

The Interview

'My parents are a part of Canadian history': Judy Fong Bates



Photo: Fernando Morales / Globe and Mail

In an attempt to understand her parents' tragic lives, author Judy Fong Bates went on a pilgrimage back to China

Sarah Hampson

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When Judy Fong Bates was a teenager of 15 or 16, she declared to her friends that she was going to write a book about her mother. Little did she know that it would take her nearly 45 years to do it.

"The story had all the elements of great drama," the author of *The Year of Finding Memory* says during a recent interview in Toronto. In her first marriage, her mother "was married to a man who abused her, who was an opium addict, who was a gambler. She was betrothed at the age of three; married by 16. She always told me that she had missed having her feet bound by a few years."

After she left her first husband, her mother moved to a small Chinese town, Ning Kai Lee, where the man who would become her second spouse (and Ms. Fong Bates' father), who was then married with four children, had hired her to teach in the local school. She later left that post to learn about silkworm culture in Nanking, but had to flee – on the last train, with a secret pouch sewn into her undergarments, she told her daughter – when the Japanese descended in 1937.

She went to Shanghai, and from there, again in flight from Japanese invaders, caught the last boat to Canton. By that time, Ms. Fong Bates' father was stranded in Canada, where he often went on business. His first wife had died. As a way of securing a future, her mother wrote him a letter proposing marriage. After the war, in 1947, he sailed to Hong Kong for a reunion. They hadn't seen each other for 15 years.

Ms. Fong Bates knew of this story because her mother told it to her, obsessively almost, when they were living in small Ontario towns (first in Allandale, now part of Barrie, and later in Acton), after immigrating to Canada in 1955, when she was a girl of six, and her parents had left their older children from their previous marriages back in China. "My mother wanted to let me know that she had led a life that was not monotonous."

Her parents ran a hand laundry. Growing up, she experienced their deep unhappiness. They had no refrigerator, no car, no bathtub, no phone. She watched from behind a curtain as customers came to hand over their dirty clothes. "They noticed shit stains in people's underwear," Ms. Fong Bates says,

her soft-spoken manner suddenly broken by the crudeness of the description. “I never told my friends that my parents had to do this. ... It’s just with retrospect that you realize how humiliating it was.”

But if she had the kind of dramatic story every budding writer wishes for, events later in her life made it impossible to tell. In the summer of 1972, when she was 22, her father, 80, hanged himself in the basement of the tiny row house her parents had in Toronto’s Chinatown. Ms. Fong Bates had just had lunch with them. Her parents had quarrelled, as usual. Her mother, a bitter-tongued woman, had scolded her father, who sat there, defeated.

For many years, she couldn’t speak about the manner of his death, even with family members, let alone write about it. Her mother’s death in 2000 allowed her to revisit the story with a more dispassionate eye. “You really have to look at all the information and decide, ‘Do I have a story here, and can I keep the tension?’ These are decisions you make as a writer, not as a daughter who’s a blubbing, emotional mess,” she explains. She and her husband, Michael, returned to China with several other family members in 2006, as she began to piece together the surprising story of her parents’ lives before they came to Canada.

The Year of Finding Memory is told in simple, clear language, as Ms. Fong Bates, author of the critically acclaimed 2004 novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, tiptoes into the past and tries to reconcile what she learns with what she remembers as a child. She begins her memoir by reporting, in a straightforward manner, the fact of her father’s suicide. But she doesn’t describe the heart-wrenching scene of that lunch before he descended into the basement to his death until the end of the book, having told their story, and her appreciation of it, in between.

“That was very painful,” she says of writing that scene. “I cried buckets,” the mother of two grown daughters says quietly.

She had enough distance to see her parents as interesting characters from a lost era. “I felt my parents are a part of Canadian history. I feel that they’re pioneers. They may not have lived in a log house and they’re perhaps not Pierre Elliott Trudeau, Tommy Douglas, Laura Secord or General Wolfe. Those big, powerful people will be remembered; they will be written about. They’re kind of the bricks. And people like my parents are the mortar. But without that mortar, those bricks will just come tumbling down. People like my parents who did all the little

things are just as important as the story of Canada, and I guess I didn’t want them to be forgotten.”

As Ms. Fong Bates utters that last sentence, she seems startled by the strength of her own pointed conviction. It’s as though quiet reflection – the carefully-considered pace of thought that’s so evident in her book – is what she is more accustomed to, as a Chinese girl who grew up knowing that her reality was different from that of other children; wanting to fit in.

I ask her what her mother might have thought of this book. She cannot know for sure how her mother would have felt, she says. “But I think that writing this book was truly an act of love,” she comments by way of an answer. “It’s giving back by saying this is what my parents did for me. They sacrificed for me.”

Pressed, she offers a simpler answer in her quiet, self-effacing manner.

“Because I am a storyteller.” She pauses, hands folded on the table in front of her. “I am a storyteller,” she repeats. She lifts her face. There’s a small smile, and a conflicted look of apology, love and defiance.