

**A Writer Speaks: An Interview with
Lorenz Bell Graham
(2 June 1983)
Charles C. Irby**

Missionary, teacher, professor, strikebreaker, cook, waiter, and author are embodied in the national treasure interviewed here. Lorenz Graham received an honorary Doctorate of Letters from his alma mater forty-seven years after receiving the B.A. degree. He is almost as old as the twentieth century in years of age and as young as a college freshman in spirit. Graham is a recognized giant as a writer of literature for young readers. His major works include South Town (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1958), North Town (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965), Whose Town: (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1969), Return to South Town? (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), and John Brown: A Cry for Freedom (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1980). In the following interview Graham shares aspects of his life with those who share the dream of a better society.

Lorenz Bell Graham was born January 27, 1902, in New Orleans to Elizabeth Etta Bell Graham and David Andrew Graham. David Graham, a minister of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, moved his family to Seattle in 1916, and Lorenz Graham attended Broadway High School in that city. The interview begins with that period of his life.

LG: I finished high school in 1920 and went to the University of Washington, but I did not graduate from there.

CI: What did you do after you quit the University of Washington?

LG: I worked at sea as a room steward and waiter on steamships and also as a waiter for the Southern Pacific Railway.

CI: The Southern Pacific came down to California?

LG: Yes, in fact, that was my first way of getting to Los Angeles. I came down in a dining car.

CI: How did you get involved in working on a steamship?

LG: Well, that's a long story.

CI: Tell the story.

LG: While I was in high school, my white companions used to get jobs working on ships in the summer. I could never get a job. Race. Then the Seaman's Union called a strike. The Alaska Steamship Company advertised for people to go to sea. I volunteered. I wound up as ship steward on the S.S. Northwestern headed for Alaska.

CI: What year was that?

LG: That was 1921. I was chief cook—not because I was a good cook but because I was a volunteer. When I revealed the fact that I was a cook and a Negro, they zeroed in on the fact and asked, "Well, do you have any friends who are also cooks?" And I said, "Oh, yes, I have lots of friends who are cooks with lots of experience." "And could you organize a crew?" Well, I organized a crew, and I signed on the ship.

CI: So you were essentially a strikebreaker?

LG: I was a strikebreaker. I was a scab.

CI: How long did you do that?

LG: I did that off and on for about two and a half years and then I got off a ship in San Pedro and came to Los Angeles to go to school.

CI: What school did you go to then?

LG: University of California, Southern Branch.

CI: Did you graduate from UCLA?

LG: No, I did not.

CI: When did you go to Liberia?

LG: 1924.

CI: Why did you go to Liberia?

LG: I went to Liberia for several reasons. But immediately, I heard a bishop of the AME Church who had established a school in Liberia make an eloquent plea for the help of trained young people who would be able to go on to teach. This was while I was at UCLA. I volunteered, and, much to the surprise of my friends and myself, I was accepted. So I left in 1924 to go to Liberia to teach.

CI: How long did you stay in Liberia?

LG: I stayed in Liberia a little over four years.

CI: What did you teach?

LG: My value as a teacher was that I had taken all the trades that there were to take in high school, including woodworking, auto mechanics, machine shop, foundry, drafting, and so forth. I knew

how to work. When I discussed my qualifications this was what appeared to the bishop to be of great value in his school in Africa. So I supervised the teaching of trades and I also taught high school subjects including English, public speaking, and mathematics.

CI: What was the name of the school in Liberia?

LG: Monrovia College. It ran from beginners through high school only. Most of the students were living on the premises. About 180 were living on the premises, from 180 to 200, and then there were another 100 or so who came in from the towns.

CI: Who paid their tuition?

LG: Most of them paid no tuition. This was supported by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and their missionary program. If their parents could pay tuition, they were asked to do so. Most of them paid nothing.

CI: When did you return from Liberia?

LG: I came back and I stopped in New York. Later on, the same year, the young woman whom I had met in Liberia came back, and we were married in Richmond, Virginia, in 1929.

CI: And what was her name?

LG: Her name was Ruth Giles Morris, and she was from the east coast. Her father was a well-known, quite prominent Baptist minister.

CI: Then what did you do after you got married?

LG: After we got married we anticipated going back to Africa as teaching missionaries, but the Depression came on and the foreign mission board of the National Baptist Convention used us for raising money to try to maintain and support the missionary program over there. Then, in the meantime before our sailing date, we discovered that my wife was pregnant. The secretary of the foreign mission board felt that it would not be wise to send out a young couple beginning a family. The secretary himself had served in Africa and he had children who were born in Africa. He knew some of the hardships and problems. So we did not go to Africa.

CI: What did you do instead?

LG: I was in Richmond, Virginia, and there was the Depression. I suffered the tortures of the unemployed. I worked WPA. I waited tables and I tried to get a job. I could get a job at teaching. I was offered a job at teaching at rates of something like fifty-five to seventy dollars a month as a principal. And I could make more money at waiting tables, so I waited tables. It was a miserable

life. Then I also went to school to try to get a Bachelor's degree because I had not gotten a degree yet. I went to Virginia Union and received a Bachelor's degree in 1936. I was immediately appointed as a camp educational adviser in the Civilian Conservation Corps. That was a good position.

