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ALL SOULS' RISING

By Madison Smartt Bell

Pantheon. 530 pp.

At the core of a worthy liberal education lies history, that skeleton without which all other knowledge cannot hold its shape. And history itself is far more than names and dates and documents. It is the intersection of living human beings with the world as they found it, the circumstances at a given time that thrust greatness on a few and mold the fate of the rest. That is why Martin Luther King noted, "We are not makers of history. We are made by history."

Seldom has the sweep of events, the rise to greatness of a few and the terrible slaughter of thousands been drawn more vividly than in Madison Smartt Bell's epic account of the Haitian revolution two centuries ago.

Bell weds consummate artistry to keen intelligence and draws us into the labyrinthine complexity of Haitian society in 1791. Holding the power on this western portion of the island Columbus called Hispaniola, growing rich from its sugar and coffee, were the *grand blancs*, the white French and Creole landowners. Just below them in power were the *petit blancs*, the white artisan class, many descended from pirates, who had citizenship rights but little money. Just below the *grand blancs* in wealth were the freemen mixed bloods, often land- and slaveholders themselves, who had money but few rights.

Forming nearly ten times their number combined, however, were Haiti's black slaves. And French slavery was a different kind of horror than the American brand. Unencumbered by the British moral qualms that made Americans need to feel they were doing Africans a favor, bringing them to God and obliterating their pagan African identity, the French attitude was simpler: "Much the same as a mule, the Negro was providentially designed for the bearing of burdens." No need, then, to try to make the slave emulate the European. Let him keep his drum and the slightly Christianized animism he calls voodoo. Just work him to death. So slaves died quickly there, 20,000 new ones had to be imported each year, and at any given time two-thirds of the island population had been born in Africa.

The 10 percent of non-slaves formed a multi-layered populace, its carefully stratified mulatto society itself subdivided into 64 classes tiered by "shade." With the French Revolution newly underway, alliances in Haiti shifted quickly: white against mulatto, property owners against poor, Royalist against revolutionary, French against Spanish.

Then the lid blew off. Black rebellion that had started as a trickle in 1757 under the runaway slave Macandal became a stream in 1790 under the mulatto Ogé. After Ogé

was captured and publically tortured to death, new leaders--Boukman, Jeannot, Jean-François--guided the nearly half-million slaves toward destroying the white population.

The horror on all sides defied imagination. Bell details it all: uncountable rapes, impaled infants, eyeballs drawn from sockets with corkscrews, skin peeled slowly off bodies. The unspeakable became the commonplace until, to paraphrase Mark Antony, dreadful objects became so familiar that mothers would but smile when they beheld their infants quartered with the hand of war. One woman's fate was typical: "They raped her across her husband's dead body, though she was pregnant and near her time. When they had done, they cut the infant from the womb and slaughtered it before her dying eyes."

From this ocean of butchery a new leader emerged, Toussaint L'Ouverture, a new kind of man. This light-skinned, middle-aged descendant of the Arades tribe was a Christian and student of herbal medicine. He read Deuteronomy, sensing he was a latter-day Moses who could lead fellow Africans to the promised land if not get there with them.

Toussaint's surface calm and civility masked leadership qualities that rose far above shallow self-serving or lust for gratuitous carnage. A sane, civilized man in unbelievably ghoulish times, he had taught newly arrived Africans how to endure slavery. Now, seeing power within black grasp, he reawakened spirits killed by the middle passage. Like Macandal before him and Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X after him, he rekindled long-simmering embers of manhood. He taught slaves "to walk like free men."

After 500-plus pages, Bell ends his narrative well before its story is played out, before slavery is abolished in 1794 or Toussaint restores productivity to Haiti in 1800 or is deported in 1802 or the French attempt the massacre of all blacks in 1803 or the black massacre of all whites begins in 1805.

Bell's interest, as always, lies outside mere events. Possibly the most universally compassionate writer we have, and certainly among our most precocious, Bell steers through this story's numbing inhumanity to find in every camp the human, even noble hearts beating there. He achieves this by a continuous braiding of chapters from various viewpoints.

In addition to Toussaint's, we travel several lines of vision into this historic convergence. There's Dr. Antoine Herbert, a newly arrived physician relatively unstained by racism who falls in love with the mulatto Nanon. There's vicious *grand blanc* slaveowner Michel Arnaud, who loses everything, and his wife, Claudine, who'd been sold to him by her white parents and who proves capable of astounding courage. And there's Riau, born in Africa, joining the revolution quickly only to see its early stages as "the hell where Jesus sends people who serve him poorly, and I saw that he had made it here for the whites as they deserved but that somehow we must be in it with them too" but who recaptures his humanity in the service of Toussaint.

While he has never before attempted a historical novel, nor anything quite so massive and minutely observed, *All Souls' Rising* really proves no departure for Bell. He's doing here once again what he has done from the start: taking mankind even at its most bestial and probing it to lay bare its human heart. That's seldom easy, yet somehow Bell always manages to make it look that way.