

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

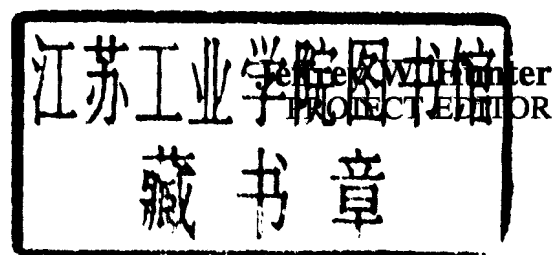
CLC

223

Volume 223

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers



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Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol. 223

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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *CLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literature Criticism series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Aronoff, Myron J. "Learning to Live with Ambiguity: Balancing Ethical and Political Imperatives." In *The Spy Novels of John le Carré: Balancing Ethics and Politics*, 201-14. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Reprinted in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Vol. 220, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, 84-92. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006.

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Madison Smartt Bell

1957

American novelist and short story writer.

The following entry presents an overview of Bell's career through 2004. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 41 and 102.

INTRODUCTION

Bell is recognized for imbuing his characters with authenticity through skillfully written narrative and dialogue, and also through the inclusion of historical settings and events within which he intertwines his fictional stories. His characters' harsh realities and hopeless situations offer readers the opportunity to expand their understanding of marginalized populations.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bell was born August 1, 1957, in Franklin, Tennessee, and has described his childhood as a peculiar combination of subsistence farming and elite private schooling. Bell graduated summa cum laude from Princeton University in 1979 with a degree in English literature. The first accolades of his career came during this time: in 1977 he was awarded the Ward Mathis Prize for his short story "Triptych," and in 1978 he received the Francis Lemoyne Page Award for Fiction. After graduation Bell moved to New York and spent several years working in various fields, notably film production. In 1980, he completed a master's degree in English and creative writing at Hollins College and received the Andrew James Purdy Award. His first novel, *The Washington Square Ensemble*, was published in 1983. Two years later, Bell moved from New York to Baltimore and married Elizabeth Spires, a poet; his second novel, *Waiting for the End of the World*, was published in the same year. Bell has since held teaching positions at: Goucher College, where he was writer-in-residence; the University of South Maine; the Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Young Men and Young Women's Hebrew Association; the Iowa Writer's Workshop; and Johns Hopkins University. Bell is also a frequent contributor of essays and book reviews to publications including *Harper's*, the *London Standard*, the *New York Times Book Review*, and the *Village Voice*. Bell's novel *All Souls' Rising* (1995) was a finalist for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award and earned him inclusion in *Granta's* list of "Best American Novelists under Forty."

MAJOR WORKS

Bell produces novels at an average rate of one every two years, and has at times added short story collections to his oeuvre. The plots and characters of his early novels are urban, often seamy and violent, and far more reminiscent of his years living in New York than of his rural childhood. The main characters of *The Washington Square Ensemble* are a heroin dealer and his band of pushers, each of whom presents a different perspective on their collective life. Careful characterizations are also the hallmark of Bell's second novel, *Waiting for the End of the World*. Written prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., this work features a group of radicals plotting to blow up Times Square with a homemade atomic bomb. Bell's early experiences with film work informed *Straight Cut* (1986), a thriller that combines plot elements of his first two works in a story centered around a drug trafficking scheme. *The Year of Silence* (1987) again emphasizes a variety of perspectives, this time in the reactions characters have to one person's suicide. *Soldier's Joy* (1989), Bell's fifth novel and the first set entirely in the South, concerns two life-long friends, one white and one black, and the trouble they encounter when they return to their native Tennessee as Vietnam War veterans. With this work Bell introduced the subject of racial tension, a theme that would become central to many of his later novels. *Doctor Sleep* (1991), a thriller set in London, follows a hypnotherapist whose insomnia wreaks havoc in his life. *Save Me, Joe Louis* (1993) is again dark and societally marginal, featuring two drifters on an East Coast crime spree.

Bell has expressed feeling a measure of trepidation with telling the stories of people whose sociocultural experiences are radically different from his own. With the publication of *All Souls' Rising* (1995), he introduced a trilogy of novels about the Haitian Revolution, based on extensive research of the era and its key figures which he began during the writing of his first novel and brought to fruition over ten years later. Critical reception was positive and grew stronger with *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), the second novel of the trilogy; by the publication of the final installment, *The Stone That the Builder Refused* (2004), the trilogy had become Bell's most well-respected work. Two unrelated novels, *Ten Indians* (1996) and *Anything Goes* (2002), appeared between the installments of the Haitian trilogy. With *Ten Indians*, Bell returned to themes of urban crime and violence, this time set in Baltimore. Racial tension also

plays a role in this novel, as a white martial arts instructor attempts to change the ingrained dynamics of an inner-city neighborhood. In *Anything Goes*, Bell created a literary outlet for his musical interests with the story of a young musician searching for fame who instead finds a series of life lessons. Bell has also published two collections of short stories, *Zero db and Other Stories* (1987) and *Barking Man and Other Stories* (1990).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Early in Bell's career, critics identified in him an aptitude for creating authentic fictional characters and complex narratives. Reviewing *The Washington Square Ensemble*, Thomas Ruffen stated, "Bell has that rarest of literary gifts: the ability to make word into flesh." Some critics felt that *Waiting for the End of the World* showed the author's strain in transitioning from short to long fiction. David Remnick identified several weaknesses in Bell's second novel, but concluded, "Ambition can sometimes carry a work, and ambition certainly makes *Waiting for the End of the World* well worth reading." Reviewing *The Year of Silence*, Jack Fuller declared, "Anyone who values grace in language, elegance of structure and the magic of finding meaning in literature's subtle ordering of fact will find in *The Year of Silence* a book that is worth the price of a dozen others." In a review of *Save Me, Joe Louis* that also included retrospective consideration of Bell's writings to date, Andy Solomon noted, "Since his first novel, . . . Bell has always written with conspicuous sympathy for the alienated and the bruised." With his Haitian trilogy, Bell graduated in critical opinion from a promising young author to an established and accomplished one. Dwight Garner observed, "In earlier novels, . . . Bell demonstrated that he was a young American novelist of the first rank. *All Souls' Rising*, however, puts him on another level as an artist." Other critics have noted this book's nominations for the PEN/Faulkner and National Book Award, and scholars have observed how the work delineates the ways captivity experiences can change opinions concerning racial hierarchy and identity.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Washington Square Ensemble (novel) 1983
History of the Owen Graduate School of Management (nonfiction) 1985
Waiting for the End of the World (novel) 1985
Straight Cut (novel) 1986
The Year of Silence (novel) 1987
Zero db and Other Stories (short stories) 1987

Soldier's Joy (novel) 1989
Barking Man and Other Stories (short stories) 1990
**Doctor Sleep* (novel) 1991
Save Me, Joe Louis (novel) 1993
†All Souls' Rising (novel) 1995
Ten Indians (novel) 1996
†Master of the Crossroads (novel) 2000
Anything Goes (novel) 2002
†The Stone That the Builder Refused (novel) 2004

*This work was adapted to film, titled *Close Your Eyes*, co-written by Bell and William Brookfield, in 2002; and was also released with an international title of *Hypnotic*.

†These novels form a trilogy.

CRITICISM

Publishers Weekly (review date 28 August 1995)

SOURCE: Review of *All Souls' Rising*, by Madison Smartt Bell. *Publishers Weekly* 242, no. 35 (28 August 1995): 102.

[In the following review, the critic applauds Bell's treatment of the Haitian Revolution in *All Souls' Rising*.]

