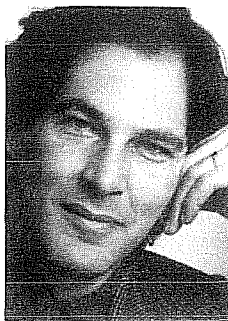


## Author Commentaries

### ON WRITING *TOWARDS FREEDOM: THE AFRICAN-CANADIAN EXPERIENCE*

Ken Alexander

**Résumé:** L'auteur parle de la genèse de son ouvrage intitulé *Towards Freedom: The African-Canadian Experience* écrit avec la collaboration d'Avis Glaze. Il montre l'intérêt exceptionnel de la contribution -souvent ignorée- des immigrants d'origine africaine à l'identité politique du Canada.



Ken Alexander

Many people have asked, “What compelled you to write *Towards Freedom*?” While there are many possible answers, the essential reason is that the four-hundred-year struggle of black people in Canada represents a great chapter in this country’s evolving narrative. Like other vital chapters of our nation’s past and present, it is a story about which all Canadians should be aware. Such “additions” often make our history come alive, help us make sense of our imperfect present, and provide direction. Young people, especially today when so much information appears as “news from nowhere,” need the type of contextualization provided through real history learning. The research phase of *Towards Freedom* may have begun during my two-year leave of absence from teaching; or, it may have started years earlier with my first reading of Austin Clarke; or, even further back in time, with my trip to Africa as a wide-eyed nineteen-year-old. I’m not sure. Without doubt, however, teaching full-credit high-school courses in black history and culture (1992-1994) impressed upon me the need for a book which filled in some missing pages in Canadian history and which would be of interest to a wide readership. So, the odyssey began. Like all consequential trips, the more I discovered, the less I knew.



Avis Glaze

Early on, I became obsessed with the idea that important anti-racist education initiatives die on the vine unless they are complemented with real stories, with elevated historically-based narratives that resonate with people young and old, black and non-black. For teenage readers, particularly, the stories of black history (that is, the stories of struggle, overcoming prejudice, and beating the

odds) have tremendous appeal. Most teenagers, it seems, feel in one way or another discriminated against. Thankfully, many have a seemingly inborn sense of idealism. These two factors converge and produce a predisposition of support for the underdog. As a result, teenage readers soak up the narratives of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Mary Ann Shadd, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, and so forth. Learning about these figures frequently leads teenagers directly into wider explorations of history. My own research began with great books, mostly histories and novels, almost all of them by black authors. “Concentric circles of possibility”<sup>1</sup> began to open up as I leapt from Austin Clarke to Derek Walcott, from Toni Morrison to bell hooks, from Don Moore to Louise Bennett, and to countless other writers. From there, I was led, with Avis, into discussions and interviews with some extraordinary people, such as Dr. Sheldon Taylor, Dr. Rita Cox, and Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, all of them authorities in their own ways and in their own fields. It was the passion, however, with which they spoke about, respectively, black Canadian history, black story-telling, and overcoming injustice, which impressed me most. Somehow, this passion had to be reflected in *Towards Freedom*. Producing a history book which reflected these voices and that passion was the first obstacle. Textbooks are supposed to be reserved, dispassionate, “objective,” and without a distinct voice. Avis and I overcame this hurdle simply enough: *Towards Freedom* is not a textbook in the traditional sense — that is, it has a point of view; it follows a narrative style; and it offers and invites opinions. It doesn’t pretend to be definitive or “objective,” and it is intended for all readers. It is not a textbook in another sense: pedagogical exercises are not included in its 288 pages. Teaching strategies and the like appear in the *Teacher’s Guide to Towards Freedom: The African-Canadian Experience*, a 126-page document which expands on the book, takes it in new directions, and is filled with skills and content-based activities.

The next problem we encountered concerns black historiography in Canada. When a community is marginalized, or perceives itself to be marginalized, and it comes time to document its history, generally “contribution histories” are the result. These focus on individual acts and individual people and come in the form of biographies, anthologies of great achievements, and so forth. Such histories are essential for a community’s self-definition and sense of place. The drawbacks to them can be (1) that they may speak only to the particular community under consideration; (2) that they can be relatively devoid of historical context — the sense of what was happening in other places at the same time; and (3) they may promote the sense that certain figures were exceptions to the rule. For example, Rosemary Brown didn’t just wake up one day and decide to become Canada’s first black female politician. She was a product of her community and her history. Austin Clarke didn’t just bolt out of the blue as a gifted writer: he cut his teeth on other black writers. Contribution history doesn’t always recognize the soil that nurtured these figures and thus may distort our perception of individual achievement. *Towards Freedom*, then, does try to recognize that soil in its attempt to do two things: one, to illuminate the great people and events

that comprise a largely-forgotten black history; two, to tell the story from a black perspective — of the building of a distinct democracy and a distinct nation in Canada. As authors, our greatest reward comes from people who read the book, internalize its messages of hope and liberation, and go, from it, to other books in the field of black studies. To quote one young man, “We have read *Towards Freedom* as a family. It has brought us closer together, and helped us to understand ourselves, our communities, and this perplexing country. We are now reading other books.” We want to say to this young man, “May your exploration take you to George Elliott Clarke, Carrie Best, Calvin Ruck, Ayanna Black, Cecil Foster, Dionne Brand, R. Bruce Shepard, Crawford Killian. And look out for Mairuth Sarsfield’s soon-to-be-published *No Crystal Stair*, a marvelous historical novel about three young black women growing up in Montreal during World War II; Austin Clarke’s next release; and, Dr. Sheldon Taylor’s *Darkening the Complexion of Canadian Society*.” The works of these writers represent a new day for black history and novel writing in Canada; we hope these are some of the “other books” our readers will turn to.

#### NOTES

1. From Jesse Jackson’s eulogy for Jackie Robinson, baseball player and civil rights activist.

**Ken Alexander** teaches high school history, English, and ESL/ESD. He is dedicated to broadening the understanding of all people regarding the history, culture, and contributions of blacks in Canada. **Dr. Avis Glaze**, co-author of *Towards Freedom* is the Superintendent of Leadership and Development with the York Region Board of Education. In Jamaica and Ontario she has taught at every level of education. She served as a Commissioner for the 1994 Ontario Royal Commission on Learning.

#### BARRIERS TO BELIEVABILITY

*Cecil Freeman Beeler*

**Résumé:** L’auteur explique le contexte historique de ses romans mettant en vedette Corinne Kragh, une jeune fille délurée de l’Ouest canadien; il puise avant tout dans ses propres souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse, à l’époque difficile de la Dépression.



Cecil Freeman Beeler

Kids don’t like stories overlaid with historical dust, realism that has no connection with understanding, or fantasy that is not a good fit with their interests. With all this in mind, I went into the writing of a rather unlikely tale of a bumptious pre-teen, Corinne, on a farm in the Dirty Thirties, *The Girl in the Well*.