



# All Souls' Rising

*Madison Smartt Bell*

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## **All Souls' Rising** Madison Smartt Bell

In this first installment of his epic Haitian trilogy, Madison Smartt Bell brings to life a decisive moment in the history of race, class, and colonialism. The slave uprising in Haiti was a momentous contribution to the tide of revolution that swept over the Western world at the end of the 1700s. A brutal rebellion that strove to overturn a vicious system of slavery, the uprising successfully transformed Haiti from a European colony to the world's first Black republic. From the center of this horrific maelstrom, the heroic figure of Toussaint Louverture—a loyal, literate slave and both a devout Catholic and Vodouisant—emerges as the man who will take the merciless fires of violence and vengeance and forge a revolutionary war fueled by liberty and equality.

Bell assembles a kaleidoscopic portrait of this seminal movement through a tableau of characters that encompass black, white, male, female, rich, poor, free and enslaved. Pulsing with brilliant detail, **All Soul's Rising** provides a visceral sense of the pain, terror, confusion, and triumph of revolution.

## **All Souls' Rising Details**

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Author : Madison Smartt Bell

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# From Reader Review *All Souls' Rising* for online ebook

## Joan Colby says

This is the first of Bell's trilogy on the history of the Haitian insurgency. It is shocking in its frank descriptions of the abuse of slaves and the terrors of the insurrection. Bell interweaves the social structure of 18th century Haiti into his tale portraying the Grand Blanc plantation owners who supported the ancient regime, the Petit Blancs consisting of artisans, adventurers and so forth most of whom were supporters of the French revolutionaries, the mulattoes who were generally freemen, often educated and wealthy, sometimes owning slaves themselves, but constrained by law from voting or of any political recognition, and finally the black slaves who outnumbered the whites 10 to one, the large proportion of whom were born in Africa and who imported their animistic beliefs into what became Haiti's primary religion: Voudon. Of this latter, Bell gives a good understanding of how the Voodoo rituals induced mass hysteria that led to some of the most egregious behaviors toward the white men.

Toussaint L'Overture is a main character, among other historical figures, and is seen as a moderate who preferred to petition and negotiate with France rather than resort to bloody warfare. He, however, had little control over the leaders of the slave contingents, most of whom had been overseers on the plantations and therefore versed in brutality. Bell inspires the reader to reflect on the nature of man's sadistic impulses, regardless of race or station. We commonly describe such activities as bestial, yet I can think of only one species that enjoys tormenting its prey: cats. The political intrigues replicate those that occur throughout history. Haiti was France's principal territory and source of revenue from sugar and coffee. France, therefore, gave serious consideration to the colonies misfortunes and dispatched ministers to attempt to mediate. While King Louis had issued edicts guaranteeing certain rights to the slaves, they were seldom followed, and the French Revolution put paid to any accommodations the royalists may have contemplated.

The novel has various protagonists: the main ones being Dr. Hebert, a recent arrival from France who has come to seek his sister; Riaux, a runaway slave; Arnaud, a Grand Blanc plantation owner; and Toussaint himself.

Bell's depiction of the era is authentic and riveting; one can hardly put this book down, though often the descriptions of unspeakable actions make reading on almost unbearable.

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## Susan says

One of the best historical novels I've ever read. It's about the Haitian Revolution—this is the first volume. There are multiple points of view among the white and black people of Haiti. A French doctor comes to Haiti to visit a sister who's married a Haitian planter and about whom he's concerned. Dr. Hébert, who becomes involved with a mulatto woman and has a child with her, who's captured by the rebels and learns about medicinal herbs from Toussaint L'Overture, is the "touchstone" character, the one whose sensibilities are most like those of today's readers. It was a brilliant decision on Bell's part to have a white man who was not a Haitian colonial (with economic interests in plantations and slave labor) as an observer/participant, one who is of the same class as the planters (without their interests) but is able to accept human beings on their own merits. I understand he continues through the next two volumes of the trilogy. There is also third person narration that focuses on different characters, increasing Toussaint who was already old by Haitian slave standards, a Christian, and from a well-run plantation where slaves were not grossly mistreated. There's some first person narrative by an African named Riaux who remembers his homeland (Toussaint was born into slavery in Haiti) and who moves between Toussaint's group and some more militant and violent groups.

