



Voices from the Gaps

Zee Edgell

“

I discovered that by writing I could overcome some of the obstacles that faced me as a woman, a Belizean, and later on as someone who was living away from Belize. It helps me to be. If I don't write—I feel unconnected.

”



Biography

Zee Edgell is the most prolific, contemporary writer to emerge from the independent nation of Belize. A journalist, a novelist, a women's rights advocate, and a college professor, Edgell is the first Belizean writer to reach a universal audience. Born Zelma Inez Tucker in Belize City, Belize (then British Honduras) in 1940, Edgell grew up in tumultuous times in the country's political history, "with a sense that the Belize I used to know would always be there...I grew up feeling that it was one of my jobs to help other Belizeans in whatever ways I could" (McClaurin 38).

After attending St. Catherine Academy, Edgell later trained as a journalist at *The Daily Gleaner* in Kingston, Jamaica. She received her diploma in journalism from The School of Modern Languages, Polytechnic of Central London in 1965 and continued her postgraduate studies at the University of the West Indies. Serving as a teacher at her alma mater, St. Catherine Academy, for a number of years, Edgell has served as Director of the Department of Women's Affairs of Belize and Head of the Women's Bureau of Belize; Secretary to the Governing Board for Concerned Women For Family Planning in Dacca, Bangladesh; and UNICEF Consultant to The Somali Women's Democratic Organization in Mogadishu, Somali.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1940
- * Belizean novelist, journalist, and activist
- * Her first published novel is *Beka Lamb* (1982)

This page was researched and submitted by Willie J. Harrel, Ph.D on 12/8/04.



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Biography continued

Edgell's academic career is equally impressive. She has served as lecturer in the Department of Education at the University College of Belize; Interim Coordinator of the Wick Poetry Program at Kent State University; visiting Writer-in-Residence in the English Department at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia; and Instructor on the culture of Afghanistan at the Marinette Center at the University of Wisconsin.

Edgell's first novel, *Beka Lamb*, was published in 1982. The significance of this publication year lies in the fact that Belize received its independence from Great Britain in 1981. The novel's publication the following year makes *Beka Lamb* the first Belizean novel of the new democracy modeled on the British system. Because of its complex portrayal of the struggle for the female protagonist to establish her womanhood, *Beka Lamb* was awarded Britain's Fawcett Society Book Prize in 1983, an international accolade that is awarded annually to novels that address issues of women's positions in society. Because of this honor, *Beka Lamb* became the first Belizean work of fiction to attract a universal audience. Set around the time of the nationalist movement in Belize in 1951, *Beka Lamb* documents a few months in the life of a struggling Belizean family, and Beka, a 14-year-old girl who, as some critics have proposed, is symbolic of the struggling efforts of the newly independent nation of Belize. After winning an essay contest, Beka reminisces about the development of her growth. *Beka Lamb* highlights the life of the young rebellious girl who can be read in many ways: the transformation of a compulsive liar to womanhood; a coming of age story; and an examination into the different lives of Belizean women. Irma McClaurin has suggested that "the young protagonist and her country come of age at the same time" as Belizean history and Beka's personal life mature simultaneously (McClaurin 40).

However, Edgell says that she has "never, consciously, tried to insert symbols in any of [her] work. At the time of writing the novel (written in Afghanistan, the U.S.A., and finished in Bangladesh), I did not think of Beka's rebellious nature as a symbol of Belize's quest for independence" (Edgell). Ironically, the state of affairs of Belize and the influence of Catholicism are intertwined into the framework of the novel and provides a persuasive portrayal of the political scene in Belize and Belizeans' reactions to colonialism. "The political situation in Belize," Edgell tells Gayle Vanderhorst, "has profoundly influenced my writing because I am keenly interested in the process by which Belize (formerly British Honduras) became an independent country in 1981. I am also interested in all that has happened since Independence" ("Zee Edgell on the Web").



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Biography continued

The realism of the political climate portrayed in *Beka Lamb* reveals the adversity, impoverished, and the unfortunate situations of Belizean women and their families. The dilemma of Toycie, Beka's best friend and confidante, a poverty stricken, neglected young girl, whose death at the end of the novel is a turning point in Beka's transformation. Despite the political climate of colonial Belize, *Beka Lamb* illustrates the strong connections to family and community of Belizeans during a time of political turmoil. *Beka Lamb* is required reading for high school students in Belize in preparation for the Caribbean Exam Council exams (McClaurin 40). The novel has been translated into German and Dutch and selected chapters have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *The Arnold Anthology of Post Colonial Literatures*, and *Daughters of Africa*.

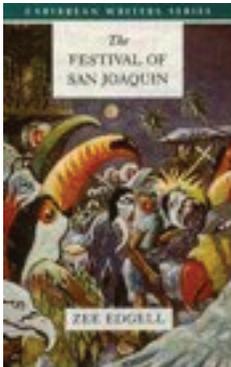
Taking place in the middle of a territorial dispute between Belize, Guatemala, and Great Britain, Edgell's sophomore novel, *In Times Like These* (1991), has been considered by some critics as a continuing saga of the young, charismatic, Beka Lamb because it "continues the theme of Belize's transformation from a colony to an independent country" (McClaurin 41). Yet others have often criticized Edgell for not continuing the story of Beka Lamb. *In Times Like These* depicts the commotion in Belize on the threshold of its independence from Great Britain, and was not meant, as Edgell contends, to serve as a continuation of Beka Lamb's growth. After studying and working for many years in London, the protagonist of the novel, Pavana Leslie, returns home to Belize in 1981 during the conflict between Belize, Guatemala, and Great Britain. A single mother, Pavana brings her twins to meet their father, who is an important government official. As Pavana accepts a position as the Director of the Women's Unit in Belize, she begins her journey to obtaining a self-consciousness and self-determination by dealing with her past. *In Times Like These* is a persuasive account of Pavana's inner conflict coupled with Belize's attempt to settle a historical dispute. As in *Beka Lamb*, Edgell, who was teaching at St. Catherine Academy at the time this dispute occurred in Belize, paints an extraordinary historical portrait of the political upheaval of the people of the developing nation of Belize.



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The Festival of San Joaquin (1997), Edgell's third novel is based on the actual events of a true-to-life incident and tells the story of Luz Marina Figueroa, a woman accused of murdering her violent husband but released on probation. Luz is determined to rebuild her life and regain custody of her children. Set in the Mestizo community of Belize, *The Festival of San Joaquin* delves into the complex territory of domestic violence while it investigates the country's "latinization as a result of the flow of political and economic refugees from neighboring Guatemala and El Salvador" (McClaurin 43).

In each of her novels, Edgell cleverly investigates the "changing history of Belize and the development of a national identity based upon the country's rich ethnic and diverse cultural traditions" (McClaurin 38). Edgell intertwines political discourse with the social concerns of Belizean women to demonstrate the manipulation of colonialism on the lives of Belizeans. Edgell says that her novels attempt to create an understanding of how to "bridge the gap between the colonial past and the new Belize," while at the same time, Edgell contends, her novels "are an attempt to reconstruct the fragmented images and myriad memories" of her native country (McClaurin 40). Edgell is currently conducting research on a fourth novel titled *On the River Belize*, which addresses issues concerning slavery in Belize.

Zee Edgell currently lives with her husband in Kent, Ohio, and has two children and two grand children. She is an Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Kent State University, Kent, OH and has received numerous awards and accolades, including a National Arts Council of Belize citation "for outstanding and meritorious contribution to the development of Belize" in 1987. Edgell has worked and studied in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, England, Jamaica, Nigeria, and Somalia.



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