

KIRKUS

A CHAMELEON FROM THE LAND OF THE QUAGGA

An Immigrant's Story

Joan Bismillah

FriesenPress (396 pp.)

\$30.90 hardcover, \$29.99 paperback, \$8.99 e-book

ISBN: 978-1-5255-3176-7; April 1, 2019

BOOK REVIEW

In Bismillah's debut memoir, she discusses growing up in South Africa under apartheid, encountering prejudice toward mixed-race relationships, and escaping oppression through immigration. "This multi-hued society" of South Africa "should have adopted the quagga, that extinct beast with its varicoloured body, as an emblem for the country," writes the author. In this book, Bismillah looks back on a life affected by racial segregation, and her remembrance has a sense of urgency: "Alzheimer's, lurking in a recess of my brain, threatened to distort my recollections to a deconstructed, Picasso-like abstraction," she discloses. She was born in Johannesburg in 1928 to an Italian father and a mother of "Scottish and Anglo-Indian descent." Her family was considered privileged, but her formative years were by no means sheltered; she was raised by a tyrannical grandmother with Victorian values, her mother died during her childhood, her father was severely wounded during World War II, and her brother was killed in a car accident.

Her life changed again in nursing school, where she met an Indian medical student, Abdul Haq Bismillah, generally known as "Bis"—the man she would later marry. Their relationship faced ugly prejudice in South Africa and they escaped to raise a family, first in London, England, then in Fergus, Ontario. Bismillah's prose is characterized by elegant, vivid flourishes; for example, she discusses how "pictures of places and people, both living and dead, tumbled like acrobats across the screen of my mind." Of a date in Johannesburg with Bis, she writes, "I recall the susurrus breeze that rustled through the branches...and the chirping cicada's nocturnal song to the accompaniment of Debussy's hauntingly beautiful and melodic 'Clair de Lune' over on the radio." Along with evocative imagery, the memoir presents an enduring message about racial awareness. At one point, the author recounts how Bis described South Africa's train carriages: "second-class...reserved for Indians...and third class with its un-upholstered and bare wooden seats for black people." As a European always traveling first class, she says, she'd never encountered such discrimination before.

Overall, this is a historically rich chronicle of 20th-century South Africa by an inspirational woman.

Tender, romantic recollections, interlaced with a biting appraisal of apartheid.