



Book Club Set

The Illegal

By Lawrence Hill

About the Author



Hill is the author of eleven books of fiction and non-fiction, including his most recent novel, *Beatrice and Croc Harry* (HarperCollins Canada, 2022). He has won numerous awards such as the National Magazine Award, the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, as well as Canada Reads twice. His first two novels were *Some Great Thing* and *Any Known Blood*, and his first non-fiction work to attract national attention was the memoir *Black Berry, Sweet Juice: On Being Black and White in Canada*. But it was his third novel, *The Book of Negroes* (HarperCollins Canada, 2007) — published in some countries as *Someone Knows My Name* and in French as *Aminata* — that attracted widespread attention in Canada and other countries.

Lawrence Hill's non-fiction book, *Blood: The Stuff of Life* was published in 2013 by House of Anansi Press. Hill drew from the book to deliver the 2013 Massey Lectures across Canada. In 2013, Hill published the essay *Dear Sir, I Intend to Burn Your Book: An Anatomy of a Book Burning* (University of Alberta Press). His fourth novel, *The Illegal*, was published by HarperCollins Canada in 2015 and by WW Norton in the USA in 2016.

Hill wrote a feature essay for *The Globe and Mail* about the life and the medically assisted death of his mother Donna Mae Hill, as well as the one-act play *Sensitivity* for Obsidian Theatre in Toronto.

Hill is a professor of creative writing at the University of Guelph, in Ontario. He helped create the annual common reading program "Gryphons Read" featuring BIPOC and queer writers at the University of Guelph. Recently, in concert with Walls to Bridges, he taught a third-year undergraduate memoir writing course in the Grand Valley Institution for Women, a federal penitentiary in Kitchener, Ontario.

He is currently working on a novel about the African American soldiers who travelled to northern British Columbia and Yukon during World War II to help build The Alaska

Highway. A member of the Order of Canada and recipient of ten honorary doctorates from Canadian universities, Hill lives with his family in Ontario and Newfoundland.

Retrieved from: <https://www.lawrencehill.com/the-author>

About the Book



Like every boy on the mountainous island of Zantoroland, running is all Keita's ever wanted to do. In one of the poorest nations in the world, running means respect. Running means riches—until Keita is targeted for his father's outspoken political views and discovers he must run for his family's survival.

Keita escapes into Freedom State—a wealthy island nation that has elected a government bent on deporting the refugees living within its borders in the community of AfricTown.

Keita can stay safe only if he keeps moving and eludes the officials who would deport him to his own country, where he would face almost certain death. Keita's very existence in the Freedom State is illegal. As he trains in secret, eluding capture, the stakes keep getting higher. Soon, he is running not only for his life, but for his sister's life, too.

Defended by Olympic gold medallist and philanthropist Clara Hughes, *The Illegal* won Canada Reads 2016, and is being adapted by Conquering Lion Pictures into an eight-part television miniseries with CBC TV.

Retrieved from: <https://www.lawrencehill.com/the-illegal>

Discussion Questions



1. Which character in *The Illegal* inspired you? Why?
2. Do you think Keita took unnecessary or foolish risks? Do you think the portrayal of Keita is realistic or believable?
3. Is Lulu a hero or a criminal?
4. What risks would you be prepared to take to save your life?
5. Do you agree that refugees have the right to seek asylum?
6. Do you think racism and xenophobia are a major concern in Canada?
7. What does running represent to Keita? To the children of Zantoroland? To Freedom State? How does this compare with the understanding of running that the children of AfricTown possess?
8. Illegality in the work refers to illegal entry, illegal residency. These seem to be collapsed into a category of Illegal personhood by people who possess legal citizenship. What other ways does the idea of *The Illegal* manifest in the work?
9. In the book, what role/responsibility do international human rights groups have in the lives of Keita and Charity? Are these roles fulfilled? What does this book tell the reader about advocacy and human rights?
10. What is / where is home for Keita? What does citizenship mean in this context?

Retrieved from:

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5706967aab48de077e1ead52/t/5748bf8b40261d759739b314/1464385425151/The_Illegal_Lawrence_Hill_discussion-guide_Amnesty_Book_Club.pdf

Author Interview

What made you want to tell the story of a refugee?



I've been thinking about the plight of refugees and what it must be like to be stateless ever since I travelled to West Berlin to visit my sister who was living there for a decade. She was beginning to hang out with a community of Sudanese expats who had come in through the Berlin wall from East Germany and settled in West Germany where they weren't welcome. They had entered legally but couldn't function legally once they were there. They couldn't work or get their lives going. It was troubling to see the lengths these Sudanese expats had to go to survive in a country that didn't want them and was doing everything it could to incite them to leave.

What is life like for your main character, Keita Ali, when he arrives in his new country?

He is in so much trouble that he doesn't have time to reflect on the pain of his loss of leaving his home country. He is in such desperate straights hiding. He's really on the run. This novel follows two or three months arriving in Freedom State in his very tumultuous life. He doesn't have time for pain because he's got to survive.

What made you want him to be a marathon runner?

It's a perfect metaphor. He is in flight. He flees a country where they want to kill him. He comes to a country where he is not welcome. He has to flee immigration officials who would gladly seize and deport him if they can catch him. He has to make money but he has no way to make money legally so he enters road races, 5k, 10k, half marathons, marathons to scrape together winnings from these races to buy food and shelter and pay a ransom for his sister who has been kidnapped. Running is about survival.

He ends up in the fictional Freedom State, a country with a strong anti-refugee movement. Was this a place inspired by any real places?

It was inspired by lots of places — a little bit of France, Texas, Arizona, Canada, South Africa. I drew from the worst of many things I've seen in these countries to create a dystopia, just set a few years in the future, 2018. I drew from anti-refugee policies and hostile activities facing refugees around the world. He comes to a country that elected a government that has publicly campaigned on a plan to deport refugees without papers.

How should Canada respond to the current refugee crisis?

We should open our doors much more widely. We have lots of room in our economy and our geography for more people and for more refugees. We need to process refugees much more expeditiously. It's ridiculous how long a refugee family can languish and perhaps die while waiting to be processed. We need to send federal officials to the places where refugees are languishing and trying desperately to get here so we can process them on the ground where they are. We've done this before.

When they do come to Canada we need to welcome them more fully. We shouldn't be stripping them of health care coverage which the federal government has done before. We shouldn't be throwing them in jail with common criminals. We need to use their skills in a way that we might benefit from them and they might benefit from us.

How might your book change the perceptions your readers have about refugees?

I hope the novel will inspire readers to care more deeply and empathize more profoundly with refugees. If we care and empathize more perhaps we will demand more of ourselves and we'll also demand more of our elected officials.

Lawrence Hill is the award winning author of the *Book of Negroes*. His latest book *The Illegal* is out this month.

Retrieved from:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/headlines/the-illegal-lawrence-hill-s-new-book-a-refugee-s-life-on-the-run-1.3220980>

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: