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Nearly lost after its anonymous publication in 1926 and only recently rediscovered, **When Washington Was in Vogue** is an acclaimed love story written and set during the Harlem Renaissance. When bobbed-hair flappers were in vogue and Harlem was hopping, Washington, D.C., did its share of roaring, too.

Davy Carr, a veteran of the Great War and a new arrival in the nation's capital, is welcomed into the drawing rooms of the city's Black elite. Through letters, Davy regales an old friend in Harlem with his impressions of race, politics, and the state of Black America as well as his own experiences as an old-fashioned bachelor adrift in a world of alluring modern women -- including sassy, dark-skinned Caroline.

With an introduction by Adam McKible and commentary by Emily Bernard, this novel, a timeless love story wonderfully enriched with the drama and style of one of the most hopeful moments in African American history, is as "delightful as it is significant" (*Essence*).

When Washington Was in Vogue: A Love Story Details

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Author : Edward Christopher Williams

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From Reader Review When Washington Was in Vogue: A Love Story for online ebook

Lauren says

An epistolary novel originally published in serial format in the 1920s, the manuscript was “lost” until a graduate student accidentally stumbled upon it in the 1990s and decided the world needed to read about Davy Carr and his introduction to the Black bourgeoisie of Washington, D.C. It’s a fluffy, light-hearted story that is light on plot but full of description (perhaps too much) and engaging characters. In particular, Caroline, the dark-skinned younger daughter of Davy’s landlord, sparkles, jumping off the page and evoking the modern sensibilities of a stylish young woman of the 1920s. I also liked the oddity of a love story told from the perspective of a reserved intellectual man. The observations and comments on race and identity (particularly within the black community) are a nice addition to African-American literature and scholarship, and the contrast between these serious moments with the bubbly plot make it one of the more unique novels I’ve read this year. Recommended.

Olivia K. says

2.5 stars!

When I first started reading this book, I didn't expect to get so agitated towards Davy's attitude and outlook towards women. It's almost painful at times to read the interactions of each character. I wasn't surprised that Davy end up with Caroline. Hah! I was mesmerized by the short history lessons so I'm giving this a half-half 2.5 ratings.

RJ says

The prose was excellent. It reminded me a bit of Jane Austen with AA characters. The topic was important and frank: colorism during the Harlem Renaissance. The story focused on society parties more than I would have liked, but it delineated class structure in the black community at the time. Wish it was more widely read.

Michelle says

Having no idea what to expect, I found When Washington was in Vogue to be a fascinating, first-hand picture into an era that was pivotal for both ethnic and gender diversity. At first, the subject matter is decidedly uncomfortable. I am not the target audience. In fact, having grown up in the 80s and 90s, I was taught to ignore the issue of race because race does not impact how I interact with others. However, with this novel, I not only could not ignore this issue, I was forced to deal with very frank discussions about this very topic.

"What would you say should be the attitude of those fair enough to 'pass'? Should they never go anywhere where their whiteness will procure them better treatment than would be accorded to them if they were known

to be colored?" (pg. 49)

Once I moved past my own feelings of discomfort, I found an amazing book that poses profound questions about race and beauty while portraying a picture of Black Washingtonian society in the 1920s. There is a love story thrown into the plot, but for me, it took a back seat to the historical and philosophical questions presented. The epistolary form of the novel was both engaging and enjoyable. I even came to realize what a lost art writing for the sake of writing truly has become.

"What is beauty, and wherein does it reside? That is a hard question to answer, when we think that the mere shadow of a line makes a difference between beauty and the lack of it. But that greater question: What is personality? How many good men have addled their brains puzzling over it!" (pg. 93)

Quite frankly, I have never read a novel that explores such thought-provoking questions with such candor. To me, as a history buff, this is the true attraction to the novel. Questions regarding who exactly defines ideal beauty and how other cultures can impact that definition, segregation, passing as white, living beyond your means, the necessity of learning about other cultures, thoughts on suffragettes and flappers, opinions regarding the Harlem Renaissance, and even political opinions regarding anti-lynching bills that may or may not pass in Congress were all mentioned more than once throughout the novel.