The first person narrative is Bell's attempt, largely successful, to "get inside the head" of the rebels, in the form of an individual who's intelligent enough to have some insight into the choices the rebels have. Bell provides ample historical material for the reader to understand the context of the only successful black revolution. It takes place during the unsettled period following the French Revolution. There exist in Haiti at the time not only the same groups of whites there were in the US during slavery (the upper class, who owned land and for whom the institution of slavery is critical and the middle class whites who were traders and shopkeepers and had other jobs and professions and whose wealth did not derive from the land), but political groups as well, those conservatives who supported the king (largely the plantation-owning class) as well as various revolutionary supporters. So to some extent French politics played out in Haiti. There was one governing official who deported those Frenchmen who disagreed with him back to France as traitors, and in some cases to the guillotine. There were also black rebels who were loyal to the king.

There's a year-by-year summary of historical events in an appendix—needed since most readers in English are not very familiar with Haitian history. There's also an excellent glossary that allows Bell to use French and Creole words in the text because all of them are explained in the glossary. That allows him to initiate the reader into the Voodoo religion and Haitian traditions among whites, Creoles, mulattoes and blacks) as it touches on the events in the novel. It's extraordinary how successful he is leading readers to understand the multiple points of view. Neither side is monolithic in its interests and values and both the rebels and the white defenders are complicated and changing coalitions of individuals and groups with various motivations. Bell's narrative also moves back and forth in time, with the novel actually beginning as Toussaint is moved to a secure prison in France in 1802. The events, though, of this first volume mainly take place between 1791 and 1793.

I already have the second volume...

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### **Mathieu says**

Madison Smartt Bell has written a mind-blowing book which is a precise and researched telling of the Haitian revolution that drove the French out of the island. But this novel's strength lies more particularly not in its historical accuracy (which is flawless) but in his writing qualities. Smartt Bell writes like if we were dreaming. Everything has a kind of vaporous, sluggish, cotton-like quality and, as such, everything, even the most atrocious deeds, such as the opening scene of a crucified pregnant woman or the scene of a Black rebel dressed in a looted dress holding a pike onto which a newborn baby is impaled, wriggling like a frog in slow motion -- all these scenes seem unreal and at the same time terrible for what they mean. Bell achieves this delicate balance by a precise and never dull use of the passive voice, one I would have otherwise condemned. Reading this book is a moral experience. Nothing is good, nothing is evil; no one is either black or white (no pun intended). A lesson in history, in story and in writing both.

My review in French: <http://lesboggans.over-blog.com/artic...>

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### **Andrea says**

"ASR" has everything - pure substance and hard content written with rhythm and grace. M.S. Bell has taken the historical novel to an ultimate point of evolution and created an original masterwork. The nightmarish events are never hidden, but seem to be filtered through a buffer zone of detached observation. The language is also highly hypnotic, and the result is like watching horrific imagery in a dazed state. For all this restraint,

the novel is never sterile - a living pulse runs through it and permeates every page with vibrant presence. I was totally immersed while reading this; breathing and sensing the island, the epoch, the fictional and historical characters.

Needless to say, I'll be reading the two other volumes in this trilogy, and soon.

Overwhelming, potent, magnificent - one of the best books I've read in ages!

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## **Tom says**

To attempt to write a historical novel out of the morass that was the Haitian Revolution would seem like way too daunting a task for me. I've read about this particular Revolution for many years and still feel like my understanding of it and all the different sides and all the shifting alliances and all the foreign intervention is still weak. This book helped provide some clarity as well as helped humanize some of the characters, like Touissant and Dessalines. The pacing is a bit of a problem for me as there are some parts that breeze over six months with no idea what happened, and some parts that dwell so much on the events of just a couple of hours that you feel like it will never end. I think that is just part of the price you pay in writing about historical events that don't always get to the climax in a well thought out timeline. One word of caution is that this book is graphic! From it's depictions of slavery to the uprising of those slaves to the recrimination and back and forth fighting - the extreme violence is spelled out in great detail making my stomach turn a few times.

