



WHISPERINGS IN THE BLOOD

by Shelley Davidow

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THE STORY

Lithuania, 1913. Haunted by memories of the pogroms, Jacob Frank leaves his village in the hope of a better life, and boards a ship bound for New York. Twenty-five years later, his daughter Bertha sets sail for South Africa to marry a man she has never met, unaware of the tumult that lies ahead. In time, her granddaughter Shelley, following those very steps in reverse, flees the violence of apartheid to live in America, before at last finding home in Australia.

These immigrant voyages, repeated from one generation to the next, form the heart of this richly layered memoir. Drawing on her grandmother's diary and letters, Shelley Davidow tells her family's stories in vivid detail, recounting their experiences of love and loss alongside her own. As she learns about the past, Shelley discovers that her aspirations and fears, her dreams and nightmares, echo those of her forebears as ancestral whisperings in the blood.

Spanning four continents and one hundred years, this extraordinary book explores the heartache and emotional legacies of those who leave their homelands forever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shelley Davidow is originally from South Africa and the author of 39 books. She grew up in a bi-racial family at the height of Apartheid. She left South Africa as a young adult, just as her writing began to take off with the publication of her first, award-winning young adult novel, *Freefalling*. Over the past two decades, she has lived and worked on 5 continents, searching for home, which she has finally found on Australia's East Coast. Her most recent book is *Raising Stress-Proof Kids*.

DISCUSSION NOTES

1. In this book, the author has tried to stay as close to historical 'truth' as possible, using letters, diary entries, dates of births and deaths, etc. And yet there is the argument that all history is story, dependent on a narrator who interprets events as s/he sees fit; there is the argument that perhaps the line dividing fiction from non-fiction is a thin one, if it exists at all. Discuss.

2. The narrative jumps around in time and location, mirroring the way memories arise, i.e. not chronologically. What is the effect of running the different narratives alongside one another?

University of Queensland Press – Book Club Notes

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3. Jacob never properly learns English and is never integrated into American society. He is unseen and unseeable. Compare this with immigrant and refugee experiences across the world today.
4. By his second letter, Phil Davidow is already asking Bertha, whom he has never met, to marry him. Discuss the context of his letters and the reason why Bertha seems to agree so quickly. Is it possible to love someone you have never met or even seen? As Phil said: 'I never did believe in love at first sight, but now I do.'
5. Bertha writes in her diary, about her husband-to-be, aboard the ship, 'I hope we click.' By the end of the book, to what extent do you think her hopes are fulfilled?
6. Discuss the complex relationship between Bertha and Joshua Lourie and how it evolves over the course of their lifetimes. Compare this with the other instances in the book of potential love relationships that never go anywhere.
7. Music (and the fugue) is one of the extended metaphors in the text. The Oxford English dictionary defines a fugue as 'a contrapuntal composition in which ... the subject is introduced by one part and successively taken up by others and developed by interweaving the parts'. How does this relate to the themes of the book?
8. Being Jewish in South Africa during Apartheid was a complex position to be in. On the one hand, the Jews were privileged white people. On the other hand, they were seen by the pro-Hitler Ossewabrandwag as 'other'. Discuss.
9. The author uses foreshadowing and sometimes reveals what happens decades ahead. Discuss this use of plot-spoiling and its effect.
10. The narrative has a very strong sense of place. How does the author use physical landscapes, the weather and the seasons in the book?
11. What are some of the 'whisperings' that are passed down from generation to generation in this narrative?