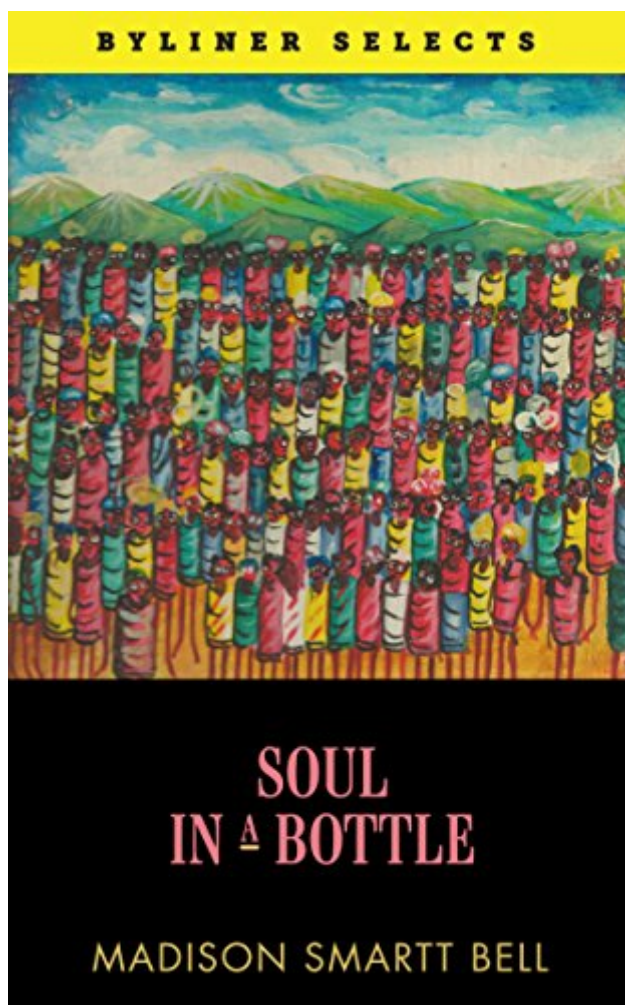


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# Soul In A Bottle: A Journey In Haiti (Byliner Selects)



## Synopsis

Soul in a Bottle, Madison Smartt Bell's memoir of his visits and his commitment to Haiti, is both a rollicking adventure story and a profound spiritual enterprise. It offers not just a short testament to its author's questing mind but also a smart and lucid tour d'horizon of recent Haitian political ups-and-downs, all of it inflected by Bell's commanding knowledge of early Haitian history. When you read Soul in a Bottle, you can feel the real Haiti surround you, vivid, palpitating, breathing, and smoldering with ancient energy and contemporary ambitions.

Amy Wilentz, author of The Rainy Season Twenty years in the making, Madison Smartt Bell's trilogy of novels about the Haitian Revolution (All Souls Rising, Master of the Crossroads, and The Stone that the Builder Refused) has been compared to Tolstoy's War and Peace. From 1995 through 2007, Bell traveled frequently to Haiti to research this work, though before long the writing of the novels became a secondary motive for those journeys. Bell immersed himself in Haitian history, culture, and religion, improving his French and learning Kreyol to smooth his passage into the Haitian world. He befriended and worked with numerous Haitian political leaders, scholars, writers, artists, musicians and priests. As this journey increasingly took on the aspect of a spiritual pilgrimage, Bell undertook the early stages of initiation in Vodou. Known on the streets of Cap-Haïtien as "Madis" (thanks to a rehabilitated straw hat he had picked up on the road to Jacmel), Bell was, for a time, accepted as a sort of honorary Haitian. Soul in a Bottle, drawn from Bell's journals of the period and from assignments he completed for The New Yorker and Harper's among others, is a record of that extraordinary journey. Bell's fascination with Haiti and his passion for the Haitian people brings his great writing skill to a laser-bright focus. For the past couple of decades, travelers to Haiti have used his novels of the Haitian Revolution as guides to the history and the culture of the country. In that sense, Soul in a Bottle is still more valuable reading, for those who are going to Haiti in flesh and bone and for those who want to take an imaginary journey there.