In [*All Souls' Rising*,] an astonishing novel of epic scope, Bell (*Save Me, Joe Louis*) follows the lives of a handful of characters from radically different social strata during the period of Haiti's struggle for independence. Nothing about that period was simple. In 1791, when the Caribbean island that native Amerindians called "Hayti" was divided between a Spanish colony in the east and the French colony of Saint Domingue, a slave revolt broke out in the French territory that claimed 12,000 lives in its first months. But the fighting wasn't only between black slaves and white owners; the colony had a Byzantine social structure that recognized 64 different "shades" of mulatto; of the half-million blacks in Saint Domingue, some 30,000 were free mulattos whose political interests often ran contrary to those of the slaves. The country's 40,000 whites were themselves divided over the outcome of the recent revolution in France. During the next 12 years, to increase their power bases, four racial/political groups—white royalists, white republicans, free mulattos and black slaves—formed and dissolved a string of unlikely alliances at a dizzying clip.

Bell's principals here include a runaway slave looking for real freedom, the disturbed mistress of a razed sugar plantation and a royalist soldier in the embattled Cap Français guard. Central to the narrative are Toussaint L'Ouverture, the enigmatic 51-year-old leader of the

revolt, and Doctor Antoine Hébert, a Frenchman who shows up in Haiti just before the revolt breaks out. Hébert, who spends time as Toussaint's prisoner, falls for a freed mulatto. Warned by a young married Frenchwoman that "Who marries a black woman becomes black," the physician is appalled, yet heeds the very words he dismisses. Toussaint, too, bears the mark of contradiction. He appears to be a simple, devout man, but he has "learned a way to make his words march in more than one direction." A handful of chapters are set in 1802, when Toussaint is taken across the Atlantic as a prisoner. By omitting the middle of the revolutionary's story (during which he takes over Haiti, names himself governor-general and refuses to declare it independent), Bell astutely indicates that Toussaint, who saw himself as a noble warrior, was in fact motivated by a bizarre and self-defeating concept. By alluding to the end of the revolution only in a beautiful and haunting epilogue, moreover, Bell avoids the sense of victory that mars so many novels about revolution. Here at least, after more than 500 wrenching pages of rapes and massacres and fetuses impaled on pikes, there can be no question of a winner of the battle for Haitian liberation. Surviving it was feat enough. In Bell's hands, the chaos, marked by unspeakable acts of violence, that surrounds these characters somehow elucidates the nobility of even the most craven among them.

Donna Seaman (review date 1 September 1996)

SOURCE: Seaman, Donna. "Ten Indians." *Booklist* 93, no. 1 (1 September 1996): 5-6.

[In the following review of *Ten Indians*, Seaman praises Bell's exploration of relationships among black and white characters.]

Bell is a powerhouse. Just a year after the release of *All Souls' Rising*—a novel about Haiti that landed him on *Granta's* "Best Young American Novelists" list—he's back with a new, very lean and mean novel [*Ten Indians*] much in keeping with his signature themes. Bell, whose inner compass always points to the highest concentration of tension, is one of the few white writers to consistently explore relationships between whites and blacks both socially and as individuals. Here he sets up a dramatic dynamic between Devlin, a white psychologist specializing in the treatment of children, and a group of young black men and women living in the projects in Baltimore. Married and the father of a 17-year-old daughter, Devlin is both savvy and rash and, we suspect, self-destructive and possibly worse. Weary of his privileged clients, he decides to open a tae kwon do school in a dangerous inner-city neighborhood. Initially, his school is a great success. Devlin tells his heavily armed, drug-dealing, but, at heart, sweet-natured

students to treat the school as a sanctuary, a "place where things make sense." But discipline and agility are no match for firepower, and Devlin is in way over his head. This is a troubling and profoundly ambivalent drama about violence and the urge to do good that reminds readers, sadly, that there are no simple, elegant answers to complicated, messy problems.

Wyn Cooper (essay date winter 1999-2000)

SOURCE: Cooper, Wyn. "About Madison Smartt Bell." *Ploughshares* 25, no. 4 (winter 1999-2000): 205-09.

