

Book Review

Chitra Ramaswamy *Homelands: The history of a friendship* Edinburgh: Canongate pp 360 ISBN 978 1 83885 266 5

According to its cover, *Homelands* is a memoir about two unlikely friends. One (the author) was born in 1970s Britain to Indian immigrant parents. The other, Henry Wuga, a young Jewish boy who fled persecution in Nazi Germany in 1939. While the book covers many important topics including migration, racism, family, belonging, love, and loss, it is not in any obvious way just the story of a friendship. Instead, the author chronicles Henry's life and times, its triumphs and tribulations, its highs and lows. Henry escapes almost certain death in coming to Britain on the Kindertransport. He lives with a sponsor family before being interned as an alien, and eventually released in Glasgow where he meets Ingrid his future wife, who also arrived via the Kindertransport. Henry becomes a highly successful chef and caterer but over time his main contribution is as a curator of the truth about the Holocaust. His life says much about what it means to be a survivor, to overcome grief, and to negotiate the move from one country and culture to another. These themes are elaborated by Ramaswamy as she reflects on the experience of her own immigrant family and, indeed, her own life.

There is no contents page, and apart from a short prologue, nothing to prepare the reader for what is to come. Over more than 300 pages, the memoir unfolds in relatively short bursts of unnumbered chapters; some comprising several pages and some much longer. This could have felt disjointed but for me, it had the distinct advantage of being able to pause often in what otherwise could have become a bit of a slog. In fact, the book is anything but. While the subject matter is at times intensely personal and detailed, it is always set within a time or period, and a wider context. Ramaswamy consistently uses the present tense to speak of the past. We constantly observe Henry or others doing or saying something as if it is happening before us in real time. For some, this literary technique could be annoying or confusing, but for me it served to bring moments, situations, places and events to life.

The narrative zig zags back and forth through time. Some might find this disconcerting, but I soon became accustomed to it, with each chapter presenting as a surprise. The reader is often led from what at first seems to be an obscure place, literally or metaphorically, to an end point

of significance. We learn, for example, about Sassoon's painting *The Rocks of Carrick* which depicts a scene on the Solway Firth. We then learn about the sand flats and salt marshes, and even the marine life, before finding that 'This is where Henry washes up for one unforgettable summer before the advent of war'. By this means the book conveys many interesting facts about places, people and the seismic events that have shaped our lives.

What might a reader take away from this book? The slow, methodical way in which the Nazis dehumanized the Jews and their other victims is well depicted. While Ramaswamy stops short of drawing parallels with more recent or even current oppressions, this book speaks to our need to be on guard about such atrocities ever happening again. The fact that Ramaswamy is a subject in her own book means there is a danger of being a little too self-centred and self-important. After all, not everything about one's life is necessarily of great moment or significance to others! In general, however, the book avoids this pitfall. It does so by offering insights into how culture can be understood as living and emerging, not something simply to fit into, and how individuals from different backgrounds inhabit, negotiate and influence the varied spaces in their lives. To return to the book's title, for the author, home is not a place or destination, but a journey. Fittingly, therefore, *Homelands* ends with Henry Wuga's original journey to his new British, indeed Scottish, homeland - where he will eventually meet his new friend, Chitra Ramaswamy.

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