



## Edenland

*Wallace King*

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Born a slave, Bledsoe had never left Our Joy plantation, and a daring escape offers his only chance for liberty. On the run he encounters Alice, an Irish indentured servant, committing what appears to be an act of murder as she burns down a shack in the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina.

Faced with the threat of capture, Bledsoe and Alice become reluctant allies. An epic tale unfolds as their quest for freedom pulls them from swamp to city, from North Carolina to Virginia. Somewhere between injustice and loss, they discover a hidden place that seems an Eden, where their bond and love are forged.

But the Confederate army is on the march and soon tramples their tenuous freedom. Separated, they are cast into fates they never imagined. Through it all, the hope of deliverance drives them onward and the memory of their Edenland remains, burning bright against the darkness of slavery and the American Civil War.

## **Edenland Details**

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Author : Wallace King

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## From Reader Review Edenland for online ebook

### Debra Eve says

Bledsoe is a slave, the son of his master. Raised in the “big house,” he’s cultured and erudite, part servant, part entertainment. With his near-photographic memory, he can recite almost anything. On good days, his master/father treats him like a talking parrot.

Alice is an Irish orphan indentured to an abusive midwife who has left her scarred, physically and otherwise. She’s illiterate but knows about herbs and plants, both benign and deadly. And she’s not afraid to use that knowledge.

Bledsoe and Alice have nothing in common except one fateful day at the Civil War’s onset. They collide in The Great Dismal Swamp on their separate quests for freedom.

What happens next is part tragedy, part adventure, part romance. The buildup to the Civil War’s first major battle serves as a backdrop to Bledsoe and Alice’s unlikely alliance, which turns to love. They’re both heroes, although it took me longer to warm up to Alice. She’s a wild animal with no regard for human morals, a survivor in the deepest sense. Bledsoe transforms her.

Never have I felt so immersed in this era’s historical context—the physical and psychological battle between two American ways of life, both convinced they represent the truth. But as Wallace King illustrates, if one group feels it’s their divine right to subjugate another, they don’t make distinctions. Alice, a lower-class woman without family, is no different than Bledsoe in their eyes.

Edenland is the stunningly-told story of two people searching for each other and freedom, using their love and wits to survive the madness of a time and place that would enslave them both. How they triumph will take you by surprise.

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### Rose says

I received a free copy of this book through Goodreads Giveaways.

This is well-written and does a good job with the development of the two main characters. Bledsoe and Alice have a relatable, imperfect relationship that makes sense in their circumstances. From a historical aspect, you really get a sense of how having so little power and living at other’s petty whims based on things beyond the characters’ control wears away at them emotionally and you experience how difficult it is to achieve even the simplest goals.

It did drag a bit for me. There’s constant movement, but none of the secondary characters have time to develop or matter much. It kept my interest to the end anyway, since I wanted to find out what happens to Alice and Bledsoe.

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## **Cheri says**

If you're looking for a sweeping adventure or action-packed journey through the south during the civil war, this isn't it. It was interesting to experience what life was like for various types of people during the era but the story was just so slow and the number of happy coincidences for the main characters made it a slog for me.

I'd go 2.5 if it was an option and am rounding down since it was, as two stars on GR states, ok.

There's a longer review on C-Spot Reviews but this sums up my experience. Thanks to NetGalley and the publisher for the copy.

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## **Jack Messenger says**

*Edenland* is the evocative title of an evocative novel set in the early days of the US Civil War. Its story plunges us into the Great Dismal Swamp that straddles Virginia and North Carolina, and never quite allows us to escape the treacherous waters that threaten to engulf its protagonists.

The Great Dismal and other swamps were places where runaway slaves could hide from their pursuers. Harriet Beecher Stowe's second novel, after *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856). Thus, the literary and historical sources of *Edenland* flow across the years in currents swift, deep and wide.

In *Edenland*, Bledsoe is a runaway slave determined to fight in 'Lincoln's army', Alice a penniless Irish indentured servant. Both have fled their captors and are intent on escaping from the South. Their stories converge and diverge as they make their way northwards, encountering the chaos and horrors of the war, the comforts and dangers of the natural environment and, above all, the moral terrors of institutionalized slavery.

