

the deep read

Wayne Grady's long-awaited first novel examines race in Canada

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In 1955, the *Jamaica Star* newspaper introduced a beauty pageant divided into 10 streams, assigned by skin tone. The title of Miss Allspice was open to those who were “part-Indian,” while Miss Lotus had to be “pure Chinese” and Miss Mahogany of “cocoa-brown complexion.” Believe it or not, the “Ten Types, One People” contest was designed to foster diversity and tolerance by allowing Jamaica’s beauties to compete on a supposedly even playing field. In the past, shadeism – assigning hierarchical rank and file according to minute splicing of skin colour, eye colour and hair texture – had prevented dark-skinned black women from winning pageants, while beauty queens seen as too fair to represent Jamaica had been jeered at and pelted with oranges.

Shadeism probably has its roots in urban-rural class bias: Upper class women worldwide have long hid indoors to avoid looking like suntanned, wind-chapped farm workers and servants. European colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade kicked this prejudice up several serious notches, with specific local flavours in countries from Brazil to Indonesia. By the early 20th century, several American states had actually instituted a “one drop rule,” defining the point at which someone became legally white.

There’s a wonderfully brutal illustration of the one-drop rule in Wayne Grady’s new novel, *Emancipation Day*. The book tells the story of Jack Lewis, a Windsor, On.-born musician who joins the Navy during the Second World War, lying about his age in order to escape his family and transform himself more than he already has. Stationed in Newfoundland, the curly-haired, Sinatra-esque Jack romances a local girl, Vivian Fanshawe, eventually bringing her back to Ontario as his wife. By the time Vivian realizes she’s pregnant, she’s also realized that there’s something off about his family: Jack bristles when they call him by his full name, Jackson; his mother wears an awful lot of face powder; his brother has blond hair, but a heavily freckled complexion; and she’s never quite able to meet Jack’s father or older sister.

One day at tea, Vivian won’t accept it when her mother-in-law and a shrewd, mean friend she calls “the bird woman” suggest that she find a “coloured” doctor to see her through her pregnancy. So, the bird woman gives the expectant mother a white candy egg called “Dark Secrets,” which is apparently “a special Windsor treat.” When Vivian opens it, she sees nestled in one ivory half “a small curl of brown chocolate in the shape of a fetus.” Shocked, she almost faints.

“White people been tellin’ us for years that if we got one drop of coloured blood in us, then we coloured,” cackles the bird woman. “What’s wrong with us sayin’ it back to them?...If that baby got one drop of coloured blood...it belongs to us.” When it came to race, the mid-20th century was an all or nothing age. Jack is a trombone player who hates the new, exciting bebop sound, and a construction worker who doesn’t correct assumptions that his father and brother are his employees. He calls himself white, he exists in white spaces and he angrily shuts down Vivian’s suggestions that their baby might not emerge out of the womb white.

The story is historically accurate: plenty of fair-skinned multiracial people like Jack have tried to jump over the colour line and “pass” as white, sometimes abandoning their families and histories forever. It’s also believable. Grady’s fourteen books to date have all been non-fiction, mostly about science and

nature. It takes a careful writer to make science clear and engaging to the layperson, and here Grady uses his skills to keep his prose quiet, spacious and neat, showing us how his characters navigate racial politics without telling us what to think about it. While some of the interactions may seem unbelievable, families often excel at ignoring the main topic, especially if it invokes shame. In the end, it doesn't matter whether Vivian is obtuse or in denial, if Jack actively knows that he's "passing," or what Jack's father really believes about his own wife's faithfulness. What matters is how they live.

That Vivian needs to choose her medical care according to race highlights one of the novel's strengths – the subtle way that Grady continually reinforces that Canada's post-slavery history isn't simply about heroic efforts welcoming refugees off of the Underground Railroad. Post-war Windsor is divided into white, coloured and black neighbourhoods, schools and parks. The segregation is more polite than in Detroit, across the river, where a race riot forces Jack's dark-skinned father to deny his son in the name of safety and, perhaps, love. But it's still segregation, limiting the characters' movements and opportunities, and leading Jack to nurture animosity towards his family and a burning core of self-hatred.

Grady does a thorough job of parsing Canadian race relations, though times his story is too simplistic. *Emancipation Day* joins a huge body of work from the United States and Caribbean about post-slavery identity and shadeism. Sometimes, the volume of those narratives can restrict discussion of race and racism to dichotomies of black and white. It's an issue everywhere, but perhaps especially in Canada, where we're used to fighting to have our stories heard above the Stateside din. There are no Aboriginal, Chinese or Jewish people in Grady's book, although their communities existed in and around Windsor at the time. The best analyses of race engage with multiple layers of identity. The novel would have both richer and more real if Jack and his family interacted with (or avoided) all of Windsor's residents, further complicating the region's geographies and politics. Otherwise, it's tempting for an observer of Canadian multiculturalism to resist this particular, specific story (which is based in part on Grady's own family history), to brand it as well-told, but kind of "American," and move on.

Somewhere between Jack's rejection of his history and the *Jamaica Star's* crown for the Mediterranean "Miss Pomegranate" lies the truth: Race itself is a silly human construct. The attempt to justify its labels and hierarchies is the entire problem, but it's almost impossible to make our way through the world without relying on its structure at least sometimes. Even with its missteps, *Emancipation Day* is an engaging look at when and where true co-existence and polite tolerance dissolve into prejudice and power struggle. That's a fully contemporary issue, and one that's entirely Canadian.

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