

Michael Fraser: How I wrote the poem that won the 2016 CBC Poetry Prize

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Erin Stropes · July 6



Michael Fraser won the 2016 CBC Poetry Prize for "African Canadian in Union Blue." (Krystyna Wesolowska)

Michael Fraser's poem "[African Canadian in Union Blue](#)" won the 2016 CBC Poetry Prize. The poem, which was written specifically for the contest, is inspired by the black Canadians who fought in the American Civil War — a period of history that Fraser has researched for more than two years, informing much of his writing.

In his own words, Fraser shares how he wrote "[African Canadian in Union Blue](#)" and how he feels about winning the CBC Poetry Prize.

The power of poetry

"I also write fiction, but prefer poetry's immediacy and ability to quickly relate the essence of being human. Poetry is efficient and deadly accurate when describing the passionately visceral and intrinsically human experiences we share. I believe poetry's true power dwells in its ability to articulate and display human emotion, passion and the visceral. It is most adept at portraying that which is most ingrained and inherent about us. When do most people write poems in their lives? When they're in love. Poetry, especially in the form of lyrics, unfastens and relates love's mesmerizing husk better than any other art form."

On researching a dark period in Canadian history

"The poem is a first-person account of an African-Canadian soldier leaving the Union Army due to little or no pay, horrid living conditions and animosity directed at him from white Union soldiers and relatives. The poem is from my current

manuscript, which profiles and commemorates the lives of African-Canadians (British North Americans at the time) who fought in the American Civil War. I'm fascinated that many of these individuals went to fight for the freedom of their African brethren in the U.S. while fully cognizant of the severe discrimination and outward enmity expressed by Union soldiers and residents. They were inadequately armed, underpaid or not paid at all, poorly rationed, and suffered horribly in unsanitary training camps.

"Moreover, once engaged in battle, it was impossible for black Union troops to surrender. Confederates did not recognize black soldiers as human. Thus, the conventions of surrender were never applied to black soldiers. This resulted in many massacres of black troops, the most notorious being the Battle of the Crater, and Fort Pillow. White soldiers were given quarter [shown mercy, in other words] while black troops were slaughtered.

"I believe it's crucial and necessary to educate people about African-Canadian history. People are unaware that slavery existed in Canada and the first slaves arrived in 1628! It wasn't abolished until 1835. Also, we should recognize and commemorate the sacrifices these brave African-Canadians made."

On entering the CBC Poetry Prize at the last possible minute

"I felt relieved when the poem was finished. I completed the poem roughly 15 minutes before the deadline. There was no time to contemplate or ponder line breaks or word choice. In fact, the bulk of the poem was written in three hours. I had composed the first five lines two weeks earlier. Hemingway claims one's subconscious will work on your writing when one is not writing, and I believe this is what happened in this particular instance."