

THE BLACKRIDGE HOUSE: A MEMOIR

by JULIA MARTIN

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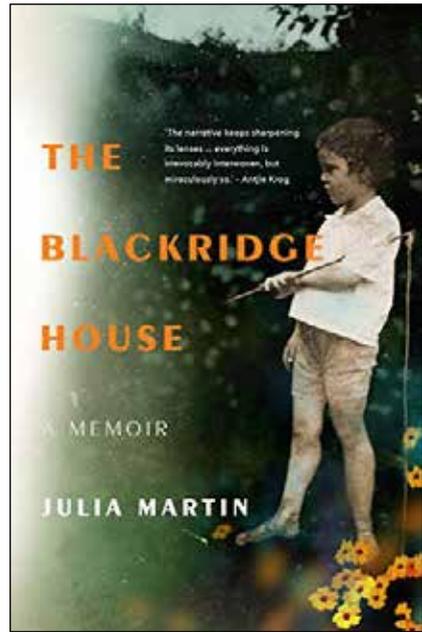
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252 pages, illustrated

AN OLD woman of 92 lies bed-ridden in a Cape Town nursing home watching squirrels and birds in the branches of a syringa tree. Feeding the birds is a point of contention with the home's management. Her short-term memory is failing, a form of dementia possibly exacerbated by repeated anaesthesia for hip operations, but she has sharp recollections of a childhood home at Blackridge in Pietermaritzburg and the people, animals and vegetation that populated it. Her daughter, the author, whom Betty Martin constantly misidentifies as her dead sister, goes in search of the house in the hope of bringing her mother some tangible evidence of it before her 'koki pen memory' fails altogether.

Blackridge is among Pietermaritzburg's most intriguing suburbs, historically one of the few areas where urban whites lived in close proximity to rural Africans (in Zwartkop, or Sweetwaters, location). The topography of Betty's mid-1920s childhood included a small church (St Mary's), stream, road, bridge and functioning railway; all of them still there bar the last which these days is just a servitude. Above the suburb were swathes of Mistbelt grassland, now highly endangered, which features strongly in Betty's vivid memories of Sunday walks.

A main feature of the Blackridge house's garden was a mango tree and Martin makes some pithy comments about its imperial meaning. She also has some relevant and pertinent observations on imperial communication



and in particular the importance of railways, like the main line that once passed through Blackridge en route to the Reef. Catching the train there to go to Longmarket Street School in Pietermaritzburg was a source of acute anxiety to Betty.

Martin is very thorough about ancestral context. One aspect involves the discovery of her maternal grandfather's papers with a transcribed version of his South African War letters and a considerable volume of autobiographical writing. A successful army officer, he was a romantic dreamer who seldom held a job for long and ended up in charge of locust extermination. Her grandmother, the unlovable Madge Tatham, left

nothing literary except a recipe book, but an amount of material possessions including silverware. Intriguingly, one book of hers that survives is Mary Martens' novel *A Woman of Small Account* (1911), which contained powerful social commentary. Then there is a tangential excursion into the author's husband's Cope ancestry and the farm Hoek near Mooi River.

The search for the house is described in great and fascinating detail and involves a number of willing volunteers including an employee of the Surveyor-General's Office, Francois Marais, and a librarian, Andrew Naicker, sundry local academics, and some members of the Blackridge community. After many false starts and red herrings, and after Betty had died, the plot of what had been named as Allandale was identified at the very end of Uplands Road, now subdivided into four properties. The old wood and iron house of Betty's childhood was long gone, but there were enough clues to identify its location. Ultimately, much depended on comparing limited and faded photographic evidence with the present-day appearance of the hill behind Blackridge.

There are one or two blemishes in this book. The modern Peter Kerchhoff Street is misspelt. And while the reproduction of old photographs is always challenging, the maps and plans could have been redrawn to the benefit of readers. Period charm diminishes when a magnifying glass is required.

But this is a highly evocative tale about ageing and death, and historical research, tackled by a literary academic in discursive fashion. She makes fascinating use of archaeological metaphor to describe the layers of a deteriorating brain; and the process of her search and the unexpected discoveries it threw up along the way. There is even a diversion into real archaeology and early Iron Age pots discovered in the Pietermaritzburg area. Each case involves mining for data and reconstruction of the past – parallel practices.

Perhaps the main and most significant point of this book is that place and time are linked by many connected lives, their meaning cemented by variable and selective memory and a fragile written and graphic archive. This is a useful template for a multitude of writers.

CHRISTOPHER MERRETT