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## **Nick says**

Nasty, brutish and long. I pine for the days when crucifixion was the climax of a narrative, not the opening gambit, as it is here. I understand what the author is trying to do, I think, and I write as someone with great affection for the historical epic, *Les Misérables*, for example, or *Zhivago*. And it is impossible to address revolutions past without acknowledging that they tend to set the devils free. This book lacks either the immediacy of Hugo or the sweep of Pasternak, which is understandable, since very few books achieve that, but the structure and focus are also problematic. The first third of the narrative begins in what was apparently the most gruesome phase of the Haitian rebels (with a prologue that details slaveholder brutality). spending its time with a few characters who could have taught the Aztecs something about cruelty. The following parts tend to follow the intricacies of colonial and rebel politics. That need not be fatal; after all, the maneuvers of the Jacobins, the Spanish and even the English, not to mention the divisions on the other side between Africans, Haitian-born blacks and mulattos, makes for constant intrigue, if one can follow the twists. French soldiers and rebels both wound up fighting for the Spanish at one time or another, and the leaders of the rebellion at one time apparently offered to send their soldiers back to the plantations in exchange for their own freedom -- only to have the obstinate planters reject the proposal. The fundamental problem, though, aside from the unremitting violence of the opening section, is the characters. Too many of the men seem either to embody either historical figures or historical types (the French soldier, the mulatto, the African slave) or historical figures. Both seem manipulative. There is a doctor one of whose functions seems to be to place the story at key historical and narrative points. The women fare especially poorly, with the joylessly adulterous Isabelle Cigny and Claudine Arnaud, whose madness seems too convenient to the

story at key points. The black women fare even worse, serving the plot rather than humanity. A sweeping view of history is a fine thing, but it does require that real humans occasionally appear.

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## Moloch says

Volevo scrivere una recensione bellissima appena terminata l'ultima pagina, ma mi mancavano le parole... e, soprattutto, non avevo tempo da perdere, perché dovevo subito andare avanti con la lettura di questa voluminosa "Trilogia di Haiti", incentrata sulla rivolta degli schiavi neri capeggiata dal carismatico Toussaint L'Ouverture alla fine del XVIII secolo.

Ora che ho finito anche il secondo volume, *Il Signore dei crocevia*, e mi sono un po' calmata, mi sforzerò. La colonia francese di Saint-Domingue, nel 1791, risente dei tumultuosi cambiamenti che stanno investendo la madrepatria. Sulla scena, gli attori sono molti e tutti con interessi contrapposti: fra i bianchi, i grandi proprietari che si servono della manodopera degli schiavi e la borghesia del commercio, più sensibile agli ideali rivoluzionari ma notevolmente meno estremista dei giacobini europei; i disprezzati ma spesso facoltosi meticci, che rivendicano gli stessi diritti dei bianchi; i neri, riuniti nelle piantagioni come schiavi o in bande di fuggitivi nascosti nelle foreste dell'interno, arrivati dall'Africa o nati sull'isola, uniti comunque dal patrimonio comune delle pratiche *voodoo*.

I destini di tanti personaggi, un medico da poco arrivato sull'isola e sua sorella, un grande proprietario schiavista e sua moglie, una prostituta meticcina, un mezzosangue figlio illegittimo di un bianco, uno schiavo in fuga, un soldato, un avventuriero, un singolare missionario, si intrecciano magistralmente su uno sfondo cupo di violenza che vede ciascuna fazione (bianchi, meticci, neri) inizialmente l'una contro l'altra, quindi in cerca di fragili alleanze sempre mutevoli, continuamente ribaltate e messe in dubbio, esplosioni improvvise di ferocia e inaspettate redenzioni.

