

The Haitian Revolution at the Crossroads

Toussaint Louverture

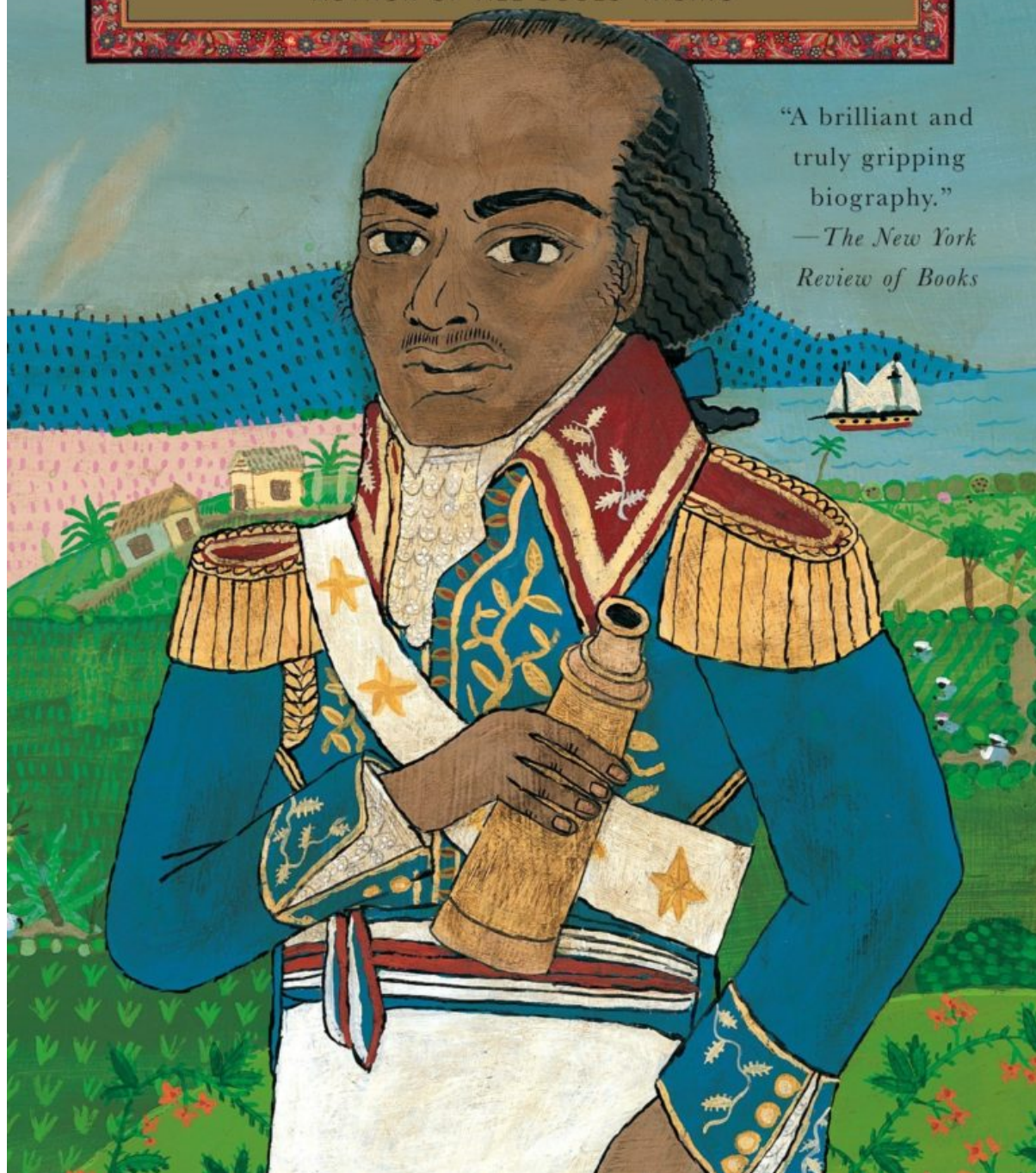
A BIOGRAPHY

MADISON SMARTT BELL

AUTHOR OF ALL SOULS' RISING

"A brilliant and
truly gripping
biography."

