

ENCUENTROS



Belize: A Literary Perspective

Lecture by

Zee Edgell

CULTURAL CENTER

Director: Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez

Visual Arts: Félix Angel

Concerts and Lectures: Anne Vena

Technical Assistance: Alexander Miller



The Cultural Center of the IDB was created in May 1992 at the Bank's headquarters in Washington, D.C., as a gallery for exhibitions and a permanent forum from which to showcase outstanding expressions of the artistic and intellectual life of member countries. Through the Center, the Bank contributes to the understanding of cultural expressions as an integral element of the economic and social development of its member countries. In addition to exhibitions, other Center activities such as conferences, lectures, and concerts stimulate dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas.

BELIZE: A LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

By Zee Edgell

Buenas tardes señoras y señores. Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to begin by thanking the Cultural Center of the Inter-American Development Bank, a partner in Belize's development efforts, for honoring me with an invitation to speak today about my perspectives on life as a writer, and as a woman from Belize. During the past few weeks, I tried to envision this audience, and wondered what I could usefully offer, as the letter from Director Ana María Coronel de Rodríguez suggested, to help stimulate dialogue and contribute to the understanding of cultural expression as an integral element of the economic and social development of the Americas. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Mrs. Anne Vena for the assistance she has so generously given me during the past weeks.

With the objectives of the Cultural Center in mind, I formulated this talk as a way to discuss with you some of the values, attitudes, and traditions of my country that I try to explore in my novels. I also intend to speak with you today from the point of view of a person who wrestles daily with the

complexities and contradictions of being a writer, female, black Creole and Belizean.

Belize achieved full independence on September 21, 1981. The administrative capital of the country is Belmopan, built in 1970. Belize is now a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, the United Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Organization of American States, the Caribbean Community, and related institutions.

Formerly called British Honduras, Belize lies on the Caribbean coast of Central America, bounded on the north and part of the west by Mexico, and on the south and the remainder of the west by Guatemala. The area of the mainland and cayes is 8,867 square miles, approximately the size of Massachusetts or El Salvador. The climate is subtropical, tempered by trade winds.

The 1993 Population Census figures estimate that the multiethnic population is approximately 205,000, growing at the average annual rate of 2.6 percent. The country's economy has been largely based on agricultural development, and the main exports include sugar, citrus, bananas, fish products, timber and garments. Of major importance is an expanding tourist trade. A parliamen-

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tary democracy, Belize operates under a constitution that provides for a full range of freedoms. The government and the various religious denominations are partners in running the education system and other social services.

Belizean culture, like most others, is not static. In certain ways, it is culture-in-progress. Many of the changes in Belize occurred during the last 13 to 15 years and are directly linked to our emergence onto the international stage as an independent nation.

Here is how the protagonist of my first novel, *Beka Lamb*, saw Belize City, the former capital, and the various ethnic groups who made up the country in 1951. At that time, a nationalist consciousness was beginning to emerge, and the population was between 60,000 to 70,000 people:

“It was a relatively tolerant town where at least six races with their roots in other districts of the country, in Africa, the West Indies, Central America, Europe, North America, Asia, and other places, lived in a kind of harmony. In three centuries, miscegenation, like logwood, had produced all shades of black, and brown, not grey nor purple or violet, but certainly there were a few people in town known as red ibos. Creole, regarded as a language to be proud of by most people in the country, served as a means of communication amongst the races. Still, in the town and in the country, as people will do everywhere, each race held the varying degrees of prejudice concerning the others.

“The town didn’t demand too much of its citizens, expect that in good fortune they not be boastful, not proud, and above all, not critical in any unsympathetic way of the town and country. Then in bad times, whether individuals forsook the common

reality, murdered or went bankrupt, Belizeans generally rallied around to assist in whatever ways they could. The townspeople rewarded those citizens perceived as truly loyal with devoted tolerance that lasted for generations.

“The inhabitants of the other five districts of the country, and those living on some of the offshore islands, seemed to feel more or less about their towns and villages as Belizeans felt about Belize, the main town. In times of danger, it was a tradition for all races to present a united front...”

One of the most striking changes in Belizean culture has been in the area of demographics. The 1993 Population Census confirms that Mestizos, people of Maya-Spanish descent, are now the largest single population block, outnumbering the Creoles, people of African descent, for the first time. It is estimated that starting from the 1970s to the present, approximately 30,000 people from other countries in Central America, including 8,966 officially registered refugees, from El Salvador, have settled in Belize.

