

# **BOOK REVIEW:** *A Desperate Road to Freedom: The Underground Railroad Diary of Julia May Jackson*

Review by Cindy Newton

**Author:** Karleen Bradford

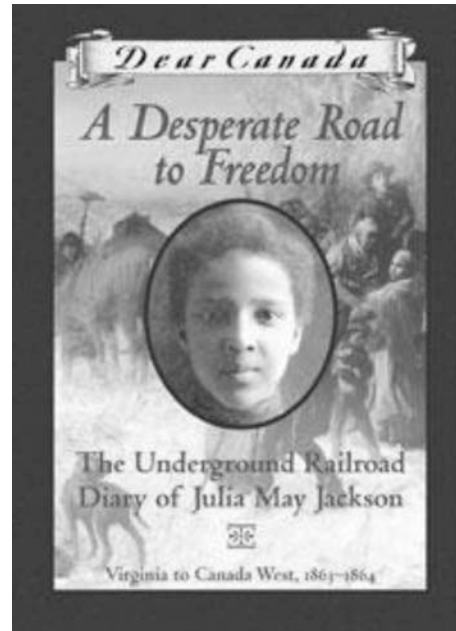
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In *A Desperate Road to Freedom: The Underground Railroad Diary of Julia May Jackson*, author Karleen Bradford has created an absorbing fictional account of a young girl's journey from slavery to freedom. It is a recent addition to the *Dear Canada* series published by Scholastic Canada Ltd. Each novel in this series takes the form of a diary kept by a young woman during an important period in Canadian history. Set in 1863 during the American Civil War and told from the perspective of a precocious eleven-year old, *A Desperate Road to Freedom* is largely a story about family.



As other slaves begin fleeing to Union lines in response to the Emancipation Proclamation, Julia May's family is compelled to escape their forced labour on a Virginia tobacco plantation. A quick pace is established from the earliest pages, when she is awakened by her mother to begin their perilous flight. Her parents are desperate to keep the remaining family intact, after three of their children are sold by the plantation master. They run, knowing the consequences of being caught are severe, and follow the Underground Railroad to Canada, eventually settling in Owen Sound.

Bradford is able to evoke a sense of place and time in few words, complementing the brevity of the diary format. Family members and other characters are well developed and relationships are central to the unfolding of the story. Strong themes emerge through the compelling narrative; of freedom, loss, education as a liberating force, the pioneering struggle to adapt in a new land, and how social conditions can impact the bonds of family and friendship. Historical people are included as characters in the book, an interweaving of fact and fiction that familiarizes the story and should inspire readers to learn more about this integral part of local history.

Although the target audience for *A Desperate Road to Freedom* is adolescent girls, readers of both genders and all ages can appreciate the story and it is appropriate for classroom study (Scholastic has published teaching resource guides for earlier books in the *Dear Canada* series). It is evident that Bradford has carefully researched the conditions, locations and historic events experienced by her characters. While she does not shy away from depicting the hardships of slavery, war, migration, poverty and racism, this is done in a manner sensitive to young readers. A Notes section includes historical information, copies of relevant documents, and resources such as a recipe and song lyrics that invite readers to participate in activities referred to in the story. Julia May's first-person account personalizes and provides insight about struggles, attitudes and practices that children and young adults today may find difficult to imagine. They will have no difficulty identifying with her spirit, though. Julia May is an inquisitive, engaging character whose diary entries reveal a maturing awareness of the world and her own strengths and personal challenges.



*Author Karleen Bradford reads aloud from her book "A Desperate Road to Freedom".*

Bradford is a seasoned author with local roots. Born in Toronto and raised in Argentina, she returned to Canada to attend university. It was here that she met her husband. They traveled extensively for his job as a Foreign Service Officer with the Canadian Government, raising 3 children along the way. Inspired by her children, Bradford began writing professionally in the 1970s and is now an award-winning author of over 20 books of fantasy, historical fiction, and contemporary stories for children and young adults, many published through Scholastic Canada.

When her husband retired they moved to Owen Sound, his home town (as well as that of her father). After 10 years they decided to relocate to the Orillia area to be closer to their children and grandchildren. The author's biography at the end of *A Desperate Road to Freedom* further describes her ties to Owen Sound and the chance encounter that moved her to write this story.

*A Desperate Road to Freedom* brings to life, from Julia May's perspective, an important period in North American history and, as the northern terminus of the Underground Railroad, Owen Sound is a significant setting for this story. Readers will gain a greater understanding of how a network of compassionate people and abolitionists helped escaped slaves from the southern states elude capture, and of the great risks facing all involved. Bradford has written an intriguing, informative historical novel that captures the imagination and encourages thought about the importance of family and freedom, and subjects such as human rights, multiculturalism, and war that are just as relevant and crucial today.

Book Excerpt:

*We huddled there, all holding onto each other. The bushes prickled something awful, but we none of us paid them any mind at all. We heard the dogs coming closer and closer, baying and howling just the way they were the night Uncle Bo got caught. Men were shouting, too. The noise was fierce and it was coming straight at us. I held my breath and prayed as hard as I could. I knew real well those dogs could smell us easy as could be in those bushes. All I could think of was Uncle Bo shot and hanging dead in that tree.*

### ***INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR***

The following brief interview with Karleen Bradford was completed just prior to the local launch of *A Desperate Road to Freedom*, which was held at the Downtown Bookstore in Owen Sound on September 24, 2009.

Q: Did you approach Scholastic with the idea for this story, or had they asked you to write about the Underground Railroad in Canada?

A: After we returned to Owen Sound I began to learn more and more about the city as the northern terminal of the Underground Railroad. As I researched, I began to see the story that I wanted to write. I talked to Sandra Bogart Johnston, who is the editor of the series and with whom I had worked on my previous *Dear Canada* book, and she was very enthusiastic.

Q: As an experienced educator, what do you hope children and young adults will gain from reading *A Desperate Road to Freedom*?

A: I think it is of immense importance that children and young adults know as much as possible about the experiences of the Black families who risked their lives to achieve freedom for themselves and for their families. I also feel that it is important for Black children to know that the Underground Railroad, and that the safe houses were run by ordinary Black people as well as white. All of these people put their own lives in danger and ran extraordinary risks. I would also like readers to learn about the communities into which the escaped slaves were welcomed. There was a great diversity of people within them, including many well-educated and professional Black families. It was interesting to me to find out that schools in Toronto were integrated right from the beginning, although the teachers were all white until early in the 1950s.

Q: This is a carefully researched story -- what resources were most helpful to you during the research process?

A: The Grey Roots Museum and Archives was definitely one of the most important of my resources. (It's) a wonderful place to do research, with a most helpful and friendly staff. I spent hours poring through old microfilm copies of newspapers from the era at the Owen Sound and North Grey Union Public Library, and also found valuable information about shipping at the Owen Sound Marine & Rail Museum. John Shragge, the Road Scholar, Ontario, was very helpful with finding out about the existing roads at the time, and gave me valuable references to books about hotels and taverns along the way from Toronto to Owen Sound.

During the ten years that I lived in Owen Sound before actually starting to write the book, I read every book I could find about the Underground Railroad, the Civil War and the lives of slaves in the United States in general, Owen Sound history in particular, and every newspaper article that was published in the *Owen Sound Sun Times* during that time that had to do with historical events. I attended the Black History Conference in Durham, Ontario, and visited the Black History exhibit at the ROM in Toronto.

Obviously, I researched as much as I could in libraries and on the Internet, but my husband and I also drove down to Virginia and North Carolina. I have tried to visit the setting for every historical novel that I have written. I find that it opens up so much more information and inspiration for me. We explored around the Great Dismal Swamp, which isn't dismal anymore, and visited Fort Monroe. The Fort was dismal in a disturbingly new way. Empty and echoing, because all the military personnel there were away in Iraq.

Q: Are the documents reprinted in the notes section of the book ones that influenced the development of the story?

A: I had the idea of the story in my head when I began researching. I always research for months, sometimes years, before I begin writing. As I research, new ideas for the story emerge, new variations on the plot. With the *Dear Canada* books, I have to supply the documentation, so I am continually searching various sources for pictures and documents that will illustrate the story both before I begin and also during the time I am writing the (numerous) drafts. And yes, often I find a document that leads me in a new direction—that sparks a new idea. Before I began my research, for example, I had no idea that so many young Black men fought in the Civil War, and that boys from Canada, both Black and white, went south to fight for the Union. When I learned that, I knew immediately that was what Julia May's brother, Thomas, was going to do.

When I am talking to students about research, I tell them that, far from being boring, research is like putting the pieces of a puzzle together, or following the clues in a mystery story. Research is exciting. (And it's sometimes hard to stop and actually being writing--which is much more difficult.)

Q: What were the most surprising discoveries you made during your research? What were the most meaningful?

A: I discovered that a lot, if not most, of the people who provided the safe houses, and who were the conductors of the Railroad, were Blacks. History has tended to emphasize the contribution of white people, which was, of course, considerable, but overlook this fact.

I also learned about communities of Blacks in Canada which included highly educated, professional people. That was perhaps not too well known.

Q: How do you as an author avoid stereotypes when creating characters of another ethnicity, cultural background, and/or time period?

A: I immerse myself in the history and culture of the period I am writing about and try to put all pre-existing beliefs or ideas that I had about the people who lived in that time out of my mind. For this particular book, I was fortunate enough to have help. I have known Lawrence Hill, author of *The Book of Negroes*, for several years. I went to him for advice when I was first planning the book, and he was generous enough to offer to look over my first drafts. He did so, and gave me good advice regarding dialogue and any possible instances of involuntary stereotyping. Also, Karolyn Smartz Frost, author of *I've Got a Home in Glory Land*, was the academic expert that Scholastic brought in to vet the book, and she gave me invaluable guidance. Having said that, from the moment I began writing, I was inside Julia May's head. She was a living, human, child, and I just put myself in her place.

Q: The author information included in the book mentions that you wrote the final drafts of this story during the 2008 US electoral campaign. Can you comment further on the significance of this timing, what thoughts and emotions it raised for you?

A: It was immense. I watched the election of Barack Obama, and wrote the ending of the book in tears. To think that history could have come so far in little more than one hundred years. After being mired in the mindset of those times, it was miraculous to see a Black man elected to the presidency of the United States.

Q: What were your expectations for how the local community would receive *A Desperate Road to Freedom* and what response have you received so far?

- A: The response has been great and local reviews have been wonderful. I hope the community will embrace my book as an integral part of our shared history.
- Q: Are there aspects of this story, or findings from your research, that you would like to explore further in future books?
- A: Oh, yes!
- Q: How did your collaboration with the popular theatre company Sheatre for the local launch of the book come about?
- A: This is an exciting, new venture for me. Sheatre approached the Downtown Bookstore about a presentation for the launch, and a possible full production later on. When I learned about it, I was delighted. I am looking forward to seeing their presentation at the launch at the bookstore this September.\*

*\* Artistic Director Joan Chandler created an adaptation of the story which was presented by Sheatre at the book launch and in a special performance for school children held at the Owen Sound Public Library on September 25, 2009.*



*Performance at the book launch of “A Desperate Road to Freedom” at The Downtown Bookstore*