—*The New York
Review of Books*

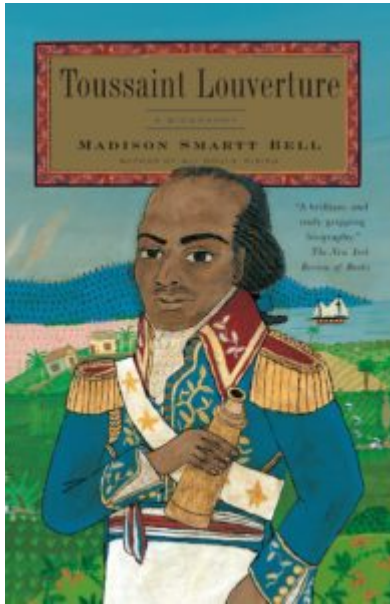


A discussion between Madison Smartt Bell and Laurent Dubois

Laurent Dubois: To start off our discussion, I thought I might ask you a question. I was struck in reading your biography of Toussaint Louverture how it both followed the narrative presented in your Haitian Revolution trilogy and also, of course, represented a very different narrative style. What was it like writing a biography after having written so elegantly, but also imaginatively, about Louverture in your novels?

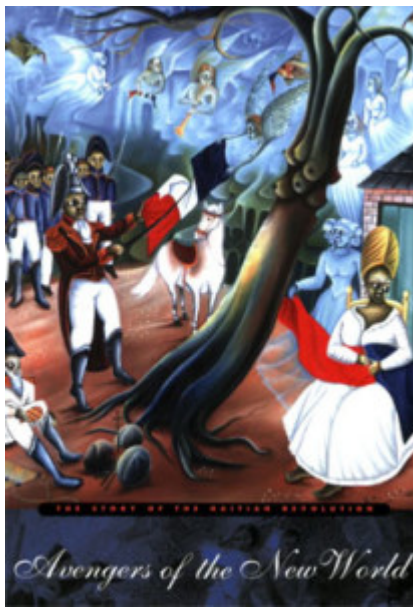
Madison Smartt Bell: I've spent most of my writing time on fiction since the early 1980s, so the idea that I can't make anything up took some getting used to at first. That said, I think biography and novels both require the writer to imagine the character—to breathe life into what you can construct from the information you have. That's particularly true in the case of Toussaint, a character who has to be constructed out of rather small and widely scattered shards. It actually helped me quite a bit that I never set out to fictionalize him much in the novels either—I always meant to portray him as I believe him really to have been (and I had plenty of room to work out my make-it-up jones on the horde of fictional characters). So in fact I had done a lot of the preliminary work of projecting the character already. The difference was supporting the projection with facts alone (not to mention a few reasonable conjectures).

Which leads to a question I wanted to ask you—there's a recent trend of a sort of novelistic characterization of historical figures in works of history, and since *Avengers of the New World* is the first place I saw it, I sort of wondered if you started it. David Bell does it in his new book *The First Total War*, using as one of a number of wandering heroes Lauzun, a personage previously unknown to nonspecialists, I think. A forthcoming book about North American colonists and Indians by Peter Silver uses similar techniques. And there is the forthcoming *Boone*, by Robert Morgan. I don't really remember seeing this before *Avengers*, except for Shelby Foote, but he's another crossover from fiction writing, and he always understood himself as writing a sort of Homeric epic (while Homer probably understood himself as recording history . . . but that's another story . . .).



Madison Smartt Bell: Toussaint Louverture

LD: I think there has always been cross-fertilization between history and literature, going way back, and certainly among the great nineteenth-century historians like Michelet in France, Parkman in the United States, and also Thomas Madiou in Haiti. But I think you are right that there is a kind of new trend in a lot of works of history to bring in relatively unknown people and make them into characters, braiding their stories through whatever larger narrative is being told. You can see this in Simon Schama's work, notably in his recent Rough Crossings; in Shelby Foote; in work by Natalie Davis; and many other places.



Laurent Dubois: Avengers of the New World

Although different writers obviously do this for different reasons, I think it

has something to do both with developments within the field of history and with the continuing inspiration provided by literature to historians. In part, bringing in lesser-known figures is a way of incorporating the insights of social history, particularly the idea that we need to understand people's everyday life and everyday struggles, and also to multiply and expand our notion of who the actors of history are. It also allows writers—and it allowed me in Avengers—to foreground the interpretive problems of history writing, particularly the need to situate and contextualize the sources we use to get at that history, by effectively turning our sources into characters. So, for instance, in Avengers it was important to me to present Moreau de Saint-Méry as a character, in a sense, precisely because I was depending on him so much to help me describe Saint-Domingue. Not only do such characters provide a narrative strand that you can carry through the story, they also remind readers that what they are reading is itself based on the writings of people who lived through the period and who had their own personalities, blind-spots, and obsessions.

