

Interview with Esi Edugyan
Athabasca University's
Writer in Residence 2015-16

Esi Edugyan is an award-winning writer and novelist whose second novel, *Half-Blood Blues*, was nominated for the prestigious Man Booker Prize, and received the 2011 Scotiabank Giller Prize, among other awards and nominations in the fiction category.

Hailed as one of the best books of the year by Oprah, *Half-Blood Blues* was also critically acclaimed by *The Globe and Mail*, Amazon, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Vancouver Sun*, and was a New York Times Editor's Choice.

Towards the end of her residency at Athabasca U, Esi spoke with Mark A. McCutcheon, Associate Professor of Literary Studies, and Veronica Thompson, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, about her novels, her process, her reading, and her advice for AU students and aspiring writers.

The Second Life of Samuel Tyne is set in the fictional town of Aster, Alberta, which has been identified as Amber Valley (a community not too far from Athabasca); how much research did you undertake about the community of Amber Valley, and did you discover anything about it that surprised you?

Perhaps the biggest surprise was in discovering that Amber Valley existed at all. I had been born and raised in Alberta, and never in the whole course of my education had I ever heard about the historically all-black settlement in the north. It was a very inclusionary moment for me, despite my own family history being drastically different. I was all at once surprised and heartened and confused. I thought the story of this settlement needed to be more widely told, but I also didn't want to presume upon it, and so based a fictional town upon it, rather than use the actual Amber Valley itself. This also gives a writer more latitude — one doesn't have to stick to the known facts. But I did do a lot of research — both on Amber Valley, reading everything I could and visiting the area some months before publication; and on black settlements in Western Canada in general. It was a true education in place.

In *Dreaming of Elsewhere*, you stated, "Home is the first exile. To belong in one place is to not belong in another." Belonging is central to *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*; can you share some of the way the question of belonging informs the development of the characters in the novel, and in your writing in general?

The concept of "home" seems to have been at the heart of everything I've written -- I say this as someone who did not consciously set out to explore this theme; it is obviously something elemental for me. Samuel has felt adrift for most of his life, and sees in Amber Valley a chance to find community. Sid Griffiths in *Half-Blood Blues* is also seeking a sort of belonging.

The concept of "home" is symbolized by the houses in *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, but the houses also introduce gothic elements into the novel. How does the novel contribute to the traditions of Canadian gothic and postcolonial gothic literature?

I suppose it can be said that *The Second Life* does belong to a Canadian and postcolonial Gothic tradition, but it is difficult for me, the writer, to say how it does. I only followed the story to its conclusion.

How has Half-Blood Blues been received in Germany?

I admit I was nervous as to how it would be received — here was an outsider writing about a very painful part of their history. I am happy to say the reception was good, as far as I have heard. Someone told me that it sparked a dialogue about "other histories" of the second world war; this I took as the highest compliment.

The novel explores not only the history of black Germans under Nazi rule, but also the history of trans-Atlantic cultural traffic between Germany and African-American music. It's interesting that the popular success of jazz in Germany (and Europe in general) has been followed by that of later black music, especially Detroit techno, which was huge in Germany long before "EDM" became popular in the USA itself. But debates over the regional and even ethnic "ownership" of techno have arisen; the Detroit origins of techno have been met with surprise and even skepticism in Europe. Did your research encompass more recent postwar cultural relays in this context of what one techno track calls the "Afro-Germanic"? And did your research find any evidence of earlier debates over the ownership and appropriation of black diasporic music forms?

What an interesting question — I had no idea there was such debate and furor over Detroit techno music in Europe! My own research was quite tightly focused on African-American jazz musicians of that era, and didn't stray too much into other art forms or other eras, and so anything I could offer about this would be pitifully uninformed. I will say that American music in general was such a global force in the twentieth century (and continues to be) that its cultural influence cannot but be felt in the music of places farther afield.

A process question: do you listen to music while you write? And (whether you do or not), which records or songs figured prominently, or became favourites, while researching (& maybe while writing) Half-Blood Blues?

During the writing of my first novel, I needed absolute silence to write. It was only when writing Half-Blood Blues six years later that I found myself craving music; its rhythms, its moods. This was obviously because I was writing about music, and needed some aural touchstones. The most key recording for me was Miles Davis' Porgy and Bess, specifically the track "Prayer (Oh Doctor Jesus)". Davis was in rough physical shape during the recording, and in it you hear all the suffering and pain of physical anguish. This is exactly what I wanted the Half-Blood Blues recording in the novel to sound like; it was perfect.

AU students represent a distinctly "mature student" body: many of our students juggle families and full-time work and careers with their studies. But our students are also distinguished by their ambition and drive to achieve, academically, intellectually, and creatively. What might be one piece of advice you'd share with the AU student who's a parent, who works full-time, and who aspires to produce and publish literary work?

Do not wait for "inspiration" to strike -- you will write nothing. Inspiration always comes at the wrong times -- when you are driving, or cooking dinner or folding clothes. You must carve out some inviolate hours for your writing, and stick to them. Even on the days you are feeling least inspired, you might find yourself with something written, in the end. And if you don't, at least you have put in the time to think and figure things out, and this, I would argue, is just as important as getting words down.

If this isn't the same as my previous question — Because of AU's "mature & multitasking" student body,

students are always interested in work process, in how to get things done, how to keep up with studies. What does your work day look like?

I wake up to the mad morning rush. The children need to be changed, fed, driven to school. Then I finally return to the house around 10:00am, where I spend the next 5 1/2 hours writing, possibly answering a few emails at the end of the day. Then it's off to get the kids and begin the mad evening rush of dinner/bath/bedtime until 8:30pm. If I'm not utterly exhausted — or if I have a looming deadline — I will get back on the computer, then and write until 10:30pm.

What's one word or phrase you don't like to see in reviews of your books? What's a word or phrase you would like to see?

Aside from all the negative things one can say about you, which are legion, the one word that a reader can utter that always feels lukewarm is "interesting." It seems an ambiguous way of saying, "I did not enjoy it."

Of course, the words one longs to see are legion, too -- any of the superlatives will do, really. I'll take anything.

In concluding *Dreaming of Elsewhere*, you affirm "the power of stories to affect and alter the realities of our world." Can you discuss some particular stories that have exercised this power? And how have you seen this power exercised by your own work?

It is impossible for me to speak of my own work in this respect, but in terms of other writers — Alice Munro is someone who is remarkable in that she manages to dismantle your notions of everyday life with such subtlety that you do not even realize it is happening.

I am currently reading Phil Klay's short story collection, *Redeployment*, and it is also stunning.

What authors or works are Canadians not reading enough of? Who or what should we read more of? (Besides your own works, natürlich.)

Oh I would never presume to be prescriptive about this, or wag my finger. I can only say that personally I like to read literature from every corner of the world, and that this includes contemporary Canlit.

What can you share about what you have worked on during your AU residency, and do you have a timeline for publication?

I tend to be cagey before publication, because I have got a completely neurotic superstition when it comes to my work. I can say it is another historical novel, though set this time not in Nazi Germany, but in an early 19th century world. The new novel will be published in Canada in August of 2017.

In *Dreaming of Elsewhere* you address the complex intercultural contexts of diasporic identity, with candid reference to your own experience of travel to visit family in Ghana. Cognizant that you locate your own sense of belonging both interprovincially and internationally — somewhere ambiguous between, as Eric B and Rakim wisely distinguish, "where you're from" (Calgary) and "where you're at" (Victoria) — can we ask if you've been reading recent Ghanaian fiction (eg. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*) and, if so, what's your reading of it?

I was given a copy of Yaa Gyasi's novel (she is a Ghanaian-American, I believe?), but I have been

scrambling to finish my own novel and so have not had a chance to read it. I have heard nothing but great things, though. There are a lot of intriguing books coming from African diaspora writers. My most recent read was *The Fishermen* by Chigozie Obioma, which was excellent.

I'd like to ask a question that's more often asked of music artists — a writer colleague says they never get asked this but would love to. So: who are your influences as a writer?

They are so countless that to list everyone would be tiresome, I'm sure! But to name a few: Alice Munro, Michael Ondaatje, Peter Carey, Tolstoy (pretentious to say, but true), Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, John Murray, Evelyn Waugh, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Roberto Bolano. Et cetera. Et cetera.