



# Beka Lamb

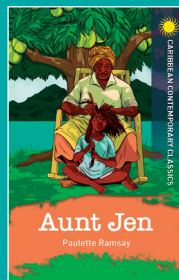
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Set in Belize City in the early 1950s, *Beka Lamb* is the record of a few months in the life of Beka and her family.

Beka and her friend Toycie Qualo are on the threshold of change from childhood to adulthood. Their personal struggles and tragedies play out against a backdrop of political upheaval and regeneration as the British colony of Belize gears up for universal suffrage and progression towards independence.

The politics of the colony, the influence of the mixing of races in society, and the dominating presence of the Catholic Church are woven into the fabric of the story to provide a compelling portrait, 'a loving evocation of Belizean life and landscape'.

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# *Beka Lamb*

Zee Edgell



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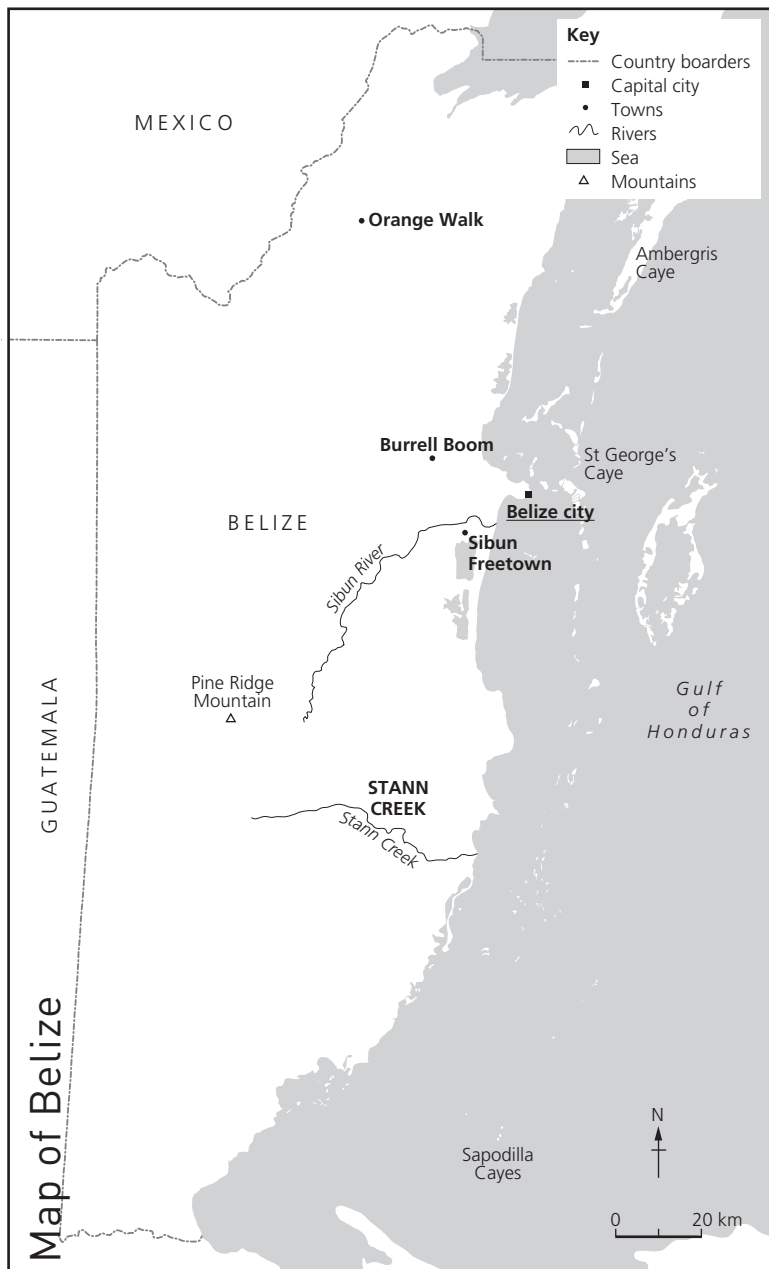
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# *Caribbean Contemporary Classics*