Wallace King is excellent at evoking nature, especially the fine-grained details that capture characters' eyes when they themselves are suffering:

When he opened his eyes he was blinded by the sun ... He was lying in smashed ferns only inches from sluggish water that glinted metallic where the light broke through the trees. Above his head was a canopy of green. The springtime-opened leaves of slender cedars, junipers, and swamp oak fluttered like iridescent wings. Great cypress trees stood big trunked, their wild tangled roots home to otters and snakes. Birds told each other things, some sang. A shimmering damselfly flitted by the boy's face. He watched it alight on the sunny side of a pawpaw tree, where it was swiftly picked off by a warbler. The bird flew with its prize into the treetops, a bright yellow dash. Close by, something splashed in the bark-coloured water.

We learn of the firing on Fort Sumter via newspaper headlines seen by Bledsoe, who learned to read in secret and has instant recall of articles he read on the sly in his 'master's' Encyclopedia Britannica. At first, Alice is a hindrance, a weight around his neck. Her ignorance of wider events, her vanity and self-obsession slow him down and threaten their safety. Gradually, however, she reveals a capacity to grow and to feel, plus

important knowledge of the healing properties of plants and the natural world that proves crucial (she can deliver a child and knows how to skin a rabbit). Both of them are changed by the other; both of them discover themselves in the other.

As the title suggests, Bledsoe and Alice are heading for a destination that may or may not exist – more myth, memory or aspiration than it is a historical reality. An extended idyllic interlude far from human habitation invokes an Edenland that can only be discovered in prelapsarian isolation. Society is sick with moral corruption, its rampant disease symbolized by ravening dogs and a perverted sense of justice.

When they are obliged to renew their journey, Bledsoe and Alice encounter bloody history by way of Norfolk, Virginia, Bull Run and Fort Monroe. Interestingly, they are both forced to play-act in order to survive. Indeed, the novel shows how everyone – slave and slaveholder alike – performs in some fashion in order to stave off the full implications of the peculiar institution. Of course, far more was at stake for the slave than for the free, and our sympathies are entirely with the oppressed, yet the oppressor, too, is made misshapen by the illogicality of the evil he or she represents and perpetuates. It is almost incomprehensible how so many slaveholders believed themselves beloved by their ‘servants’, and how they could be surprised and hurt when their slaves turned against them.

‘God is a bastard,’ declares Tirzah Brennan, who is one of the most memorable characters in *Edenland*. Tirzah is positively Dickensian in the depths of her anguish, hatred and cruelty, a distant cousin to the thwarted Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* (1861), but with none of her redeeming qualities. It is a resonant line, truer than Tirzah suspects. People have a habit of creating God in their own image; certainly, the slaveholding South justified itself in terms of Christianized racial theory that was complete nonsense, and allowed slaveholders to hide behind religious ideology, to think well of themselves even as they treated the Other with unspeakable cruelty. Tirzah is no exception: she only comes to recognize the true nature of the God she has created when she herself suffers beyond endurance and loses everything.

*Edenland* is very good indeed at evoking this inner tension – the danger lurking beneath the gentility and manners of southern slaveholders, whose sentiments can turn on a dime, whose rage and cruelty can be unleashed at the slightest challenge to racial stereotypes. Bledsoe and Alice cannot trust anyone because no one can be relied upon to understand truths that are beyond their capacity to comprehend. Recurring imagery of drowning conveys much of this tide of terror – literal drowning in swamp or river; nightmares of drowning dreamed by Bledsoe and Alice.

While *Edenland* could be said to have too much plot and to be too episodic, so that there are few genuine surprises – one knows, more or less, where it is going and how it will get there – nevertheless, I am glad to have read it and I admire its achievement. Readers looking for an excellent story in a vital historical setting will, I am sure, find it gripping and illuminating.

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### **Jeanette says**

Historical fiction is one of my favourite genres, especially when the story is based around slavery. This novel was beautifully written and I couldn't turn the pages fast enough. Loved the characters. I have watched a few movies or drama's over the years, and feel sure that *Edenland* would make wonderful tv viewing. I very rarely write what a story is about for fear of spoiling for others, but I do highly recommend this novel.

