

Hunter Graduate Writes BEST SELLER

Ruth G. Freidmann '29

The success of our fellow alumna, Bel Kaufman '34, author of the best seller, *Up the Down Staircase*, fills us with pride and pleasure.

Bel, of course, is delighted with the response to her novel. Teachers from the midwest remark how well she portrays their kids. A superintendent wrote that her book should be required reading for anyone who trains teachers. She is happy that so many readers respond to the warmth in the book. "I wrote it with love," she says. "I was afraid people would think it was just a funny book."

Up the Down Staircase seems more like a documentary than a novel. It contains no narrative. It is composed exclusively of spoken dialogue, letters, memoranda, notes, formal circulars, student tests and compositions, and other apparently authentic documents, which seem actually to have been retrieved from teachers' wastebaskets, desk drawers and files. However, most of it has been invented, but from such a rich background of experience that it is perhaps truer than reality. "It has fictional truth."

The book grew out of a short piece, published in the *Saturday Review*, which became Chapter Fifteen, "From Miss Barrett's Wastebasket." Prentice-Hall approached her agent the very day the issue appeared, and suggested a novel using the same technique throughout the book. And when you read the book, you find that from this agglomeration of scraps and bits and pieces, the characters come alive with distinct individuality and, before you realize it, you are inextricably involved in their problems and destinies.

Although some see the book as an exposé of intolerable conditions and an indictment against inept school administration, it was written purely as a novel. Of her many writings—mainly short stories, some lyrics for privately performed musicals—this is the first about school, and she intends it to be the last. Her plans include another novel, and lyrics for a forthcoming Broadway musical.

Up the Down Staircase happily combines Bel's two careers. She is as much a teacher as a writer. She looks back appreciatively at the excellent training provided by Seward Park High School where she served as teacher-in-training. Several years of substitute teaching followed, at various high schools. Her permanent appointment was to the Central High School of Needle Trades where she taught for eight years, resigning in order to write. She returned to teaching on a per diem basis, but at the High



Bel Kaufman

School for the Performing Arts mutual affection was so great that she yielded to entreaties and was reinstated. About five years ago she resigned a second time, again in order to write. Now she teaches at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, newly opened in September in bright quarters at 134 West 51st Street. She also gives a course in Eighteenth Century Literature at the New School for Social Research.

At the college, a teaching program of fifteen hours and no clerical chores leaves time for writing. Asked whether it was possible to combine high school teaching with writing, she said, "I can't, because of my total involvement. Perhaps others can." But she could think of no one who had done it successfully.

Bel spoke no English until she was twelve. Her native language was Russian, and she became proficient in French and German. (She still thinks in Russian when adding or multiplying.) As a child she knew Hebrew well enough to correspond with the famous Hebrew poet, Bialik, a friend of the family; but she remembers little of it now. Although her grandfather, Sholom Aleichem, won great renown as a Yiddish writer, the family spoke Russian at home, and Bel as well as her mother, the only writer among his six children, learned Yiddish only after arriving in the United States. (Bel's mother died just a

month before publication of *Up the Down Staircase*; but she was able to see a pre-publication copy.)

Bel was born in Berlin where her father studied medicine. When his studies were completed the family returned to Russia, residing in Odessa and Moscow. They were in Berlin again for nine months on the way to the United States.

Bel's first English words, "I am a large girl," were learned on board ship. ("False. I was a scrawny, thin thing.") Her next attempt was in a Bronx elementary school where, with another silent, non-English speaking girl, she had been placed in a 1A class. "M-moo-oom-m?" she asked, waving her hand. After several weeks in that class, "Do you know what happened? I started speaking English!" In two years she skipped her way through the grades, graduating at the normal age of fourteen.

The 1A class in the Bronx was her first school experience. As was customary in affluent Russian families, Bel had been educated by private tutors. She had read all the great Russian classics and knew Chekhov's short stories almost by heart.

Shakespeare and Coleridge had been introduced to her in Russian translation. "But in the United States I found wonderful things—the Bobbsy Twins, Red Fairy Tales. . . ." For the first time she was reading children's stories.

"I had a dream." She tells of watching the senior girls with awe. They carried their gym sneakers tied together by the strings and hung over one shoulder. Some day she would carry her sneakers so, "And then I would be a real American girl!"

Bel recalls her extracurricular activities at Hunter with obvious pleasure. She was secretary of the English Club, member of Make-Up Box and the Shakespeare Society. ("I remember going from class to class reciting Shakespeare.") In the Hunter *Echo* she was published for the first time since, at seven, her four-line paean to spring had appeared in a Russian children's magazine.

She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa as a junior, and to Sigma Tau Delta (honorary English society) and was graduated Magna Cum Laude. At Columbia she studied English and Comparative Literature, specializing in eighteenth-century research, and received her M.A. with highest honors in 1936.

Bel does not remember her grandfather, but among the family traditions one is still being observed after nearly a half century. In his will, Sholom Aleichem asked that he be remembered with laughter, not tears, and that, on the anniversary of his death, his family and friends gather round and read his funniest stories. And so they do each year, and they laugh.

In *Up the Down Staircase* Bel Kaufman shares generously with us her rich heritage of wit and humor.

In the PEACE CORPS



Carol Ann Roxby

Carol Ann Roxby '64 is serving with a group of fifty-two Peace Corps Volunteers who went to Panama last winter. They are participating in an urban and rural community-action health project.

Before leaving for Panama Carol's group had studied for three months at the University of Arizona and had had three weeks' training at the Peace Corps camp in Puerto Rico.

Volunteers in Carol's group in Panama are working with farmers and laborers who come to the cities in search of better job opportunities and better living conditions.



George E. Keyes

George E. Keyes '59 has been serving with the Peace Corps in Honduras since January. As a member of the Central America University Education Program, George teaches English at the University of Honduras in Tegucigalpa. He also teaches at the only training institution for secondary school teachers in the country, the Escuela Superior del Profesorado de Francisco Morazán, and the Escuela de Servicio Social.

George also works with the Escuelas Radiofonicas, which beam literacy classes to rural areas, and he advises amateur dramatics groups.