



Book Club Set

# In the Upper Country

By Kai Thomas

## About the Author

Kai Thomas is a writer, carpenter, and land steward. He is Afro-Canadian, descended from Trinidad and the British Isles. *In the Upper Country* is his first novel and was shortlisted for the Amazon Canada First Novel Award. Born and raised in Ottawa, Thomas now lives in the Capital District, New York.

Kia Thomas loves a good story, of course, but beyond that, he cherishes his family, community, and the natural world—in particular the forests where he lives and works. He is partial to a deep stretch, as well as a good sweat, and perhaps his favourite meal is a nice, slow-cooked callaloo over rice. Aside from writing, he does carpentry and maintenance at **Soul Fire Farm**.

## About the Book



The fates of two unforgettable women - one just beginning a journey of reckoning and self-discovery and the other completing her life's last vital act - intertwined in this sweeping, deeply researched debut novel set in the Black communities of Ontario that were the last to stop the Underground Railroad.

It's 1859 and Lesinda Martin lives in Dunmore, a fictional Canadian town that is settled by escaped slaves. She's the local journalist, working for a paper titled *The Coloured Canadian* along with her mentor and friend Arabella. One night she is called to a neighbor's house in hopes she will administer some first aid, but when she arrives it quickly becomes clear that the man she has called to help is dead. He was a slave hunter, sent after an old woman by the name of Cash who had fled slavery years back, but Cash fought back and killed the man. She is immediately sent to jail, likely to hang, so Lesinda visits her in hopes of getting her full story before it's too late. By writing about Cash's experience and reasoning for the attack, Lesinda hopes to secure her freedom. Much to Lesinda's annoyance, Cash isn't willing to talk easily; she demands gifts of food, hard-to-come-by fruits, and stories in exchange for stories. Relying on both stories told to her, and found texts, Lesinda alternates her stories with Cash's, both women arriving at an understanding and bond that offers hope to not only each other, but those who want to see justice for those fleeing to freedom.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.writerstrust.com/authors/kai-thomas/books/in-the-upper-country#modal> & <https://ivereadthis.com/2023/11/07/book-review-in-the-upper-country-by-kai-thomas/>

## Discussion Questions



- What other books did this remind you of?
- Would you read another book by this author? Why or why not?
- What did you already know about this book's subject before you read this book?  
28. What new things did you learn? 29. What questions do you still have?
- If you got the chance to ask the author of this book one question, what would it be?
- What did you think of the book's length? If it's too long, what would you cut? If too short, what would you add?
- What feelings did this book evoke for you?

## Author Interview



**The book is set in the mid-19th century in the Great Lakes region of the U.S. and Canada. What is the legacy of this region?**

This region is really interesting, especially in the period that the novel is set in. Between 1850 and emancipation in the U.S., in 1863, there was a massive influx of Black folks fleeing enslavement in the American South. The Fugitive Slave Law was passed in the U.S. in 1850, which meant that folks fleeing enslavement could no longer find relative safety, even in the northern states where slavery had been abolished for quite some time because it was a law that deputized regular people to catch and return them to bondage.

I thought it was this interesting period in history. We as Canadians have this association with the Underground Railroad and we know that Canada was the promised land for many of these people fleeing enslavement. During that time, a number of communities, in particular in Southern Ontario, emerged.

Perhaps we don't know as much as we think about what life was like in these communities. Why, for example, many of them did not survive the test of time. What was a social life? What were the struggles of people in these places as they navigated their newfound freedom? That's what I was interested in getting into.

**The book revolves around two women whose fates are intertwined. Can you tell us about these two women and how they meet?**

The protagonist is a young woman named Lensinda, who finds herself in Dunmore working for a Black journalist and activist. Lensinda is literate and works as a scribe and then eventually as a journalist.

The novel opens as another character has been imprisoned for shooting and killing a slave hunter. This kind of premise came out of the research I was doing. There were instances of slave and bounty hunters coming north of the border to try and capture people, kidnap them and take them to be enslaved.

Lensinda sits down in the jail with this person who happens to be a very old woman and they have a series of conversations. Lensinda initially wants it to be simple, cut and dry.

Let me interview you; let me take your story. But the old woman has different designs for her and instead challenges her to engage in an exchange of stories. That exchange forms the core narrative structure of the book.

**What did your research tell you about what Lensinda's life might have been like at that time as a young, Black journalist?**

Her character, as well as a couple of others, were modeled off of a few different real-life people. One of whom, Mary Ann Shadd, was involved in starting the first Black newspaper of the region.

The thing that I love about fiction is you get to not only try and model what you find in the history books, but you get to read between those lines.

I did a lot of reading and tried to identify the areas that weren't going to be found in those sources. For example, what does dialogue look like between somebody like Mary Ann Shadd and her contemporaries? What did gossip look like in these communities? These are things that aren't necessarily going to show up in historical records. That's the fun.

**Speaking of fiction, obviously there have been works before about a slave narrative and the Underground Railroad. How did you want to approach this story and what did you want to bring to the table when writing historical fiction within that era?**

The centrality of the Black characters' relationships to Indigenous characters is a historical relationship that I personally hadn't seen depicted almost at all in fiction and I was finding ample evidence of it in the history books.

In my lived experience, I have ample evidence of Black and Indigenous people connecting and having relationships and political alliances. It was important to bring that historical relationship into the novel in meaningful ways.

I tried to represent these characters who are marginalized or oppressed as powerful agents of their own experience and who are capable of all of the things that the humans inflicting violence on other people are.

I found it tricky to do because oppression and the types of struggles and challenges that a Black person in mid-19th century North America faced make it tricky to really hone in on these scenes of power in ways that are not romanticized or unrealistic.

That was just a good challenge for myself to dig into the research and say, "Okay, where am I seeing instances of Black and Indigenous people taking power in very meaningful ways?" Let me represent what that could have looked like on the page.

Retrieved from:

[https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/kai-thomas-s-novel-in-the-upper-country-is-a-fr  
esh-take-on-black-canadian-history-the-underground-railroad-1.6719474](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/kai-thomas-s-novel-in-the-upper-country-is-a-fr<br/>esh-take-on-black-canadian-history-the-underground-railroad-1.6719474)

## Other Links and Resources



- Awards Kai has won

- **Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust Fiction Prize 2023 Winner:** In

- this exceptional debut, Kai Thomas deftly and compassionately braids deeply engrossing stories within stories that explore a little-known aspect of Canadian history. In the Upper Country is a mesmerizing, lyrical testament to the power of storytelling, as this is among the protagonists' tools for survival in a harsh reality rife with violence and dehumanization. Thomas immerses us in the novel's compelling landscape where, despite an honest depiction of the effects and consequences of enslavement for Black and Indigenous peoples in Canada, hope remains palpable.



## Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: