

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*.

*Why, you ask, did I choose to use a female voice?* It's an old writers' trick. I use a mirror: that is, I distance myself from my own character that way; otherwise, I would write about myself. I believe there are three genders in human sociology: male, female, and fictional. Both men and women can write in that last one without going too far from the first two. Also, I'm familiar with, and sympathetic to, the female voice. I had five sisters. One quarter of a mile away from where I grew up (on a farm in Saskatchewan about 100 miles north of Regina), I had four female cousins. Being sympathetic to females was also a matter of self-preservation: both at home and school, girls outnumbered boys. Unlike a lot of boys who left school to work on their farms, I stayed in school, and was the most educated boy in the district because I held on till grade nine.

*Did I do research for my historical fiction?* No, because I lived through the period I wrote about. I have far more details in this bone box of mine than I need. For instance, I remember clearly that when I started out for school I had a fifteen-cent slate and a package of straight, scratchy pencils made of slate rock. The 20-cent slates were bigger, but the 35-cent slates were even bigger and had better binding. You could also drop them on the ground more times before they'd break.) Sometimes there were impurities in those pencils — like hard silicate — which would scratch the slate or make it screech. Those pencils left a greyish chalk behind. I have always had a good memory for details such as these. But in fiction this kind of detail would be dull as dishwater; you have to polish facts. There has to be even more truth than an old-timer's recollection, and more truth than journalistic reality.

*Why the Depression?* I chose the Depression as a period for my fiction because I'm trained in journalistic opportunities. I don't think the Depression has been done right in fiction — it's always treated with shades of gray. We didn't have money in those times, but we had fun. It cost 25 cents to go to a dance, and there was one every weekend within ten miles of us. I like to show the good side of those times. It was a time when people were resourceful. My father used to say that "there's been lots of hard times, but this is the worst of hard times" because the Depression went so deep and lasted ten years. At the time, a farmer or a drover could ship a carload of cattle to Winnipeg to be sold at auction. But, he would be charged \$6 for freight, which is more than he would get for the cattle, which were five-cents on the hoof. Part of my income came from skinning the pelts of skunks. I would sell the pelts to the Hudson Bay Fur Division in Winnipeg or I'd bundle them up and send them off to auctions where buyers came from around the world.

*How long have I been writing?* I've been a writer since I was fifteen and a reader much longer. I could read before I went to school, at six, in Annapolis Valley, Nova Scotia. In Saskatchewan, I read the whole school library — I was the only one to do that — and I was librarian for the Open Shelf Library (a traveling library from Regina) when it settled in our area for a year. When I was eighteen, I had a ruptured appendix. It took me two years to recover. I was withdrawn and read more. I also knitted. When I came out of the hospital, I was designing and knitting double thickness mittens for the whole family! Corinne, my

fictional heroine, is depicted in the full horrors of that period: deprivation, hopelessness, and isolation. I lived through the period, but I remember the acceptance of those conditions and that the joy of life was never extinguished. It was a time of powerful drama, especially for young people. That's what I'm after in my fiction. So there's the story of my encounter with children's literature!

**Cecil Freeman Beeler** was born in 1915, eldest of a family of eight, and raised in rural Saskatchewan. He began writing as an avocation at fifteen, but his career was in technology. Retiring in 1980, he increased his writing side, mostly for children and young adults. He is best-known for his stories about his feisty prairie heroine, Corinne Kragh (Red Deer College Press). The Girl in the Well earned a nomination for the Mr. Christie Book Award and No Room in the Well received a Canadian Children's Book Centre Our Choice Award. A third book in the series, Boys in the Well, has just been published. Cecil Freeman Beeler lives in Calgary.

## IT ISN'T JUST A STORY

*William Bell*

**Résumé:** L'auteur discute des relations entre le récit historique et différents genres narratifs comme le roman, la biographie et l'autobiographie; il parle ensuite de la genèse de son roman *Forbidden City*, qui raconte l'expérience d'un jeune Canadien témoin du massacre de la Place T'ien an Men, en juin 1989.

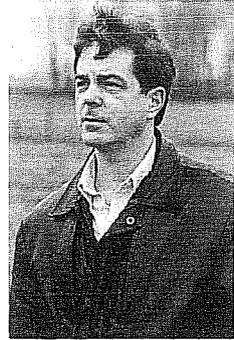


Photo credit: Peter McEwen

William Bell

In the third of six radio lectures that make up *The Educated Imagination*, Northrop Frye suggests that the historian *tells us* "what happened" whereas literature *presents* "what happens." But, while good history entails impersonal examination of objectively acquired data, the mantle of the scientist does not rest comfortably on the historian's shoulders, for as soon as she moves from the hard data (a treaty, the household records of a medieval king) toward exposition that will make clear to her reader the significance of this information, she must analyze, draw conclusions, suggest alternatives, attribute motive and assess the impact of events on persons and populations. She employs not just analysis and synthesis but her imagination; she moves toward the realm of the literary writer. In developing argument, she employs rhetoric (imagining the result of one's statements on the reader); in bringing to life historical personages, she becomes, at least in part, a novelist. Personal histories (biography and autobiography), often assumed to be compendia of fact and nothing else, make no less use of the imagination, for even basic decisions like what to include in and what to leave