

# Black Bottle Man: A Fable By Craig Russell

## A Book Review

Saskatchewan School Library Association

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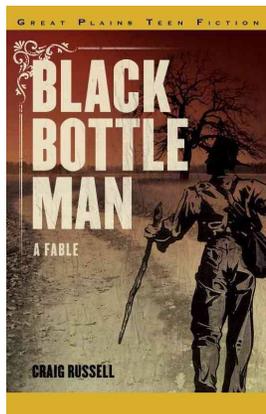
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What would you be willing to sacrifice for the thing you wanted beyond imagination? Would you sell your soul to the Devil himself? If you do, how is that debt repaid? These are the questions surrounding the book Black Bottle Man: A Fable by Craig Russell. A story that spans over 80 years and captures the heart of sacrifice; what people are willing to sacrifice for their deepest desire, for their family, for love, for survival.



<http://www.greatplains.mb.ca/buy-books/black-bottle-man/>

Three Farms is located in the dustbowl of the 1920's. Three couples; two brothers along with their sister and spouses struggle to make ends meet, but happily live and work together. Children would be a welcome addition, but Rembrant is the only child. His father's brother Uncle Thompson and wife Emma, and his father's sister Aunt Annie and husband Billy have tried unsuccessfully for years to have children. In a desperate attempt to gain what they want most, Rembrant's two aunts force a deal to be made with the Black Bottle Man for a magic bottle. This breaks the family apart and forces Rembrant, his Pa and Uncle Thompson to leave Three Farms and set off on a journey for their souls. Move every twelve days or be taken, find a champion to face the Devil and be saved.

The story weaves together through time, back and forth between present (2007) and past. Russell paints a perfect picture of what life is like mainly in the 1920s and 30s both on the farm and on the road as the three of them move from place to place every twelve days to save their family from the Black Bottle Man. As people struggled to make a living after the Great War and during the Depression, moving from place to place to find work, 'buying a miracle', and the power of prayer become important survival tools. Russell works those creatively, drawing the reader into

the setting and crux of the story. The struggle against the times, good vs. evil and even the 'coming of age' of a boy are intertwined wonderfully to keep the reader engaged and entertained. There is a lesson in all of this; after all, it is a fable and comes together quite craftily at the end.

The novel was the Gold Medal winner of the 2011 Moonbeam Awards, and finalist in several other literary awards. It is, in my opinion, geared perhaps towards high school aged young adults due to the complexity and maturity of the story. The length is perfect as the description and story is interesting and appealing to that age group. Growing up on the prairies, much like the author who is from Manitoba helps me identify with and have a deeper appreciation of this story, its backdrop, and the lessons learned.