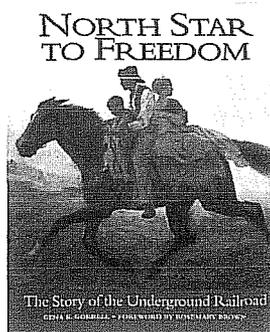


NORTHSTAR TO FREEDOM

Gena K. Gorrell

Résumé: L'auteur parle de la difficulté de concilier vérité historique et rectitude politique.



When Lester Publishing asked me to write a young-adult book about the Underground Railroad, I was initially very keen on the project; I felt that the subject was important and timely, in view of today's racial tensions, and that the individual stories involved would be both powerful and deeply personal. As well, my Quaker background made this a subject close to my heart.

Then I started thinking about how to proceed with the work, and I wondered if I was out of my mind.

I didn't want to traumatize young readers, but how could I tell the truth about the era without including horrific stories of misery and degradation, of casual torture and murder, of families split up on a master's whim and never reunited? If I sugar-coated the story, I would not only be falsifying history; I would be denying the valid roots of today's anger and bitterness.

How would black children, in particular, react to this account of the persecution of their ancestors? Might the book only contribute to racial hatred? Or might it add to their sense of victimization?

I didn't want to reduce the tale to a simplistic fable of bad guys and good guys, but how could I explain to children the context of these events — how a democratic nation could be founded on slavery; how otherwise decent, charitable families could deny other families' humanity — without going way over their heads about political, economic, and psychological factors?

And then there were the ideas of "political correctness" and "appropriation of voice" ...

When you write for adults you have at least the benefit of "waffle." If the obvious word is too blunt or unpalatable, there's a thesaurus full of slicker alternatives. If you don't want to confront something head on, you can insinuate it through allusions, implications, and hypotheses. But kids have a limited vocabulary, and tend to miss (or misinterpret) indirect suggestions. You pretty much have to come out and say what you mean.

The best way I could find to describe the personal tragedies of slavery was to focus on the accounts of survivors, and to use their own words whenever I could. Fortunately, I was able to draw on several published collections of first-person narrations. Drawing on the words of the victims themselves added outrage and

pain, but I hope it also added some sense of pride and triumph; whatever they had endured, these people had lived through it to pass the truth down to history.

Hoping to give readers some perspective on slavery — trying to avoid the book being a tool for the “us-against-them” mentality — I began by putting it in the context of human history; slavery has been with us throughout recorded time, and it is not over yet. This was of course a massive and horrendous example; but still, slavery is not just a matter of one lot of bad people, or one bad era; it is a miserably persistent manifestation of the self-serving, self-deluding side of human nature.

To help readers grasp the roots of what might seem like incomprehensible evil, I had to include the essentials of the political and economic background — the labour-intensive agricultural economy of the south versus the mechanization of the north, the political shenanigans as one American territory after another came to statehood — but I tried to keep them as simple as possible, and to express them in terms of greed, jealousy, fear, and other motivations children could relate to their own experiences.

The book is newly published, and I fully expect to hear complaints about one aspect or another. But I am happier with the result than I expected to be. I have not waffled; I have not downplayed anything; I have not pandered to revisionism. Now I can only hope that children (of whatever colour) read it, and remember it a little as they live their own lives.

Gena K. Gorrell is an editor and writer living in Toronto. Her previous book, *Stories of the Witch Queen*, was published in a limited edition by Peppermint Press.

IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Linda Granfield

Résumé: Pour son ouvrage intitulé *In Flanders Fields: the Story of a Poem* by John McCrae, Linda Granfield a dû consulter les archives de l'auteur qui lui ont fait découvrir les horreurs de la guerre. Pour elle, les vrais héros sont les petites gens qui ont vécu l'enfer de 14-18 et non les poètes officiels qui ont servi à la propagande.



Linda Granfield

Photo credit: Dan Callis

In Flanders Fields: the Story of the Poem by John McCrae, Lester/Stoddart, 1995, was my most difficult project thus far, primarily because it dealt with war, a topic (not specifically Flanders, I should mention) with which I had approached different children's book publishers during the five previous years; none would have any part of the idea. I commend Kathy Lowinger for realizing the potential.

It was agreed upon from the start that I would not have to water down any of the horrible information I found and wanted to use. I could see no point in