

# Wayne Grady: Stranger than fiction

By Mark Medley

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In 1995, Wayne Grady made a discovery that changed his life. He had come to Windsor, the city of his birth, with his wife, the writer Marilyn Simonds, who was conducting research for her book *The Convict Lover*. While in town Grady decided to do some research of his own, and began looking into the history of his father's family, whom he believed had come to Canada from Ireland. He unearthed a census from 1901, and quickly found the name of his great-grandfather, Andrew Jackson Grady, as well as the names of other relatives. He was astonished by what the census revealed.

*Emancipation Day*, Grady's debut novel, is the result of the discovery he made almost two decades ago. It is a startling book, one that will likely be celebrated come awards season, but one that is impossible to discuss at length without revealing its ending. It is the kind of book that benefits when a reader has no prior knowledge of its contents, so I suggest putting down the newspaper, or closing your browser, and proceeding to the bookstore before reading any further. Come back after you're finished.

Jackson Lewis, known as Jack, arrives in St. John's at the height of the Second World War. A trombonist in the Navy Band, he has enlisted, in part, to escape himself: while his parents are black, Jack is light-skinned, so much so that he can pass as — and actually believes himself to be — white. He is alienated from his father, William Henry Lewis, who runs a plastering company in Windsor but prefers drinking to working, and ashamed of his family. While in Newfoundland he falls in love with Vivian, the youngest daughter of a prosperous family, whom he marries when the war ends. When they return to Windsor, Jack tries to keep his past from interfering with his future.

"I didn't know how this novel was going to end when I started writing it — I didn't even know how it was going to start — but I think we write in order to find things out," says Grady, sitting in the bar of his Toronto hotel earlier this week. "To find out who we are."

It was while studying an old census in a library in Windsor that Grady found out who really he was. Although *Emancipation Day* is labelled a novel, it is "primarily" non-fiction, he says. The book's final chapter, told from an eight-year-old Wayne Grady's point of view, reveals that what you have just read is the story of Grady's family. What Grady discovered in that census was that his great-grandfather had not come to Canada from Ireland, as was assumed, but the United States. In the column marked "ethnic origin," the clerk had written "African." Under "colour" there was a single B.

"I want the reader to have the same kind of 'Holy s—t!' reaction that I had in the library," Grady says.

After the discovery, Grady began to research his father's family at length, visiting archives and tracking down old marriage licences and death certificates — which all supported his original findings. He traced his father's family all the way back to 1835, when they arrived in Indiana from Kentucky. After the Civil War they moved north, to Michigan, while his great-grandfather crossed the border into Windsor in 1880.

Grady produced a family tree and presented it to his father for his 70th birthday.

“He was very quiet,” Grady says of his father’s reaction to the news. “My mother’s response was ‘I knew it!’ ”

Although Grady is doubtful, his father claimed he hadn’t known the truth, and while he didn’t dismiss the results of his son’s research, “he never acknowledged that I had [found] something tangible.”

The discovery “did change the way I thought of myself,” Grady says. “It’s earth-shattering. Suddenly everything you thought you knew about yourself is in question. Why do I do this? Why am I like this? Why do I like this colour? Why do I like this food? Why do I like this music? I’m not saying it’s all genetic, but you question it.”

It helped explain a lot. For instance, Grady often wondered why his family never returned to Windsor after they moved away (his father joined the Air Force) and why Grady and his brother were raised in relative isolation, away from his father’s family.

“We never even went back for my grandparents’ funerals, or any weddings,” says Grady, who currently lives near Brockville, Ont. “There was no more contact with the family.”

Before settling on the years right after the Second World War, when his parents settled in Windsor, Grady envisioned writing a novel that would encompass everything he’d learned about his family, a sprawling family saga spanning from 1835 until the present day. “It was all over the map — Victor Hugo was in it!” he says. “It was not a novel. It was just a whole bunch of stuff.” (He is currently writing a sequel to *Emancipation Day* that will resurrect some of this material).

The book was originally going to be a work of non-fiction, but “it morphed into a novel without much intervention on my part,” he says. “I thought it would be more believable, oddly enough, as a novel.”

This meant he had to learn, in essence, how to write all over again. Although he’s published 14 books, and translated another 15 from French into English (for which he won the Governor General’s Literary Award in 1989) Grady soon realized writing fiction requires an entirely different skill set.

“In the beginning of this process, I misunderstood how novelists work,” he says. “You can’t write anything you want. Once you write that first chapter, then everything else is determined. You can write anything you want, but only one thing works. There’s a million things you can have [the characters] do, but only one thing makes sense within the logic of the novel.”

In another serendipitous twist, the book’s release date falls on Emancipation Day itself, the date on which slavery was abolished in the British Empire. And, fittingly, it also marks his 65th birthday.

“I become a first-time novelist and a senior citizen on the same day,” he says.