

## Memoir traces trip to uncover family truth

Reviewed by: Maureen Scurfield

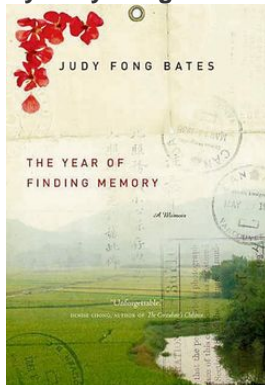


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Judy Fong Bates' trip to China answered questions about her parents.

### **The Year of Finding Memory**

**By Judy Fong Bates**



**Random House Canada, 304 pages, \$30**

This quietly affecting memoir qualifies as "creative non-fiction." Though it makes several protective name changes, it feels truthful.

In 1972, Judy Fong Bates' father killed himself in the basement of his Toronto house, well after his

business, a small-town Chinese hand laundry, was sold.

Clearly, he still felt the pain of what he called his "gow meng," his dog's life, here in Canada.

What had his life been back in China that had always made this new life so hard to bear? Why was her mother so angry and bitter? What was the whole story back home?

Looking for many answers, Fong Bates takes two trips to the Pearl Delta region of southern China after 2006 when she's silver-haired and "past middle age."

The first clue is the arrival scene in Kaiping City. A group of about 20 very excited Chinese relatives are at the Ever Joint Hotel to greet Judy, a retired teacher and writer (*Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*, *China Dog and Other Stories*), plus her tall Canadian husband Michael and 11 other relatives.

After a trip through the countryside to their ancestral village, they're surprised with a great fanfare in their honour. "The entire village of Ning Kai Lee was waiting for us on a paved area about the size of a tennis court. ... The moment we arrived one string after another of firecrackers began to explode. The villagers cheered and waved as they rushed forward and greeted my brothers and me by name."

People constantly told Fong Bates her father was a great man, loved by all for his generosity, continually sending money back to family in China in difficult times, coming back personally when others who went to Gold Mountain (North America) turned their backs.

In China, Mr. Fong was a hero. In small-town Canada, he was a lowly laundry worker, taunted with the word "Chink."

One mystery solved.

*The Year of Finding Memory* reveals much about Chinese life and the tragic stories of Chinese immigrants. It is a quiet read, written like a song in a minor key, with many refrains.

Fong Bates often repeats the bits of the story we already know, then adds the new tidbits. The depressing theme of disappointment starts the book and continues through to the end, with beautiful bright spots during the two trips back to her ancestral home.

China was the only place that would ever make sense to her parents. Now it finally made sense to her, too.

The loving father often told his daughter: "The first generation plants the tree; the next generation enjoys the shade."

At a bountiful goodbye dinner in China that Judy hosted for family at the end of her second trip, her husband Michael asked what her dad would have thought of her that night.

" 'He would have wept,' I finally whispered. 'He would have wept.' ... What would my father have said? Would he have said his gow meng, his dog's life, was worth it? Would his tears have been tears of joy? "

Going to the homeland answered more questions about Fong Bates's parents than decades of living with them in Canada. As children and grandchildren of immigrant people, we might all consider such a trip.

*Winnipegger Maureen Scurfield writes the Free Press's Miss Lonelyhearts advice column.*

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