Book Review

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Jacaranda rain – a South African story

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> Memory fades, memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember. Joan Didion, *The year of magical thinking* (2005).

Joan Hettema's *Jacaranda rain – a South African story* is a deeply personal account that intertwines the author's life with the rich tapestry of South African history. In this self-published work, Hettema skilfully navigates through her memories, vividly portraying her experiences growing up in Pretoria alongside the backdrop of significant historical events.

After reading the first few chapters, the question arose with this reader whether this is a memoir or an autobiography. In this distinction lies one criticism of the book. In *On writing well*, William Zinsser (2006:289) states that '[u]nlike autobiography, which spans an entire life, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it. The memoir writer takes us back to some corner of his or her past that was unusually intense – childhood, for instance – or that was framed by war or other upheaval.' He continues: 'Memoir isn't the summary of a life; it's a window into a life, very much like a photograph in its selective composition' (Zinsser 2006:289).

Salman Rushdie (2012:82), famous (or infamous) British Indian author, also makes a distinction between the two in *Joseph Anton: A memoir*: 'The difference between memoir and autobiography, as far as I see it, is that a memoir is there primarily to tell one particular story, whereas an autobiography tries to be a full account of a life'. In

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the same work, he says, 'in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe' (Rushdie 2012:82).

The fact that the book describes the author's life chronologically, starting with the Second World War and eventually ending with the inauguration of Cyril Ramaphosa as South Africa's president in 2018, does not bring the powerful themes of love, loss, unhappy decisions, and a navigation into a democratic South Africa into clear focus. This could be considered a lost opportunity.

This distinction should not, however, detract from the reader's overall experience of the book. Hettema embarks on a journey to capture the essence of her life and her homeland. Her approach to writing reflects her deep connection to words.. Through her prose, Hettema aims to convey the unique texture and colour of South Africa, dispelling misconceptions and offering a nuanced perspective on its diverse population.

The narrative unfolds with a thematic focus on the passage of time, symbolised by the blooming jacaranda trees that grace Pretoria's landscape. Hettema weaves personal anecdotes with historical vignettes, providing readers with a multifaceted understanding of her identity and the broader context in which her life unfolds. From her reflections on family history to poignant accounts of love and loss during wartime, each chapter resonates with authenticity and emotional depth.

Hettema's writing style reflects her background in journalism, favouring brevity and clarity in storytelling. She eschews sensationalism in favour of understated yet evocative prose, allowing the narrative to unfold naturally without embellishment. This approach honours the integrity of her memories and ensures that readers remain fully engaged throughout the narrative.

One of the book's strengths lies in its meticulous attention to detail, whether describing a particular moment's sights, sounds, or smells. By plunging readers into the sensory richness of her experiences, Hettema creates a vivid and immersive reading experience. From the vibrant hues of jacaranda blossoms to the solemn silence of wartime, each scene comes to life with remarkable clarity.

However, the book is not without its flaws. Throughout the book, there are instances of repetition and anecdotal retelling that could have been streamlined through more rigorous editing. Additionally, while providing insight into her observational prowess, Hettema's penchant for detailed descriptions of individuals' physical appearances may sometimes be overly judgmental or superficial. For example, she describes her Standard Four teacher, Miss Bam, as follows: 'Another thorn in my flesh was our class

teacher, Miss Bam, who looked like a gargoyle or harpy with bright hennaed hair resembling a lavatory brush, a sallow, wrinkled complexion, hands like garden forks with red tips and legs that would have done a kitchen table proud' (Hettema 2019:27).

Despite these minor criticisms, *Jacaranda rain – a South African story* stands as a testament to Hettema's skill as both a storyteller and a chronicler of history. Through her autobiography, she invites readers to embark on a journey of discovery, exploring the complexities of identity, belonging, and the enduring power of memory. Salman Rushdie's reflection on memory from *Midnight's Children* resonates here: 'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own' (Rushdie 1981:211). Like Rushdie suggests, Hettema's recollections are shaped by the passage of time and her own perspective, creating a version of events that reflects her personal reality. Her narrative offers not just a record of historical events but a crafted memory, rich with emotion and meaning, inviting readers to trust her own, coherent version of the story. Through this lens, the work becomes more than autobiography – it becomes a testament to the transformative power of memory itself.

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