Alors que certains étrangers pr<sup>o</sup>tendent apr<sup>e</sup>s quelques jours ici <sup>q</sup>tre des « experts » sur Haïti, il est rafra<sup>î</sup>chissant et enrichissant de lire ces pages o<sup>ù</sup> Madison Smartt Bell qui a pris le temps de s'initier aux <sup>é</sup>léments basiques de la culture haïtienne, parle d'Haïti avec tant d'humilit<sup>é</sup> et de respect. (translation: At a time when some foreigners pose as experts on Haiti after a just a few days here, it is refreshing and enriching to read these pages where Madison Smartt Bell, who has taken the time to initiate himself in the basic elements of Haitian culture, speaks of Haiti with such humility and respect.)

•Evelyne

Trouillot, author of *Rosalie L'Infernal* In Soul in a Bottle Madison Smartt Bell takes us through a mirror to view Haiti from another side. By itself it is the story of a seeker after wisdom encountering Haiti, Haitians, and their ancient religion, Vodou, rather than as one on a preconceived mission to "do good" by helping Haitians to be more like us. He discovers and reveals to his readers a deeper realization of our human condition as rooted in the earth and bound to all that is visible and invisible in the cosmos. Thus he shows Haiti to be a place and a people of spiritual sophistication with much to teach us all.

LeGrace Benson, author of *Arts and Religions of Haiti*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Madison Bell is as close to being an honorary Haitian as a "blanc" can be. Through years of research, travel, and study of the Haitian Revolution he created his masterful trilogy of the life of Toussaint Louverture: *All Souls Rising* (1995), *Master of the Crossroads* (2000), and *The Stone that the Builder Refused* (2004). But more significantly, at least on a human level, his journey has gone far beyond scholarship or literary ambitions to

encompass a deep immersion in Haitian culture and spirituality. *SOUL IN A BOTTLE* is a memoir of his experience, an “immersion memoir” reminiscent of Amy Wilentz’s *The Rainy Season* (1990) or, more recently, Jonathan Katz’s *The Big Truck That Went By: How the World Came to Save Haiti and Left Behind a Disaster* (2010), though both of these are works of journalism as well as memoir. Madison Bell’s *SOUL IN A BOTTLE* is a personal book: confessional, self-revelatory, experiential, opinionated, and satisfying in the heat and sweat of its recollections. The Preface alone is worth the price as this is where he describes his initial astonishment “shared by many of us” “blans” who came late to Haiti “on learning about the profound significance of the Haitian Revolution in his mid-twenties. From that astonishment, his determination to write a novel of Haiti was born although “the subject became more intimidating the more I learned about it.” Thus, the notion of a trilogy. But time would pass and 8 other novels get written “before the *All Souls Rising* was published in 1995 by a young-ish writer “without ever having seen the country where it was set.” Indeed, he makes it clear at the outset of his memoir that “This book tells the story of someone groping his way through a transformative experience” often getting it wrong at first, then fumbling toward a better comprehension. This fumbling includes factual errors, such as his mention in the Preface that “the US marines left Haiti in the 1920s.” (They left in 1934.) But in a strangely refreshing way, Bell acknowledges that errors do exist in some of the previously published chapters included here. (In most cases, up-to-date footnotes correct errors.) The essential message within this tale of transformation is that Haiti matters, and largely because (in comparison to the American or French revolutions) “the Haitian Revolution was clearly the most radical and the most complete, because only the Haitian Revolution put an end to slavery.” But he also floats thought-provoking ideas we rarely encounter about Haiti’s strengths in our own era: a spiritual culture, community life, and race relations vis-à-vis the USA. He further expresses the admiration he felt for Aristide, even after this “man of the people” joined the corrupt, political elite in the mid-1990s: “Indeed, I saw him as one of the most extraordinary heroes that the twentieth century had ever produced.” And though he dares to reflect on his possibly redemptive motives as a son of the South to go deep into Haitian culture and contribute something to it, the essence of his attachment to Haiti has more to do with