## **Introduction**

Over the last century, Caribbean authors, overflowing with stories about the life and society around them, have written many great and enduring works of literature. The Caribbean novels in this *Caribbean Contemporary Classics* collection were written from around the mid-1900s to the present day, and we are proud to publish them. They serve as unique and personal records and are also works of art, running parallel to what historians say about the region, and revealing to wider audiences the depth and brilliancy of generations of Caribbean writers.

The novels in this collection are re-issued in their original forms even though some words and phrases may seem derogatory in the eyes of modern readers. Some words have been partially redacted, but none have been removed. We acknowledge the sensitivities of persons who have experienced discrimination especially in the verbal form and would like to state without reservation that the publisher in no way supports discrimination against any persons or groups of persons by the publication of these works. As in all works of literature, the language used in these novels reflects the authors' experiences and insights and forms an integral part of the text they set out to produce.

As the publisher, we have followed a number of principles in bringing these works to a wider audience. First, it is important to us to allow readers to interpret the authors' words in the context of the story as a whole, reflected through the readers' own experience, but without trying to dictate what that interpretation should be. Second, we respect the authors' integrity and their intellectual property. Third, we believe it to be important to experience works of art from specific geographic and historical contexts in their original form. The choice, as we see it, is whether to publish the book or not, rather than whether to change its language or not. In the present series, we have opted to publish a series of books which we believe to be significant, valued and important parts of the canon. They are rich, engaging and luminous works, in the authors' authentic voices, and we offer them to readers in the hope that they will delight, entertain and inform.



# CHAPTER 1

ON A WARM November day Beka Lamb won an essay contest at St Cecilia's Academy, situated not far from the front gate of His Majesty's Prison on Milpa Lane. It seemed to her family that overnight Beka changed from what her mother called a 'flatrate Belize creole' into a person with 'high mind'.

'Befo' time,' her Gran remarked towards nightfall, 'Beka would never have won that contest.'

It was not a subject openly debated amongst the politicians at Battlefield Park – a small, sandy meeting ground near the centre of town. At home, however, Beka had been cautioned over and over that the prizes would go to bakras, panias or expatriates.

'But things can change fi true,' her Gran said, slapping at a mosquito.

The front verandah was in its evening gloom, and the honeyed scent of flowering stephanotis, thickly woven into the warping latticework, reminded Beka of the wreaths at her greatgranny's funeral. The vine half-screened the verandah from excessive sunlight during the daytime, and at night, provided a private place from which to observe passersby. Beka fingered the seed pod that dropped like a green mango from the glossy leafed vine. Her Gran continued,

'And long befo' time, you wouldn't *be* at no convent school.'

On the far side of the street below, Miss Eila limped her way to the waterside, a slop bucket heavy in her right hand. As she drew abreast the Lamb yard, she called,

'Any out tonight, Miss Ivy?' Beka was grateful for a slight breeze that carried the bucket's stench away from the house.

'One or two, Eila,' Beka's Gran called across, brushing at her ankles with a cloth she used as a fly whisk. Steadying the swing, she got up and leaned on folded arms over the railing,



‘The boys went into prison this morning, Eila! Going to the meeting tonight?’

‘Shurest thing, Miss Ivy,’ Eila said, turning into the lumber yard opposite on her way to the creek.

The People’s Independence Party, formed nearly two years before, was bringing many political changes to the small colony. And Beka’s grandmother, an early member of the party, felt she deserved some credit for the shift Beka was making from the washing bowl underneath the house bottom to books in a classroom overlooking the Caribbean Sea.

Miss Ivy wasn’t completely at ease with the shift. But whenever her daughter-in-law, Lilia, had troubles with her eyes, Miss Ivy washed and ironed the family’s clothes so that Beka could study. At those times, however, she seldom failed to comment that at fourteen, Beka’s age, she had long been accustomed to handling a bowl and iron alone, and do some cooking as well.