Preoccupati per la piega sempre più radicale che sta prendendo la politica francese e convinti di poter facilmente controllare la situazione, un gruppo di grandi proprietari bianchi schiavisti prepara il terreno per una rivolta "dimostrativa" dei neri, che nelle loro intenzioni deve servire solo a spaventare l'opinione pubblica e il governo per attrarli dalla propria parte, ma che sfugge loro totalmente di mano, generando uno spaventoso massacro della popolazione bianca da parte delle bande dei ribelli, spesso disorganizzate e ferocemente assetate di vendetta per le tremende sofferenze patite, mentre i rappresentanti della Francia rivoluzionaria, dopo aver inizialmente cercato l'appoggio della componente meticcina, intraprendono una politica di alleanza sottile e rischiosa proprio con la popolazione nera, fino all'abolizione della schiavitù, per rendere irreversibile la radicalizzazione e sbarazzarsi dei realisti una volta per tutte. Nel frattempo, comincia a emergere la figura carismatica di Toussaint Bréda (che poi si farà chiamare Toussaint L'Ouverture), all'apparenza un umile schiavo nero non più troppo giovane esperto di erbe mediche, e invece in realtà l'unico che, probabilmente, ha di fronte a sé un obiettivo ben preciso e non negoziabile, la definitiva abolizione della schiavitù e la liberazione della sua gente, ed è in grado di muoversi abilmente e astutamente per raggiungerlo a qualsiasi costo.

Si possono fare paralleli con un'altra "trilogia" da me letta di recente, quella dello scrittore danese Thorkild Hansen (questo post e successivi): là l'autore non sceglieva la strada dell'invenzione narrativa ma ricostruiva, concentrandosi su alcune figure rappresentative realmente esistite, più o meno note o nomi che hanno lasciato solo una flebile traccia di sé e da lui sottratti all'oblio, la storia del commercio, del trasporto e del trattamento degli schiavi, stavolta nelle colonie danesi nelle Antille. L'effetto era quello di una panoramica a tutto tondo e che abbracciava diversi secoli, ma la maggiore affinità con l'opera di Madison Smartt Bell si ha probabilmente nell'ultimo capitolo della trilogia, *Le isole degli schiavi*, in cui viene narrata, con piglio

tragicamente romanzesco, la sanguinosa rivolta nell'isola di Saint John del 1733, tentata da Kong Juni, capo-tribù africano: là, però, la violenza vendicatrice si sfogò e si esaurì in se stessa, non riuscì a saldarsi a un compiuto progetto politico, anche perché non poté approfittare di un contesto favorevole come quello della Rivoluzione francese, e rimase un episodio destinato al più totale fallimento. Ma ciò nonostante le due figure dei comandanti, pur diversissime, grazie alle penne di Hansen e Bell assurgono a una dimensione epicamente tragica e di profonda dignità (più nota, naturalmente, la figura di Toussaint L'Ouverture, su cui esiste un'ampia letteratura).

Per tornare a *Quando le anime si sollevano*, accanto alla forza e all'importanza dei temi trattati, non bisogna trascurare il fatto che questo libro regala anche ore di *piacere puro* grazie alla sua trama avvincente e avventurosa. È meraviglioso anche come riesca a essere commovente e a descrivere con forza e persuasione grandi passioni, tenendosi tuttavia lontano da qualsiasi scivolone nel sentimentalismo, e mantenendo anzi un tono asciutto e spesso brutale (qualcuno, su Goodreads, lamentava l'eccessiva violenza di certe scene e di certe immagini: ma essa è essenziale per far comprendere appieno la realtà delle atroci condizioni di vita nelle piantagioni, delle inumane punizioni, l'esasperazione degli sfruttati, lo stato di tensione e sospetto costante).

Un romanzo-fiume (ma le successive puntate della trilogia sono ancora più voluminose) che però, se lo leggerete, scorrerà via alla velocità della luce... e più vi avvicinerete alla fine, più vi rincrescerà il pensiero che siete "solo" a... svariate centinaia di pagine dalla conclusione e dovrete prima o poi risvegliarvi da questo incantesimo.

Se devo proprio trovare un difetto (che poi forse è da rimproverare più all'edizione italiana che all'opera in sé), la cartina di Haiti sul risvolto di copertina è un po' troppo sommaria, una grande quantità dei luoghi citati nel romanzo non è presente e si finisce per perdere l'orientamento fra i continui spostamenti dei personaggi.

Questo è un romanzo scoperto totalmente per caso: stavo esplorando il catalogo di questa casa editrice a me finora sconosciuta, Alet, per arricchire un po' il database di Goodreads. Oh, giorno fortunato!

