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Any Known Blood

By Lawrence Hill

512 pp. New York: Morrow. \$24

Langston Cane V has fallen asleep at the wheel of his life. "Convictions ruled the lives of my ancestors," he confesses, but at 38 the half-black, half-white serious writer-turned-speech-writing-hack has lost his. When the Canadian loses his wife and job too, he turns his car south toward Baltimore to research the lives of the four men with whom he shares a name but not their sense of purpose. Aided by a quirky aunt and a Cameroonain alien of Dickensian appeal deftly slaloming his own way through America, the marked vagabond moves past the physician father he's disappointing to learn of his highly educated minister grandfather and great-grandfather, all the way to slave-born Langston Cane I, who'd fled via the Underground Railroad to Canada but may have returned to join John Brown's Harpers Ferry raid. Mr. Hill's affable narrative voice makes Cane's a delightful quest spiced with wit and humor, uncovering the ancestral lives of proud men of achievement, each worthy of his own novel, as well as a new romance for Langston V that makes the memory of his ex fade like a pinprick in velvet. Bordering this unified tapestry we witness Klan violence, kidnappings, African sojourns, bigamy, drive-by shootings and a glimpse of Frederick Douglass. Though it's praising with faint damnation, Mr. Hill frustrates us: offering a rich, absorbing novel in which at least five others are bursting to be told.