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Review: Memoir

Chinese boxes

Judy Fong Bates has written a brilliant, affecting memoir of her parents' uneasy journey to the Golden Mountain (a.k.a. Canada)

Reviewed by Keith Garebian

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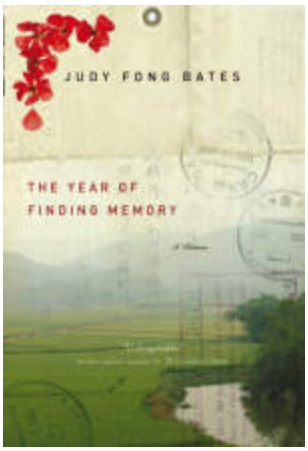

The Year of Finding Memory: A Memoir, by Judy Fong Bates, Random House Canada, 296 pages, $29.95

After her acclaimed first novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Café,* six years ago, Judy Fong Bates consolidates her reputation as a writer whose plain, quiet style, free of elaborately gilded language and devices, is well calibrated to the grain and texture of her themes. A Chinese-born Canadian who feels more connected to Canada than to the land of her ancestors, she is a clever saboteur of narrative conventions of the immigrant story, as she proves with her superb memoir *The Year of Finding Memory,* a moving account of her parents' desolation as immigrants to Canada.

Quite beyond the shock of its opening, in which her frail, meek father, beset with ill health and the accumulated bitterness of years of indignity and humiliation, hangs himself, this memoir, like all true memoirs, has the piercing sharpness of unexpected life-affecting revelations.

We are what we remember, but we are better according to how we remember. Fong Bates remembers the story of her parents well, but only after a struggle with time and various, sometimes-conflicting, versions of other family members who are all, in some way, born storytellers. Her memoir builds itself out of the shock of her father's suicide in the summer of 1972, an explosion like that of shattering glass, “hurling shards so small and fine” they embedded themselves deep in her flesh, “never to be removed.”

Fong Bates discovers a small cardboard box tucked under her dead father's bed, and in this box his Chinese passport, immunization certificates, the stub of an airline ticket from Hong Kong to *Gam Sun* (Gold Mountain), the Chinese name for Canada, their anticipated El Dorado. She also discovers his Canadian citizenship certificate with his photograph and dates of his trips back home, bringing to her mind memories of the hated head tax imposed only on Chinese and the cost of her own unhappiness in the story of her parents.

Her father and his elder brother had arrived in Canada from Kaiping County (in Guangdong Province) in 1914, on a day when the mayor of Vancouver, expressing concern about the large number of Chinese immigrants entering his city, emphasized the uncontrollable temper of Orientals to make his case against them. Nine years later, Canada passed the Exclusion Act that prevented Chinese from sponsoring family for immigration. Bates's father had already had children from his first wife, but her mother (divorced from her first husband, an opium addict) had been a schoolteacher in Canton before becoming the second wife after proposing to him in a shrewd strategy of survival.

Wearing a gold pendant with “HAPPY” embossed on it, she and young Judy (who wore a gold bracelet with the word “LUCKY”) fled what had become Communist China for Canada, leaving behind the mother's daughter by her first husband, Ming Nee.

Bates never once saw a sign of affection between her parents, who spent most of their lives quarrelling bitterly and lamenting their adoptive country. Her father owned a hand laundry, first in Allendale, then in Acton, small Ontario towns in which he and his family were for a while really the only Chinese. The family lived without a refrigerator, car, bathtub or phone. Food was cooked on a two-burner hot plate.

Though burdened by work, racism and heartache, her father quietly wrote verse that his widow would discard after his passing. Unable to speak English, Fong Bates's sharp-tongued mother hardly ever left the laundry to go anywhere: “As far as she was concerned, her life had ended the day she set foot on Canadian soil.” She gave her daughter an imperishable image of this fate: a table sawn irreparably in half.

One of the wonders of this book is the way in which the author joins these two parts together by stitching a story within stories of different time periods and cultures: her parents' separate marriages and fortunes in pre-Communist China, the impact of the Cultural Revolution, their separate expatriations and misery, Fong Bates's impatience with her mother's bitterness, the parents' aging, dementia and deaths in Toronto, and Fong Bates's momentous trip (with relatives and her empathetic Anglo-Canadian husband) to ancestral Kaiping. where she made valuable but soul-shaking discoveries about family secrets, love, loss, courage and shame.

Fong Bates evokes daily life in Kaiping with sharp sensory detail, including the eclectic architecture, communal lifestyle, estranged or eccentric family members and their superstitions. Characters (such as First Wife, who dies after over-indulging in dog meat and yellow beans, or half-sister Jook, who is old enough to be Fong Bates's mother) emerge without fuss or melodramatic elaboration, and Chinese history (such as the Japanese air-raids and assault on Nanking, and the brutality of communism) is seen in brief episodes.

The book cuts back and forth between her return visit and her memories of the past when she yearned to be a “normal” Canadian girl with “normal” immigrant parents. Fong Bates's style, while understated and non-symptomatic of literary labour, grows out of a need to discover truths about her parents, her Chinese blood family, and the mysterious but comforting nature of memory. No fairy tale, this is one of those rare memoirs where the reader never wants the book to end.

Keith Garebian's book of poems, Children of Ararat, was launched in April in Edmonton and Calgary.