Black Bottle Man
by Craig Russell
paper (teen fiction).

Reviewed by Donna Gamache

*Black Bottle Man*, subtitled “A Fable,” is an interesting tale by Brandon author and lawyer Craig Russell. According to Russell, the book began life as a novel, became a radio play staged at Brandon, and then transformed back into a novel. In the process he created an unusual story that readers won’t forget. However, I’m not sure that the “teen fiction” classification is accurate. Older teens with a taste for fantasy and history will enjoy the book, but the story format, with different viewpoints and timelines, and a couple of incidents in which sexual matters are suggested would indicate that the book is not intended for younger teens.

The main character is Rembrandt, whom we see in several timeframes – as a homeless 90-year-old in 2007, backtracking to 1927 when he is ten and following him over the years. He is the only child in the tiny community of Three Farms, consisting of the homes of Rembrandt’s parents and two sets of aunts and uncles, built close together on adjoining quarter-section prairie farms. The other couples are childless, and the two aunts are both desperate to have a child of their own. When a letter and glass bottle suggest a possible solution, the two women are eager to try it, though the men want no part of the “black magic.” Eventually the aunts trick Uncle Billy into doing his part, and both women become pregnant. Soon the devil, dressed as the “black bottle man,” arrives to claim the women’s souls. In an attempt to save them, the men make a deal, and Rembrandt, Pa and Uncle Thompson take to the road, moving every twelve days, trying to find a champion to defeat the black bottle devil. As hobos, they learn to use new magical powers: they can make something happen by carving meaningful symbols into wood or on the ground, though they cannot control what occurs next. The story follows
the wandering Rembrandt across Canada and the U.S. through different stages of his life, with predominating themes of family connection, loyalty and betrayal.

Interspersed at intervals with Rembrandt’s story is that of Gail, a former primary teacher who is now also homeless and has compulsive habits that are contributing to her destruction. Gradually her past history is woven into the story to explain reasons for her behaviour. Her homelessness is an interesting contrast to that of the Depression-era hobos. When the 90-year-old Rembrandt meets Gail, he tries to use his magic to protect her, too.

The dual plots and timelines, and the mixture of realism and fantasy are handled with a skill that adult readers will appreciate. Craig Russell has a deft touch for similes such as: “The front door to the house, half-hinged, hung like a torn lip” (155) and “It was like her bosoms were Magnetic North and he was a compass needle” (95).

Donna Firby Gamache is a writer/retired teacher from MacGregor, Manitoba. Her newest work is Sarah: A New Beginning, a novel for children, loosely based on the coming of her great-grandparents to Canada in 1891.