‘Gran?’ Beka said, lifting her head off her knees. ‘What woulda happen to me before time?’

Miss Ivy glanced over to the corner of the verandah where Beka sat on the floor twisting the seed pod around and around. Beka had been asking that same question since she was ten years old, and Miss Ivy always tried to explain the present to Beka with stories about the past. But Lilia had told Miss Ivy during their last big quarrel to please stop filling Beka’s head with old-time story. Lilia said it would make Beka thin-skinned and afraid to try. Miss Ivy picked the square of laundered flour sacking off the swing, and with it began a slow flap, flapping against her legs.

‘Eh, Gran?’

‘If you turn that pod around one mo’ time, Beka Lamb, it will pop right off the vine!’

‘But Granny Ivy ...’

‘Eila coming back,’ Miss Ivy said.

In the sawmill yard across the street, Beka watched Miss Eila’s rinsed-out enamel pail glinting in the abruptness of complete nightfall. Dousing her flashlight, Miss Eila crossed the street, and paused by the picket fence. Miss Eila had lost most of her front teeth. Beka couldn’t see her face clearly in the dark, but the two teeth she had remaining on either side of her gum space gleamed white like the posts that supported Government House gate.

‘Flies really bad at waterside, Miss Ivy,’ she said, brushing her frock tail against her legs.

‘Sawdust in that swamp by the creekside would help with these flies,’ Miss Ivy replied. ‘And I suppose the Comp’ny will wait for more accident befo’ that latrine bridge gets fixed.’

There was no sound from Miss Eila for a while. In the quiet before Friday night began, Beka heard the insistent grumblings of frogs, and the nervous continuous shrilling of every cricket in the high grass of the swamp opposite. Miss Eila’s flashlight licked against the bucket handle.

‘But look how Toycie gone – eh Miss Ivy? December comin’ will make it four months.’

‘Too soon to stop the grievin’, Eila, but time to start,’ Miss Ivy said.

‘My sister will never forgive me, you know Miss I. She only lent Toycie to me.’

‘You gave of your best to Toycie for fourteen years, Eila, ever since Toycie was three, so your sister can hardly grieve more than you.’

Beka slapped at a mosquito whining around her face, and Miss Eila called a little louder,

‘That you up there, Beka pet?’

‘Yes, Mam.’

‘I hear you pass first term, Beka,’ Miss Eila said.



‘Yes, Mam.’

‘She win that contest too, you know, Eila,’ Miss Ivy interjected.

‘Tell me ears now! Keep it up, pet. Toycie woulda win the music prize.’

‘There was no music contest, Eila,’ Miss Ivy said, ‘and whatever happened to that guitar?’

‘It’s still there in the house, Miss Ivy. I cover it with some crocus bag.’

‘You should sell it in these hard times.’

‘Maybe I’ll do just that, Miss Ivy. I eat soso rice and beans Sunday to Sunday since devaluation.’

‘Eila,’ Miss Ivy said as if reminded of something, ‘come early so we can get a seat near the rostrum this time.’

‘Shure thing, Miss Ivy,’ Eila said picking up her bucket.

As Miss Eila began moving off down the street towards her house, Miss Ivy called laughingly after her,

‘And don’t forget your stool, Eila!’

‘Gran!’ Beka exclaimed, scandalised.

‘Well, she never even bring a box to sit upon the last time she was at Battlefield,’ her Gran retorted in anger. ‘Can’t you take a little joke nowadays?’

‘Eila must be getting over Toycie if she’s going to the meeting tonight,’ Miss Ivy said after a while. ‘You coming too, Beka?’

‘Not tonight, Gran,’ Beka answered.

Miss Ivy got out of the swing, settled her bosom, and without saying another word to her grand-daughter, limped on fat, varicose-veined legs into the house.

