



# Washington Black

By Esi Edugyan

## About the Author

Esi Edugyan is a Canadian novelist, born and raised in Calgary, Alberta, to Ghanaian immigrant parents. She studied creative writing at the University of Victoria and Johns Hopkins University before publishing her debut novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, in 2004.

Despite favourable reviews for her first novel, Edugyan had difficulty securing a publisher for her second fiction manuscript. She spent some time as a writer-in-residence in Stuttgart, Germany, which inspired her to write another novel, *Half-Blood Blues*, about a mixed-race jazz musician in World War II-era Europe who is abducted by the Nazis as a "Rhineland Bastard."

Published in 2011, *Half-Blood Blues* was shortlisted for that year's Man Booker Prize, Scotiabank Giller Prize, Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and Governor General's Award for English language fiction. She was one of two Canadian writers, alongside Patrick deWitt, to make all four award lists in 2011. On November 8, 2011 she won the Giller Prize. Again, alongside deWitt, *Half-Blood Blues* was also shortlisted for the 2012 Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction. In April 2012, *Half-Blood Blues* also won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award.

In 2018, Edugyan released *Washington Black*, which was long-listed for that year's Man Booker Prize.

Edugyan lives in Victoria, British Columbia, and is married to novelist and poet Steven Price. (*From Wikipedia.*)

Retrieved from: <https://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-reading-guides/fiction/11372-washington-black-edugyan?start=1>

## About the Book

Eleven-year-old George Washington Black—or Wash—a field slave on a Barbados sugar plantation, is initially terrified when he is chosen as the manservant of his master’s brother. To his surprise, however, the eccentric Christopher Wilde turns out to be a naturalist, explorer, inventor, and abolitionist. Soon Wash is initiated into a world where a flying machine can carry a man across the sky, where even a boy born in chains may embrace a life of dignity and meaning, and where two people, separated by an impossible divide, can begin to see each other as human.

But when a man is killed and a bounty is placed on Wash’s head, they must abandon everything and flee together. Over the course of their travels, what brings Wash and Christopher together will tear them apart, propelling Wash ever farther across the globe in search of his true self. Spanning the Caribbean to the frozen Far North, London to Morocco, Washington Black is a story of self-invention and betrayal, of love and redemption, and of a world destroyed and made whole again.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Big Kit tells Washington that “If you dead, you wake up again in your homeland. You wake up free.” How does this line resonate at the end of the book, in the final moments as Wash asks about Dahomey and looks out into the horizon?
2. Why do you think Big Kit didn’t tell Wash that she was his mother? Do you think he would have responded to Titch’s offer differently had he known? How might his life have been different?
3. Another secret kept in the novel is when Philip delays giving Titch the news of his father’s death—which turns out not to be true. How does this lie compare to Big Kit’s? How is Titch’s response different from Wash’s?
4. Wash describes his scar from the explosion with the Cloud Cutter as “the utter destruction [that] his act had now wrought upon my life.” Discuss the kinds of scars the characters sustain in the novel, both visible and invisible.
5. Tanna tells Wash, “You are like an interruption in a novel, Wash. The agent that sets things off course. Like a hailstorm. Or a wedding.” How does this metaphor manifest in literal and symbolic ways throughout Wash’s journeys?
6. Wash’s final meeting with Titch calls into question Titch’s motives for educating him. Wash accuses Titch of not really treating him as more than a slave. What is Wash’s benchmark for love and trust? Do Big Kit and Tanna fill the holes in his life that send him on an “erratic pursuit of an unanswerable truth [and] calm my sense of rootlessness—solve the chaos of my origins”?
7. Describe Wash and Tanna’s relationship. What qualities and life experiences do they share that draw them together? What differences create a gulf between them?
8. How is Wash sometimes manipulated by those around him? Who would you say is the worst offender? As one example, consider the bounty Erasmus puts on his head. Do you believe Titch’s remark that it was more a way to get back at Titch than a desire to find Wash?
9. What does it mean to be a “master” in this time period and for these characters? Recall Wash’s first impression of Philip as “the oddity of a body used for nothing but satisfying urges, bloated and ethereal as sea foam, as if it might break apart. He smelled of molasses and salted cod, and of the fine sweetness of mangoes in the hot season.”
10. Part of what Titch first notices in Wash is an uncanny gift for drawing. How does the ability to observe and record run through the novel as a motif? What becomes, as Titch says, “worthy of observation”?

