

Sarnia-born author tackles U.S. slavery

Updated 5 hours ago

A few decades ago, Bruce Kemp was just another Sarnia kid.

Now an award-winning journalist and photographer, Kemp has just released his first novel.

"Letters from a Fugitive's Son" is a sweeping historical fiction story that Kemp spent over four years writing.

Set during the American Civil War, the novel follows the experiences of Frederick Douglass MacDonald, whose father escaped a life of slavery through the underground railroad. MacDonald leaves safety behind to fight in the Union Army -- and the anti-slavery movement.

Kemp made southwestern Ontario the backdrop for much of the novel. Born and raised in Sarnia and now living in British Columbia, Kemp has a strong attachment to his hometown.

"I consider myself a Sarnian first and foremost," he said.

He is also fascinated with the rich history of the area. A former teacher at Lambton College, Kemp uncovered a some buried facts while researching his book.

"I was just blown away by the history that we're not taught," he said. "There's an incredible range of history that nobody says anything about."

Kemp was originally inspired to write the story while working on a magazine assignment, doing research about the African-Canadian Trail. But the issues of race and discrimination the story discusses have always been close to his heart.

"By the time I was 10 years old, the civil rights movement was just taking off," he said. "[It] was one of the first major stories that affected me, and it's something that's always been in the back of my mind."

At first, he was hesitant to write the story, unsure of whether a white author would be taken seriously regarding racial issues.

But it was advice from a close friend in Trinidad that helped convince Kemp to write the story.

"He said, some people are going to say you shouldn't do this," Kemp said. "But tell a good story, tell it truthfully, and that's all you can do."

Liz Bernier is volunteering at The Observer. She will graduate this spring from the post graduate journalism program at the University of Western Ontario.

Copyright © 2011 The Sarnia Observer