Beka went over to the swing and sat down. Street lights came on illuminating the wire baskets of lavender bush-orchids her mother strung at intervals high along the front wall of the house. It wasn’t quite seven o’clock, but a few shopkeepers on the corner opened their doors and windows spreading rectangles of light

onto Cashew Street where it became Manatee Lane. Outside Gordillo's Grocery and Dry Goods, the Salvation Army captain and three women were setting up a drum. A man in a white suit and Panama hat peddled lottery to a scrawny creole woman standing in the mud-caked drain. A customer in Chico's Saloon and Bar punched the juke box. Street boys lounging near the doorway broke into song and dance, punctuating the American pop tune with sharp claps as they moved sideways together in a straggly chorus line. The Salvation Army drum began to boom boom boompety, boom. Tambourines jangled.

Loud laughter came from down the street. A dancing boy with a deep manish tone shouted,

'Soldier taffee!'

Beka pulled the swing against the verandah railing and peered over. National Vellor was coming down the street pretending to ignore the hisses, boos and mimicry of the boys playing men outside Chico's Saloon and Bar. A purple velvet dress flopped around her ankles. She swung along on gold, high heeled sling backs, and the silver sequins on her bag winked on and off. Beka went quickly over to the bushy end of the stephanotis vine where she couldn't be seen from the street. She felt ashamed of herself. Vellor had tried hard to save Toyocie, but Lilia had said, only the night before,

'If I catch you conversing with that half-crazy coolie woman once more, Beka Lamb, I'll report you to your father!'

Her mother watched her of late, Beka felt, like a john crow eyeing dead crab.

Vellor clacked by in a stink of Kus Kus perfume. Her straight black hair was swept to the side in a sweep, and the rhinestones of her comb glittered. She didn't so much as glance up at the house. Beka wondered if Vellor had a date in town with one of the British soldiers stationed at Airport Camp, nine miles from Belize.



Miss Ivy came out of the house, a three-legged stool tucked under one arm.

‘That Jamaican lawyer might talk at the meeting tonight, Beka.’  
‘About what, Gran?’

‘Bout why he couldn’t save Pritchad and Gladsen from going to jail. Why don’t you put on your shoes and come? There’s no school tomorrow.’

‘Not tonight, Gran.’ Beka said, ‘I just feel tired.’

‘All right then, but try not to fret too much, especially on a day like today. I’ll wait for Eila outside the gate.’

‘Bye, Gran,’ Beka said as Miss Ivy grunted her way down the front steps.

Beka yawned and stretched out full length on the verandah floor. No wake had been held for Toyicie, not even one night’s worth. Miss Eila had explained to her Gran that times were too hard to hold a proper nine nights for Toyicie, especially as Miss Eila didn’t belong to a lodge or a syndicate. Miss Ivy offered to pay for the food, but Miss Eila’s refusal had been strong.

‘Toycie would not have want me to put misself in Poor House over wake, thank you all the same, Miss Ivy,’ she’d said.

Beka felt that a wake should have been held for Toyicie, at least a remembrance in the privacy of Beka’s own heart. Through the space between the railing and the floor, Beka could see Toyicie’s house down the street. Miss Eila was padlocking the door before coming to meet Granny Ivy who was clearing her throat impatiently as she waited at the gate.

Beka hesitated. It was only today, with a small success of her own, and the panic and fright subsiding, that she dared pause for breath. She turned her head consciously in her mind, expecting to take one quick look before continuing a flight she had begun. But the past surprised her, the pain wasn’t so bad anymore! She stayed longer, turned fully around, caught glimpses of sun shafts,

the glint of the sea, a slight brown-skinned figure with crinkly hair made a bird's nest by the wind, running along the hot sand path at Fisherman's Town ...

'I'm so sleepy now, Toycie gial,' Beka muttered to herself, 'so sleepy and tired, but I'll keep a wake for you when I wake, I swear by jumby's block.'