

Emancipation Day by Wayne Grady: Review

When Wayne Grady discovered his ancestor was black, he researched and wrote his first novel to explore his discovery

Wayne Grady's *Emancipation Day*, Doubleday Canada, 330 pages, \$24.95

By: Marcia Kaye Published on Fri Aug 09 2013

So you're in the library researching your ancestral roots, casually curious about which Irish county your great-grandfather immigrated from before settling in Windsor, Ont., when you get the shock of your life. Your great-grandfather wasn't Irish at all. He wasn't even white. The 1890 census clearly shows that he was a black African-American, but no one ever told you.

You're stunned. This changes your entire self-image, but also exhilarates you because your family history suddenly seems more interesting than you'd thought. What do you do?

If you're Wayne Grady, you write a book. Not a nonfiction book, even though you're one of Canada's finest nonfiction authors, with 14 books of science and natural history to your credit, including one co-authored with David Suzuki (*Tree: A Life Story*). No, you write your first novel, which will go through 22 drafts and take 18 years — 18 years! — to complete.

The result is **Emancipation Day**, Grady's fictionalized account of what might have happened in the 1940s when a fair-skinned youth born to black parents harbours such loathing for his race that he denies his heritage, cuts off contact with his family and lives as a white man.

We meet Jack Lewis as a teenage drummer and trombone player in a navy band stationed in St. John's, Nfld. With his wavy black hair and Frank Sinatra swagger, handsome Jack easily passes for a white man. He favours big band music over the jazz that ironically his white friend Peter excels at. He has a Summer of '42-style affair with an older white woman.

Jack pursues all things white, including Vivian Fanshawe, a girl from a solid Newfoundland family. His obsession is clear, even in the nickname he's chosen for Vivian: Lily White. "You're cherry-pink and apple-blossom white," he croons in her ear. "You're the White Cliffs of Dover. You're the cream in my coffee, you're the milk in my tea. . . ."

Even after they're married, Vivian can't understand Jack's distance from, and secretiveness about, his family. When they finally make the trip to his hometown of Windsor, Jack manages to keep the secret by having Vivian meet only his light-skinned mother and blond brother, making sure she doesn't meet his dark-skinned father or sister.

Interestingly, the revulsion goes both ways. Jack's father, William Henry, is deeply ashamed of his fair-skinned son, at first believing wrongly that Jack was fathered by another man, for how could a black father produce a child who's "as white as a Klansman's bedsheet"?

The novel pulls us into the racial tensions of the 1940s, including the Detroit riots of 1943. We also get a peek into the world of wartime jazz clubs. We're not immersed in it, as with Esi Edugyan's Giller-winning [Half-Blood Blues](#); here it's more background music.

Images of light and dark weave throughout *Emancipation Day*, especially as so many of the characters have brooding, gloomy, dark thoughts. "A thought ain't like an apple you can put down on the table and say, 'Oh, I'll have that later,'" muses William Henry. "A thought is a window you got to look through. If it's dark, it makes everything you look at dark, too."

Emancipation Day — generally celebrated in the British Empire on August 1 to commemorate the end of slavery in 1833 — should be liberating, but many of this novel's characters are virtually imprisoned by their deep-seated prejudices.

In his acknowledgements, Grady writes that he initially attempted to write a sweeping family saga covering 200 years and five generations, until he was talked out of it. I wish he hadn't been. While it took me a while to warm up to the moody, surly character of Jack, I quickly took to his troubled black father, as well as to Jack's white lover, and I was reluctant to let them go when the book ended.

Those (myself included) whose genealogy searches have turned up racially different ancestors may be surprised at how this novel's profound theme of racial identity dredges up feelings that are more than skin deep.

Marcia Kaye is a freelance journalist who worked briefly as Wayne Grady's editorial assistant 33 years ago.

http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2013/08/09/emancipation_day_by_wayne_grady_review.html