

African boarding school experience informs new novel by island author

Book sales benefit
Kongwa school

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Salt Spring resident Anthony Edwards reveals a fascinating world that has seldom been examined in literature with his debut novel, *The Slope of Kongwa Hill*.

Set in colonial Tanganyika (now Tanzania) almost 60 years ago, the book is a fictionalized account of Edwards' own experience at a remote English boarding school in the African bush, located on the grounds of a notorious failed agricultural scheme.

Although a first-time author (many will know Edwards as a driver for Salt Spring's transit system) he has had a long career in the arts, beginning as a photographer and moving to television and then advertising. He began keeping the notes that would form most of his personal research as early as 1984, when he became an early adopter of the home computer.

"I didn't think I'd ever write a book — I really didn't. I thought I'd write a record for my kids," Edwards said.

"I only really started when we moved to Salt Spring, and fortunately I had all these notes."

Kongwa School was a temporary, co-ed facility that

existed for just 10 years while a permanent boarding school was being constructed in another location. It made use of the abandoned buildings originally constructed for the failed "Groundnut Scheme," but in taking advantage of that opportunity, resulted in creating a facility that was many miles away from the nearest town.

Edwards was just nine years old when he first arrived at the school in 1952, and although he had lived at boarding schools since he was three and a half — his parents had worked and lived in Nigeria, where the climate was deemed unhealthy — he had never been so isolated or experienced such an alien landscape, where poisonous snakes were abundant and children were known to be carried off by crocodiles.

Looking back on this remarkable environment many decades later, Edwards admits he was very unhappy in the early days, due to being away from his parents for the long school term, the school's strictness and the constant fear of beatings. In addition to the outside dangers (including situations with "shades of Lord of the Flies"), there was the harsh discipline handed out by headmaster, teachers and student prefects at every opportunity.

"But it was very free — and

boys like that," Edwards said. The same unfenced openness to the wilderness, which forced children to fight off hyenas just to get to the outhouse at night, also provided them the opportunity to explore. The students were essentially unsupervised except for needing to attend their classes and meals.

The school's remote location became more of a drawback when famine hit the country. Fresh food had to be trucked in from the nearest town, but when supplies came they were often short on meat. The senior boys had the responsibility of hunting for game, and a large concrete platform in the yard doubled as laundry table and butchering station.

Luckily for Edwards, and his readers, the experience wasn't all bad.

"As we got older we started learning the ropes and learned to be more careful," he said. "And then we started getting into girls." A central theme of the book is therefore the boy Edwards' coming of age and his relationship with Hazel, an older student who offers to teach him about girls.

Edwards has incorporated much research into the novel, having contacted fellow Kongwa alumni and historical records, as well as drawing from his own memories for the emotional content and character arc. Although the story he tells is largely his own — he

has not changed his name or those of the other characters — he has approached the content as a novel rather than a strict memoir for honesty's sake.

"For me, the integrity of a memoir or autobiographical account requires an extraordinary amount of verification," Edwards explained, adding that he has included a lot of dialogue that is believable and could have happened, but that no one can remember for sure.

"The other thing is that, given that I'm not a famous author (befitting a memoir), I had to find a way to give the story over in a very interesting way."

While Edwards' former school mates, now located all around the globe, have certainly appreciated his initiative and the resulting product, his real target audience is all the people who know nothing about this unique place and time.

"I didn't write the book for Kongwians, but for the rest of the world, because no one else has. It's 10 years of the Earth's history and there is no record of it."

The Slope of Kongwa Hill is available locally at Salt Spring Books and Volume II, and is also available in all major e-book formats through Amazon. Half of the profits from book sales will benefit Mnyakongo School, the impoverished facility that now serves some 800 Wagogo children in Kongwa today.