Novel a moving tale of slavery and escape

BY DR. GLENN ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

"Washington Black," Esi Edugyan's third novel, opens in 1830, on a slave plantation in Barbados. An 11-year-old field hand, christened George Washington Black by his first master, who said, sarcastically, that he saw in the boy the birth of a nation, a warrior-president, "and a land of sweetness and freedom," has become the manservant to Christopher Wilde, brother of the plantation master.

A lonesome, designative of a flying machine, and an abolitionist, "Titch" Wilde forges a bond -- of sorts -- with "Wash." Before the novel ends, Wash will find himself (with and without Titch) in Virginia, Nova Scotia, the Arctic, London, Amsterdam, and Morocco. He will discover his artistic talent. Most important, he will acquire a powerful understanding of the impact of slavery and the meaning of freedom, forgiveness, and love.

Compelling characters

"Washington Black" has some Dickensian qualities. The novel's cast of characters is large and compelling: Big Kit, a fierce, proud, and protective slave, tells Wash that when she dies she will wake up in Dahomey, her homeland, a free woman who "ain't got to answer" when someone asks a question and "ain't got to finish no job you don't want to finish."

When he laments that he was born "here," she promises to take him with her. "That's how it works."

John Willard, a vicious slave catcher, quotes Aristotle to support the claim that "some creatures are put here in the service of others."

A fellow of the Royal Society in England, Titch's father, a "man with a broken apparatus in place of a heart," predilects scientific investigation in an Arctic igloo to life with his family.

A rare thing

Edugyan's novel is also Dickensian in its reliance on improbable events to drive the plot and get Wash to his next destination. Unlike Dickens, Edugyan occasionally uses words like "transnational" and "mind-set" that seem out of place in a 19th-century setting.

These flaws do not detract very much (or at all) from Edugyan's moving, and at times profound, exploration of identity, self-discovery, and the systemic social and cultural forces that divide human beings.

Wash cannot forget that Titch chose him, initially, because he had the ideal weight to provide ballast for his Cloud Cutter Flying machine. "What else would I have had to go on?" Titch asks. "It is not why I befriended you," he adds, "You were a rare thing."


Risking it all

Looking at Titch's "sad, kind face," Wash acknowledges that in joining an abolitionist society, he did "far more than most to end the suffering of a people whose toil was the very source of his power," risking his own comfort, relationships with family members, and his good name.

Wash knows that Titch had saved him from an almost certain death at Faith plantation. "His harm," he continues to believe, "was in not understanding that he still had the ability to cause it."

Some hope

Even as Edugyan lays bare the brutality of slavery, she leaves us with some hope that individuals can cut through racist assumptions and embrace one another as human beings.

When Wash declares that no person can discern "the true nature of another's suffering," Titch responds: "No. But you can try your damnedest not to worsen it."

The two men fell silent, Edugyan writes. Recognizing now that Titch had suffered emotional wounds as a child, George Washington Black walks slowly toward him and "very slowly, very gently," places a soft hand on his shoulder.

Might Wash be fulfilling his role as the founder of a land of sweetness and freedom? --

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.