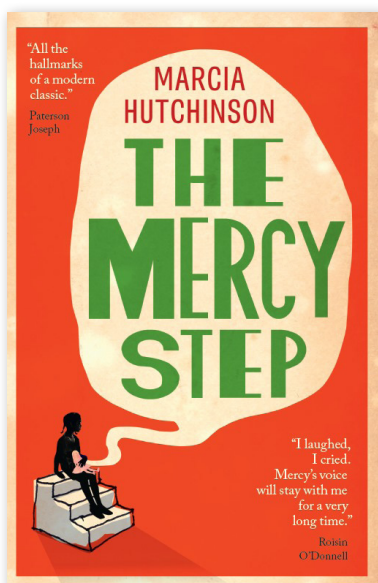


# The Mercy Step

by Marcia Hutchinson



## PLOT SUMMARY

Bradford, December 1962.

A precocious Mercy makes her reluctant entrance into the world, torn from the warm embrace of her mother's womb, to a chaotic household that seems to have no place for her. Her siblings do not understand her, her mother's attention is given to the Church, and the entire family lives at the whims of her father's quick temper.

Left to herself, Mercy finds solace in books, her imagination, and the quiet comfort of her faithful toy, Dolly. But escapism has its limits, and as the grip of family, faith and fear threatens to close in, Mercy learns she must act if she wants a different future; one where she is seen, heard, and her family set free.

*The Mercy Step* is a sharply-witted and tender portrait of a young girl's quiet rebellion, and her refusal to be broken.

## WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *The Mercy Step*, Hutchinson expertly uses the device of a naïve child narrator to highlight the unfairness of life around her and, in particular, the abuse that she witnesses and experiences.

Mercy, a bright child who can talk before she can walk, asks questions of everything that she witnesses. She is relentless in asking why bad things are okay; fearless in asking the questions that Mummy, in particular, doesn't want to answer:

'How could anyone miss Daddy? Splinters from the scratchy bare floorboards and six to a mattress is better than being scared stupid all the time.'

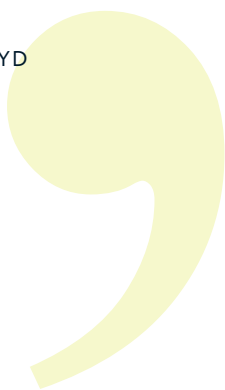
Mercy asks, 'Why is Daddy's Sweet Talk more powerful than Mercy's love?' and, later, after Pastor Williams has sexually assaulted her, 'How could they all know about him and still let him be a Pastor? What was wrong with Mummy for staying in a Church like that?'



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“A beautiful and tender portrait of what it takes to leave where you’ve come from and forge your own future.”

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The adults around Mercy might consider the answers to those questions complicated, but Mercy knows that there are no complicated answers when it comes to protecting children from abuse, whether that be from their own fathers, or from powerful members of the community. Mercy’s ability to see clearly without the corruption of adulthood comes across in her brave voice, which makes the reader root for her throughout her difficult journey.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Men in *The Mercy Step* are almost uniformly abusive and unpleasant. Daddy is abusive from Mercy’s babyhood, hitting her on the forehead, and later threatening her with a machete and telling her that he’s going to run her over in his car. Daddy’s friend Uncle Red sexually abuses her, as does Cousin Bobby and Pastor Williams.

Mercy hates Devon, the One Bwoy Pickney, who is treated differently to his sisters. When he’s born, Daddy is over the moon. When Daddy dies, Devon is devastated – presumably because he hasn’t ever experienced the same kind of violence at Daddy’s hands as the girls have. When Devon is caught stealing, Mummy doesn’t punish him in the same way as she would the girls, but instead tries to exorcise the demons from his soul. In Mummy’s eyes, Devon, Pastor Williams and Daddy’s bad behaviour is caused by an entity outside them, rather than the inherent wickedness present in her daughters. Mercy’s PE teacher Mr Cavanagh is the only male character who is kind and supportive.

What is Hutchinson saying about masculinity and religion in *The Mercy Step*? How do the male characters in Mercy’s life affect her growth?

### QUESTIONS

What did you think of the Chapter ‘No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs’? How does Hutchinson present racism here, contextual to its time and place?

How is the physical landscape of Mercy’s life symbolic, e.g. the front and back of Hill View, to the scene jumping the middens with Tracy Barraclough?

How does Hutchinson use the continuing metaphor of the umbilical connection between Mercy and Mummy?

How does *The Mercy Step* represent libraries? How important is the library to Mercy? What does it provide in her life?



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## NEXT STEPS

Take one of the scenes in *The Mercy Step* and see if you can adapt it into a short play. You might need to research how a play is supposed to look on paper, including speech prompts and background details. How will you set the scene? Will you introduce any extra dialogue, or amend what there is? What scenes would work well on stage? Why? Think about how you might stage the scene. What would the set look like and move? What key props would you need?

Alternatively, rewrite one of the scenes in the book from a different character's point of view. How does that character view the events of that scene? What are their feelings about it? How might they perceive the event completely differently – noticing different details, smells, sounds, tastes? How can a point of view drastically alter the meaning of something that happens? ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Marcia Hutchinson** was born to Windrush generation Jamaican parents in the UK in 1962. The first pupil from her comprehensive school to attend Oxford, she earned an MA in Law and worked as a lawyer before founding educational publisher Primary Colours, which she ran until 2014. Moving to Manchester in 2012, she became a community activist and was eventually elected as a Labour Councillor in 2021. Now a full-time writer, she is an active member of the Black Writers' Guild. Marcia co-authored *The Blackbirds of St Giles* (published by Simon & Schuster) and made her solo debut with *The Mercy Step*.



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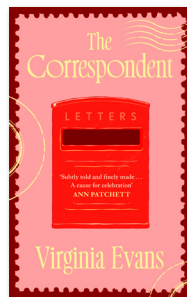
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