5/5

<http://moloch981.wordpress.com/2012/0...>

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## **Edith Wheeler says**

The first in a trilogy about the slave uprising in Haiti. If you like detailed historical writing, told from multiple viewpoints, this book is for you.

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## **Lydia says**

I would suggest that anyone reading this book also read "The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and San Domingo Revolution" by C.L.R. James. The James book gives the history of the Haitian revolution, but "All Souls Rising" gives more a sense of the human toll the revolution took. Using the physician Antoine Hebert's search for his married sister, Smartt Bell steers the reader through the lives the landed gentry (slave owners); mixed race persons; the darker slaves and rebel and military leaders. It sheds light on the attitudes of color in

Negro race and how it has been used by blacks and whites to divide black people. The atrocities of war are vividly conveyed and how a kidnapped and enslaved people would use any means necessary to free themselves.

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### **Diane says**

I found the subject matter very interesting, but I thought that the story was difficult to follow. This was partially due to the switch between different voices telling the story and partially due to the author's tendency to stick in whole paragraphs in French! There were also sections about Toussaint as a prisoner in France before it was explained exactly what his part was in the Revolution.

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### **Mary Gaetjens says**

This book will haunt you forever and give you something very important to remember in these times -none of us are free until all of us are free. If you like historical novels but often find them too dry to read all the way through you'll appreciate the brilliant way in which this author brings history to life - epic, gripping, excruciating and enlightening.

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### **Shomeret says**

I thought that the sympathetic viewpoint characters anchored the narrative. Other readers may find the viewpoint changes difficult to follow. I didn't have this problem, but I did find the appended Chronology of Historical Events useful. I had hoped for more voodoo content, but finding out about the political factions during the revolutionary period was educational.

I do have to say that the novel is extremely violent. The author does illustrate the motivations behind the violence, and I did not imagine that the brutal reign of the aristocratic slaveholders in Haiti could be overthrown by idealistic anti-slavery pronouncements. There were similarities between Haiti's revolution and France's revolution, but there were also some important differences.

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### **Colleen says**

As others have noted, this book is incredibly violent- I skimmed over a few paragraphs because I could see what was coming and did not want that specific picture in my head. However, it is also an unflinching and well-written exposure of the impact of Haiti's history of slavery, violence, oppression and rape. I struggled to connect with some of the characters (Riau), but I believe that it was deliberate in a way, to highlight how foreign but equally valid his experience of the world is to mine. I learned a ton about a part of world history that is never taught in schools.

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## **Djrmel says**

Perfect balance of character/story/setting, this is a book that tackles a big event (Haitian slave rebellion) and brings it down to a very human size. The story is told through all the various points of view that brought about an incredibly bloody and deadly event, which in a lesser writer's hand would feel like padding. But Bell takes the time to let each character not only establish their link to history, he also makes them three dimensional enough that even the "villains" of the story have their sympathetic moments. In light of how the current nation of Haiti is so often in the news, this is a timely and very good background read.

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## **Jen says**

This book was brutal—truthful, perhaps, yet brutal—AND I am glad I read it. Having minimal knowledge of Haitian history other than the fact of the revolution, I learned more than I expected. The book viscerally displays the effects of slavery on a society. I wish I could recommend this book without caveats, but I can't. This should be a book you seek out and choose for yourself. In the meantime, read Frantz Fanon, read Memmi, and if you do read this book, be prepared to think deeply and recognize the correlations between this world and our own.

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## **Dergrosseest says**

I don't know that I have ever read anything as shockingly disturbing as this story of the early phases of the Haitian slave revolt of the late 18th Century. Told from the perspective of an intrepid French doctor, a savage creole plantation owner, his insane wife, a rebel slave from Africa and Toussiant Louverture, the black Haitian George Washington, the breakneck pace of this novel never lets up even for a moment while it moves from the unbelievable routine atrocities committed by the unrelentingly cruel French against their slaves, the even more sickening atrocities committed by the black slaves who rise up against them, and the shifting allegiances of the mulattos living in the margins of both the black and white worlds. Making everything worse is the madness of revolutionary France, the various governors, administrators and committees of the colonial government, the generals and admirals dispatched to maintain order, and the contradictory pronouncements flowing from the ever-changing governments of the motherland. The author makes easy sense of this maelstrom without ever missing a beat of the many different stories being told.