[In the following essay, Cooper, a poet, songwriter, and college classmate of Bell's, presents a profile of Bell's career through Master of the Crossroads.]

When asked about the role of martial arts in his life, Madison Smartt Bell replies that it gave him the opportunity to be bad at something. To those of us who have followed his career as a writer, it's something of a relief to know that this might actually be true. In sixteen years he has published nine novels and two collections of stories to almost universal praise, in addition to writing essays and reviews for *Harper's*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Village Voice*, and many other publications. He has taught at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the 92nd Street Y, the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars, and Goucher College, and his students have included Carolyn Chute and Darcey Steinke. In addition to writing numerous screenplays from his own novels and those of others, he is also an accomplished musician and songwriter.

Madison Bell was born in 1957 and raised on the family farm outside Nashville. His parents had gone to Vanderbilt and had been friends with Allen Tate and some of the other Fugitive poets. Bell's mother taught him how to read when he was four, and he began having an image of himself as an author "when I was not as tall as the table." "By the time I was seven," he says, "I thought the writer was the most powerful person in the universe—that's what I wanted to be." He went to a grade school that encouraged creative writing, and a high school that didn't. Near the end of his senior year, he had a spontaneously collapsed lung and was offered the choice of surgery or staying in bed for a couple of weeks to see if the lung would mend on its own, which it did. "Out of ennui," he says with a laugh, "I wrote my first real short story."

In need of a change, Bell applied to Princeton, which, to his great surprise, accepted him with a hefty scholarship. They had a creative writing program for undergraduates, rare in the 1970's, "but you had to show them a body of work to get in. I didn't understand the

requirement was a paper tiger, so I left for a semester, moved back to Nashville, got a job, and wrote stories at night." He returned the next semester with an entire portfolio, "which was overkill, but I ended up in George Garrett's workshop and became one of the hundreds of people whose career he has started and fostered." In his four years at Princeton (described in hilarious detail in an early story, "**The Structure and Meaning of Dormitory and Food Services**"), Bell won four awards for his fiction and graduated summa cum laude.

After Princeton, Bell moved to New York, where he worked as a security guard, a production assistant, and a sound man for Radiotelevisione Italiana. The M.A. program at Hollins College (now Hollins University) in Roanoke, Virginia, followed. There, he studied with Richard Dillard and Rosanne Coggeshall, and continued writing some of the stories that would appear in his first collection. His classmates at Hollins included Jill McCorkle, Cathryn Hankla, and Kimberly Kafka. Bell also managed, in the intensive one-year program, to write his first published novel, *The Washington Square Ensemble*, which Viking put out in 1983.

After Hollins, Bell returned to New York, the locale for most of his early work. In "**Zero db**," the title story of Bell's first story collection, a sound man in a bar on 14th Street ends the story by advising, into his recording device, "Listen. Listen. Listen. We can never be too attentive to our world." The two novels that preceded the book of stories, *The Washington Square Ensemble* and *Waiting for the End of the World*, showed that Bell had already taken this advice. These two New York novels put a twenty-something Tennessean on the New York map. His characters represented everything about New York that scares (or used to scare) so many away: junkies, dealers, prostitutes, anarchists. At a time when *Bright Lights, Big City* was getting an abundance of attention, Bell was writing about a world that didn't come and go in a decade, a night world that told the rest of the story. His characters, he says, "are the guys that would have been mugging McInerney's characters as they stumbled out of the Odeon at three in the morning."

His fourth novel, *The Year of Silence*, took an unusual tack: it ends in chapter six, the only chapter from the main character Marian's point of view. The five chapters before, and the five after, are narrated by ten very different people who all knew—or thought they knew—Marian before her overdose. *Soldier's Joy*, published in 1989, was a long tour de force about a Vietnam vet who comes home to Tennessee and runs into his black childhood friend, a novel held together in part, as its titles implies, by bluegrass music. Bell's second collection of stories, *Barking Man*, appeared the next year, and the year after that saw the publication of *Doctor Sleep*, which Bell has described as "basically structured

as a prayer." When he finished it, he realized "in a way I hadn't before that all the novels I had written up to that time were spiritual pilgrimages of one kind or another. Though they are by and large couched in the form of thrillers, they're essentially experiments in religion. My model for that is Dostoyevsky, who was basically a thriller writer with a lot of religious obsessions that he was trying to work out."

Doctor Sleep was Bell's eighth book in as many years, and it was the first time he took a break of longer than a week before starting his next book. Not that he wanted to rest, though: he felt that *Doctor Sleep* was the end of a trend in his work, and he wasn't sure where to go next. In his own view, his first novel presented "a rather complicated argument" between Islam and the Afro-Caribbean religion Santeria; his second had very much to do with Eastern Orthodox Christianity; his third, *Straight Cut*, which was more like a conventional thriller than the others, involved "philosophical Christianity under the aegis of Kierkegaard"; *The Year of Silence* concerned life in a world without religion, based on the ideas of French existentialism; and *Soldier's Joy* went back to primitive Christianity. Bell's pilgrimage ended with *Doctor Sleep*, which embraced hermetic gnosticism and the writings of Giordano Bruno. "This seemed like the answer," Bell says. "I think the idea that the universe is divinity is viable as a fundamental precept for a reformed religion for our time."

While researching Santeria for his first novel, Bell ended up reading some books on voodoo, which fascinated him. While researching his second novel, he happened upon some studies of the Haitian revolution, and became especially interested in the character of Toussaint Louverture. Thus *All Souls' Rising* was born, a dozen years before its publication in 1995. Bell continued researching the only successful slave revolt in this or any hemisphere, and finally began writing the novel, very slowly at first, after the release of *Doctor Sleep*. He intensified his research, relearned French, and learned Creole—but there was one thing he could not do, because of an embargo: go to Haiti. The conditions under which he wrote the novel, he says, "were in a way ridiculous. I'd never been there, I didn't know any Haitians, and so I was relying entirely on historical records, which fortunately were pretty complete, and on anthropology."

The fact that *All Souls' Rising* was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award, and that he was named one of *Granta* magazine's "Best American Novelists Under Forty," seems less important to Bell than the fact that "it was good enough to convince a lot of Haitians who've talked to me about it. For an outsider writing from the point of view of an insider, to get anybody on your side validated it." Bell

knows a lot about the reaction in Haiti to his book, having made nine trips there in the four years since the book appeared. It has also done well in France, where he has read from it—in French. The novel is the first in a trilogy that will eventually cover the entire revolution, with Toussaint Louverture at the center.

Bell recently completed the second volume, *Master of the Crossroads*, which Pantheon will publish in the fall of 2000. "I tried to make this book less violent than the first one," he says. Indeed, the violence in *All Souls' Rising* got rather graphic. In *The New York Times Book Review*, John Vernon called it a "carefully drawn road map through hell." He also said the novel, "refreshingly ambitious and maximalist in its approach, takes enormous chances, and consequently will haunt readers long after plenty of flawless books have found their little slots on their narrow shelves." The only negative reviews seemed centered on the assumption that the violence was gratuitous. Bell received complaints from readers that the book gave them nightmares. "The real reply," he says, "is that it's supposed to."

The fact that Bell's maximalist approach has paid off critically is more than just a feather in his cap. In 1986, before he had turned thirty, Bell turned his sharp critical eye on the rising tide of minimalist fiction in an essay for *Harper's*, "Less Is Less: The Dwindling American Short Story." Taking aim at a few writers who Bell thought had far too much influence, his long, cogent essay sent shock waves across the literary landscape. Someone was daring to criticize the work of Raymond Carver and Ann Beattie? Was he out of his mind? Was Carver really guilty of "dime-store determinism," abusing his characters, "presenting them as utterly unconscious one moment and turning them into mouthpieces for his own notions the next"? Bell's argument was extremely convincing, though his courage took its toll. More than one person threatened to stamp out his career. "There was enough ire among powerful publishing types to do me harm, but obviously I'm still around."