During the past 50 to 60 years, about 60,000 Belizeans, including large numbers of Creoles and other Belizeans emigrated, legally and illegally, largely to the United States and to other countries. English is the official language, but Spanish is taught in the schools. Other languages spoken in Belize include Maya and Garifuna. East Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Lebanese and Mennonites are also part of the Belizean population.

Because the population of Belize is heavily intermixed, the characters in my novels reflect Belize’s multiethnic personality. Through them, I try to show the issues, public and private, with which Belizeans

struggle, during the historical time frames within which each of my novels is set.

My own life parallels some of the changes I have described, especially that of Belizean mobility. I, too, am one of the Belizeans who has spent a good portion of my life viewing my country from the outside. However, my family and I last lived in Belize from August 1986 to July 1993, so I believe that many of my perspectives still have some validity, and images, memories, and stories are still vivid in my mind.

Before my marriage in Belize City, I trained and studied to be a journalist in Kingston, Jamaica, and in London, England. I worked as a journalist in Jamaica and Belize, and later on I was employed by the government of Belize as Director of the Women's Unit in 1981 and as Director of the Department of Women's Affairs in 1986. I also taught at the University College of Belize in 1988-89.

In addition to these Belizean experiences, my family and I lived and worked for many years in a variety of countries, including Belize, because my husband, a U.S. citizen, has devoted most of his life to working with international development agencies such as CARE, the Peace Corps, and Save The Children USA. During the latter part of the Biafran War, and for some time afterwards, we lived and worked in Enugu, Nigeria.

I mention these things in order that you might better understand that my experiences, observations, and work in a number of developing countries, including Belize, have had a profound influence on my life, and on my own attitudes, values and beliefs. They have also played a major role in shaping my perspectives as a human being, and as a writer.

Beka Lamb was written in Kabul, Afghani-

stan, continued in Menominee, Michigan, and completed in Dhaka, Bangladesh. *In Times Like These*, my second novel, was begun in Mogadishu, Somalia, and completed in Belize City. Both novels have been published by Heinemann International Literature and Textbooks, Oxford, England.

The Festival of San Joaquín, my novel-in-progress, was begun in Belize, and I have every hope that it will be completed in Ohio, where I teach creative writing and literature courses, at Kent State University.

A very large number of Belizeans and other people I've met over the years and in a wide variety of places—some quite briefly—make up the population of my mind. Many of these people, from all walks of life and with similar backgrounds and agendas, sometimes converge, stepping onto the pages of the novels as fictional characters, with their needs and aspirations, internal and external conflicts, back stories, forward stories, motivations, secrets and driving forces.

My novels usually start with a specific incident in Belizean history, over which my characters have no control but which has a direct effect on their lives. For example, *Beka Lamb*, published in 1982, explored the situation of Belizean women through Beka and her friend Toyocie during the 1950s. The novel explored the effects on the Belizeans of the colonial power's devaluation of the British Honduran dollar, the birth of the Nationalist Movement, and the ensuing struggle for self-government. Another issue of personal concern was the wider educational opportunities becoming available to women.

Beka Lamb focused on one Belizean family, relatives and friends, as they struggle within this context to change their socio-economic situation.

In this first novel, 14 year old Beka Lamb, a black Creole girl, is given the rare opportunity of attending St. Cecilia's Academy. She fails her first form, disappointing herself and her family. Beka's driving force throughout the novel becomes her determination to examine and overcome the obstacles that prevented her from passing her first high school year. When she wins an essay contest at school, she finally feels safe enough and able to allow herself to take the time to remember her friend's death, and the circumstances surrounding it.

Toycie, 17 years old and a straight-A student, was forced to leave St. Cecilia's because she became pregnant, while her boyfriend Emilio was able to continue his high school education.

Since the period in which *Beka Lamb* is set, Belize has been engaged in the ongoing struggle of trying to decolonize its collective mind, a process that may take a hundred years since many of our laws, institutions, attitudes, values and traditions were established during the colonial period to further the objectives of British imperialist expansion and consolidation.

In Times Like These, published in 1991, explores the themes of Belize's transformation from a colony to an independent country, and the latest attempt, in 1981, to resolve a dispute dating back to 1859 between Britain and Guatemala over the latter's alleged claim to the then colony of British Honduras. The event represented the first time Belize was directly involved in such discussions, and culminated in widespread riots against the resulting agenda for discussion, or Heads of Agreement, as they were called.

