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The Known World
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Throughout *The Known World*, you intersperse your fictional account with historical records and data about Manchester County, VirginiA: Are these records factual? What was your intent in incorporating them into your novel?

The county and town of Manchester, Virginia, and every human being in those places are products of my imagination. Other counties and towns (Amelia County, Charlottesville, etc.) are real, but were employed merely to give some heft and believability to the creation of Manchester and its people. The same is obviously true of real, historical people — President Fillmore, for example.

The census records I made up for Manchester were, again, simply to make the reader feel that the town and the county and the people lived and breathed in central Virginia once upon a time before the county was "swallowed up" by surrounding counties. Saying that the census of 1840 shows that there were so many black people, so many white people there, et cetera, affords a hard background of numbers and dates that makes the foreground of the characters and what they go through more real.

How unusual was it for free blacks to serve as slaveholders in the South? How did the idea come to you to write a novel that dealt with this issue?

I don't have any hard data but I'm quite certain that the numbers of black slaveowners was quite small in relation to white slaveowners. The fact that many people — even many black people — didn't know such people existed is perhaps proof of how few there were. In addition, as I note in the novel, husbands purchased wives and parents purchased children, and so their neighbors may have come to know the people purchased not as slaves, as property, but as family members. Finally, owning a slave was not a cheap proposition, and the economic status of most blacks back then didn't lend itself to owning a human being.

Women in The Known World wield roles of extraordinary power, whether assuming the typically male responsibilities of the plantation like Caldonia Townsend; educating the illiterate like Fern Elston; inspiring violence, passion, and grief, like Celeste and Minerva; or creating art that transcends the brutal realities of slavery, like Alice Night. How important was it to you to give voice to women's experiences of slavery in this work?

I didn't set out with any agendA: When you are raised by a woman who had it hard and you are sensitive to how hard a life she had, you don't necessarily look around and think of women as fragile creatures, whether slave or otherwise. You develop the belief that they can "make a way out of no way." The hardy women of today had predecessors, I'm sure. It would have been insane for me, of course, to write a novel about a black woman who was president of the U.S. in 1855, or even a senator. But a black woman who becomes the head of a plantation due to the premature death of her husband who was helped along the way by the wealthiest white man in the county, that is believable. It is also believable that Fern Elston could make part of her living by teaching free black children; there were educated black women back then, and not all of them would choose to stay in the shadows, especially one with Fern's temperament. And no doubt there had to be people like Celeste who tried in their small way to fight something they were forced to live under; perhaps she, of them all, understood how Moses got to be that way: He was not born hating the world, she would have said. And I suppose Alice would have said that as well, had she not been so focused on escaping alone.

Your account of antebellum Manchester County, Virginia, is by no means linear; you weave different strands of the story together and return to them at various phases of the novel. Why did you choose this format for your book?

I always thought I had a linear story. Something happened between the time I began the real work in January 2002 of taking it all out of my head and when I finished months later. It might be that because I, as the "god" of the people in the book, could see their first days and their last days and all that was in between, and those people did not have linear lives as I saw all that they had lived. What Tessie the child did one day in 1855 would have some meaning for her 50, 75 years later. She might not be able to look back and see that moment, but her creator could. That, perhaps, is why she says something about the doll her father made for her to Caldonia and Fern in September 1855 that she will repeat on her deathbed, some 90 years later; she might not even remember the first time she uttered those words, but I can't afford to forget if I'm trying to tell the truth.

There is a touch of the supernatural in events such as the spontaneous combustions of the Otis boys and the slave Teacher, the cow with the endless supply of milk, the transformative experiences of Stamford with the crows and the lightning, and the details of cadavers "talking" to Wilson and Morris Calhenny. How do you explain these incidents in the larger scope of your novel?

I was raised among a people who believe that if a person is killed on a city street, the blood of that person will show up on that spot every time it rains. Even years and years later. I was raised to believe that one's hair should be taken from combs and brushes and burned (my mother did it in an ashtray) because the hair could somehow get out into the world where birds could find it, make a nest of the hair, and give the person headaches. Those people believed you shouldn't rest your hands on the top of your head because it will shorten your mother's life.

Given all that, it's easy to create a situation where lightning runs away from a man because the lightning doesn't think it's time for the man to die. The cow with all the milk came from hearing law school friends talk in the 1970s about a court case where a man sued his neighbor to get back a cow he had sold him after the cow began producing milk again. So the supernatural events are just another way of telling the story by someone who grew up thinking the universe did weird things all the time.

You open and close *The Known World* with the figure of Moses, the overseer of Henry and Caldonia Townsend's land. In what ways is his odyssey central to your novel?

Moses became another symbol of what slavery had done. I have no doubt that when Moses was standing naked in John Skiffington's jail and saying that he and Bessie were "one," were "family," that he was not the man who years later was bitter and grasping and wanted, as he put it, to get rid of his family now that they stood in his way of becoming Caldonia's husband. Slavery did things to everyone; some were able to transcend, as with Celeste, and others succumbed.

What are some of your favorite books and authors? Which writers have most influenced your work?

Black fiction writers, including Ann Petry, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks. The southern writers (black and white), including Faulkner. And others such as Chekhov and James Joyce, who was the primary inspiration for my collection of stories, *Lost in the City*.