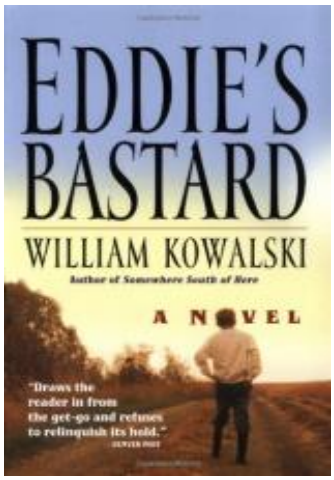
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Eddie's Bastard

by William Kowalski



About the Book

"My life has been made of stories from beginning to end," reflects Billy Mann. "And just when it seems one is ending, a new one begins. The world itself is woven of stories, each man and woman and child of us threading our own brightly colored tale into the bigger story that was already being told as we were born and that will continue to be woven by others long after our threads have run out."

So, too, is the novel, **Eddie's Bastard** made from stories, beginning to end. And these stories, told and retold to Billy Mann by his irascible grandfather, form the basis of the boy's education as he discovers what it's like to be a man -- and a Mann.

Whether he's hearing the circumstances of his own birth, or reading tidbits of philosophy and pioneer wisdom in his ancestor's diary, Billy is surrounded by tales of adventure, bravery, misfortune, friendship, feuds, greed, and death. For Billy, these stories transform an existence that is often difficult and painful: orphaned at birth, left in a basket on his reclusive grandfather's doorstep; made to fend for himself when his alcoholic guardian was too drunk to care for him; subject to his grandfather's fits of rage and gloom. At a relatively young age, Billy witnesses child abuse, death, poverty, and sex. It is not surprising that he will grow up to be a writer, he himself a teller of stories.

But Billy's world is also filled with wonder and freedom. Guided by his grandfather's unconventional views on caring for children, Billy is left to explore the world around him: the dilapidated farmhouse and its overgrown yard, the fields and farms beyond it, the town of Mannville, where his grandfather seldom ventures. Through his own experiences, Billy learns many of life's lessons. But it is his grandfather's perspective, his certainty that the Mann family is both indomitable and tragic, which most informs Billy's coming-of-age. Billy's awareness of his legacy gives him the courage to stand up to the school bully, to teach himself to drive a motorcycle, to take on his friend Annie's wretched father, and to remain her friend, even through the most strenuous of times.

The details of life take on a larger meaning when they are framed as stories. It is easier to accept, if not understand, life's hardships when they are viewed through the prism of a story. It becomes easier to explain one's own choices when they are presented in the form of a story. Without stories, Billy Mann might have been somewhat less optimistic about the path his own life has taken. But what else do the stories offer? For Billy and for his grandfather, they are a way of keeping the Mann family alive. For, as his grandfather's life aptly demonstrates, money and fortune are fleeting. But families -- and the history they create -- endure forever.

Discussion Guide

1. Billy's grandfather says, "Knowing the kind of people you come from is just as important as knowing yourself. In fact you can't know yourself if you don't know your people." Do you agree with this statement? How and what do we learn from our ancestors' actions and lives? Does information make us feel our limitations as well?

2. After his first terrifying confrontation with Annie's father, Billy realizes that he "had caught a glimpse of how the world could be sometimes and . . . that sight is horrifying to children." Discuss the impact that realizing the cruelty of Annie's father and the condition of her brother would have on a boy like Billy. Can you remember your first confrontation with life's cruel realities? What impact did it have on you?

3. What do you think of Billy's relationship with Elsie Orfenbacher? Do you think a boy can learn valuable lessons from uncommitted sex with an older woman? Should Elsie have put a stop to their relationship? What do you think Elsie teaches Billy about love and women?

4. Accompanying his grandfather to the home of an Amish family, Billy witnesses the traumatic birth of a baby and the death of its mother. Why do you think Billy's grandfather wants him to see this painful event? What does it teach Billy?

5. Discuss the character of Annie. Are you surprised at how Kowalski chose to develop her character? What does her lesbianism teach Billy? How would their relationship have changed if it had developed romantically?

6. What do you think of the way Billy is raised by his grandfather? How do you think Billy's character is shaped by his grandfather's alcoholism, his isolation from the community, and his "hands-off" style of parenting? Would Billy have been better off in a more traditional-style family, such as the Grubers? Why or why not?

7. Do you think Billy will go in search of his mother? Why do you think Kowalski chose not to pursue this aspect of Billy's story?

8. What is the effect of including Billy's novel within this work of fiction? What does it tell you about Billy? What did you learn about the process of writing from Billy's own experience?

9. **Eddie's Bastard** is filled with other examples of stories-within-a-story: Grandpa's experience in the war; Willie Mann's diary; the story of Billy's father, Eddie. To what end does Kowalski employ this technique? Is it effective?

10. In his diary, Billy's ancestor wrote that Americans "have practically no history. . . . We have only our present, which we are continually creating and recreating." These words were written centuries ago -- do you believe they are true

today? How are Americans at an historical disadvantage -- or advantage -- because of the relative newness of their country?

11. As a group, discuss stories that have been passed down between generations in each of your families. What kinds of stories are they? Is their purpose to teach or to entertain-or both?

12. How does Eddie's Bastard compare with other coming-of-age stories you have read? How and why is it different?

Author Bio

William Kowalski was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1970. He has lived in Boston, New York, Santa Fe, West Palm Beach, and the Mojave Desert, and currently lives in the Maritime Provinces of Canada. He is now at work on a fourth book.

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