Through the protagonist, who is affected by these events, the novel tells the story of

Pavana Leslie, an unmarried mother of twins who returns to Belize after studying in England and working in Africa. She goes home with the tangible objective of introducing the twins to their father, who is now influential in the government of the day and who does not know of their existence.

During that turbulent political year, 1981, Pavana accepts a controversial position as director of the new Women's Unit. The position has been offered to her by the head of the Community Development and Social Services Department, who at that time was the only woman department head in the entire Public Service. In 1981, five to six years into the Decade for Women, the position of director was funded by the United Nations. Pavana accepts the position because she has retained much of the idealism, optimism, and hope of her student days. She has also been assured of a significantly better income than she had been earning as a teacher at her old school.

Ignorant of the wily ways of the bureaucracy, and of party politics, she is shocked to discover that the Cabinet, in an attempt to convince her to reject the position, has decided to pay her very little more than she has been earning and to reduce her contract to one year. But she chooses to honor her word and proceeds with the daunting task of trying to establish a Women's Unit in the Public Service, which was at that time a bastion of male privilege and machismo, where many men felt affronted and threatened by the unit.

Her new position brings Pavana into conflict with the father of her children and with outside opposition groups who were trying to defeat the ruling party. She also comes into conflict with nongovernmental women's organizations who see her as a willing dupe

of a government who, through the Women's Unit, is attempting to usurp their newly acquired influence among women. Another obstacle to Pavana's success is the ruling party's women's group. Their leaders feel they should have been given an opportunity to fill the position with someone of their own choosing.

In this novel, I also tried to show the complex and various effects outside interventions can sometimes have on the economic, political, social and cultural lives of people living in a developing nation like Belize.

My third novel, a work-in-progress, is set within the context of the more recent demographic changes in Belize that increasingly push the country toward latinization as a result of a flow of political and economic refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador. *The Festival of San Joaquín* explores issues of domestic violence and crimes of passion.

This third novel differs from my previous novels in several significant ways. I am writing in the first person, rather than using the third person restricted. I am writing about a subject outside my direct personal experience. And I am writing from the point of view of a Mestiza, although I am a black Creole.

To my knowledge, no one in Belize or from Belize has ever published a novel from the point of view of the Mestizos, the Maya, the Garifuna, the East Indians, the Mennonites or any of the other groups who make up the Belizean population.

This novel, I think, is also significant to my own development as a writer because I hope it will help to further my overall objective to continue writing novels reflecting the cultures of the various ethnic groups who live in Belize.

The Festival of San Joaquín opens on the steps of the Court House in Belize City on a Friday afternoon in May 1989. Luz Marina Figueroa, the protagonist, released from prison on three years' probation, begins to reflect on the events that, 13 months before, led to the death of Salvador Raphael Casal, her common-law husband. Because of her parents' difficulties and her own needs she returns to San Joaquín upon her release.

There, against her will, she is forced into a life and death struggle against her former friend and benefactor, Doña Catalina, Salvador's mother, and other members of the Casal family. Here is the voice of Luz Marina Figueroa, my protagonist, near the beginning of one of the many drafts of the novel:

"...I shudder with fright each time I remember the bad looks I last saw in Doña Catalina's eyes, which for so many years, used to look at me, most of the time, with such affection.

"The truth is that I know that she would never answer me, even if I dared to call from Avenue Cahal Pech. And if I waited in the plaza, and if by chance we met there, and if by some grace of God she chose to speak, I can guess what she would say as loudly as possible, so that anyone who cared to do so could stop and listen.

"You were always brazen, barefaced, and bold, Luz Marina. Heartless, without conscience, or you wouldn't even think about talking to me. So where is the famous smile that I understand enchanted the judge and the jury? You frighten me now. My family and my church ladies, even Rufina, agree that I succored an Ixtabai. Regardless of what you now say Salvador did, or didn't do, how come you didn't think of me?"

“I would want to tell her,

“I am no Ixtabai, Doña Catalina, and I did think of you, I think of you all the time. Allow me to explain.”

“But I know such a conversation is a fantasía. It could never happen. It is very difficult for me to remember, and it feels more than strange to think I am not one of her family anymore, that I am outside not only of Doña Catalina’s home, but outside my old life, outside everything I want so much.

“In bad moments I think that perhaps I should give up, find a cotton tree in the bush, and lay in wait behind it, forever, as they say Ixtabai does, waiting to pounce on innocent men. This is how the people in San Joaquín will look at me, I know.

“I can hardly breathe when I think about it, for I loved them so, worked hard, and tried to please everyone. But I did not succeed.

“When we first began to live together Salvador seemed to lose a certain kind of respect for me because I wouldn’t sell the little piece of land my father left to me.

“You are three times loco, Luz Marinita,” he said to me, ‘in my family we never place sentimental ideas over money.’

“In the end, because I loved him, and because I was desperate for him to stay by my side, I let him sell the land for little or nothing. I didn’t understand then what he meant, but I do now that I have lost everything.”

To date, my protagonists have been women, because I am a woman and because I want to continue exploring our situation in the Belizean environment. I need to try and understand why it is that our culture values a silent woman so highly, why the men in our society are so proud of women, married, or in consensual unions, who seldom leave the house without male permission, or company.

I needed to try and understand, in the Belizean cultural context, why women are as we are in the society, the roles that are expected of us, our responses to these expectations, teenage pregnancy, pregnancy for economic reasons, women’s lack of access to resources, the images, stereotypes, and perceptions of Belizean women and the changes that have occurred and are continuing to occur over the years.

I wanted to know why it is so difficult for women to complete their formal education; to understand their responses to men telling them what to do, having so many children, with no man living in the house on a regular basis to help with the raising of children; how they cope with domestic violence, drugs, and the increasing crime rate in towns and villages all over the country.

Of course, men as well as women are at risk in our society. And I am very curious to know what the attitudes, values and traditions are that prevent many more black Belizean men from becoming entrepreneurs. It is my observation that most of the successful businesses in Belize are owned or run by Mestizos, Lebanese and Chinese Belizeans, although there are more successful black businessmen in Belize today than ever before.

We understand from writers like Gunnar Myrdal that even in their economic choices, people are conditioned by their total mental make-up, and in particular by the communities in which they live. Cultures in progress, like multiethnic Belize, are difficult to capture in any systematic way, unlike what can be done with only the economic dimension.

This is why, for my next novel—health, shelter, and economics permitting—my intention is to write a novel about an underprivileged, black Creole Belizean boy to

show that he is sometimes his own worst enemy; how he comes to recognize his weaknesses, abilities and strengths; and the strategies he uses to rise above the social evils that threaten to destroy him. My protagonist will become a successful young businessman, who pays his taxes, pays a fair wage for a fair day's work, and does what he can do to improve the quality of life in his neighborhood, community and country. He will also aspire to be an enlightened husband and father. The working title of this novel will probably be, *Cobbo Nathaniel Jones, aka Raindrops*.

I believe that my attitude towards my intention is strong, clear and meaningful because I feel a deep sense of regret that so many Creoles and others in Belize, and elsewhere, are in economic, social and political and cultural chaos. I feel very sad that so many black Creoles have had to make the cruel choice to emigrate, legally and illegally, from Belize, leaving children like Raindrops, my latest protagonist, behind because of perceived and real economic needs and because of political, social, and cultural pressures.

I feel so badly that more Creoles have not been able to act as a more cohesive group working to better themselves economically in Belize, and I want to explore and show some of the reasons for this.

As Nobel Prize winner Dr. W. Arthur Lewis, the St. Lucian economist, argued, "...economic growth is vital not because it necessarily makes people any happier (although it may or may not), but because it provides a wider range of choices, and the freedom to make those choices, whether you are male or female..."

Although it has been a long time in coming, and I understand the perhaps historical inevitability, it is no less painful to me that

Creoles are now a minority in Belize. I feel I need to explore the sources of this pain, including the attitudes, values and traditions that were dominant when we rejected participation in the British-sponsored West Indian Federation in the 1950s.

I need to take another look at why it is that some people remained British Hondurans, with all the values, attitudes and traditions this implies, and did not become Belizeans, with its complex definitions. I need to re-examine some of the fears British Hondurans expressed then. For example, fears that as Belizeans we would not be able to sustain our development due to a number of factors (including demographic changes) and Guatemala's alleged claim to the then colony of British Honduras.