I received an e-copy via Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

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## **Megalion says**

The synopsis gives you the general grist of the book.

Here's what it doesn't tell you. Bledsoe and Alice deeply dislike and mistrust each other.

Bledsoe can't get over thinking that Alice is a murderer and therefore a person of low character not to be trusted. He's desperate to escape capture and sees her only as hindrance. Worse than that, someone more likely to get him caught than if he was by himself.

Alice is constantly frustrated with being disdained by Bledsoe and not being able to escape the fact that to escape to the North, she needs his help. Her life has been far too sheltered to understand the more populated areas. She also doesn't have much experience in the way of manners or halfway decent elocution.

The last bit adds for an extra sense of authenticity as Bledsoe happens to be thoroughly knowledgable about such things and societal roles and expectations due to his training as a house boy slave. So their exchanges are rather humorous despite the very real dangers they face.

These are the things that make this book stand out among the many good books about the Civil War and slavery times.

Recommended read, 4 stars.

Thank you to the publisher for providing a free copy of this book in exchange for this honest review.

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## **Cindy Woods says**

### **Real! Raw!**

I give this book five stars because it's the closest thing to real I have read relating to interracial romance! I know from my own experience having been white married to a black man for over 30 years until his passing some years ago. This is real!

After reading the author's note at the end of this book, I can honestly answer her question as to how much change there has been socially since the Civil War.....not near enough! That is my honest answer. This book goes a long ways describing the human atmosphere, feelings, emotions and deeply inbedded prejudice and hate of the times...the. ...Civil War. They're still there, only polite and restrained, masked.

This book is a sad reminder of what the Civil War was about and how unfortunate...it wasn't about freeing slaves. It was an economic war....a social philosophical war....a war predicated on the idea that by freeing slaves the South would be economically destabilized and forced back into the Union and made to share the wealth. It destabilized an entrenched system of slavery, but no one truly gave a damn about the human condition of slavery. It never changed the mindset of enslaved people being human.

I give great credit to Wallace King for her research into the actual war. What a marvelous job she does writing battle scenes and describing geography and politics of the times. As to the human emotions....I'm in

awe of her understanding of the human heart.....why would anyone subject themselves to shame, ridicule, lowering of their social position and expose themselves to punishment and death unless they were passionately, thoroughly in love? There is no understanding the human heart! It overpowers the brain..it exposes our vulnerability and makes us do the unexpected and the socially reasonable option to stay safe, act "normal" and do the "right thing" by political standards ground into us from birth is thrown out the window! Shame!!!

I highly recommend this book to anyone from high school age on.....in fact, it should be required reading to those students and any student of sociology. I am profoundly grateful to Wallace King for writing this wonderful book! Readers of history, historical romance novels, women's books and sociology should definitely read this enlightening and amazing romance novel. I felt it from my heart to the pit of my stomach...I'm numb!

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### **Monica says**

#### **Engaging read, take's you back in time!**

First book I've read by this author. Alice & Bledsoe are well developed characters! Their personality comes through clearly. Alice is my kind of stubborn! King also shows the very ugly side of a lifetime we tend to forget & don't discuss, slavery. A whole war was fought with slavery being one of the top issues. Not something I want to repeat. A good read to lose yourself in. You can think on things if you want or just enjoy the wonderful story!

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### **Diane Moyle says**

This was an exciting historical fiction. The setting is the beginning of the Civil War in the south. It starts in the Great Dismal, a terrifying swamp. Here, Bledsoe, a runaway slave, finds himself lost and scared. Although his father was the master of the plantation, his mother was a slave condemning him to a life of servitude. He meets Birdy as she is burning down her decrepit log cabin with an old woman in it. Her dress accidentally catches on fire and he helps to extinguish it but then flees because he thinks she is a murderer. Birdy is an Irish orphan who was adopted by the old woman after her mother passed away. She lives in squalor and is forced to help the old woman conjure up spells and rob her neighbors. Both are outcasts from a hypocritical society that will neither accept nor help them. Bledsoe reluctantly joins with Birdy to try and find their way north.

