

Debut novel puts big ideas to catchy beat

Reviewed by: Douglas J. Johnston

Posted: 08/3/2013

Emancipation Day

By Wayne Grady
Doubleday Canada,
336 pages, \$25

In wartime St. John's, N.L., Royal Canadian Navy bandsman Jackson Lewis meets, courts and marries native Newfoundlander Vivian Clift. He's 19, sings, plays the trombone and looks "so much like Frank Sinatra it took your breath away."

This literary novel is set in the heart of the big-band era, when large jazz orchestras dominated the airwaves and pop charts. Its soundtrack is the music of Glen Miller, Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway.

The music swings. So does the story.

Kingston, Ont., resident Wayne Grady is a translator and the author of 14 non-fiction books, many on science topics. His last book (co-authored with his wife, Merilyn Simonds) was the travel memoir *Breakfast at the Exit Café* (2011).

But this is his first novel. And it's a stellar debut.

Though the main storyline unfolds in Second World War Newfoundland, it alternates with chapters that background Lewis's recent past in Windsor, Ont., and Detroit.

Jackson -- or Jack, as he goes by in the navy -- harbours a dark (literally) secret: He's white; his family isn't.

Jackson is the offspring of black parents, and sibling to a black brother and sister. But latent Caucasian DNA buried deep in his family history surfaced when he was born.

He spent his childhood and adolescence "passing." He likes being white. In race-conscious Windsor and neighbouring race-conflicted Detroit, it's his passport to a better life.

But the price of that better life is denial of his family.

Caught up in the burning and looting of the 1943 Detroit race riots, the teenage Jackson found himself part of a white mob that attacked his brother and father.

To escape Windsor, and his betrayals, he shortly thereafter enlisted in the Canadian Navy.

He's dispatched to Newfoundland, where his and Vivian's fates collide, and then merge.

Vivian, meanwhile, hasn't a clue she's married into a black family (none travelled from Ontario to St. John's for the wedding). She only belatedly figures it out when she and Jackson move to Windsor after the war.

When she becomes pregnant, it's not her that's desperate and afraid about the colour of their child, but Jackson.

Jackson is a study.

Growing up, unlike his neighbours and family, he has no wish to challenge the de facto segregation operative in large parts of his community. Rather, he embraces the status quo.

The subservient position of black people doesn't bother him because, despite compelling evidence to the contrary, he views himself as white. Invisible to himself, he hasn't a clue who he really is.

Though Grady portrays the complexities of race and racial politics, there's nothing overtly didactic here. It's a novel of ideas that succeeds precisely because it's also a good story.

Without giving too much away, the final pages hint at Jackson's redemption -- only to smash that hope at the last second.

It's a brilliant sucker punch of an ending.

<http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/entertainment/books/debut-novel-puts-big-ideas-to-catchy-beat-218195072.html>