

# OPEN BOOK TORONTO

## TEN QUESTIONS WITH BRYAN PRINCE

Submitted by clelia on January 30, 2009 - 9:10pm.

Bryan Prince is a descendent of slaves who came to Canada prior to the American Civil War. He is a farmer with a profound interest in the history of the Underground Railroad – particularly in the Canadian involvement. He has spent thousands of hours researching, writing and lecturing on this topic over a period of nearly 25 years. In 2002, he was awarded the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Medal for contributions to history. His latest book, [\*A Shadow on the Household\*](#), is published by McClelland & Stewart. Bryan Prince will be at [This Is Not A Reading Series on February 3](#) and at the [Royal Ontario Museum on February 8](#).

**OBT:** Tell us about your book, *A Shadow on the Household*.

**BP:** *A Shadow on the Household* is the true story of the large enslaved family of John and Arabella Weems who had lived together in rural Maryland. John had been able to purchase his own freedom and had been promised that he could buy his wife and children at a “reasonable” price.



The couple and their nine children found comfort in being part of a much larger black community – relatives, friends, freedmen and fellow slaves. That world came to a nightmarish end when Arabella and her children were sold to slave-traders following the death of their master. Their case caught the attention of anti-slavery sympathizers in North America and the British Isles who were impassioned by the recent publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and were intent on expressing of their outrage at the cruelties of the institution in a tangible way. Money was quickly raised to purchase and free the family, however it arrived too late and the family was separated and sold to various parts of the south. Ultimately, after years of perseverance, all of the family found freedom through a variety of means and many of them were reunited and began new lives in Canada.

**OBT:** How did you research your book?

**BP:** I travelled extensively to look for primary materials, making multiple trips to a variety of archives and libraries in Ontario, Washington D.C., Maryland, New York,

Michigan, Pennsylvania, Alabama and Ohio. Some requests for materials – particularly from the U.K. and some New England states were done by mail or telephone. I also made extensive use of online digitized newspapers and other anti-slavery materials. Most importantly, I had the help of D.C. historian and friend Charles Brewer, who did extensive research on my behalf and made countless suggestions.

**OBT:** Did you have a specific readership in mind when you wrote *A Shadow on the Household*?

**BP:** No, I hoped that the story was so broad and had so many family members of all ages that I hoped it might appeal to a very diverse audience.

**OBT:** Describe your ideal writing environment.

**BP:** I have done most of my writing at my late grandparents' old homestead, located on a farm on a quiet country road. The house is rustic and comfortable – no phones ringing or other disruptions. I could work to all hours of the night and leave my books, notes and files scattered in such a way that was meaningful to me, but would have been considered the after-scene of a tornado by any reporter on the 6 o'clock news.

**OBT:** What was your first publication?

**BP:** A short story entitled “Home” that won a contest and was published in a Chatham newspaper.

**OBT:** If you had to choose three books as a “Welcome to Canada” gift, what would those books be?

**BP:**

*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* - Stephen Leacock  
*Jean Beliveau: My Life In Hockey*  
*Rush Home Road* - Lori Lansens

**OBT:** What are you reading right now?

**BP:** *The Assassin's Accomplice: Mary Surratt and the Plot to Kill Abraham Lincoln* by Kate Clifford Larson

**OBT:** What's the best advice you've ever received as a writer?

**BP:** A publisher once advised me to focus in on individual characters that a general audience could become attached to rather than write broad historical texts that might only appeal to people who were already hooked on history. During the course of researching and writing this book, I discovered that following this advice was also much more satisfying for me.

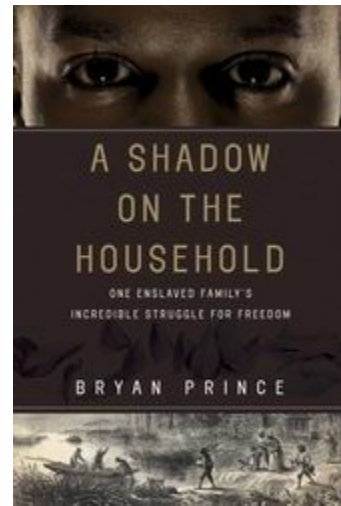
**OBT:** Describe the most memorable response you've received from a reader.

**BP:** The most memorable response to something that I have written actually came from an audience (at a scholarship banquet) rather than from a reader. I used to write first-person stories of enslaved women for my wife, Shannon, to tell. She got into 19th century costume and character and complete with a southern accent told the true story of Catharine Green whose husband had been sentenced to 10 years in a Maryland penitentiary for having a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other abolitionist literature. The audience jumped to their feet with prolonged and enthusiastic applause – certainly for her theatrical performance much more than for my words.

**OBT:**

**OBT:** What is your next project?

**BP:** Black Canadians who fought in the U.S. Civil War.



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