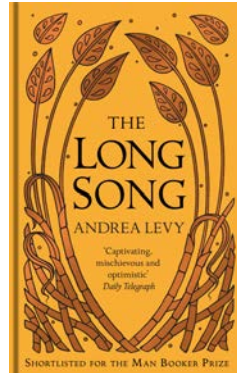


THE WALTER
SCOTT PRIZE
FOR HISTORICAL
FICTION **10**YEARS



Readers' Guides



2011 Winner

The Long Song

Andrea Levy

Headline

About the author

Andrea Levy (1956–2019) was born in London in 1956, and described herself as 'a Londoner.' Her parents were both from Jamaica: her father came to England on the famous ship, the *Empire Windrush*, in 1948, and her mother followed a few months later. Levy did not begin writing seriously until she was in her thirties, and she published her first novel, *Every light in the house burnin'*, in 1994. She wrote four further novels, including *Small Island* (2004), which won several awards (including the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2004, the Whitbread Book of the Year in 2004 and the Commonwealth Writer's Best Book in 2005). Her final novel is *The Long Song* (2010), which was shortlisted for the 2010 Man Booker Prize and was the winner of the 2011 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. The novel was adapted for BBC television in 2018. In 2014 Andrea published the collection *Six Stories & an Essay*.

About the book

'This tale is set in Jamaica during the last turbulent years of slavery and the early years of freedom that followed. July is a slave girl who lives upon a sugar plantation named Amity and it is her life that is the subject of this tale. She was there when the Baptist War raged in 1831, and she was present when slavery was declared no more. The story tells also of July's mama Kitty, of the negroes that worked the plantation land, of Caroline Mortimer the white woman who owned the plantation and many more persons besides - far too many for me to list here. But what befalls them all is carefully chronicled upon these pages for you to peruse.'

Reviews

"Levy's handling of slavery is characteristically authentic, resonant and imaginative. She never sermonises. She doesn't need to – the events and characters speak loud and clear for themselves... Slavery is a grim subject indeed, but the wonder of Levy's writing is that she can confront such things and somehow derive deeply life-affirming entertainment from them." *The Sunday Telegraph*

"The Long Song is a thoroughly captivating novel... As well as being beautifully written The Long Song is a thoroughly researched historical novel that is both powerful and heartbreaking." *Daily Express*

"July's story, ... gallops along, full of humour and incident, linguistically fleet of foot and by turns illuminating and heartbreaking. As a document of the end of slavery, *The Long Song* proclaims its own incompleteness and partiality; but as a story of suffering, indomitability and perseverance, it is thoroughly captivating." *The Guardian*

"Levy brings her distinctive lightness of touch to what is otherwise unrelentingly bleak subject matter.... This is a beautifully written and cleverly constructed novel that projects convincing personal relationships on to the feral backdrop of the Jamaican plantations." *The Times*

Discussion Questions

When a young woman asked the author how one could possibly take any pride in one's ancestry when all one's ancestors were slaves, she planted the seed that would eventually become *The Long Song*. By telling such a story and writing this novel, Andrea Levy wanted to make her questioner feel proud of her heritage. Discuss how the novel does this.

In *Small Island*, Andrea Levy told the story of Jamaicans in London just after World War II; in the *The Long Song*, she goes further back, to the nineteenth century. Both books explore the relationship among the Caribbean, Jamaica, and Britain. What did you learn from *The Long Song* that surprised you and that you didn't know before? How do you think novels bring the past to life in a way that history books don't?

When she was doing research for the novel, Andrea Levy found plenty of accounts of slavery in Jamaica by white plantation owners, but the voices of the plantations' slaves seemed silent or lost. In *The Long Song* she saw a way to fill the silence with a fictional voice, and to give us a sense of life as it was lived on a daily basis during the period. How successful is the novel in achieving both these aims?

July is clearly an unreliable narrator, but what does that mean? How did your feelings for her develop or change in the course of the novel?

Caroline Mortimer takes July away from her mother without any thought. Discuss how the relationship between master and servant develops. Does it change once July is "free"?

Discuss the author's use of language and of voice in the novel. How does she use humour in tackling the grim and disturbing subject of slavery?

Discuss the differences between men's power and women's power in *The Long Song*. Who are the most vulnerable characters?

What role does religion play in the novel? What motivates the leaders of the Baptist revolution, some of whom are tortured for their abolitionist beliefs? What does Christianity mean to the characters?

What does Robert Goodwin learn about the nature of work and worth? How do his beliefs about coercion and punishment change? How is this reflected in his feelings for July?

In the novel, how do Jamaicans perceive England and the monarchy? What does living in England or leaving England mean to them? Who honors an English identity? Who rejects it?

What is special about the structure of the novel? What is the effect of the format, including Thomas's foreword and July's frequent comments aimed directly at the reader?

What do you think happened to Emily? Discuss how July portrays motherhood and fatherhood. How do the characters handle the estrangement between mothers and their children?

Discuss your own family legacies. What are the chapters that no one wants to speak of, as well as the ones that spark pride?

(Questions adapted from Oprah.com)