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# ANCESTRAL WHISPERS

When Sunshine Coast writer Shelley Davidow inherited a box of her grandmother's letters it sparked a journey into her past and resulted in a moving memoir, writes **Phil Brown**

**H**er grandmother had always told her stories but it wasn't until a cache of letters were discovered that writer Shelley Davidow was able to flesh those stories out.

The Sunshine Coast author, who grew up in South Africa and lived for many years in America, had settled in Australia by the time her late grandmother Bertha's correspondence came to light.

And when it did she had the letters shipped here. Immersing herself in those letters, spanning half a century of war, displacement, migration and the social upheaval of apartheid South Africa, was an emotional experience and inspired Davidow to write her moving memoir, *Whisperings in the Blood*, a fascinating reimagining of the lives of her forebears based on the material found in her grandmother's letters.

"When I received the box of letters it was like a treasure box, nobody had opened it before," Davidow recalls. "The letters were in bundles and there were hundreds of them and I read them all. I had a germ of a story before then from stories my grandmother had told me but it was a story I didn't know how to write. Then I read the letters and immersed myself in the voices of the past. I cried so much, it was an emotional roller-coaster but I felt privileged to be reading them and they opened up this panorama of events."

Davidow, 46, says the "visceral" experience of reading the letters took her into the world of the past and as she read them there where "ghosts and voices all around".

Her book begins in 1913 with her Jewish great-grandfather, Jacob Frank, leaving Lithuania to escape a pogrom persecuting local Jews. Frank makes his way to America where he does it tough and his children, including Davidow's grandmother, Bertha, are

placed in an orphanage. Eventually Bertha goes to South Africa to marry a Jewish man there, Philip Davidow, Shelley's grandfather.

While she has never really followed the tenets of Judaism even though her father was an Orthodox Jew, Davidow does embrace her Jewish ancestry and says she feels a deep connection to her Jewish heritage.

And, after all, it is the persecution of Jews in Europe that started her family story and a fascinating aspect of the book is that it features passages in Yiddish, the almost-lost language of European Jewry.

The Hebrew-Yiddish script in some parts of the book may bamboozle readers but it adds authenticity and has been checked out by a Yiddish scholar, in case anyone wants to get picky about it.

Davidow also uses family photos and copies of excerpts from the letters which are now stored in the garage of the family home at Weyba Downs, near Noosa, where she lives with her writer husband, Paul Williams, who lectures in creative writing at the University of the Sunshine Coast, and their trainee-pilot son, Tim.

Until recently Davidow taught English at the Noosa Pengari Steiner School and for the past couple of decades she juggled her teaching duties and writing life. That seems to have worked for her because she has written 40 books across multiple genres.

Her last book was non-fiction and was entitled *Raising Stress-Proof Kids*, drawing on recent research and her own experiences as a mother and teacher. Since that was published she has been hard at work on the book that has been her labour of love, telling a

family story she felt compelled to share. Davidow quotes her black South African half-sister (that's another story) on the subject.

"My half-sister, 10 years my junior, tells me that she spoke to a sangoma, a witchdoctor in South Africa once. The sangoma told



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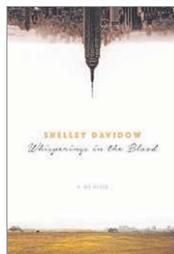
her that sometimes an ancestor will attach itself to a descendant in order to work through something that it could not complete itself in its lifetime. It will live vicariously through its descendant until some long-held grief pattern is resolved.”

While she may not believe that literally, it certainly resonates as a metaphor for Davidow who, throughout her book, says she is often moved by unseen forces from her past, those “whisperings in the blood”.

Her memoir is a moving generational story that many people will relate to and it will inspire people to reflect on their own history. For Davidow it honours what she imagines were her grandmother’s wishes.

“I believe she kept these letters so that one day they would be found,” Davidow says. “I feel like she documented her journey and that there was a purpose to keeping the letters.”

As a boon, Davidow also got her grandmother’s diaries too. The letters and diaries allowed her to hear the “authentic voices of the past” and to tell a story that was longing to be told.



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**PAST VOICES:**  
Author Shelley Davidow believes her grandmother had a reason for keeping all of her letters and wanted them to be found.