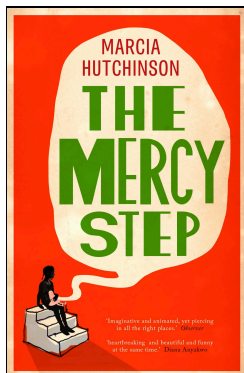


THE READING GUIDE



THE MERCY STEP

Marcia Hutchinson

Cassava Republic Press, 2026

Debut Novel · Autofiction · Bildungsroman

CASSAVA
REPUBLIC

Please be aware that this discussion guide contains spoilers

PRE-READING CONTEXT

Set in 1960s Bradford, *The Mercy Step* unfolds within the social and historical landscape shaped by the Windrush generation: Caribbean men and women who came to Britain from the late 1940s onwards, invited to help rebuild a post-war nation, yet met with discrimination, housing inequality, and a hostile public culture.

At the centre of the novel is Mercy, a perceptive child growing up in a large Jamaican immigrant family. Her world is shaped by her father's temper, her mother's divided attention, and the structuring force of religion. Within this environment, Mercy learns early what it means to feel unseen — and begins, slowly, to imagine a way out.

Hutchinson draws on her own lived experience to render a world that is both specific and meaningful: one where family, faith, and survival are tightly interwoven. Readers may find it useful to come to the novel with some awareness of the Windrush generation's experience in Britain, and of the pressures faced by Black families in the industrial north during this period.

SHORT SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Mercy enters the world already marked by disappointment as the fifth daughter in a household that had hoped for a son. From the outset, she is attuned to her marginal place within the family.

Her father's authority and violence dominate the home, her mother's care is stretched thin, and affection is unevenly distributed. Mercy turns inward, finding solace in books, imagination, and her doll, Dolly.

But inwardness is not enough. As she grows, Mercy begins to understand that if she is to live a life where she is *heard and valued*, she must take steps — deliberate, difficult steps — towards independence and self-definition. The novel traces this movement with clarity and restraint, holding together humour, pain, and a quiet insistence on becoming.

KEY THEMES

Childhood resilience

Windrush generation

Domestic violence

Faith & religion

Black British identity

Migration & belonging

Books as liberation

Quiet rebellion

WHY READ THIS NOVEL NOW

The Windrush legacy

As the UK continues to grapple with the legacy of the Windrush scandal and ongoing questions of systemic racism, *The Mercy Step* offers an intimate, human account of a generation whose lives are still being reckoned with.

A radical child's voice

In an era of renewed interest in diverse coming-of-age narratives, Mercy's funny, perceptive, and unsparing voice reshapes how we understand trauma, placing us inside the emotional logic of a child navigating neglect, power, and belonging.

A late-life debut

Hutchinson published *The Mercy Step* at 62, after more than 54 rejections. Her journey underscores the structural barriers within publishing, while also insisting on the value of stories that arrive outside expected timelines.

Prizes and recognition

The novel has been named one of The Observer's best new novelists of 2025 and shortlisted for The Women's Prize for Fiction and shortlisted for The British Book Award Discover Prize, reflecting strong critical attention and growing readership.

Imagination as survival

Mercy's inner world is filled with books, play, and storytelling. It is not mere escapism but a form of resistance. The novel insists on the power of imagination as a means of enduring, and reshaping, difficult realities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Narrative structure and point of view:** The novel opens from inside Mercy's mother's womb. What effect does this extraordinary narrative starting point have on how we receive Mercy's voice throughout the story? In what ways does humour soften or intensify the portrayal of trauma?
2. **Absence and silence:** Mercy's father is volatile and frightening, yet her mother's devotion to the Church also fails to protect her children. How does the novel balance these two very different kinds of parental absence? What does this say about neglect and invisibility in toxic homes?
3. **Religion and moral authority:** How does the Church influence family priorities and Mercy's upbringing? Does religion serve as a source of guidance, or does it reinforce guilt and control?
4. **Gender, power, and control:** How are gender roles enforced within Mercy's family? In what ways do power and control manifest between parents, children, and community figures?
5. **Family as a site of conflict:** How does Hutchinson depict the family as both a place of belonging and of struggle? What conflicts define Mercy's childhood?
6. **Class and social respectability:** How does class intersect with race and migration in shaping the family's reputation? What pressures of respectability weigh on Mercy's parents?

7. **Motherhood and responsibility:** How is Mercy’s mother portrayed in terms of responsibility and care? What does the novel suggest about the burdens of motherhood?
8. **Male authority figures:** How does Mercy’s father embody authority? In what ways does the preferential treatment given to her only brother shape Mercy’s childhood experiences?
9. **Violence beyond the physical:** How does the novel portray emotional neglect and psychological harm as forms of violence?
10. **The title — *The Mercy Step*:** How does “mercy” operate as both a personal and cultural concept in the novel? What do you think this image of “mercy step” means within the world of the novel? What step does Mercy ultimately take?
11. **The inner life as refuge:** Books, imagination, and Dolly are Mercy’s primary refuges. What does the novel say about the role of storytelling and inner life as survival tools for children in difficult circumstances?
12. **Race and everyday exclusion:** There is a moment where Mercy wonders whether Black children are permitted to enter the local library. How does racism operate in the background of the novel — present but rarely named outright?
13. **Autofiction and the author’s presence:** Hutchinson describes this as autofiction loosely based on her own childhood. How does knowing this shape your reading of events? Does it change your relationship to Mercy?
14. **Publishing, gatekeeping, and whose stories get told:** The book was rejected more than 50 times before being picked up by a small Black-owned independent press. What does this say about which stories are considered commercially viable, and who gets to decide?
15. **Endings and aftermath:** How does the novel conclude Mercy’s journey? Did you find the ending satisfying, or does it feel deliberately open and would you want a sequel?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Hutchinson grew up in Bradford with Windrush-generation Jamaican parents. She attended Oxford University, worked as a lawyer, and founded educational publisher Primary Colours, for which she received an MBE in 2011 for services to cultural diversity. She began writing seriously after becoming single at 55, finding her voice through a local Bradford writing group. *The Mercy Step* took over a decade to write. After more than 54 rejections, it found a home with Cassava Republic Press and was published in 2025 as her solo debut, when Hutchinson was 62. It was named one of The Observer’s best debut novels of 2025 and shortlisted by the Women’s Prize for Fiction.

Much of the novel was composed in an unusual way: Hutchinson would take her dog for a walk and dictate chapters aloud directly into Google Docs, often completing a first draft in under an hour. She has described the process as almost unconscious, a way of staying in that liminal space between memory and imagination, allowing buried recollections to surface without the self-consciousness of sitting at a desk.

CONTENT NOTES

The novel contains depictions of domestic violence, child abuse, and sexual assault. Please exercise care when reading or discussing these themes in a group setting.