



Washington Black, by Esi Edugyan
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, July 2019

In *Washington Black*, Esi Edugyan's acclaimed novel, the title character narrates his life's adventurous story. "I might have been ten, eleven years old—I cannot say for certain," he begins, "when my first master died."

"Wash," as our eponymous hero is called, was born a slave in the early 19th century at a sugar cane plantation in Barbados, sardonically named Faith Plantation. The late master had left Faith Plantation to his nephew Erasmus Wilde, and the new owner's arrival is met with trepidation.

Indeed, Erasmus proves to be a harsher master. "A man who has belonged to another learns very early to observe a master's eyes," Wash relates. "What I saw in this man's terrified me." Erasmus replaces the overseers with more brutal men. Even Big Kit, the bold enslaved woman who has been Wash's protector, was fearful.

One evening, Big Kit and Wash are summoned to the Great House, Wilde Hall, to serve dinner at the master's table. It was the first time Wash had been that close to Erasmus, but his focus was on a guest, Christopher Wilde. Nicknamed "Titch," the master's younger brother is his polar opposite in temperament and avocation. A man of science, Titch is an inventor, an explorer, and—secretly—an abolitionist. Titch, in need of an assistant for his scientific endeavors, coaxes Erasmus to lend him Wash.

Titch had come to Barbados to research wind currents for his "Cloud-cutter," a rudimentary hot-air balloon. Titch teaches Wash to read, and he quickly discovers the boy's intelligence and natural aptitude for drawing. With the help of additional slaves, Titch constructs the Cloud-cutter on a hilltop outcropping.

When an incident on the plantation implicates Wash, Titch hastily decides to launch the Cloud-cutter, with the boy aboard. "The air around us began to howl," Wash

narrates. "The sky rushed towards us. We were rising...And up we went into the eye of it, untouched, miraculous."

As the story continues, Wash is transported to unexpected venues, from Virginia and the frigid Arctic to the Moroccan desert and the teeming streets of London. Throughout his adventures, Wash wistfully remembers Big Kit on Faith Plantation, all the while wondering if Titch is his friend or his master.

Not since Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* has a work of fiction so viscerally depicted the horrors of slavery. *Washington Black*, however, is a more engaging novel as it perfectly captures the joy of discovery and freedom itself.