My purpose in wanting to write this novel about *Raindrops* is to prove that through a great altruistic love, even in the midst of social, political, economic and cultural disasters, and changing cultural patterns and through education, training, employment, and the sound financial advice of a respected, honest, successful, hard-working mentor, a young, ambitious, semi-illiterate, abandoned black boy can develop into a successful and more humane person. This does happen (although not often enough) in Belize, against very great odds.

My new protagonist, who made a brief appearance in my second novel (published in 1991) will represent all young boys who are underprivileged and ambitious and who must struggle against poverty, crime, drugs, and disease in order to become the persons they have decided to be.

I am qualified by experience and observation to write this novel because my own father, except for crime and drugs, began this

arduous, and heartbreaking journey as a boy of 12 or 13 during the depression years earlier in this century. I will dedicate this novel to the memory of my father because it is only now that I more fully appreciate the driving force, often misunderstood, behind his quest for relative economic security, not only for himself, but for his nuclear and extended families.

Without his unceasing efforts and later on with the help of my mother and their children, I perhaps would not have had an education or had the freedom to become a writer and the mobility to pursue my own quest.

I understand and appreciate the objectives of the IDB Cultural Center, for it has been my experience in Belize and elsewhere that there is a tendency, in government and in nongovernment organizations and institutions, to undervalue fiction as a social activity and to place political and social criteria outside the field of novels.

Yet, in her soon-to-be published dissertation, "Women and the Culture of Gender in Belize, Central America," Dr. Irma McClaurin writes, "But generally, what little is known (about gender role acculturation) often comes from literature... (page 290)...(and)..., sometimes in trying to explicate cultural meaning, it is popular culture that provides the necessary exegesis on what is happening in a society.

Many years ago, somewhere overseas, I first came across a quotation attributed to a Peruvian intellectual by the name of Augusto Salazar Bondy. I know little else about him, but I have never forgotten that he said, or wrote:

"Underdevelopment is not just a collection of statistical indices which enable a socioeconomic picture to be drawn. It is also a state of mind, a way of expression, a form of outlook, and a collective personality marked by

chronic infirmities, and forms of maladjustment."

At this point, I would like to make clear that I believe that writers should be free to write about whatever they want to write about most. One of the easiest choices I had to make was in choosing to write about Belize and its development; not merely as a backdrop for my stories, but as an integral part of the narratives, 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.

There are not many published novels by Belizeans. However, whether through private publication or other means, their numbers are increasing. I see this as a great step forward for a newly independent country like Belize where silence and secrecy about public and private affairs are still highly valued.

My novels are also an attempt to reconstruct my images and memories of Belize. I want to create, record, and preserve through fiction the echoes of a rapidly changing multiethnic culture.

But above all this, I try to write novels that deal with universal themes, because in the final analysis, readers of fiction need books that are companions, that help us through difficult days or nights; books that have characters with conflicts with which we can identify; books that deal with everyday themes like youth, middle age, old age, work, play, sacrifice, love, hate, jealousy, passion, crimes, poverty, wealth, hope, etc.

I try to do for others what writers do for me—to help to show the universality of our human frailties, emotions, intellectual lives, needs and aspirations and how certain fictional characters in a certain environment

with certain cultural traits fling themselves into the working out of their problems. Whether they are successful or not, the process causes the protagonist, and perhaps the reader, to recognize or understand something significant (even important) about life that may renew hope, faith, charity, courage. Fiction, I believe, can provide us with a new way of seeing ourselves and other cultures.

So, in my novels, through the lives of my Belizean characters, I try to show some of those attitudes, values, and traditions that are no longer serviceable and some of those that are still valuable but need to be strengthened, and where new ones need to be introduced to develop through national introspection and analysis a vision of where we are and whether or not this is the direction in which we intend to go.

I believe, like Augusto Salazar Bondy, that underdevelopment is a state of mind. Therefore, in my work, the private lives of my characters are never really separate from their sociopolitical activities, because in large part, this is the reality, which often seems like unreality, of the Belizean socio-political environment.

The affiliations of individuals with one political party or another and their continuing good standing with these parties, particularly the leadership, are pivotal to their economic, social and cultural advancement.

There is a growing group of people in Belize who, while not party political activists, would like to continue discussing through writing and radio talk shows and other media many of the issues raised here today. But that group is still scattered, disorganized, marginalized, and justifiably fearful of losing employment, and losing access to other economic and social opportunities.

