



# Voices from the Gaps

# Zee Edgell

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*My early exposure to books and literature affected my sense of country, community and culture very positively because the books I read taught me how to write about my country and community as other writers wrote about theirs. As I grew up, my family passed their love of Belize on to my sisters, brothers and me. I knew even as a young girl that I was going to write for the country of Belize.*

— Zee Edgell, Bombay Interview

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## Biography

Zelma, or Zee, Edgell was born October 21, 1940, in Belize City, where she was raised. She worked as a journalist and reporter, earning her degree at the Polytechnic of Central London and the University of the West Indies (Evaristo). Her first journalist position was for *The Daily Gleaner* in Jamaica, and later she became editor of a newspaper in Belize City. From 1966 to 1968, Edgell taught at St. Catherine’s in Belize City, Belize. St. Catherine’s Academy is an all girls’ Catholic School that has focused on the advancement of young girls in Belize with a concentration on faith since 1883. She lectured at the University College in Belize from 1988 to 1989, and is presently working at Kent State University in Ohio as Associate Professor of Creative Writing in the Department of English. She has also traveled extensively across the globe, living in Nigeria, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Britain and the US. Edgell is dedicated to writing about Belizean society. Interestingly, she is able to write about her homeland, Belize, from abroad. She does this through reading newspapers, newsletters, articles on the internet and by visiting Belize regularly.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1940
- \* Belizean novelist, journalist, and educator
- \* Portrays a different Belizean “national identity” in her writings

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# Zee Edgell

## Biography continued

In 1981, she was appointed as the Director of Women's Bureau, and, from 1988 to 1989, Edgell became Director of the Women's Affairs in Belize. She was the first Belizean novelist to win the 1982 Fawcett Society Book Prize and gain international recognition (Bromley 10). The Fawcett Society is an Organization based out of London that strives for equal opportunities for women worldwide. Its aim is to benefit and improve women's lives through changes in society and policies. Edgell also won the Canute Broadherst Prize for her short story "My Uncle Theophilus" in 1999. She is an internationally recognized author. Some of works have been translated into Spanish, Dutch and German.

All of Edgell's works include, to a great extent, the political changes and themes taking place in Belize, from the partition of the former British Honduras in 1981, to the present. She gives her parents and close community credit for instilling in her such a strong sense of nationalism for Belize. She also states that not only did native writers of Belize inspire her to write, but also authors across the world who wrote about their native land inspired her (Shea). She says, "[o]ne of the easiest choices I had to make was in choosing to write about Belize and its development, because I believe that the more we understand about the cultural forces that shape our characters, the more we can understand ourselves and each other" (Cohill).

### *Major Critical Responses*

Despite Zee Edgell's straightforward and easy to read writing style, she is able to create complex stories, weaving together politics, culture and women's roles in Belizean society. Edgell is the first internationally acclaimed Belizean writer and Belizean nationalist. Belizean women have always been the backbone of Belizean society, and through self education many have become heads of businesses and involved in the government. Yet the majority of uneducated women in Belize still have limited opportunities to become economically independent as compared to women in The United States (Cohill). This has been a major focus of Edgell's writing.



# Zee Edgell

## Biography continued

Most critics agree that, in general, Edgell is a Belizean nationalist. Her incorporation of environmental issues or the partition of Belize into her stories conveys a strong sense of nationalism. Roger Bromley of *Wasafiri* states that every word of hers creates an extremely powerful idea of “social, cultural and political complexity” (Bromley 10). This is shown with clear diction and also the lack of elaborate detail of the characters’ surroundings. Edgell chooses an almost bare or unexaggerated style of writing because she places more importance on the cultural and political atmosphere.

Kristen Mahlis of *ARIEL* says that Edgell gives a different view of “national identity,” not from a masculine perspective, but from a feminine perspective. Since Edgell’s main characters tend mostly to be female, this is self-evident. But Edgell also has her characters tackle feminine issues, themes, and problems.

In a later article in *ARIEL*, Lorna Down points out the feminine characteristics that both Toycie and Beka take on in *Beka Lamb*. Toycie falls for Emilio and mistakes sexual acts for love and then becomes pregnant and is abandoned by Emilio. Down also takes note that Beka is at a crucial period of growing into a woman. She says Beka takes on feminine roles and traits, such as cleaning, to gain approval in her family’s eyes. Also Beka’s source for political information is her grandmother Ivy. Ivy is a strong feminine political leader in the family because she is very informed about the political situations, attends political meetings regularly, and encourages others around her to do the same.

### *Our Interpretations*

Zee Edgell’s written works have a strong focus on her native land of Belize and the issues that its citizens face. In her work, Edgell gives a face to politics by showing its effects on her characters’ lives.

*Beka Lamb* is Edgell’s first novel. *Beka Lamb* was written while Edgell lived in Afghanistan, the US, and was finished while she was in Bangladesh. The story takes place entirely through a flashback consisting of a few short months. Edgell uses flashbacks to allow the reader to live Beka’s past with her and understand the events that led up to, and the impact of, Beka’s best friend Toycie’s death.



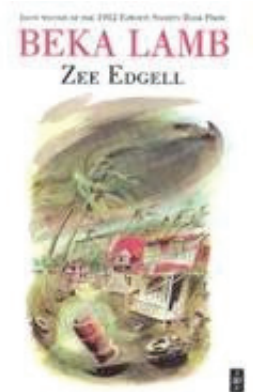
# Zee Edgell

## Biography continued

Her narrator says, “It was a town, not unlike small towns everywhere perhaps, where each person, within his neighbourhood, was an individual with well known characteristics. Anonymity, though not unheard of, was rare. Indeed, a Belizean without a known legend was the most talked about character of all” (*Beka Lamb* 11). Beka’s town, which is the capital of Belize, continues to bear the scars of colonization; Catholicism, desire for independence, and political freedom are at the core of this story.

Catholicism is important to this novel because it is a symbolic representation of colonization and a matriarchal society. Catholicism represents to many living in a colonized society the power and control that the colonizers have. At the same time Catholic schools represent a way out for many through education, especially of women. The people of Belize also use Catholicism as a way to show that they want the best for their children in an emerging independent government. The importance of Catholic schools in *Beka Lamb* for children’s future is evident when Toycie is expelled from St. Cecilia’s Academy. Beka’s father, Bill Lamb, pleads Toycie’s case and even attempts to explain to the dean the importance of school for Toycie’s future. The importance of Catholicism and education are shown through the sacrifices that people of Belize make to send their children to school, because it is not an easy task to earn enough money to pay for the tuition. Also because education is such a major part of getting out of poverty.

In the novel, Beka and Toycie represent the struggle for independence from colonization. Both Beka and Toycie are at a crucial age of growing, where new emotions and a longing for change begin. For instance, Beka is struggling for truth, as Toycie is slipping away from an otherwise successful life, by becoming involved with Emilio. The friendship represents the turmoil of political freedom that is taking place in Belize. This turmoil is also seen in the Lamb house, between Miss Ivy and Bill and Lilla Lamb. Beka is greatly influenced by her grandmother Miss Ivy. Miss Ivy is a strong Belizean woman, who is fighting for the independence of Belize and who has a strong desire for change. This change that Miss Ivy so desires is a change that is central among the people of Belize.





# Zee Edgell

## Biography continued

Beka's parents are also torn between the new and old ways of Belize. They are ready to look towards the future yet the past will not loosen its grip. Beka is caught between these two worlds. Her parents want her to forget about the old ways, but Miss Ivy will not let them forget because those ways are part of their past—a past that got them to where they are today and that she will not allow Beka to dismiss.

Said to be the sequel of *Beka Lamb*, *In Times Like These* is Edgell's second novel. Like *Beka Lamb*, Edgell uses flashbacks throughout the novel. Through this technique the reader is able to understand the main character, Pavana, as being complex. The reader can see into the most painful and humbling events in her life. This is evident when the father of Pavana's children, Alex, is shot in front of her eyes. Through flashbacks you are able to see the true emotions of the characters. The novel also portrays, to a large extent, the political situation that Belize is in during the period. However, the relationships and personal experiences that Pavana encounters are at the center of the book.

The novel is set during the partition of Belize from Britain. This situation is brought closer to Pavana because Alex is employed by the government. The problem with the up and coming government in Belize is that it is just as corrupt as it was under British rule. Because of the situations Pavana and Alex take on in Belize, Pavana represents the country itself and Alex represents the government. The political unrest that Belize is encountering at this time parallels how Pavana feels upon her return to her homeland. Alex symbolizes the new government because although his intentions may on the whole be good, he still wishes to partake in an immoral job, just as the government is trying to help the people of Belize yet remains corrupt.

Alex holds both a position in this corrupt government and a relationship with Pavana. His job creates a tension that makes their relationship stand out just as much as the political controversies. The tension comes from the reader knowing that Alex is part of a corrupt government and has also left Pavana, but Pavana sees Alex as a good person. Based on Pavana's own personal experiences, the reader is able to become close to and to like her as a character. Pavana is likeable because the reader is allowed to get inside her head and know what she is thinking. For instance, as Pavana struggles with an abortion or to continue with her pregnancy, the reader is made to understand both her dilemma and her feelings about it. And although she has flaws, she is realistically human, which makes her appealing to readers.







# Zee Edgell

## Biography continued

Inspired by actual events, *The Festival of San Joaquin* is Edgell's most recently published novel. It was written while Edgell was traveling and living abroad. Edgell again uses flashbacks as a method to develop her story and characters. This novel addresses similar issues, such as gender roles, and also ties in Belizean politics. Unlike her previous novels, environmental issues are at the center of the novel.

In this novel, Edgell uses the first person from the point of view of Luz Marina. This is different from her previous novels, which are in the third person restricted. As in *Beka Lamb*, Edgell makes use of the flashback technique, which not only gives insight into Luz Marina's character and emotion, but also sheds light on cultural aspects of San Joaquin. We learn through these flashbacks who is powerful in the city and who has power over Luz Marina.

Gender roles and feminine relationships between Luz Marina and others play a large part in the novel, as well. A main goal for Luz Marina is to gain custody of her children once more. Thus a feminine, or maternal, relationship is constant throughout the novel. Another important relationship in the novel is Luz's relationship with her mother. After her father's death, Luz Marina becomes very close to her mother, and they are practically inseparable towards the end of the novel. They work and live together, make costumes for the festival, and both fight for Luz Marina's children and against the threat of losing land in Belize.

Whether the issue is related to gender, the environment or politics, Edgell gives these issues life and makes them more familiar to her readers by presenting them through a character or several characters. Through her raw and truthful writing style, she creates characters that are genuine; this makes it easy for the reader to understand the characters. Though all of Edgell's books up to this point are feminine based *The Festival of San Joaquin* seems to have the most feminist point of view.

Zee Edgell is in the process of writing a new novel about a young woman living in the former Bay of Honduras (now Belize) working to gain economic security and freedom from forest slavery. "The protagonist of this novel will be an under privileged, black Creole boy. As of now the working title of this novel will be 'Cobbo Nathaniel Jones, a.k.a. Raindrops'" (Cohill).





# Zee Edgell

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