



Toussaint Louverture: A Biography

By Madison Smartt Bell

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Author of an acclaimed trilogy of novels charting the Haitian revolution of 1791–1803 (*All Soul's Rising*, *Master of the Crossroads* and *The Stone That the Builder Refused*), Bell is eminently qualified to write a biography of that struggle's central figure, Toussaint-Louverture. Beginning with a pithy overview of 18th-century colonial Haiti, taking in its harsh Spanish- and French-controlled slave plantations and its complex systems of race and class, Bell trawls documentary sources to trace Toussaint's stealthy emergence as a revolutionary leader. The author emphasizes Toussaint's unusual status as a free black man of property who commanded trust and authority among both blacks and whites. Sifting hard evidence out of the heaps of conjecture that surround his subject, Bell examines Toussaint's royal African origins, questions of his literacy, and the relationship between his outward Catholicism and the Vodou beliefs in which he was immersed. With scholarly conscientiousness, Bell examines differing historical accounts of Toussaint's military and diplomatic campaigns, comparing Toussaint's "meteoric trajectory" to that of Napoleon Bonaparte before describing Toussaint's demise in a Napoleonic prison. Since then, Bell comments, writers and politicians "have constructed whatever Toussaint Louverture they require"—usually, he adds, a vicious one. Bell's own contribution avoids mythology without detracting from the achievements of Toussaint-Louverture's dramatic career. (*Jan. 16*)

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Madison Smartt Bell's extensive work on Haitian history makes him the right man to tackle Louverture, an elusive but significant figure. Critics felt, however, that since so little is known about him prior to age 50 (something even Bell himself concedes), Bell might have better served his subject with historical fiction. Instead, he devotes much of the book to dry, academic information instead of dramatic storytelling. Bell's forthright presentation of Louverture's multifaceted personality and contradictions, however, intrigued critics the most. While reviewers debated the quality of previous biographies, all felt the necessity for something new on Louverture, especially considering his legacy in Haitian and African American cultures and his effect on Napoleonic expansion.

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From [Booklist](#)

Bell's monumental trilogy of historical novels--*All Souls' Rising*, 1995; *Master of the Crossroads*, 2000; *The Stone That the Builder Refused*, 2004--dramatically imagines the revolution that transformed the French colony of Saint-Domingue into the independent black nation of Haiti. Now Bell shares his deep knowledge of Toussaint Louverture, the remarkably wily and enigmatic leader of the slave revolt. A freed slave, consummate horseman, healer, and prosperous landowner, Toussaint emerged at age 50 as a warrior for black liberation and a shrewd, ruthless, and "ever-secretive" tactician. Charismatic and devout, Toussaint commanded a volatile guerrilla army; expertly pitted France, Spain, and England against one another; and romanced women of every color and class. Then Toussaint met his match in Napoleon Bonaparte. Bell draws fascinating parallels between the two "self-invented and self-made" men, who each experienced a "meteoric rise" and "precipitous fall." Thrillingly perceptive and compelling, Bell illuminates Haiti's overlooked war for independence both as a conflict as resounding as the immortalized battles of antiquity, and a revolution sharply relevant to today's insurrections. *Donna Seaman*

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