Candid national introspection, through creative and critical expression, has only limited and short-term possibilities to flourish since the Belizean media presents national and international events, in the main, from party political imperatives and perspectives. No relatively independent media exist, as yet, to report generally on national news, including party political activities.

With the introduction a few years ago of television, which is characterized by a heavily foreign content, the attitudes, values and traditions of Belizean society continue to change at an even more accelerated, sometimes chaotic pace.

Belizeans are demanding more employment opportunities. They want antiquated laws changed, and they want the equitable distribution of land denied them under the Crown Land laws of the colonial era. Land is now allocated, based mostly on party political affiliation, although a promise has been made to devise a more equitable system.

Other emerging themes in Belizean life, and in my work, include the increasing demand by the general population that the political rulers fulfill the remainder of the promises made to them during the fight against colonialism, and the promises made subsequent to that era when the birth of the nationalist movement gave Belizeans a sense of optimism and hope.

We believed then, and for some time afterwards, that our leaders, government and nongovernment, would continue, for the most part, to use the people's labor for the progress of the people and of the country, and not, as it is now popularly perceived, for the enrichment and advancement of a national elite, or for the enrichment of foreign interests, where those interests do not con-

tribute equitably to the national well-being.

It is my experience and observation that Belizeans of all classes, but particularly those of low-to-middle income, have reached a stage in our national development where they are disposed to accept new ideas. There is an eagerness to try new ways of seeing and doing things. However, this disposition to participate in national discourse is hampered by a paucity of national leaders whom people feel they can trust to do what is constructive and what is fair. They want basic respect and prompt, adequate service when, as for a small example, they visit government offices.

I base these observations on the fact that Belizeans have, using the electoral process, changed governments in each election since 1984, three times in less than a decade.

With the lessening of foreign aid to Belize, it is also the view of many Belizeans that the promises made to them by international financial institutions, established by the rich countries, are also being betrayed, now that Cold War competition has vanished. In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, President John F. Kennedy said,

“...To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supportive of our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supportive their own freedom.

“To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because

we seek their votes, but because it is right. If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

“To our sister republics south of our border, we offer a special pledge—to convert our good words into good deeds—in a new alliance for progress—to assist free men and free governments in casting off the chains of poverty.”

Belizeans are also analyzing changing international development priorities. For example, not too long ago, Belizeans were being encouraged to develop agriculture, to clear the land for farming, much as the Menonites of Belize have been doing for years. Now with the rise of greater ecological concern among rich countries, Belizeans feel that their national development priorities may be impeded while the use, and overuse, of the world's resources by the rich countries continues, exceeding levels most Belizeans, especially in rural areas, can hardly comprehend.

Belizean attitudes, values, and traditions in the area of human rights, regular free and fair elections, and the preservation and conservation of our natural resources are in the vanguard of many countries with far greater resources. Belizeans are making a commendable effort to select and use the new technologies that are appropriate for Belize, to develop an effective and accessible health care system, and to provide educational opportunities at a lower cost to more people.

However, in addition to those problems mentioned earlier, Belizean attitudes to the further development of its Public Service must be examined to see where the service might be strengthened to better serve the changing and expanding needs and aspirations of Belizeans. Belizeans have good rea-

son to be proud of some of their Public Service officers who, despite being quite poorly paid or inadequately rewarded in other ways, are able to remain incorrupt.

The positive values, attitudes, and traditions of low- to middle-income countries like Belize are seldom positively portrayed in the media of rich countries. The images of these countries in the media, especially on television news, are of general incompetence, petty dictators, terrorists, madpersons, destroyers of civilized attitudes, values and traditions, fanatics, communists, revolutionary guerrillas and one-party states.

Another element that continues to hamper Belizean development, and that of other countries as well, is the attitude towards educated, trained individuals, and other citizens, who make the often cruel choice of leaving Belize because of the aforementioned economic and sociopolitical limitations. Belizeans affect an attitude almost of indifference to those talented Belizeans, whether they come or they go. There is little courting of these people, or indeed any determined, systematic attempt to put their skills and talents to the best use for the country.

Of course, for those with strong ties with one political party or another, places can and will be found for these people, so long as their attitudes and values do not conflict with party political symbols and criteria. Belizeans place a high value on what Creoles call not "forcing up" to anyone, except under dire circumstances, perhaps not even then.

