



Professor Zelma "Zee" Edgell

Chancellor, a very precious few novelists have succeeded in embodying the history and the spirit, the aspirations and the struggles, the culture and the place of their country in their work. For such great writers the country is the muse of the writer, and the writer in turn becomes the muse of the country and the people.

Professor Zelma "Zee" Edgell is such a writer. She was born in Belize City, the capital of the former British Honduras, now Belize, well before independence. I shall not tell you how LONG before, Chancellor, firstly because it would not be chivalrous of me to do so, but secondly because you would not believe me if I did tell you, as Professor Edgell embodies the spirit of eternal youth!

Her father, Clive Tucker, worked his way up through the ranks of an import / export agency, retiring as director. Her mother raised seven children and wrote poetry. This marriage of hard work and creativity blended beautifully in Zelma.

She was educated at the St. Catherine Academy in Belize, learnt the gems of journalism at the Daily Gleaner in Jamaica, and earned her diploma in journalism from the Polytechnic of Central London. She returned home to teach at her alma mater, and started a newsletter which blossomed into The Reporter, leading Belize newspaper.

In 1968 Zee married American Al Edgell – Director of CARE in Belize at the time. His career in international development took the family around the world, to Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Britain, Nigeria, Somalia and other places, before returning to Belize, where Al and Zee became lecturers at the University College of Belize.

Zee's first novel, *Beka Lamb*, was published in 1982 and was a sensation. Set in the early years of the national movement in pre-independent British Honduras it explores the

emotions of 14 year old Beka Lamb. It draws on the struggles of the new nation, symbolised in the eyes of many by the struggles of young Beka.

It was the first novel from Belize to reach beyond its borders and it won Britain's Fawcett Society Book Prize – a prize for a work of fiction that contributes to an understanding of women's position in society. And it is a CXC literature text.

Her three other novels all portray the struggles and feelings of Belizean women in conditions of challenge and change – slavery, colonialism and independence. And the search for the heroines' freedom intertwines with the struggles of the people and the country for freedom.

As one critic wrote: "The young protagonist in Beka Lamb and her country come of age at the same time as Belizean history." At the same time her novels explore relationships with a deep insight and understanding of human nature that is both fascinating and instructive.

Professor Edgell has more than paid her dues in every way to her motherland, as teacher, Director of Women's Affairs and Head of the Women's Bureau, Lecturer in Education at the University College of Belize and unofficial literary voice of Belize.

She recently retired as Professor of English, teaching creative writing, at Kent State University, Ohio.

And so, Chancellor, I invite you, by the authority vested in you by the Senate and Council of this University, to recognise this great griot of her people, this marvellous muse and eloquent voice of her country, Belize, and to confer on her the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.