CI: Where was that?

LG: That was in Virginia beginning in Fort Monroe and later moving to south-side Virginia near a town called South Hill which became the focus of my book *South Town*.

CI: How long did it take you to write *South Town*?

LG: Well, the proper answer is that it takes all of one's life to write a book. But in this case it took less than six months to turn out the first manuscript.

CI: How long did it take you to get it published?

LG: Twelve years.

[The black family in South Town had too much dignity for the white publishers, and that is the reason why it took twelve years to get the manuscript published as a book. C.C.I.]



Lorenz B. Graham at the Eleventh Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies, Ontario, California 16 April 1983.
(Photograph by Barbara L. Hiura)

- CI: How long did it take you to do *North Town*?
- LG: Approximately a year to do the draft.
- CI: How long did it take you to get that published?
- LG: About three years.
- CI: Three years—getting shorter. And *Whose Town*?
- LG: By that time I was away and running, and it did not take too long to get that one published.
- CI: How about *Return to South Town*?
- LG: There was a demand by this time for my books, so it went pretty fast.
- CI: How long did it take you to write *John Brown*?
- LG: I was working on it for about ten years because there was a lot of research. I had completed a pictorial on the raid at Harper's Ferry, a picture book for Scholastics Publishing Company, and I wanted to do a full narrative on John Brown. I continued the research and did other things in the meantime, had some other publications. I taught at Cal Poly [California State Polytechnic University] and it was brought to my attention that I wasn't writing while I was teaching because teaching took up too much time even though I was not a full-time teacher. I had to come out of the classroom in order to get back on *John Brown*.
- CI: Good! That's the question I wanted to ask anyway. What advice do you have for people who want to write literature about coloured ethnic people in this country?
- LG: Giving advice is really difficult. I hesitate to do it. I want to tell you something that I feel about writing. I first feel on a general plane that I ought to write that which I know well. I am black. I have been black all my life. I've lived in Africa. I've been to the West Indies. And I've been in other countries around the world. I am black, and I am coming from there. I've experienced all the hell that goes with being black. I've been discriminated against. I've been isolated. I've been disenfranchised, and I've been a victim of racial violence. I know these things. So, I write from there. Next, I think that a writer ought to write that which is important. It was my realization when I was in Africa that the Africans were not as wild, as vicious, as barbarous, as uncivilized, as backward as I had expected them to be. I had gotten my opinions, primarily, from that which I had read about Africans. I found that there were no books about Africans, *no books about Africans which dealt with them as people*. I felt that somebody ought to write some books about Africans treating them as people. This was my motivation for writing.

CI: Tell me about your African books.

LG: My first good novel which I submitted was considered attractive to Random House. They said they were very interested in it, but they said, "there weren't enough American people who would accept this view of Africans. The characters have too much sense. They're too well organized. They're not savage enough. We couldn't sell this book." However, one of my early books was *Tales of Momolu* which was the story of an African boy at home without benefit of any contact with our way of life. And it gives village life, the training program in which this boy is involved, the activities, the family structure, the village political structure. This was very well accepted. The reviewer in the *New York Times* said, "The American boy reading about Momolu will recognize him as just another fellow." For this I was very happy. I later did another Momolu book with the same boy growing up, a little older, at the age of fifteen—puberty—coming from the interior village out to the coast and seeing the Americoliberian way of life, learning some things from it, being repelled by some of the things that he sees also, some of the unpleasant things.

CI: How did the *Town* series evolve?

LG: My *Town* series came out of the realization that our whole race problem was involved with people not knowing other people and my belief that I could present a normal black family. The books about American Negroes were of three kinds: there were sociological studies of Du Bois and Johnson and some others; there were historical ones like those of Carter G. Woodson; and there were some hero books about outstanding, successful Negroes—my sister [Shirley Graham Du Bois] was into that—George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass. But there were no books about people like I considered myself to be, people like people in my family. People who were all around me. People of whom there were so many. The people who were in South Hill, Virginia, which I knew so well. With the help of my own family, my wife and my children, we put together the story of a plain family who had dignity, who had some ambition, who had little education, but *who believed* that there was a god somewhere and that we shall overcome some day. And this was the beginning of the *Town* series. The only books I had published before starting the *Town* series were African-based, the children's book about Momolu and the Bible stories in West African pidgin—*How God Fixed Jonah*, the birth of Jesus, and the flood.

CI: What book are you working on now?

LG: I don't like to talk too much about that because I have a conference tomorrow with my collaborator, Ruth Graham May, Ph.D.

CI: Is that your daughter?

LG: Yes. We're doing a textbook for upper elementary grades about family stories. We are recognizing that every student out there has stories within the family and that each student can do research. That is, asking parents, the aunts, the grandparents, if available, about how they came through or what their experiences were, and whatever achievements or whatever failures they have had. All of us have had the elements of great stories within our lives. We had love. It may not have been successful. We might have loved and lost. We have had some successes. We have had some failures. We have had some problems. We have had some struggles to overcome.