

Q & A for CROSSING TO FREEDOM

by Virginia Frances Schwartz

WHY DID YOU WANT TO WRITE THIS BOOK?

This book brewed in the back of my mind for a decade. Two other slavery books were written first: *If I Just Had Two Wings & Send One Angel Down*. My readers constantly asked me what happened to the slaves who took the UGRR and entered Canada in safety. I did not have the answers. Yet.

I wanted to know about the Canadian experience of runaway slaves too. However, I had no time to research and I was busy with other book projects. It was important to me also to visit the Ontario depots that sheltered the slaves, to see for myself the crossing over spots along the Niagara River, to meet the actual descendants of slaves and engage in conversation and also to visit the archives at the depots to study African Canadian history. All of this had to wait until I had time.

When I read about the one-room schoolhouse that kept newly arrived immigrants outside while white Canadians stayed warm inside, that was the moment I knew I would write this book. Around that same time, my main character's face appeared (Solomon) and I had a strong impression of the direction for this book. Two months afterwards, I finally took that trip to the depots to do my research. Then I began work on the novel.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE YOU TO WRITE THIS NOVEL?

It spanned about 3 years from the moment I saw Solomon's face until the book was published. Much of that time was spent in research, in dialogue with my editor and historical advisor, Karoyln Smardz Frost and the descendants of the slaves and in imagining the life Solomon had.

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH WITH THIS NOVEL?

Slavery was such a harsh experience and a sad one. My purpose in writing about slavery was to examine the mind and heart of a runaway slave – how they would feel, how they would adjust, what was left behind that haunted them, what they were afraid of. Solomon was a haunted boy. That's why there are several ghost appearances in this novel, as a reflection of the deep abuse, fear and sadness a slave must have experienced. I wanted to show this shadow over a person's life and how it might have affected them. So the idea of ghosts arose naturally out of the writing process as a metaphor for living half a life and not feeling whole.

When Solomon crosses over, he has an opportunity to overcome his past and have a new life. I wanted to document that journey. But first, Solomon had to come to terms with all the ghosts surrounding him. I enjoyed how he negotiated or made a deal with the ghost Rodney in the cellar tunnel at Bertie Hall: "Let him (grandpa) pass through safe, like you did us." As Solomon confronted Rodney in that tunnel, he began to become his own person, not one who was a slave anymore.

HOW DO YOU WORK WITH YOUR CHARACTERS?

My characters "appear". In other words, I get an impression of a real person, a visual image, a feeling. I do not "make" them up. I have a strong feeling that they already exist somewhere. All I have to do is listen close and pay attention and I can hear the character speaking.

For me, a book begins when the characters show up. Sometimes an author has to wait a long time for that to happen. They must be very patient and allow the process however long it takes. When they do, the book appears more real. As I watch and listen to my characters, my pencil moves fast to keep up with them. What they do surprises me. Like how Solomon behaved in the tunnel. If I were in that tunnel, I would not have been that brave; I might not have gone ahead. Solomon's going ahead showed me that he had the strength somewhere inside to change his life. He did not know it at the time. But in that moment, he revealed himself by his actions. I felt then and there that he would eventually find freedom inside himself.

WHAT SETTINGS ON THE UGGR INSPIRED YOU THE MOST ON YOUR TRIP TO CANADA?

Here's what stands out:

Looking out across the swirling Niagara River from Ft. Erie toward Buffalo and knowing slaves swam across with all their belongings on their back in the middle of the night so that no one saw them.

Stepping into the underground cellar at Bertie Hall, surrounded by stone walls, dampness and dimness. There is such a strong feeling there. It was as if all the runaways who had entered there and been sheltered were standing guard, waiting for me to tell their story.

The cemetery at Buxton between the schoolhouse and the church. I walked there alone many times amongst the runaways and their descendants, studying the old names and crooked tombstones. It was beautiful and haunting to stand in that spot. One day I suddenly stopped in my wanderings through the cemetery and looked down. There, at my feet were two tombstones with these names: Phoebe and Eliza. These were also the names of the main characters in my first two books about slavery. In that moment, I felt I was meant to be there and write about the slaves.

