

Q&A with Leonard Pitts, Jr., author of *Freeman*



What was the genesis for *Freeman*? Where did the idea first come from?

Years ago, I read the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Been In The Storm So Long*, by Leon F. Litwack, about the lives of the slaves during and immediately after the Civil War. One of the most poignant things I learned from that book was the ordeal freed slaves went through to find their lost and separated family members. Men and women wrote letters, haunted the offices of the Freedmen's Bureau, and walked hundreds of miles in search of their mothers and brothers and sisters and sons and husbands and wives. The quests were rarely successful; it was not uncommon, for example, for a man to find his wife only to discover that she had given him up for dead and taken up with another man. The idea that freed men and women would strive to be reunited that way, against such impossible odds, struck me as a profound and inspiring statement about the importance they attached to family and to loved ones. It also struck me that this is an aspect of history about which most of us have no clue. It's something I've always kept in the back of my mind. I always thought it would provide the framework for a compelling novel.

Why did you write *Freeman*? What were you hoping to accomplish with this story?

Well, obviously, the first goal of any novel is to entertain. Beyond that, though, there were a number of things I was out to accomplish. I wanted to write a love story that I thought would have a particular resonance for African-American women. I think there is something inherently affirming in the idea that a man would walk a thousand miles in a nearly hopeless search for one particular woman. I wanted to question, albeit indirectly, the whole stereotype of African Americans as a people who are frivolous about family connections, particularly paternal connections. That was certainly not the case right after the Civil War. Finally, I wanted to deal with questions of identity. We tend to treat race as something obvious and immutable, a bright, hard line of separation that cannot be crossed. But from science's point of view, race does not exist—it's a myth—and if you look at the history of race, you find it's a lot more complicated and self-contradictory than we typically believe. I liked the idea of characters grappling with identity in the context of a country that was forced to do the same.

What kind of research did you do in working on the book? Did you learn anything that surprised you?

Researching a historical novel is less about finding out what happened when than about

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trying to unearth the small details that will help you recreate the physical look of a given time and place, i.e., a grocery store in 1865. I spent a lot of time in the Library of Congress. I also toured a railroad museum and a place that uses horses to help rehabilitate the physically handicapped. I should mention, also, that some of the minor episodes in *Freeman*—for example, the woman who approaches Sam and Ben in the courthouse, looking for her long lost baby—are fictionalized renditions of things that I learned had actually happened.

Your previous novel, *Before I Forget*, is set in the recent past. Was it difficult to write about the lives of characters from 150 years ago, who lived in such a different world?

It was challenging, but frankly, that's what made it fun, the whole idea of trying to keep true to the way things would have been said and done a century and a half ago.

Freeman juggles three quite different perspectives (four, including the character of Bonnie). It was challenging to switch between them, but it was also satisfying in the sense that it allowed me (and, I hope, the reader) to view the same action through different lenses. It was necessary, too, given that two of the four characters—Prudence and Sam—are so monumentally lacking in self awareness that the other two are required to serve as reality checks, both for Prudence and Sam themselves and for the reader.

How do you feel that the events and characters you write about in *Freeman* reflect on relations among the races in the U.S. today?

I think in *Freeman* you see the birth pangs of the harsh racial bitterness that made the civil rights movement necessary a century later and that, to some degree, haunts American racial politics to this day.

***Freeman* is, among other things, a very powerful love story. What has been the reaction to the love story from readers so far?**

It's been very gratifying. One reader pronounced it "magnificent." Others have been in tears over the fates of various characters—which means they were emotionally invested in those characters.

What are you working on next?

The next novel is called *Grant Park*. I hope to begin writing it later this year. It's about a black columnist and his white editor, and it follows them in two pivotal eras: Memphis in the spring of 1968, just before the assassination of Martin Luther King, and Chicago on election day 2008, when Barack Obama made history. The columnist, "Chappie," was just a few feet from Dr. King when he was shot—he actually saw the rifle poking out of the window but didn't move fast enough and has been haunted by his failure ever since. Now he is racing against time to stop a bizarre assassination attempt against the president-elect. It's a novel about racial disillusionment, friendship, and what I have taken to calling the "stupidification" of America.