IDEAS

Science, technology, trends, art, books, personalities, ephemera . . .

756,132,390,815,553

One of more than a quadrillion numbers a physicist produced with a quantum random number generator. Why does it matter? Because for each of them, an alternative reality may be born. **Welcome to the multiverse.** P.96

ESI EDUGYAN IS…

A two-time Giller winner.
A public intellectual. Not a nutritionist.
What else do you want to know?

BY IAN WILLIAMS

Esi Edugyan

Page 1 of my search for Esi Edugyan turns up familiar information. She is the bestselling author of four books. She has won the Scotiabank Giller Prize *twice*. Twice, she has been shortlisted for the Booker. She won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (company: Toni Morrison, Nadine Gordimer, Zadie Smith), and Barack Obama is a fan.

I hit the space bar and Google offers a deck of predictions:

- Esi Edugyan Massey Lectures
- Esi Edugyan books
  - Washington Black
  - Half-Blood Blues
- Esi Edugyan husband
- Esi Edugyan net worth

I do not click *net worth* but I involuntarily calculate her prize money over the years. I do not click *husband* but I have fond memories of riding in a stretch limo with Steven Price, also a writer, during the Winnipeg stop of our 2019 Giller tour as we both tried to suppress our glee. Maybe I should click. See how they live. Google makes it so easy for searching to become stalking. Edugyan and her family live in a house with an ocean view. What creep is sitting in his basement, illuminated by his screen, searching for single, wealthy celebrities to recruit into his fantasies?

I hover over the autosuggested options for a long time before choosing.

Esi Edugyan + Massey Lectures

Although my pessimism predicts that they'll be virtual this year, the CBC Massey Lectures at the University of Toronto are actual lectures, usually involving a podium and a bespectacled audience. In recent years, the speaker has delivered each of the five lectures in a different Canadian city. The lectures are later broadcast by the CBC and published as a book. In short, they're a significant public-intellectual event. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered them months before his assassination. Noam Chomsky gave his lectures on propaganda. Margaret Atwood, on debt. Ken Galbraith, Doris Lessing, Claude Lévi Strauss, Adrienne Clarkson, Lawrence Hill, Douglas Coupland and Michael Ignatieff all gave lectures. And this year the honour goes to Edugyan, who will deliver lectures on race, art and storytelling: *Out of the Sun*.

Very few Black people have been invited to give the lectures. I wonder if Edugyan feels any burden. The responsibility for addressing race has largely been downloaded to Black public figures. I wonder if she suspects that she was asked to give the lectures because she is (one of Canada's most accomplished, decorated and respected novelists and) Black. A suite of add-on expectations is implicit when the media searches for Black people. *We are lending you this platform to represent the underrepresented. We are embarrassed by the historical exclusion of your people from intellectual discourse. Please*

find a way to discuss what you want while giving us what we need. You may chastise people who resemble us but are not us. If you must, reprimand us gently. Please vaccinate us so we can get back to life as it was.

I schedule a call with Edugyan. While we small-talk, I strain to listen to the background. Not a bark, not a rattle of a spoon, not a gently crashing wave, not even a flush from an upstairs toilet. Her house sounds clean. Her voice sounds incapable of shouting. I imagine her at home in pearls.

I confess to her that I find it impossible not to contextualize her lectures within the recent global conversation on race, justice and representation. That frame doesn't bother her. But she clarifies that her lectures are not rooted in stories of Black hardship. "Instead," she says, "I want to cast back and enlarge the view of Black experiences by looking at some of the cultural convergences of the African diaspora in different regions, and to focus on the contributions and histories of Black people that have been made obscure."

Her understanding of the Black diaspora goes beyond the Caribbean and the Americas. "It would be a surprise for most people to learn that there's been a Black presence in Japan since the 16th century, and in China it goes back to a much older point of contact, from the Tang dynasty onward."

The Black experience, historical and contemporary, is not confined to one or two continents. The Black experience is plural, global, uncontainable.

Edugyan is her own best example.

She's moved about 30 times in her life. She has been to every continent except South America and Antarctica ("but life is long!"). Her first trip outside of Canada by herself was to everyone's bucket-list destination: Iceland. She still has good friends there. She lived in Germany and wrote her breakout novel *Half-Blood Blues.* I suspect that if she weren't a Canadian writer and these designations were a matter of temperament and style rather than residency, she would be a Russian writer.

She confirms, "Russian sounds good."

And yet, doesn't something jangle in your head when you think of a Black Russian writer? That dissonance reminds us of how constrained our expectations of Blackness are.

The algorithm occasionally shifts when I search for Esi Edugyan.

People also ask
How do you pronounce Esi Edugyan?
Is Esi Edugyan Armenian?
Where is Esi Edugyan from?
What made Esi Edugyan successful?

Armenian? Maybe her name gets confused with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the Turkish president, but he's not Armenian either.

Where is she from? The very first sentence of her Wikipedia page states that Esi Edugyan is a Canadian novelist. That's good enough for me. The first sentence of her bio says she was born and raised in Calgary, Alta. But we all know what's behind this question. It's the familiar ethnic tracing that writers of colour endure. The creep in the basement who is searching for Edugyan is still operating under colonial ideas that to be Canadian is to be white.

"Some people are born in a place and feel they own that place. They feel that this is exactly where they are meant to be. Maybe they live in that place their whole lives," Edugyan says.

Her feelings are not so simple. Her success as a writer has taken her all over the world. After residencies in Europe, Edugyan compiled her thoughts on belonging for the Henry Kreisel Memorial Lecture Series, published as *Dreaming of Elsewhere: Observations on Home.*

"I didn't have an innate sense of feeling perfectly at home anywhere," she continues. "In the wider world, your differences are made clear to you although you don't necessarily feel yourself to be different. There was always a dissonance between what I could claim for myself and what others were allowing me to claim."

Images for Esi Edugyan

While researching the African diaspora in Europe for the Massey Lectures, Edugyan became fascinated by how Black people were represented in portraiture. At the most basic level, portraits capture the physical likeness of a person. At their best, they offer a glimpse of character. And inevitably, they reveal the artist's perception and his culture's values through the subject's expression, clothing, posture and position. "How is our physicality expressed?" Edugyan asks. "How is it distorted? How does art obscure so much of our experience in the world?"

I open my browser and run an image search.

I see posed photos of Edugyan looking directly at us, Edugyan looking away, Edugyan smiling softly, Edugyan reading from her books, Edugyan in libraries, Edugyan in gowns, Edugyan in white, Edugyan in black. Very few candid shots. But that's true for most writers. And by the time "candid shots" hit Instagram, or wherever, they've already been selected, filtered, cropped and distorted in the subject's favour.

The images don't convey what it's like to meet Edugyan. It's an obvious point, but it's worth mentioning. The first time I met her in person was in Brampton, at the Festival of Literary Diversity (FOLD). She was shorter than I'd imagined—*petite* is

Edugyan by the numbers

3
In 2018, she became the third writer to win the Giller prize twice, joining M. G. Vassanji and Alice Munro

3
Each of her novels has taken three years to write

18
Living on the grounds of an 18th-century castle in Stuttgart, Germany, for a time helped to inspire *Half-Blood Blues.*

26
Age when her debut novel, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne,* was published

5,000+
Edugyan's personal book collection, at last count

Chris Young/CP. Previous spread: Alana Paterson; Victor De Schwanberg/Science Photo Library

the better word. She had a quiet, unflappable presence, like an old, wise karate sensei, although we're roughly the same age. I think the word my mother used for her during our debrief was *proper.* A photo of our panel survives on Facebook. Edugyan sits with her legs crossed, reading from her book. I'm farthest from her, wearing a turban. (What? You never had a year-long turban phase?)

Sorry, Google. An array of images can't replace the information emanating from our bodies. I don't intend to objectify Edugyan with my image search, but to ask of her photographers the same questions she asks of painters. How has she been seen? How is she represented in this very article? What are you supposed to think when you look at these images? What do you actually think?

Esi Edugyan + Books

Usually when I search for people, I have to make sure that I'm searching for the right Jamie Owens, say. There's only one Esi Edugyan, but it turns out that she could have been a very different person.

She published her first book at 26. She had been in a library at the University of Virginia, where her husband was doing graduate work, and she came across a book on Black settlers. She discovered that there was a settlement of freed Black slaves in Amber Valley, north of Edmonton. That detail became the basis of the novel *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, set in the late '60s. A Black man uproots his family and moves to an inherited homestead in rural Alberta. Edugyan had to go all the way to the other side of the continent to learn about her home province.

Her second novel remains unpublished. It's a story about a young Black piano prodigy, the only novel Edugyan has written from a female perspective, set in the 1970s against a Cold War backdrop. In a way, it sounds like the ghost of *Half-Blood Blues.* I try to get plot details, and in perfect Canadian-writer form, both modest and protective, Edugyan says, "I won't bore you by describing it."

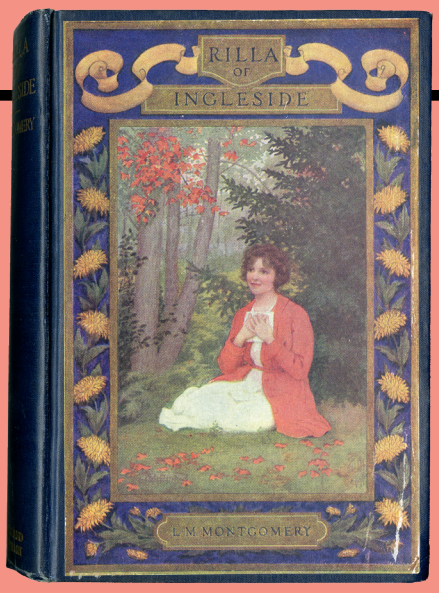
But Edugyan offers unsparing self-reflection about the unpublished novel: "It was absolutely right that it wasn't published, not that it couldn't have been gotten into shape. But it was written in a state of despair, so it has a sense of exhaustion to it."

The internet does not tell me why young Esi Edugyan felt such despair.

When she started the novel, she was living in Europe, she explains. "Then suddenly I was home and jobless and broke and unhappy."

I type *Esi Edugyan existential crisis* into Google. Google rejects the premise of my search. The results come back: "Missing: ~~existential crisis~~."

Edugyan assures me, "But the unhappiness was largely tied to the novel's prospects, and the



THE LIST

100 YEARS OF RILLA

Rilla of Ingleside, the eighth book in L.M. Montgomery's Anne of Green Gables series, turns 100 this year. Centring on Anne's youngest child, the novel's true subject is the First World War—Montgomery drew largely from journals she kept during the war. *Rilla* was published in more than a dozen languages, and each translation has a story of its own. Here are a few:

Lilla Marilla (*Little Marilla*, 1928)
The Swedish translation neutralized some of the original text's negative references to Germany, particularly those made by Susan, Rilla's family's housekeeper, who often spoke of Germans as "Huns."

An no Musume Rilla (*Anne's Daughter Rilla*, 1959) Hanako Muraoka translated the Anne series into Japanese, doing much of the work in secret during the Second World War. Her biography, written by her granddaughter, was recently translated into English as *Anne's Cradle.*

Anne og Marilla (*Anne and Marilla*, 1959)
In Norway (as in Sweden), *Rilla* was part of a publisher series, in which all books had a set number of pages. Some material was cut to fit the prescribed length, and some—such as details of war—to protect young readers. The Second World War was not long past.

Anne & Rilla: Zum ersten Mal verliebt (*Anne & Rilla: First Time in Love*, 1995); ***Anne & Rilla: Der Weg ins Glück*** (*Anne & Rilla: The Road to Happiness*, 1996) The two-part German translation was based on the original source text, altering negative references to the word "pacifist."

Rilla ze Złotego Brzegu (*Rilla of the Golden Shore*, 1933) In the Polish translation, Rilla's suitor Kenneth Ford goes by the name Krzysztof. His mother, Leslie—Anne's friend—goes by Ewa.

Source: "L. M. Montgomery Censored?: Canadian War Commentary in Rilla of Ingleside Adapted for Nordic Audiences" by Laura Leden, published in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017

Courtesy of Archives & Special Collections/University of Guelph Library; Courtesy of LM Montgomery Institute/Robertson Library/University of Prince Edward Island

struggle to make it work." She went on to complete the novel; it went through several drafts but "it just didn't catch on."

"It was creatively devastating," she says. "I felt that *Half-Blood Blues* was my last shot. If it failed to get published—and it almost failed to get published—I was just going to pursue something else."

Half-Blood Blues, a story about the excavation of a forgotten jazz player in Nazi Germany, was passed over by Canadian publishers, then it finally found one, went through the editorial process, then that publisher went under.

"I was in such despair," Edugyan says. This is the second time in our conversation that she uses the word *despair*. "It took so much to write the book and then for all of that to happen. It seemed like a disaster."

But the book found a new publisher and a ton of attention. In Canada, it won the Giller prize and was shortlisted for a Governor General's Award and the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. Internationally, it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Orange prize.

"For fortunes to change so drastically and so suddenly," Edugyan says, "you can see how luck and taste play a role in these things."

And what if her writing career hadn't worked out? What if she had stuck to her plan to change course after the ghost novel, or if *Half-Blood Blues* hadn't found a publisher? What would my search for Esi Edugyan turn up?

"Oh, I don't know," she says. "I was thinking about maybe going to law school or becoming a nutritionist."

The rest is history. And if there's anything we know about Edugyan based on her novels, it's that she loves history and loves research.

Her next novel, *Washington Black*, an adventure tale and slave narrative set in the 19th century, also won the Giller and was shortlisted for the Booker. She researched both it and *Half-Blood Blues* for a full year. Research is her favourite part of the writing process.

In fact, for the Massey Lectures, Edugyan was offered a research assistant but quickly realized that there was no way she could outsource that job. "How would that person know what I would find interesting or what things could be drawn together? Maybe they would overlook a footnote that I would think is central."

In the end, she chose to do all the research herself. Does she research herself?

Searching Yourself

Edugyan never googles herself. "I'd have a nervous breakdown," she says.

'I think what makes a person or what can make a person successful is tenacity. If I had given up, I wouldn't have been successful.'

I explain to her that I feel some duty to ask the questions that the Googleverse wants to know. These are not my questions. I don't want her to think that I'm the sort of person who laps up *TMZ* and folds open a corner of the *Enquirer* in the checkout line.

"Are you Armenian?" I ask.

"I've had that question to my face," she says. But no, she confirms. She is not.

I ask another question, this time verbatim: "What made Esi Edugyan successful?"

She laughs but I can hear her frown. She says, "That's so abstract and weird."

"It's pretty rude, actually," I say.

A few minutes later, she returns, unprompted, to the question. What made Esi Edugyan successful?

"I think," she begins, then hesitates. "I think what makes a person or what can make a person successful is tenacity. You know, if I had given up after *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, I wouldn't have been successful. But I stuck around and I kept writing."

That's right. She could have been a nutritionist. For kicks, I search, *Esi Edugyan nutritionist,* but I instantly get rerouted to results for *Esi Edugyan writer*.

In fact, when I think about it, all my searches failed. That's why I keep searching. Search traffic relies on the fact that we cannot be satisfied. Even when we find our intended result, we continue searching because we know that there is more out there. We can easily find the books that Edugyan has written, but if we persist, maybe we'll uncover the unpublished one. We can easily find her husband's face, but what was it like when they first met? We want Google to deliver more. We want images to reveal more than bodies. Google, show us Edugyan's consciousness. What's it like to be her?

In the first Massey lecture Edugyan will deliver, she recounts the story of sitting for her portrait—an oil portrait, painted in real time. In surrendering herself to the artist's vision, she discovers that "we fool ourselves into believing we have some measure of control over how we are perceived."

True. The portrait of ourselves that we find online is so permutable that it feels incomplete at best and inaccurate at worst. I think of Edugyan, and all of us, as lying under those 3D autostereogram pictures that were popular in the '90s. We're hard to uncover. But some people can perceive the mystery object instantly. They trace a shape through the static and say, "Look there. Unfocus your eyes. The shark is coming right at you. Keep looking. How can you not see it?" ✾

Ian Williams won the Giller prize in 2019 for *Reproduction*. His latest book, *Disorientation: The Experience of Being Black in the World*, publishes in September.