11. What draws Wash to the beauty of the octopus? What does it mean for him, a former slave, to capture it and other specimens for study and display, even with the motive of showing people that creatures they thought were “nightmarish . . . were in fact beautiful and nothing to fear”?

12. Titch’s confession about how he treated Philip as a boy reveals a new side of him to Wash. Does this revelation lead you to feel more or less compassion toward him? Does it complicate his relationship with Wash?

13. The novel is set between 1830 and 1836 and takes place on multiple continents. How are the larger global and political tremors shaking the world during this time felt through the characters? For example, Titch is described as an Abolitionist and often derided for it. How does this aspect of his worldview affect the way he behaves? What about your perceptions of him as a character?

14. Today in 2018, there are many groups suffering under the oppression of cruel governments and leaders. How might a narrative of their experiences compare to Wash’s? How are today’s oppressed being given or denied a voice?

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## Author Interview

### **Q. When did you decide that you wanted to be a writer?**

A. I was always a big reader. But writing never seemed like something that was like a viable career for someone like myself. I didn't really take it seriously, but I always did a bit of dabbling. I started writing poetry — very bad poetry — and then writing short stories.

I guess it was at the end of high school when I had to make a choice as to what I was going to study at university. It didn't matter what I studied, I was going to go to university — my parents were pretty resolute about that. I thought I would study journalism. Once I got to the University of Victoria I was so compelled by the creative writing aspect, which I had also gone to study, but thought of it as something secondary.

But with teachers like Patrick Lane, Lorna Crozier and Jack Hodgins, I became so impassioned and I thought, OK, this is definitely what I want to do.

### **Q. What was your inspiration for writing *Washington Black*?**

A. The inspiration ended up being something that didn't make it into the book beyond these bare bones things that are still lingering. I thought I was writing a book about the Tichborne Claimant case, which happened in Victorian England in the 1860s and 1870s. It centred on the disappearance of this aristocratic young man, 25-year-old man from the south of England who was shipwrecked and pronounced dead at sea. But his mother refused to believe that and hired a clairvoyant. She then discovered her son was living in Australia and sent for him to come home. A lot of people saw him as being a pretender, but he became a folk hero for the working class.

There was a whole series of trials in which one of the main witnesses for the defence was a man called Andrew Bogle, who was an ex-slave who had retired to Australia. When he was 11 years old, he was stolen off a plantation in Jamaica by Sir Edward Tichborne. I don't know how he came across this young boy — but he had seen him and somehow decided that he was going to steal him and take him back to England.

I thought that was a fascinating story to have a sense of your life as being one thing and very prescribed and very, very much something that was defined by a lack of freedoms

of all kinds. And to be wrenched out of that and taken into this completely alien world, in which you could never have imagined a life for yourself — I found that was my main interest above and beyond all of the craziness of the various trials.

**Q. So what was your research process like when writing *Washington Black*?**

A. I did research for like a year before I started writing it. I was just constantly reading, looking at old files online and in the library, these kinds of things, and then started to write. You can research for years and never sit and write a word, but I had to force myself to sit and write after that.

I spent a long time researching also because I had just given birth to my son. I didn't feel like I was in the place where I could sit down and obviously keep the hours that you need to keep to do a book. But there was always time to research something here and there. So it was about a year of research and then two years of writing.

**Q. Your fiction centres the Black experience in different historical periods and you often write about themes of identity. Why do you feel compelled to write these stories?**

A. I think these things are not always wholly self-chosen. I think you write from certain instincts and you write out of your own experience — and you essentially write what's in you. So although I would never have put it that way, that those were my abiding interests, I think maybe given who I am, where I was born, all of these things, this has obviously shaped and defined my own life, and these are things that I'm interested in exploring in literature.

**Q. Can you talk about the theme of freedom — both physical and spiritual — in *Washington Black*?**

A. That was a theme that emerged very naturally out of the material that I was working with. Obviously he's been born in bondage and then he's in a sense, forced into escaping with this man and is granted a kind of physical freedom. I think this comes out of this Andrew Bogle figure as well with the Tichborne trial, you start to wonder — OK, so now that you have a certain modicum of physical freedom what are the things that you're carrying with you into your life? What are the ways in which you still feel bound up in the trauma of that old life?