"Wallace brought up the subject of the recent revival of interest in the Negro as a subject for writers of fiction. I say 'revival,' for he was a legitimate subject for such treatment in the generation preceding the Civil War" (pg. 176)

I took more notes and earmarked more pages throughout this novel than I have ever done before or since. There was so much fodder for reflection, it really did change the way I looked at history and at the race issue.

"I, for one, feel very sure that Stribling, Shands, and Clement Wood are merely the vanguard of a small army of writers who will soon lay hands on the unusually dramatic material which has been lying so long unused within the borders of our Southern civilization. Somehow, I feel, too, that Southern white men may handle it better than the writers of our own group. We are too near to it, and feel it too keenly, to achieve the detachment necessary for work of the highest artistry." (pg. 177)

There was a quaintness about each sentence and the picture it painted that I found charming and refreshing. Mr. Williams has a way of making me wish we did not have TVs or computers so that we too would be forced to write letters to each other, write in journals and diaries, and just appreciate the written page much more than it is now. For having been lost, I am very glad that *When Washington Was in Vogue* was found and republished. It is definitely a treasure worth visiting, both for its picture of the 1920s and the forthrightness it uses to address some very serious topics.

Kristen says

A neat book that speaks of DC in its heyday for African Americans. The book was written to prove that the U Street area was every bit as fun and full of culture and high-living as 125th Street in NY. It's told through a series of letters (without the accompanying responses); many of the letters address important social issues of the day. I thought that style was very inventive and clever -- a good way to raise awareness without getting too preachy or having to artificially weave incidents into a plot.

Laura says

When Washington was in Vogue by Edward Christopher Williams (1871-1929) tells a fascinating tale of life during the Roaring Twenties--a time which also encompassed the Harlem Renaissance. Williams shows in his book that African Americans also had thriving communities in other cities (Washington for instance), and not just Harlem during this period. He should know--although born in Cleveland, OH, Williams moved to Washington DC where he took a post at Howard University in 1916; he served as head librarian as well as teaching multiple classes. Originally published as a series in the magazine *The Messenger* from 1925-26, the collection of letters comprising *When Washington was in Vogue* was rediscovered by Adam McKible, who republished it in book form.

We meet Davy Carr, a fair skinned African American of unknown age (although presumably late 30's or early 40's), who served in WWI and is now working on a literary work chronically the cultural and historical implications of the slave trade. To that end, he takes up residence in Washington DC for research purposes, and as luck would have it, he rents a room from a middle aged lady with two daughters--Genevieve and Caroline. Davy soon discovers that the social lives of middle class African Americans is anything from dull, and he chronicles his experiences in letters to his best friend Bob.

Williams layers food for thought on a host of topics into the sparkling descriptions of parties and dinners though--many of these topics are just about as relevant today as they were in the 1920's. For instance, before reading this novel I thought the phrase "Keeping up with the Joneses" was a modern concept...turns out a comic strip featuring that phrase debuted in 1913, and the concept was very much alive in the 1920's. Those who didn't have cash to literally spend engaged instead in the practice of "conversational spending" where various women lament great deals on expensive items that they just missed out on! On a more serious note, Williams tackles the issue of "color lines" for the African-American community, and compares it's effect on women to other beauty practices and issues such as corsets, binding feet, etc. which women do "not only uncomplainingly, but eagerly. All civilized and cultivated races ridicule such practices, and very rightly, indeed, but--mark you, my friend!--each group ridicules the conventions of the other groups and not its own." Williams also discusses the suffragette movement which achieved marked success in the 1920's, while also commenting on a wide variety of writers who (sadly), are not all widely known, but seem to have done much which paved the way for the Equal Rights Movement. Last but not least, he shows us an exciting glimpse into a time gone by. Before televisions, cellphones, and the internet good evenings were occupied by reading books, writing letters or musing in journals, and fireside chats with friends. Williams is no slouch at writing himself, and below are some of my favorite excerpts.

~~It is all a puzzle to me. I can see some good in many of the innovations of the past five years, and it is no doubt true that every generation suffers from accretions of conventionalisms which must be removed at regular intervals, like the barnacles from the hull of a ship. But I must confess that a few of the new ideas and tendencies leave me gasping in a maze of wonder as to how the whole thing will end. After watching one young girl whose dancing was especially atrocious, I asked one of the older men present, "How do they get away with it?" He laughed. "They don't," he said, "but then," he added, "they don't want to."

~~No man does the very highest type of work of which he is capable until he is in some way touched by love. That without the element of love, human ambitions are utterly selfish, and, as such, dangerous to all who come in contact with them. [...] Life without love is conceivable, but it is life senescent.

~~The establishment of every kind of human relationship is fraught with responsibilities which cannot be eluded. Very often we can decide as to whether or not we shall make this or that tie, but once it is made, the matter is largely out of our hands. Once we have set up our gods, though with our own brain and hands we may have fashioned them out of the clay of the roadside, and by taking, though, have invested them with life, the creature becomes master, and we can no more control what it shall do.

Given 4.5 stars or a rating of Outstanding. Highly recommended!

Shannon says

This novel, which is referred to as a lost novel of the Harlem Renaissance, unfolds as a comical series of letters written by Davy Carr to his friend Bob. Davy is in Washington, DC to do research for a book about the African slave trade. While there he meets a young woman named Caroline that he's not quite sure how to handle. But through the letters he sends to Bob, it's obvious that he's falling in love with her.

As Davy becomes familiar with his new surroundings, he gets absorbed into circles of friendship and finds himself right at the center of life as a black elitist in Washington, DC. They are people that play as hard as they work and love an elaborate affair that will bring people together. One such occurrence is an HBCU football classic between Hampton and Howard Universities. People travel from all parts of the country to attend parties and reunions that take place because of the annual event. On game day, people don their best apparel and catch up with those they didn't manage to see before the game. Even today, HBCU football classics are a huge deal, and can still be considered more of a fashion show and social function than sporting event.

This colorfully written book also does some pretty heavy lifting when the author decides to tackle some community issues. After spending time with his new friends, Davy decides he must be in the company of the wealthiest individuals around town. But an acquaintance points out that the professions of those individuals could not afford them the lifestyles of which they boast. In other words, there's a lot of keeping up with the Joneses.

It's even stated that many of these self-proclaimed, well to do individuals are ignorant about things that should be most important. While they are about town making sure they are seen at the festivities surrounding the football game, the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill is dying in Congress.

The book goes on to address colorism, passing, and even delves into women's issues. Even though a love story does play out in the book, all characters don't have the same luck. Apparently the supposed lack of eligible bachelors is a one hundred year old problem. But there were many things in this book that made me think, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Originally published in 1926, When Washington Was in Vogue is a fun and thought provoking read that's definitely flown under the radar. It was the only book published by Edward Christopher Williams, the country's first black professional librarian. He died in 1929 and was a librarian at Howard University at the time.

Dana says

I found this at "Frugal Muse" and bought it out of desperation to find something...the description of the book compares it to the Great Gatsby...it was written during the Harlem Renaissance and was interesting from a historical perspective. The story line was a little "loopy", but I did like reading it...some parts made me chuckle as was intended...

Bebe20018 says

This was a change of pace for me but I enjoyed it. It's a very different kind of falling in love story, maybe because of the time it took place 1922 or because of the way it is told, through letters written to a friend.

Laura says

Maybe there are other whimsically romantic fantasies written by and for middle-aged intellectual black men, but I have not yet read them, so this was a delightful novelty for me. I came to this book because I was interested in its author -- a fellow Clevelandler and the first professionally trained African American librarian. I came away from it convinced that I couldn't have gained more insight into his personality and values if I'd uncovered his lost memoirs.

An interesting note: The main character, Davy Carr, is extraordinarily well-read, so his frequent literary asides make a pretty good reading list for anyone interested in black culture and society of the Roaring '20s. At one point, Davy even comments on novelist Charles W. Chesnutt -- the author's own father-in-law!

Cheryl says

I FOUND THE BOOK MILDLY INTERESTING. DAVY'S DIMNESS REGARDING WOMEN IS SOMEWHAT ALARMING GIVEN HIS EDUCATION AND WORLDLINESS. DON'T THEE PEOPLE WORK? ARE THEY ALL A BUNCH OF BOOTLEGGERS? THE CHARACTER INTERACTIONS ARE SO SOPHOMORIC AND TEDIOUS THAT THEY REMIND ME OF MIDDLE SCHOOL EXCEPT THESE PEOPLE HAVE A BETTER COMMAND OF THE LANGUAGE. THAT DAVY ENDS UP WITH CAROLINE IS NO SURPRISE; SHE IS OBVIOUSLY LOOKING FOR "DADDY" JUDGING FROM HER FONDNESS FOR DATING DOCTORS WHO, BY DEFINITION, CAN AND DO TAKE CARE OF HER. THE READ WAS WOTHWHILE AS A BIT OF HISTORY AND IT WAS MERCIFULLY SHORT.

Emily says

"He said...that better incomes are making us more cowardly, rather than more bold, for we can now procure in our own circle the satisfactions we once could get only outside, and so we shut our eyes to what we do not wish to see, and then assert that it does not exist; that we love pleasure too much, and that we will spend more both of time and money in following it than any other struggling race in the world." - pg. 39

SunnyD says

this was a difficult read for me...a book club selection. i just couldn't get into it. it's a story told through letters, during the harlem reniassance but set in washington DC. the writer of the letters is writing to his friend back in harlem about all his experiences in DC among the black elite crowd. he fits right in as he is

stuffy too. although i'll give him credit for the fact that he did not 'pass' as he could have. that was not something many people chose to do at that time if the option was available. lots of references to color code/class/etc within blacks in the story. i guess it's good historical fiction. i just found it annoying for a lot of the story. williams (the author) is the first black professionally trained librarian in the US. that seems to be pointed out in every single review, so i guess i'll include it here as well.

Vzenari says

The book focusses too much on descriptions of parties and the predictable resolution of love plots to allow me to assign three stars. Those interested in American society in the 1920s and in African-American society in particular, this book may be worth reading. The introduction to the book outlines the book's significance in the field of Harlem Renaissance studies (i.e., the book is set in Washington, not New York, and is an epistolary novel with no white characters at all).

Ari says

"The reactions of woman to ordinary stimuli seem to be different from those of the average man. Man, so I think, reacts largely to the act, while woman reacts to the motives she sees, or thinks she sees, behind the action. Most men are not audacious enough to feel that they can evaluate motives, but women are not so faint-hearted. So it happens that often the reaction of one is exactly the opposite of the reaction of the other" (166).

In the first few pages of this book the Wall Street Journal calls it "The Great Gatsby with a happier ending" that doesn't feel like the appropriate comparison but if it means a novel that features drinks and flappers than sure. I also LOVE this cover, the girl looks ballsy and on her shit and I wish there was a photo credit.

The novel features no white characters and it feels especially noteworthy that none of the Black characters featured are "passing". In fact it's only briefly touched on which stands in stark contrast to the more well known novels of the Harlem Renaissance era (and that's no shade to those authors, Nella Larsen forever). This novel delivers on its promise to be easy and riveting, the author has a keen eye for detail and its almost as if he knew he needed to be as detailed as possible for posterity's sake. It's an interesting choice to make this novel a series of letters, I think it would have been fine without it. It's hard to believe two men would write to each other the way Davy does, he even notes the way the women dress with great care which I found hilarious. But the novel would have stood fine on its own as a first or third person story.

I'm glad this novel was discovered, I don't think it's a classic in the traditional sense of the word but does it offer additional information on the Roaring 20s as seen through the eyes of the Black upper class. The story hints at deeper issues from time to time but it's mostly just trying to be entertaining and shed some light on an under-looked part of Black history, in that regard it delivers. A thoroughly enjoyable historical read that has a little bit of everything; fashion, great parties, romance and witticisms.

"And that brings me to a question which has interested me very much, the existence of color lines within the color line. It is a very fascinating subject, and one on which I am going to write someday, for nothing that I have seen in print thus far seems to do the theme anything like justice. Then, too, the whole face of the matter is undergoing ceaseless transformations, as might be expected. The complexity of our social life is amazing. It makes one think of the kaleidoscopes we used to have when I was a very small boy. As you looked through them, the colors and forms changed moment by moment. To my mind, and I speak, as you

well know, from a varied experience, this town presents a better opportunity for the study of this question of color lines within the rare group than any city in America, so I am keeping eyes and ears open" (16).