Because of this very generally stated situation, fewer and fewer capable, idealistic persons aspire to political office, or to work in the Public Service. Often this is because they are reluctant to become involved in

scandals and corruption quagmires, real or imagined. These individuals, to retain their integrity, privacy, and dignity, go into other fields where there is more room for their values, attitudes and aspirations, or they emigrate to the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other countries, where they believe that there are systems and incentives that better reward merit and achievement.

Belizeans living abroad often work very hard, and reports are that they achieve remarkable successes, seldom forgetting to send home remittances, one of the mainstays of the Belizean economy. Most of the people who migrate from Belize are self-motivating, achievement-oriented. These are the kinds of people Belize needs now as the country struggles to fight crime, unemployment, domestic violence, and a weak economy.

The Belizean economy is dominated by a long colonial tradition of importation, taxes upon which provide much-needed government revenue. Economic development is also hampered in part by the small Belizean market for locally made goods.

Just recently the country lost millions of dollars in potential revenue and employment with the departure of the British troops, who guarded the Belizean borders before and after independence 13 years ago. Further economic losses were sustained when the United States Agency for International Development recently reduced its activities in Belize.

These and other related issues, I believe, are causing Belizeans to re-evaluate their traditional dependence on externally aided development, and to undertake the daunting task of becoming more economically self-reliant. In most cases, this will require a radical shift in attitudes, values and traditions. As

Belizeans, we will probably have to ask ourselves the question: “What can we do, given our limited resources, to foster, encourage, and nurture the creative capacities of Belizeans in all areas of our economic, political, social, and cultural development?”

During my writing life so far, I have focused on Belize as the environment of my narratives because I hold fast to the belief that literature, no less than history, anthropology, archaeology, and the sciences (fictions, constructions and inventions in their own way), can contribute to the social, political, economic and cultural development of a country, depending on the writer’s idea, intention, attitude towards the intention, and purpose for writing the novel.

According to world tables and international financial statistics, Belize may be considered a middle-income country. While it is true that many Belizeans are better off today than at any time in their history, it is also true that many people are not better off and that they are faced with an extremely high cost of living and low wages. One measurable indicator of their deteriorating situation is the literacy rate.

Traditionally, Belizeans have always been proud that their literacy rate—the actual ability to read, write, and understand what they read—was reported to be of the highest in the world. However, Belizeans are now appalled by reports that suggest that literacy standards have fallen significantly, not only in the rural areas, but in the city and towns as well.

This falling literacy rate is very worrying for Belizean writers, as it is for everyone, although efforts are being made, to remedy the situation. However, if it is true that a large number of young people and adults are unable to read, write, and understand what they read, the hope of writers like me of making intangible and hard-to-measure contributions to the Belizean development effort dims considerably.

Whenever I am in Belize, or when I read the newspapers, or talk with family and friends, I sometimes find myself uncomfortably reflecting on Don Quixote, his journey, his quest, and those windmills. Those are often painful moments. But they soon fade, for the journey, arduous as it is, hard to measure as it is, still seems to me to be worthwhile.

So, it is with eagerness that I sit down to work every day, to watch, listen, and write about Luz Marina Figueroa, on three years’ probation, who is fighting to overcome obstacles of poverty, social ostracism, injustice, guilt, and physical attacks. San Joaquín, a fictional town, like real places in Belize and the world, teems with Don Quixotes and Sancho Panzas.

But at this stage in her life, these kinds of people, male and female, are the very least of her worries. If Luz Marina can successfully complete her probation and overcome the spites, cruelties, superstitions and violence that are also part of her life, maybe others in Belize can, maybe I can. Maybe people can, everywhere, someday....

Thank you.

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Zee Edgell was born in Belize City in 1940 and grew up in Belize. One of her first jobs was as a reporter on the Daily Gleaner, Kingston, Jamaica. From 1966 to 1968 she taught at St. Catherine Academy in Belize, during which period she was also editor of a small newspaper in Belize City. After travelling widely—in addition to Jamaica, she has lived in Britain, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Bangladesh and the U.S.A.—she returned to Belize to teach and in 1981-82 was appointed Director of the Women's Bureau in the government there. During 1986-87, Edgell was Director of the Department of Women's Affairs. She lectured at the University College of Belize from 1988 to 1989 and was visiting writer at Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia, for a semester in 1993. Edgell now teaches Creative Writing at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, U.S.A.

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