

The writing of *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy

At a conference in London, several years ago, the topic for discussion was the legacy of slavery. A young woman stood up to ask a heartfelt question of the panel: How could she be proud of her Jamaican roots, she wanted to know, when her ancestors had been slaves?



Of Jamaican heritage myself, I wondered why anyone would feel any ambivalence or shame at having a slave ancestry?

Had she never felt the sentiments once expressed to me by a Jamaican acquaintance of mine? 'If our ancestors survived the slave ships they were strong. If they survived the plantations they were clever.' It is a rich and proud heritage. It was at that moment that I felt something stirring¹ in me.

Could a novelist persuade this young woman to have pride in her slave ancestors through telling her a story? That was where the idea for *The Long Song* started.

[...] There is an excellent body of scholarship, both in Britain and in the Caribbean, on the history of slavery. But there are very few surviving documents and artefacts that I could find where enslaved people speak of and for themselves. Little writing or testimony has emerged that was not filtered at the time through a white understanding or serving a white narrative – whether it be the apologists for slavery and the West Indian planter classes, or their opponents, the abolitionists.

This is where I believe that fiction comes in to its own². Writing fiction is a way of putting back the voices that were left out. Not just the wails³ of anguish and victimhood that we are used to, although that is very much part of the story, but the chatter and clatter of people building their lives, families and communities, ducking, diving and conducting the businesses of life in appallingly difficult circumstances. Now THERE is a story. [...] I wanted to put back in the voices of everyday life for black Jamaicans that are so silent in the record.

Slowly I began to realise that I was not in fact writing a novel about slavery. *The Long Song* is set in the time of slavery, and the years immediately after, but it is really a story about a person's life, a lost voice from history that needed to be heard. July, a black house slave, is my main character and she tells her own story. It features her mother, her father, her owner, her lover, her children. It's the story of her life lived in a society so strange to us that we can barely understand it. But she lives it

45 much as you or I would try to – with ingenuity, cunning, charm, resilience,
despair, love, [...] and humour.

[...] So what do I have to say to the young woman at the conference
who was shamed by her slave ancestry? Why should she be proud? Well,
there was hardship, cruelty and humiliation to be sure. But out of
50 circumstances where their very humanity was denied, I would ask her to
just look at what these people created: a vibrant language that infuses our
own modern speech; a rich fusion of oral stories; complex festivals of
dance and costume that echo today on our own streets; a musical tradition
that has spread across the globe; religious innovation; fabulous
55 cuisine; world- class sporting prowess; a strong literary canon. I could go
on. These are people who, from their tiny islands, have made a mark on
the world.

I would tell the young woman that our slave ancestors were much more
60 than a mute and wretched mass of victims and we do them a great disservice
if we think of them as such. If history has kept them silent then we must
conjure their voices ourselves and listen to their stories. Stories through which
we can remember them, marvel at what they endured, what they achieved,
and what they have bequeathed to us all. *The Long Song* is my
65 tribute to them and, I hope, an inspirational story not only for their
descendants, but for us all.

<https://www.andrealevy.co.uk/other-media/>

Vocabulary:

1. To stir = to wake up and move
2. To come into one's own = *se démarquer/être reconnu à sa juste valeur*
3. Wails = cris

Reporter 2 (easier task): Prepare to discuss the ideas from this document. You should look up any difficult vocabulary and prepare your answers to the following questions (at least!).

You will have only about 2-3 minutes to present as many details as possible to your group, so you must be efficient!

- 1) What was Andrea Levy's opinion about her Jamaican heritage and what was her first goal/aim in writing *The Long Song*?
- 2) What are the main problems with historical documents about slavery, slaveowners and enslaved people?
- 3) What is Andrea Levy's story really about and why is that important?