Bell shares the position of writer-in-residence at Goucher College with his wife, the poet Elizabeth Spires. He has taught there since 1984, and has helped a small army of fiction writers find their way into print. He finds that teaching helps him immensely when it comes to editing his own work, because he stays in practice. What does he do in his spare time? He wrote a screenplay for Roger Corman about the San Francisco earthquake of 1989. Two current film projects, one based on *Doctor Sleep* and one on *Save Me, Joe Louis*, "are looking like they might happen." He is a first-rate guitarist, very partial to his Gibson Les Paul. A current book project involves that very instrument, as well as both a fictional and a real rock and roll band—and the songs of both.

Madison Smartt Bell and Roger Gathman (interview date 28 August 2000)

SOURCE: Bell, Madison Smartt, and Roger Gathman. "PW Talks with Madison Smartt Bell." *Publishers Weekly* 247, no. 35 (28 August 2000): 52.

[In the following interview, Bell discusses his interest in Haitian revolutionary François Dominique Toussaint Louverture.]

[Gathman]: *Master of the Crossroads* is your second novel about the leader of the 1790s Haitian slave revolt, Toussaint-Louverture, continuing with the same cast from your last novel, *All Souls' Rising*. What originally attracted you to this subject?

[Bell]: My first book contained a character who practices Santeria, which led me to the anthropological stuff about vodou. That was the first thing. The second was that I was researching something else in 1983, and I came across a little biography of Toussaint-Louverture, and I saw that I could make a novel out of his story. So I had it in my mind while working on *Waiting for the End of the World*. I would pick up the thread between other novels, and I kept thinking that I should bear down and write it.

When did you first go to Haiti?

It was 1995. I first tried in 1991, but I couldn't get in because of the embargo and the political situation. Since 1995, I go back once or twice a year. I spend a lot of time in the bush. Sometimes, though, I go into Port-au-Prince and stay at the Oloffson hotel—which is just a beautiful place. I run into other writers there, like Robert Stone and Herb Gold.

Americans, when they think of slave revolts, think of Nat Turner and William Styron's controversial novel. Are there similarities between Toussaint-Louverture and Nat Turner?

There were a number of American slave revolts. The difference with St. Domingue, as Haiti was called by the French, was that the slaves outnumbered the Europeans by 500 to one. Nothing like this ratio ever developed anywhere in the U.S. Also, in Haiti in 1791 there were a lot more slaves who were originally born in freedom in Africa, as compared to the U.S., where many slaves were second generation.

All Souls' Rising didn't stir up the kind of controversy that Styron's book did. It won a prize, the Anisfield-Wolf award for the best book dealing with race. I was, of course, nervous about it. I'm a white guy writing about a black topic. The complaint about Styron's book was that it obscured the historical Nat Turner. I think he

made a defensible decision to give Turner a highly literate voice. But I have an artistic objection to Styron's Nat Turner, which is that I simply don't believe the guy sounded like that. The credibility of the book was lost on me.

Now, I tried not to hang my own image on Toussaint-Louverture, but to show him mainly through the eyes of others. It drove one of my editors crazy, but I held firm in my belief that the way to portray him was to have his path crossed by enough people. After these perceptions accumulate, it is like splashing an invisible man with paint. He becomes visible. I think that this is not only aesthetically but historically true. Toussaint wanted to be unseen, he didn't want his motives to be read. He could accommodate contradictions in a way that might puzzle Westerners today. He could be capable of great niceties and then devise these Machiavellian betrayals. He did what the spirit of the moment required, which has a voodoo aspect.