My only reservation is that, despite the fact that the whites clearly deserve some of what they get, it is very difficult to stomach the graphic descriptions of what the blacks, fueled by revenge and frenzied by their voodoo religion, do to the white men, women and children unlucky enough to cross their path. If you can get past these horrors, you will be afforded a unique view of a distant, foreign, but disturbingly familiar story told by an absolute master. Highly recommended.

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## Speesh says

Anyone who reads my blog (plug), will know - from looking at the Goodreads 'Currently Reading' widget there, that it's taken a long time to struggle through this one. A very long time. A very, very long time. You get the picture.

I fully accept it could be me that found this to be a long-winded way of saying very little. I don't know. It's either a polished turd, or a searing condemnation of...something or other. To be honest, I'm too bored to worry about worrying about what on earth he was trying to do with this one.

It's about the only successful slave rebellion ever. Which took place in Haiti (the French colony of Saint-Dominge, as it was) in 1791 - 1804. This book, I think, is set at the start, in 1791. Basically, we follow the progress of a French Doctor, through the French, the Haitian side of the island, before during and after the Slaves' uprising.

It's written, I think, in a style he feels is appropriate for the era (I'm guessing it's a man. You never know with a name like Madison). So a kind of Jane Austin-style, if she was writing about people being skinned alive. Well, I'm sorry, but some of the descriptions of what went on, are unnecessarily gruesome. Absolutely unnecessarily graphic and downright disturbingly horrible. I've yet to find out if these sorts of things actually went on and the descriptions are based on fact or not. And I'm not going to. But, they did absolutely nothing to advance the cause of the novel. It descended in parts, into the worst sort of gratuitous slasher, cheap horror-movie blood bath. Horror for horror's sake with an attempt to dress it up in the tattered trappings of a serious work. Yes, I can understand that the slaves were highly likely to exact their revenge on their ex-masters and you could hardly blame them for doing what they did. But stretching it out, time and time again, page after page is just badly done. And then, if this stuff isn't based on actual incidents, on hard documented fact, and he's making all this up - then you're one very sick man, Mr Bell. Or Ms Bell.

I came very, very close to knocking it on the head. Many, many times.

I know it's always easier to be negative than positive, but I really am struggling to find anything positive to say about this one. Oh yeah, I got it free. Phew!

That's it. If you're in the market for this sort of thing, you're probably going to appreciate it a lot more than I did. To be honest, I found the historical time-line at the back more interesting and readable than what preceded it. Probably, the Wikipedia page on the up-rising would read better.

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## Erika says

I've always been interested in Haiti, and so was eager to start this literary novel about the slave rebellion of the late 1700s. But I found it to be disjointed, confusing and overly long. It's also extremely gory, which I understand since that was what actually happened, but some of the torture scenes are so awful that I wish I could un-see them. There's one section in particular when a mixed-race man slowly kills his white father, that is really tough to read.

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## **Gregory says**

Incredible historical fiction about the early years of the Haitian Revolution. The story is told with a handful of characters...black and white, free and enslaved, rich and poor. Some of the chapters that dealt with the start of the revolt featured descriptions of the most vicious and savage violence I could ever imagine, told with a surgical coldness. Not for the faint of heart.

I have no comment on the historical accuracy but I will say that every time I did follow up research online to learn more about a historical figure from the revolution or an event from the book, it checked out.

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## **Laura Andersen says**

I'm not sure "really liked it" is an accurate representation of my feelings . . . how does one "really like" a book with such pain and cruelty, especially when it's true? Yes, this book is fiction, but Haiti is not fictional. The horrific experience of slaves in the French colony is not fictional. The slave uprising whose beginning Bell charts in this book is not fictional.

If you know me at all, you know I love this country of Haiti where I lived for a year. Reading this, though painful, feels like a small way to bear witness of the foundation on which Haiti was built, and I will read the next to in the trilogy.

That said: I'm now looking for books about this place and period written by Haitians themselves.

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