine. We rely on specialists all the time. I imagine you consulted many experts while writing your book *Blood: The Stuff of Life*.¹ You wrote about concepts like blood transfusions and stem cell research. How did you use expert consultation in this book?

LAWRENCE: I had to call people all the time. For example, I tell the story of the woman who had a rare blood type. She gave blood more than a thousand times. I called scientists to make sure I understood blood transfusions. The specialized skill of a generalist is to learn quickly. We also need to be disciplined about checking our facts.

SARAH: As I was reading *Blood*, I was immersed in it. Even though it was nonfiction, it was gripping. I learned something on every page and the book kept my attention.

LAWRENCE: Most people, whether aged 4 or 94, love a good story. If you can find a way to get into meaty issues and do so dramatically, you are more likely to excite the attention of your readers.

In fiction, you make things up. In nonfiction, you're not supposed to. You're not inventing characters or scenes. There is no injection of exaggeration into a story to make it more interesting, which is what fiction is all about. But still, there are profound similarities between writing a story that is primarily a work of fiction versus nonfiction.

SARAH: Could you elaborate?

LAWRENCE: The importance of story. In *Blood*, there are lots of my own personal stories and stories about other people. You still have to find a way to craft a narrative. In some ways, it is a bit harder with nonfiction because the story you shape still has to be true. When making something up, if you don't have enough for a story, you just add more until it works dramatically. In nonfiction, you are limited to what you learn or what you believe to be true, but you still have to create a story. Most nonfiction books that attract a wide readership are profoundly rooted in story.

SARAH: How do your approaches of writing fiction versus nonfiction differ?

LAWRENCE: For me, writing fiction is like entering a dreamlike state. I don't really know what's going to come onto the page. I sink a pipe down into my soul and see what bubbles up that day. This makes the writing more interesting and kinetic and alive. I discover as I go instead of filling in paint by numbers or thinking I have it all figured out. That would be a way of killing the energy of fiction. For my nonfiction book *Blood*, I had to divide the book into different sections. I tried to keep the sections distinct, so the reader would know, "Now I'm in the section about blood donation policies involving people who are gay or black," or "Now I'm in the section on the history of transfusions." You want to make the reader feel secure. It takes a certain rigour because you don't learn the information in a neat pile. You have to extract compelling narratives and observations from disparate sources and pull them all together in a way that seems simple and clear to the reader.

SARAH: What inspired you to write about blood?

LAWRENCE: I'm interested in blood as a metaphor and what it says about how we see ourselves. Our language is coloured by notions of blood, even when we don't really realize it. Blood influences our notions of race, nationality, religion, family, gender, and personal and collective identity.

I'm of mixed race with a black father and a white mother. In North America, some of our most deeply rooted personal understanding of blood as a signifier of race is utterly idiotic and completely unscientific. Think of the ways our policies, laws, and personal attitudes have been influenced by entirely fictitious notions that we can define people racially by their blood parts. The topic of blood keeps cropping up in my fiction. Finally, I decided that I would write a whole book about it.

SARAH: What are your thoughts about the link between blood and identity?

LAWRENCE: There is nothing more ridiculous than to say, "I have a friend who is a quarter black, a quarter Japanese, and half white." You can have ancestry that is divided among different sources of people, but to talk about your blood as if it can be boiled down to parts bears no resemblance to science. On the other hand, it is in line with how racial identity has been constructed and enforced by law over the centuries, certainly in Canada, the United States, and the Caribbean.

The ways we talk about blood are at odds with reality and it is not just a theoretical problem. Sometimes it leads to grossly discriminatory or hateful policies. Perpetrators of genocide have tried to justify their acts by claiming the blood of their victims was impure. It has happened again and again over the centuries. In the Spanish Inquisition, the Catholic monarchs defined people in terms of the purity of their blood and burned them at the stake or expelled them if they (meaning Jewish people or Muslims) were deemed to have impure blood.

SARAH: In the book, you also mention Aristotle and his thoughts about women and menstruation. Do you know the Instagram poet Rupi Kaur?

LAWRENCE: Yes, I've met her.

SARAH: She posted a photo of herself on Instagram while menstruating with blood staining her pants. Initially Instagram removed it. After public outcry, Instagram apologized and re-posted the photograph.

