



Master of the Crossroads

By Madison Smartt Bell

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Continuing his epic trilogy of the Haitian slave uprising, Madison Smartt Bell's **Master of the Crossroads** delivers a stunning portrayal of Toussaint Louverture, former slave, military genius and liberator of Haiti, and his struggle against the great European powers to free his people in the only successful slave revolution in history. At the outset, Toussaint is a second-tier general in the Spanish army, which is supporting the rebel slaves' fight against the French. But when Toussaint is betrayed by his former allies and the commanders of the Spanish army, he reunites his army with the French, wresting vital territories and manpower from Spanish control. With his army one among several factions, Toussaint eventually rises as the ultimate victor as he wards off his enemies to take control of the French colony and establish a new constitution.

Bell's grand, multifaceted novel shows a nation, splintered by actions and in the throes of chaos, carried to liberation and justice through the undaunted tenacity of one incredible visionary.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

In 1995 Madison Smartt Bell published *All Souls' Rising*, earning both critical plaudits and a National Book Award nomination for this fictional account of Haiti's 18th-century slave rebellion. Now he continues the saga with *Master of the Crossroads*, the second volume of a projected trilogy. Even in his earlier narratives of contemporary America, the author has always been attuned to the byzantine politics of color. But by focusing on the figure of Toussaint Louverture--the black general who led the Haitians to independence only to be jailed for treason against the French Republic--Bell allows the politics of race to point him in unexpected and rewarding narrative directions. This is a big, muscular book, which derives much of its strength from the author's willingness to paint his tumultuous political and physical landscapes with broadly sweeping strokes. But it is also a work of surprising delicacy, whose finely drawn characters come to life with the minutest gesture or softly whispered word.

The crossroads herein are not merely literal but metaphorical. Yes, the former slaves and their courageous leader are pinned down in the island's remote interior, caught between the English forces and the Spanish army (their nominal yet treacherous ally). But more to the point, Haiti's intricate progress from slavery to freedom brings each of the characters to a crucial, defining moment of energy or introspection. And finally, swirling through the book like an island mist, is the voodoo figure of Mâit' Kalfou, or the "Master of the Crossroads." Straddling the worlds of the dead and the living, this ecstatic spirit may at any time inhabit the body of a believer:

Between Legba and Kalfou the crossroads stood open now, and now Guiaou could feel that opened pathway rushing up his spine--passage from the Island Below Sea inhabited by *les Morts et les Mystères*. His hips melted into the movement of the drums, and the tails of the red coat swirled around his legs like feathers of a bird. With the other dancers he closed the small, tight circle around Legba and Kalfou, who faced each other as in a mirror: the shining surface of the waters, which divides the living from the dead.

Throughout, Bell's captivating vision of the battlefield bears witness to his rigorous research. Still, the voodoo celebrations, and the author's sly evocation of their unexpected resonance, remain the novel's strongest moments. Why? They speak, perhaps, to the apocalyptic nature of the Haitian rebellion. And more intriguingly, they permit Bell to play with the deceptive nature of belief and reality--a move that, in an avowedly historical novel, hints at the ironic fluidity of history itself. --*Kelly Flynn*

From Publishers Weekly

Bell manages the bravura feat of bringing coherence and novelistic focus to the intrinsically complex history of Haiti's national liberator in this second installment in his brutal, sweeping trilogy. The first volume, *All Souls' Rising*, a National Book Award finalist, took the slave revolt in Haiti up to 1793, when the great leader Toussaint Louverture was consolidating power. Continuing his stunning historical fresco, Bell traces the intricate weave of Toussaint's campaigns with an intelligence and verve reminiscent of Shelby Foote's classic military histories, braiding his rich character studies into the larger scheme. Racial classification was a science in Haiti in the 18th century, and the subtlest variations in skin color determined the treatment each person received. Riau, Toussaint's godson, is an ex-slave. For him, the desire of the white planters to reintroduce slavery, and their fundamental racism, is evident, but Riau's hatred doesn't vitiate his humanity. Riau does trust Toussaint's secretary, a white doctor, Antoine H bert. A subplot running like a silver thread in the shadow of the war is H bert's quest for his mulatto mistress, Nanon, after she runs away from H bert's

plantation with Choufleur, a sadistic mulatto planter and Nanon's former lover, who exploits the psychodynamics of slavery in a frightening erotic context. The faltering planter aristocracy is represented by Michel Arnaud, who returns to the island although his house and lands were torched in the first phase of the revolt. Arnaud's past is one of murderous cruelty. Now, he is slowly rehabilitating himself, thanks to Claudine, his wife, who suffers from possession by the darkest Vodou spirit, Baron Samedi. Bell continually integrates his history with the sacred Vodou landscape, and as events channel between crossroads, trances, dreams and bloodshed, this mesmerizing, disturbing saga of a half-forgotten war takes on the ominous outlines and biblical proportions of a prophetic vision. (Oct.)

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From Library Journal

The second installment in Bell's trilogy on the Haitian slave revolt of the 1790s (following *All Souls' Rising*) picks up the story in 1794, three years into the conflict. Toussaint Louverture, an itinerant herb doctor, has quickly risen through the ranks of the black militia to become supreme military commander of the island. Toussaint is a brilliant tactician who practices a form of horse-mounted blitzkrieg, racing his cavalry along narrow mountain trails in the dead of night to take the enemy by surprise. He is also an astute politician who shrewdly plays Haiti's numerous factions against one another to his own advantage. But the real key to Toussaint's power, according to Bell, is his mastery of the language of his oppressors. He generates an endless stream of carefully worded memos detailing his victories, often sitting up all night with a team of secretaries to compose them. It's as if the events themselves have no reality until they are put into words. As Toussaint perfects his white persona, Bell's core group of French colonials is increasingly drawn to the island's potent voodoo culture. What results is a superb historical novel that consistently surpasses the high standard set by *All Souls' Rising*. Highly recommended.

-*DEdward B. St. John*, *Loyola Law Sch. Lib., Los Angeles*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Mindy Martinez:

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