Ms. King does a wonderful job of character development. Although Bledsoe and Birdy are strangers in the beginning, by allowing me glimpses into their past and present lives and experiencing their emotions, I began to commiserate with them and was rooting for their success at the end. Also, on a deeper level, this story points out the cruelty of society. If you were not of the wealthy class, you were completely overlooked as if you didn't exist. Even if you were outside of polite society, there were lines that could not be crossed without severe consequences for both.

This book can be read and enjoyed by young teen readers to adults who like historical fiction. It is strictly a story that allows a glimpse into southern attitudes. It is a great story to take to the beach or poolside and get lost in the past.

I requested and received this book for review from NetGalley.

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### **J. Roslyn says**

Writing non-fiction about the Civil War is hard because there are tens of thousands of historical sources, many of them first-hand accounts, that must be reviewed. Writing a novel about a runaway slave and a caucasian orphan from the swamps of North Carolina in the early days of the Civil War is perhaps even more difficult because no amount of fact checking will make the writing more believable if the author is not able to channel the voices of those demanding to be heard. Wallace King clearly heard those voices and she has crafted a believable, engrossing novel.

Hawk Bledsoe is the slave son of a white plantation owner who whips him because he has learned to read. Bledsoe, however, doesn't just know how to read, he has an extraordinary intellect and an eidetic memory that allows him to read a book once and then recite it from memory. He has even named himself after the protagonist in his favorite book, *The Last of the Mohicans*. As Bledsoe learns, a literate slave strikes terror into the hearts of slave owners.

After fleeing the plantation and slavery, intending to join Lincoln's army, Bledsoe finds himself waylaid by a snake bite in the "Dismal" swamp on the border of Virginia and North Carolina. A ragged, dirty, wild girl saves him using herbal medicine that she learned how to make while apprenticed to the "old witch" in the swamp. The girl, Alice Brown, has freed herself from abusive servitude to the old woman and insists on tagging along with Bledsoe. Enraged at being slowed down, Bledsoe finds himself caught by slave hunters who also mistake Alice for a runaway slave. Dressed in rags since she was a child, Alice is outraged at being chained, but also enchanted with the new, cheap dress the slave hunter has clad her in as he readies the pair for re-sale. Alice and Bledsoe manage to flee the slave traders, encountering the lynching of Union soldiers in Norfolk, and riots against the North in Baltimore. Seeking safety in the Blue Ridge Mountains, they find themselves conscripted as slaves serving the Confederate army which, unfortunately, has encamped nearby.

For a short while, after escaping the military, Alice and Bledsoe find refuge from slavery and slave owners. The wild Alice is tamed by a gentle, old south family, and Bledsoe finds himself assisting a sophisticated Northern spy under cover in Richmond. Their stories are fascinating, but we are left wanting more. Who was Alice? We learn from her vague memories that the old woman was made her guardian after her mother died aboard the ship from Ireland to America. What became of Bledsoe and his extraordinary intellect? King provides intriguing story hints that leap off the page begging to be told in more depth

In this novel, King manages to bring the depravity of the Civil War to life. While polite society drank tea in Richmond, the rivers bordering the battlegrounds turned red with blood. Most importantly, King brings to life the gut wrenching evil of slavery that southern slave owners justified by de-humanizing their slaves. This is a novel worth reading.

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### **Libscigrl says**

Edenland is a sweet, quiet (if it is possible to call it that given that it is set mostly in the South during the Civil War) tale of two runaways who find each other and fall in love.

It is not a grotesque love story, in that their relationship is not ALL the story is about. It is about two people who have their own sad, sorrowful pasts that find commonality in their alone-ness. There is not an abundance love or sex scenes; it is their feelings that manifest for each other that demonstrate their love, and their longing to be together.

Beldsoe and Alice first meet in a swamp in North Carolina and help each other escape the situations they are running from. Throughout the book, they are split apart, reunited, and are split apart again as they make their way North, where Bledsoe wants to join Lincoln's army to fight for emancipation. Hiding in caves and bushes, stealing food from unlocked homes, and nabbing clothes off of clotheslines is what keeps them going. During their flight, they vacillate between staying together (Alice wants to) and splitting up (Bledsoe wants to). They don't fall in love on page one.

The sole plot is to bring these two together again. Will they still feel love for each other? Is the other even still alive? Will they make it North? Is everyone an enemy? The other interesting dynamic is that Alice, an orphan born in Ireland is treated like a slave, and is thus uneducated. Many others believe her to be a slave because of her poor manners and language. Bledsoe is the son of a slave owner and slave mother, and is treated like a pet growing up, being allowed to learn to read. For this, he is capable of reciting memorized pieces of books and encyclopedias he has read. As a runaway slave, this is a dangerous talent to have. The way the author swaps the education between these two characters is a refreshing change from typical books about slaves and slavery during the Civil War.

This isn't a long story, but it is a sweet one. The author just gives enough detail about each of Alice's and Bledsoe's past that you want just a teeny bit more. The ending is abrupt, but rightly so....the book would not be the same if she continued on for another 100 pages wrapping things up in a pretty bow. I appreciated the ending and it left a curious smile on my face.

Favorite line(s):

"A warm breeze ruffled the hem of her green taffeta skirt and tickled her ankles. She absentmindedly twirled the silk tassel of a button on her blouse as the brush shush-shushed through her hair. She closed her eyes. no one had ever brushed her hair before. *This must be how a dog feels getting petted*, she thought. She felt herself falling into a blissful state just short of sleep."

"...today the artist had given him a small amount of pocket money. "There you go. Buy yourself a---? What would you buy?"

Bledsoe felt the coins rattling in his pocket and it felt good. His very first *own* money.  
'A book,' he replied without hesitation. 'But I ain't supposed to know how to read.'"

"The July sun had turned from red to white and it was mean."

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### **Stephen Page says**

I loved the way the story flowed. Full of twists and turns and tension. The book is hard to put down once picked up.

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### **Karen McQuestion says**

I'm not sure how I found out about this book, but I will be recommending it to other readers. For me, it was a page turner. As a historical, I'd give it 10+ stars. The author managed to weave in the historical details without slowing down the story, which is no small thing. (Frankly, I'm annoyed when I read a book with a historical setting and I come across an info dump that goes on for more than a paragraph or so. Sometimes I wind up skimming it and then it's important later and I'm confused.)

I loved the evolution of the relationship between the two main characters and thought it rang true. It was truly an unconventional love story. The ending was a satisfying conclusion, but it also made me want more. If there's ever a follow-up book, sign me up! Otherwise, I'll just wait to read Ms. King's next novel.

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### **Ginger De wa says**

I loved reading this. I'm not a big fan of historical fiction, but the characters drew me in from the get-go. I loved the two main characters, I was rooting for them, they were so human and fleshed out I wanted them to win against all odds. The odds are stacked - that was clear from the first page, and from my flimsy knowledge of Civil War history - but that's the whole point of this story. The plot is sometimes - well, often - stretched to the point of believability, but at the end of the day, it's an engaging read and I just didn't care, I was turning the pages. A marvelous achievement, to breathe fresh life into a period that's never been terribly relevant to me (sorry, I'm a Yankee through and through) and I loved the ending, thank you for not giving me the Hollywood refrain : ))

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### **Annaleigh Morrison says**

I stopped reading this a little more than halfway through (54%). The book's synopsis says that this is a love story. This is not so, at least not from what I read. Bledsoe cannot wait to ditch Alice at every chance he is given but she continues to act in desperation to stay with him wherever he goes. I thought in the beginning this was going to be a book where they didn't like each other at first and then over time got to know one another and fall in love. Not so. Alice in my opinion, seemed mentally ill and more of a dependent than a lover or even a friend to Bledsoe. He tried just about everything to get rid of her and she kept following/finding him because she felt like she just couldn't continue on in her life without him in it despite the fact that he hurls multiple insults her way all the time. This is NOT an example of love. That is an example of obsession. A very unhealthy obsession. I do not recommend.

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