Voodoo plays a large role in your novel. What is your attitude toward voodoo?

Voodoo is one of the world's great religions. In Haiti, there is a saying that you can work voodoo with the right or the left hand. The left hand is the equivalent of Satanism's relationship to Christianity. Unfortunately, that's the image that circulates in the States. In terms of the revolution, voodoo was a definite advantage, because of the way it's organized. It is cellular, it's nonhierarchical and it might just as well have been copied from a manual on guerrilla war, it's that strategically sound. Especially because any participant can incarnate God. This means that it is a leaderless movement. You can't stop it by killing one leader. As one of Napoleon's generals said, you have to kill everybody.

The war seems especially brutal, with the blacks massacring all the whites, and the white slave owners before the war acting toward the slaves with the kind of cruelty we associate with serial killers.

There were atrocities in the American slave system, too. The things we recoil at that Haitian slave owners did were also done by American plantation owners. When you're handed absolute power over others, there's a tendency to become homicidal. The extreme expression of people as property is that you get to destroy them if you want to. In the U.S., the settlers put down roots. They built houses, married, had children. Civility mattered more. In St. Domingue, the men came out as fortune hunters, and it was about making money as rapidly as possible. You make money quicker with sugar than cotton. If they had children, they almost invariably shipped them off to be educated in France. So when a man was cruel and atrocious, there were no limits, no kids watching. A lot of the owners were absentees, and

their letters from France were all about wanting more money squeezed out of the system, so the overseers drove the slaves that much harder.

Your novel includes a number of white characters. You end it before Dessalines, the man who succeeded Toussaint, comes into power. Is there a future for these characters? Didn't Dessalines order all the whites massacred?

Obviously, that is the question with that whole cast of white characters—whether they will be standing after Dessalines goes through his ethnic cleansing. There's a third volume coming. And remember, there's a misapprehension that Dessalines killed all the *blancs*. What he really did is, those whites who might be useful to him, he just reclassified as black.

You had to be extremely committed to have spent so much time on this story.

My experience has been that people in America really don't know about any of this. The Haitians I've talked to are pleased that their history is being told to Americans. Besides, it's a great story. My original response, when I read about Toussaint-Louverture, was that I'd accidentally uncovered the Hope Diamond—it's that rich a narrative.



Michel-Rolph Trouillot (essay date 2001)

SOURCE: Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. "Bodies and Souls: The Haitian Revolution and Madison Smartt Bell's *All Souls' Rising*." In *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and Each Other)*, edited by Mark C. Carnes, pp. 184-97. New York City: Simon & Schuster, 2001.

[In the following essay, Trouillot explicates the history of Haiti and places Bell within the canon of literature written about the Haitian Revolution.]

The revolution that shook the French colony of Saint-Domingue and eventuated in the birth of independent Haiti provides more than a setting to Madison Smartt Bell's eighth novel, *All Souls' Rising* (1995), a work nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award and a National Book Award Finalist. The novel moves with the historical record, weaving facts and fiction, its pace punctuated by the chronology of the revolution itself. Bell's control of that calendar, of the twists and rebounds on the Haitians' road to final victory, is impressive. His "Chronology of Historical Events," a nineteen-page appendix to the novel, is better than most such summaries available in English.

Readers unfamiliar with Haitian history will find that chronology useful—and may want to read it first—inasmuch as Bell's interiorization of the details of that

sequence drives the fictional narrative. History here is as much part of the plot as are the individual stories of the protagonists, fictional or real. That is no small feat. Indeed, from a historical viewpoint, Madison Smartt Bell's accomplishments take their full significance against the background of the monumental silence that his novel helps to break. Let me hint at the depth of that silence and at the magnitude of the events it surrounds.