One of the things I liked about your novels was that people who I think of primarily as historical sources showed up as characters—I'm thinking notably of Descourtilz in The Stone that the Builder Refused (2004)—and I was curious whether you included them in part with a similar intention of acknowledging and highlighting the works you were drawing on for the novel.

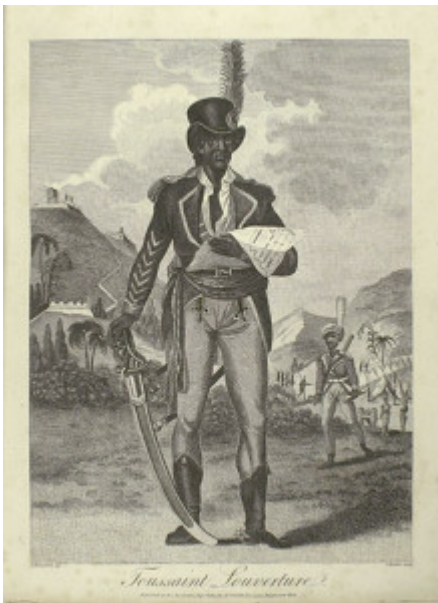
MSB: Well, Descourtilz certainly was a character, in the sense that my grandmother would have used the word—that is, an unusual person of marked eccentricity, perhaps. I think I had already committed to the character of Doctor Hébert before I crossed Descourtilz's trail. For the novelistic purposes they might have been collapsed into one character but . . . my doctor is more politically and socially progressive than Descourtilz portrays himself to have been, and then I have always been uncomfortable with the idea of treating real persons as fictional characters to any great extent—such as projecting their inner lives or portraying them in important actions that the record doesn't prove they undertook. But there was an irresistible quality to Descourtilz as a character—because of his cranky but acute appraisals of things and the fact that he really was bang in the center of key episodes like the battle at la Crête à Pierrot. So I brought him and my doctor together there and used them more or less as foils for each other.

Other minor historical players who seemed to give me something to attach to were the Procurator Gros and, especially, Pamphile de Lacroix, himself a sophisticated writer with a flair for characterizing others directly and himself rather more indirectly.

And yes, everyone does have his own ax to grind! That's one of the reasons why, in the history of Saint Domingue, it's so hard to get to a definitive understanding of (for example) whether there was or was not a royalist conspiracy to touch off the insurrection of 1791—because every reporter on that point had a propagandistic purpose . . . among other things . . .

Meanwhile, here is something that began to puzzle me while writing the biography: the fact of Toussaint's case is that he had been free for fifteen years or so when the first rising erupted on the Northern Plain. We know that he owned at least a few slaves. The description of his property to Cafarelli at the end suggests that he might well have owned more than a few slaves . . . to take care of the very significant amount of real estate in his possession. Thanks to the extent of his holdings, in some ways Toussaint had more common interest with the *grand blanc* proprietor class (which included his friends and associates Bayon de Libertat and colonels Cambefort and Touzard). Yet the power base for revolution was with the great mass of slaves who became the *nouveau libres*. Toussaint in all his rhetoric identified himself with that group, to which he did not in fact belong.

What puzzles me is why nobody ever attacked him on this point of weakness. That Toussaint was a free owner of land and slaves for over a decade before the revolution could not have been a total secret and it certainly would have hurt his identification with the *nouveau libres*, had it become generally known. Enemies who did all they could to damage him (Kerverseau, Sonthonax, Rigaud) somehow never mentioned this point. Indeed until the 1970s the version where Toussaint breaks the chains of his own slavery in 1791 became part of his image and legend. Do you have any idea *how* he was able to spin that story so successfully?



Toussaint Louverture, engraving by J. Barlow from a sketch by M. Rainsford. From *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti: Comprehending a View of the Principal Transactions in the Revolution of Saint Domingo; with It's Antient and Modern State*, by Marcus Rainsford, Esq. (London, 1805). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

LD: You are right—and you show well in your novels and in the biography—that Louverture was a masterful stylist, in his writings and (so far as we can tell)

in his speeches, and he does seem to have been remarkably successful at broadcasting a partial narrative of his own life, one that tied him to thenouveau libres. Although I did notice with interest in your biography that at one point Louverture basically admitted that he had been free before the revolution, an admission that interestingly most historians overlooked until 1977, when Gabriel Debien and his colleagues published their famous article in *Conjonction* showing that he had been free and a slave owner before the revolution. I think Louverture was not the only one invested in a narrative of his life that tied him to thenouveau libres masses.