detachment. "I was detached from the self. Though I didn't understand it fully until much later, I had come to Haiti to get away from myself," he writes. This is where I recognize the Madison Bell I met on the veranda of the Oloffson Hotel in the summer of 1997. Indeed, I am probably the "woman from the Schweitzer Hospital in Deschapelles" he mentions in his nostalgic evocation of that hotel, complete with a delicious documentary portrait of Aubelin Jolicoeur (1925-2005). And what I remember about Madison Bell at the Oloffson, apart from his excitement about the first volume of his trilogy that he had on the table and his friend the "Mad Genius," perfectly described in *SOUL IN A BOTTLE*, was a remark that has stuck with me ever since: "Haiti makes you forget about yourself," he said quietly, stirring a drink. Yes, I thought, that's exactly what it does. I became a student of Haiti during that "precarious summer" when the late René Prévail struggled to maneuver amidst a Port-au-Prince controlled by IMF/EU/World Bank/USAID bureaucrats. Making my way up and down the Route Nationale between occasional stays at the Oloffsson and the daily life of the Albert Schweitzer Hospital, I got my first glimpse what Bell expresses here in no uncertain terms, his "fanatical view that Haiti was the center of the Western Hemisphere. While that statement is open to debate, mostly because of its assumption of a "center," there is no doubt among those aware of Haiti's complex, revolutionary spirit that it holds an inviolable place in our history. As fanatics go Madison Bell has done a great service to Haiti, and to the USA, by setting the historical record straight. *SOUL IN A BOTTLE* captures a restless soul on a journey of discovery.

When in Rome? Easy enough. Don't ask for ice in your drink, don't take long showers and expect no one will ever be on time. When in Haiti? Not so easy; especially when saying or doing the wrong thing could get you killed. Reading this book is a full immersion experience. I felt every emotion he felt like it was happening to me, to such an intense degree in fact that I found my heart racing at times. Other times, I got misty eyed. There were several moments when I found myself smiling wildly at either some profound insight he bestowed, or humorous moments that could only occur in real life. Truth is indeed stranger than fiction. There are many scenes from the book I would love to share but I don't want to ruin the real time unfolding experience you will undoubtedly have. I was already a fan of MSB, but this book reaches new levels. For one, you get insight into the man behind the novels, which I found the most fascinating part. MSB is a multi-dimensional person who

really put it all out there for the readers in what I would call brutal honesty. He doesn't insult our intelligence by making himself look good. He tells it like it is, offering just the truth. This book is not only an extremely interesting history lesson, it's about a man's spiritual journey, which often includes confusion and long, dark nights of the soul. I recommend this book highly. If you are a fan of MSB, you will love this book. If you have never read his work, take my word for it, he's one of the best writers in the game...Period.

I love Madison Smartt Bell's series on Toussaint L'Ouverture, and have a great interest in Haiti and in Vodou, so picking up this book was a natural. And if you share my interests, you'll probably find this book fascinating. It is, however, a rather uneasy mix: part travel narrative, part political exploration of Haiti in the Aristide years, part spiritual journey. I say uneasy because sometimes the shifts in time and place and narrative were jarring, or it seemed to ramble a bit, but in a way, that is appropriate for the topic, because indeed, in Haiti the past is as alive as the present and clear delineations between the political and the spiritual cannot be made. For a Vodouisant reading this book, it is a fascinating spiritual journey, and many of us will recognize the author's journey and confusion (though he is not a vodouisant, and what I also recognized here was the outsider's view, though Smartt Bell's "outsider" is much closer to be "inside" than some, as he has spent enough time in Haiti to understand how much all of us Blans (non Haitians) are distanced from truly understanding this amazing and complex country and faith (even I am distanced from it though I am a Mambo who has visited Haiti and who has long studied Vodou--but I am not Haitian, and so will never have that insider understanding). So on a craft level, I was, occasionally confused by the way the various narratives jump and move from place to place, but overall, I found this book beautiful and worth reading (even when the narrator frustrated me!) Still, I found this to be a beautiful and moving book, and for me, in the end, it was a spiritual journey, the way the lwa and the spirits reveal themselves slowly to those who listen.

Of the many books out there on Haiti, this is the one to read. Like Jacob's epic wrestling match, Madison Bell's gone native engagement with the land and people of Haiti will pull you all the way down. He doesn't watch Voudoun ceremonies, he's a convert. He doesn't look at the Haitian countryside from a tour bus, he buys a patch of the stuff and tears up his rented 4 X 4s getting to the place. More than once, barely with his life. This is writing, and a life, on the line. And maybe you won't want to go to Haiti after reading this, or maybe you'll be dying to go there, but this is as close as you'll get via the written word. Try it. I dare you.

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