* * *

The Haitian Revolution created the first independent country of the Americas where freedom meant freedom for everyone. Like the French Revolution, it abolished an inequitable social system. Like the U.S. Revolution, it overthrew a colonial rule. It carried further than both the revolutionary spirit of the times in the Atlantic world. Yet because that feat was accomplished by black slaves, the majority of whom had been born in Africa, the Haitian Revolution remains largely ignored by world historiography.¹

The facts are eloquent enough. The Seven Years' War and the independence of the United States had demonstrated to rulers and merchants in France and in England the enhanced value of their Caribbean colonies. Those were the days when Voltaire could quip that the "few acres of snow" of Canada were not worth the tiny sugar islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique.

Saint-Domingue was not tiny by Caribbean standards. The third largest territory of the Antilles, located on the western side of the island of Hispaniola (the eastern side was Spanish-controlled), it gained further importance in the 1770s when coffee production in the hillsides complemented the sugar exports from the plains. By the 1790s, Saint-Domingue held world production records for both sugar and coffee, becoming France's most valuable possession and the most profitable colony of the world. It was also, in the words of historian Eric Williams, "the worst hell on earth" for blacks.²

In 1791, that hell broke loose. The French Revolution was unfolding in Paris. From Louis XVI's call in 1787 convening the General Estates to his sequestration by the mob, the news from Paris had rendered restless white and mulatto landowners as well as lower-class whites in the colonies. Some in Saint-Domingue, especially the whites who owned the largest plantations, regarded these events with fear; others—including prominent leaders of the light-skinned *gens de couleur*, some of whom also owned slaves but had no political rights—tried to take advantage of them. In August 1791, in the midst of this agitation, the slaves of the sugar plantations in the north launched an insurrection that mushroomed into a colony-wide uprising. Three years

later, the rebel slaves had a clear revolutionary goal and strategy: freedom for all and military control of the colony to consolidate that freedom.

The man most responsible for formulating that strategy and achieving this goal was a Creole black, Toussaint Louverture. From 1793 to 1801, Louverture provided coordination for the slave uprising and also directed its relations in a bewilderingly complex political situation within the colony and beyond its shores. Within Saint-Domingue, he helped the rebels exploit tensions among free mulattoes, who resented their exclusion from politics; lower-class whites, many of whom were sympathetic to the French revolutionaries but opposed political rights for mulattoes; and the white plantation owners, who sought at all costs to preserve slavery but were willing to form temporary alliances with mulattoes or radical whites to achieve their goals. Louverture also navigated the shifting shoals of French revolutionary politics and European military alliances. In 1794, when the French legislature abolished slavery, Louverture brought a majority of the armed slaves under the French flag. By 1797, having beaten the Spanish troops, repelled a British invasion, and outmaneuvered French local officials, Louverture became the most powerful figure on the island and commander in chief of the French army in Saint-Domingue. In 1799, he nullified the *gens de couleur* as a military force in opposition to his own troops. In 1801, he promulgated an independent constitution that recognized him as governor-for-life with absolute power.

Revolutionary France had reacted with growing amazement to this chain of events, sending to the island a succession of commissars whose impossible job was to keep into orbit the drifting satellite of a France that was itself careening out of control. Royalists in Paris tended to side with the white Caribbean plantation owners, a majority of whom favored the *ancien régime*. And the most extremist of the French revolutionaries, for all their rhetoric about the Rights of Man ("All men are created equal"), refused to support the blacks' claim to civil and political equality. On colonial issues, their revolutionary ardor rarely went beyond endorsing civil and political rights for the *gens de couleur*, many of whom had property—including slaves. Very few French revolutionaries questioned colonialism itself.

In 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte, whose own ascent in France paralleled that of Louverture in Saint-Domingue, sent his brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, with a formidable army and an armada of twenty-two ships to regain control of the colony and restore slavery. Louverture was captured treacherously and exiled to France. However, pressed by a number of slaves—notably some African-born leaders—who had continuously rejected all compromise with the French, Louverture's lieutenants picked up the fight, soon joined by some of the