LAWRENCE: It's unbelievable that people carrying out mass murders are allowed to post their rantings. But to show someone's menstrual blood and not allow that? It points to these archaic but continued notions we have about what is proper and what is not. As I mention in the book, we have Aristotle to thank. He wrote

that women's blood was inferior to men's because men had the ability to convert their blood into semen, which is of course ridiculous. Since women could not convert their blood to semen, Aristotle decided that their blood was colder. As a woman's blood didn't have any special use, according to Aristotle, it needed to be expelled monthly. We can't blame all of sexism on Aristotle's speculations, but he certainly contributed in his writing to the notions of inferiority of women and the impurity of their blood.

SARAH: There is a section in *Blood* where you describe the practice of bloodletting in medicine.

LAWRENCE: Most people today would shake their heads in horror to think of all the ways blood was let so routinely. George Washington died of bloodletting when a large amount of blood was taken from him to get over a cold. I think of all the people who have died or been infected as a result of bloodletting over the millennia. I'm glad I wasn't around to have my blood let.

SARAH: I have to agree with you on that one! There is also a medical theme in your book *The Illegal²* about an elite marathon runner who is living as an undocumented refugee in a country that does not want him. He has undiagnosed diabetes and faces challenges with medical issues while living undocumented. How did you research the medical issues your character experienced in this book?

LAWRENCE: I have diabetes, which is one reason I felt I could draw upon it. Although I haven't had to face the extreme medical issues that my character

does, it did give me some perspective on the matter. I also consulted with 2 physicians—an emergency room doctor and an endocrinologist—to get my facts right.

SARAH: Your essay in the *Globe and Mail*, "Act of love,"³ was also medically themed but on a more personal level. You describe your mother's experience with medical assistance in dying. You accompanied her to Switzerland for the procedure because she did not meet the criteria in Canada. What was that experience like? Could you elaborate on what changes you believe to be necessary to Canada's law on medical assistance in dying?

LAWRENCE: We allow people to drive, fly airplanes, vote, teach children, and even (if they have licences) have guns. Abortion is legal in this country, as it should be. So how is it that we still make it difficult for people to decide, free of pressure from others, that their time is up and that they would like to die? Our laws are too restrictive. My 90-year-old mother was denied a medically assisted death in Canada because her natural death was not considered to be imminent. She had to go to Switzerland to die. Eventually, Canadians will get this right. Eventually, our national leaders and

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our lawmakers will allow Canadians more agency to decide, if they wish, that they would like to die.

SARAH: Finally, let's talk about what's next for Lawrence Hill. What are you working on? Are there medical themes in your next book?

LAWRENCE: I'm working on a novel about the building of the Alaska Highway in 1942. It comes back to one of my obsessions: black migration between the United States and Canada. After Pearl Harbour was bombed by the Japanese, the Americans and Canadians were convinced that the Japanese might attack Alaska (they never did). But, fearing the attack, the Americans built a 3000-km highway from Dawson Creek, BC, into Yukon and Alaska, all to ward off an anticipated invasion of the Japanese. They sent up 5000 black soldiers to build this highway in one of the coldest winters on record. They wore rubber boots, were severely underequipped, and totally segregated racially. My next novel is about an African American engineer from Georgia who is in Yukon in 1942 laying down the Alaska Highway. It is similar to *The Book of Negroes*⁴

because it is inspired by little known elements of American and Canadian history, but written as fiction.

A medical aspect of this book is that I've had to learn about hypothermia. I had to learn what happens to the body and what mental disorientation occurs. I also had to understand how to rescue a person who is suffering from hypothermia. I spoke with a number of specialists to try to figure that out.

SARAH: When can we expect to read this?

LAWRENCE: In about 3 years.

SARAH: Thank you so much for your time, and I look forward to reading your future works, medically themed and otherwise.

LAWRENCE: It was a pleasure.

Dr Fraser is a general practitioner and is also pursuing her Master of Arts in Journalism; more of her writing can be found at www.sarahfrasermd.com.

Competing interests

None declared

References

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2. Hill L. *The illegal*. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Canada; 2015.
3. Hill L. Act of love: the life and death of Donna Mae Hill. *Globe and Mail* 2018 Jun 1.
4. Hill L. *The book of Negroes*. Toronto, ON: HarperCollins Canada; 2007.

Lawrence Hill is an award-winning author and Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Guelph in Ontario. His published works discussed in this interview include *Blood: The Stuff of Life* (House of Anansi Press, 2013), *The Illegal* (HarperCollins Canada, 2015), "Act of love: the life and death of Donna Mae Hill" (*Globe and Mail* 2018 Jun 1), and *The Book of Negroes* (HarperCollins Canada, 2007).