I do think some of his enemies, particularly Sonthonax, did attack him on this point of weakness, though somewhat indirectly, when they criticized him for being too soft onémigrés (like his former owner) and too close to the grand-blanc class. Sonthonax tried hard at some points (especially after his expulsion from the colony) to argue that Louverture was in fact quite a counterrevolutionary. Most of the powerful white leaders who were enemies of Louverture by the late 1790s and early 1800s, however, were conservative enough that attacking him for his ties to the planter class wouldn't have made sense. I do think that, among some of thenouveau libres, there always lingered some suspicion about his loyalties, especially by the late 1790s as his regime became more and more coercive and focused on plantation production. Moïse's uprising, for instance, was partly driven, I think, by the sense that Louverture was ultimately not the friend of the nouveau libres. This is one place where it is actually remarkable how little we really know and where there is a lot of research that could be done in the rich sources from the period: What did people in Saint-Domingue really think of Louverture, of his representatives, of his regime? How did they experience his regulations on a daily level, not only in the cities, but in the countryside? I think it would be possible to reconstruct some of this through more archival research, and it would be great to deepen our understanding of this.

One of the many books based on the idea that Louverture had in fact been a slave until the revolution is C. L. R. James's classic *Black Jacobins* (1963). I know this book was an inspiration to you as you started your trilogy. Can you tell us a bit about your encounter with that book, about whether you had heard about the Haitian Revolution before reading it, and more broadly about what drove you to decide to write novels about the event?

MSB: Well, let me double back to those attacks on Toussaint for being a counterrevolutionary. Moïse, a fairly inscrutable character who has left only a few of his words in the record, certainly did blame and mistrust Toussaint for his friendliness to whites of the slave-master class. He may have complained that Toussaint himself had been a slave master, and we don't know about it. But Sonthonax never made that explicit complaint—though it would have been a very powerful piece of evidence supporting his accusation that Toussaint was a counterrevolutionary . . . though he almost certainly must have known about it (seeing among other things that he was married by then to a *femme de couleur* of prominent standing—surely she would have known). Seems weird to me.

As for the experience of Toussaint's regulations, etc., as usual the eyewitness reports are almost all written by *blancs*. Descourtilz is vociferous on the subject as I'm sure you know. The manuscript of your namesake Pélage-Marie Dubois has a lot to say about it. This reporter is not exactly objective either, but his observations about the intrusion of the military into absolutely everything under Toussaint's rule are pretty interesting, especially considering the course that sort of thing has taken in later Haitian history.

The first book I read about the Haitian Revolution (back in 1983) was Ralph Korngold's *Citizen Toussaint* (1945), which was enough on its own to give me my first notion of writing a novel about the story. One of the first things to strike me was that I had *not* heard of the Haitian Revolution before—though it struck me that it was a story all U.S. citizens ought to know. Things have changed a bit since then—the Haitian Revolution is featured in my daughter's high school history textbook, for example—but I don't think that would have been true even ten years ago.

In the 1980s (and on up until *Avengers* came out) *The Black Jacobins* was the Anglophone bible for the Haitian Revolution. I reread it recently in order to write a commentary for a new Italian edition and was struck by how very good it still is, despite being dated by errors in factual matters that had not been discovered at the time of James's writing.

I would say that James is, well, *possessed* by Toussaint's version of his own story. He tells it, beautifully, just the way Toussaint wanted it told. And I believe that version of the story really is substantially true, though it has been shaped, sculpted, and improved *just* a little to make it more effective in the purposes for which it was intended. Translate the situation into the terms of Vodou and one might say that James's work stands as an extraordinary service to the spirit of Toussaint.

Further Reading:

The full titles of works mentioned in this discussion are David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston, 2007); Simon Schama, *Rough Crossings: Britain, the Slaves and the American Revolution* (New York, 2006); Gabriel Debien, Jean Fouchard, and Marie Antoinette Menier, "Toussaint Louverture avant 1789: Légendes et Réalités," *Conjonction* 134 (June-July 1977); C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York, 1963; rev. ed., London, 1980).

This article originally appeared in issue 7.4 (July, 2007).

Madison Smartt Bell is the author of twelve novels and two collections of short stories. *All Souls Rising*, the first of Bell's three-volume Haitian Revolution trilogy, was a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award. Bell's most recent book is *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography* (2007).

Laurent Dubois, professor of history and romance studies at Duke University, is the author of the award-winning *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (2004) and *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (2004), which was a Los Angeles Times best book of 2004.