“The book is about him trying to resolve these feelings of being tethered or anchored, or the ways in which he's not allowing himself to be free.”

I thought this was interesting because even when Washington manages to escape he's being followed by a sort of bounty hunter figure. And when that fear of his pursuit ends, there's still this way in which he feels anchored to his past life. I think that is natural and normal.

The book is about him trying to resolve these feelings of being tethered or anchored, or the ways in which he's not allowing himself to be free. But also the ways in which this the society in which he's living in won't allow him to be free, looking as he does and having the past that he does. These are just things that I found so interesting.

**Q. *Washington Black* is being adapted into a TV series. What is it like for you seeing your work come to life in that way?**

A. They haven't started filming, so I haven't seen anything like rushes or anything like that. They just did the casting a couple of months ago, which was neat to see who they cast because I instantly thought, that's absolutely perfect. I don't know how they go about doing that, but it's obviously an art in itself.

So as a fiction writer, I have to let go in a way. I have to let them do their thing.

I have to say, I think film and television — that's just a completely different medium. So as a fiction writer, I have to let go in a way. I have to let them do their thing. I'm not a screenwriter and I get that it will be its own piece of art that has roots in my novel, but is very much its own thing. And that's exciting to see their interpretation. I'm looking forward to it.

I'm just sitting back and turning my sights toward writing a new book. But I'm hoping to be on location just to see what that's looking like — whether that's in Nova Scotia or elsewhere. And in terms of nuts and bolts, this is not my art and I'm in great hands. So I'm happy to sit back and watch and give my input when it's wanted and required.

**Q. What are the things that motivate you as a writer?**

A. The things that always motivated me as a writer. You don't write to win prizes. You don't write to have adaptations. You can't have these things in mind. I write for the pleasure, the language and the thrill of discovering a new story. Also, for the challenge



of having to commit to that story for several years — because there are huge periods where you're sick of it and bored.

**Q. You've won two Gillers and your work has been celebrated and recognized internationally. How do you define success as a writer?**

A. I think it's hard to define. I think it would be disingenuous to say that outside accolades don't matter. I think these are the things that allow you to keep writing and both from the perspective of, it makes it possible to publish your next book — but also psychologically.

I think a lot of writers who don't get enough affirmation early enough can sort of falter and quit and feel despairing. And so it's important to have that outside affirmation.

Can I write something that I personally feel is stronger than what I've just written?

Having said that, I like to have a feeling of trying to write a better novel than the one I've just written. Can I write something that I personally feel is stronger than what I've just written? And that's always going to be the challenge. Whether I succeed or fail, that remains to be determined. But that's always what gets you to your desk — can I do better?

**Q. As a Black woman, do you ever feel pressure to speak for more than yourself?**

A. I think any writer writing out of any minority voice, maybe has a little bit of a sense of that when they're writing. Having said that, I don't carry that with me into the room when I'm writing. I feel like that's something very external. And that's something I have no control over.

Whether somebody is looking at my work and taking that as representative of a whole cadre of Canadian writers, that's something I have no control over. I certainly don't carry it with me into my office. When I'm writing, I'm just writing, in a sense for my own pleasure — especially in that first draft.

**Q. You've been through the [Canada Reads](#) experience before. What does it feel like to be here for the second time?**

A. It always feels unexpected. It's quite unique on the Canadian landscape. It's a very different thing to have your book involved in [Canada Reads](#) than in, for instance, the Giller — that's its own thing as well.

I think I think it'll be good. I'm curious. I spoke with Mark Tewksbury, who'll be championing my book, and I was so excited to hear what he had to say about it, the way that he had read it so sensitively and understood it.

What a pleasure it is to meet these ideal readers who grasp everything that you attempted to do in the novel. So that's maybe exciting, just the discussion that people have around your work and around the work of some of everything else that ends up on the shortlist.

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### **Other Links and Resources:**

Booker Prize Interview: <https://thebookerprizes.com/esi-edugyan-interview-washington-black>

Novelist Esi Edugyan On Black Genius And What Comes After Slavery:  
<https://www.npr.org/2018/10/16/657616443/novelist-esi-edugyan-on-black-genius-and-what-comes-after-slavery>

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DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK CLUB: \_\_\_\_\_

BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: