

Debesa: The Story of Frank and Katie Rodriguez

by Cindy Solonec

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Debesa is an inspiring and wondrous Australian story – arguably family history at its best. Based firmly in region, it takes place in the world of the West Kimberley, on the sheep and cattle stations around Derby. It is also a global story. We meet the seafaring Indian great-grandfather who sailed into Fremantle in the 1880s, then promptly jumped ship. We learn how he met the beautiful Nigena woman, Muninga. The narrative evolves to become a transgenerational story of interconnected Indian, Spanish, European and Nigena families.

Cindy Solonec had a Nigena mother and a Spanish father proud of his Galician traditions. They travel between worlds. Cindy's father came out to Australia to be trained in the priesthood at the Spanish Benedictine mission. Both remained devout Catholics, and the author credits their cherished religious values for helping to create their loving and stable family life.

Debesa's first chapter opens with a horror story from the earlier generation. In 1909, when working for the Chinese shop-owner Quang Sing, Muninga and another relation had their children stolen by police. They tricked the young children to get onto a cart, then took them to a cold cell in Derby where they were locked up for the night. Little Gypsy was still being breastfed so had to be comforted by the young Jira, Cindy's grannie. They were then transported on the SS *Koombana*, a luxury ship operated by the Adelaide Steamship Company, to be transported to Beagle Bay Mission. They were below deck and understandably terrified. The preceding dislocations of sovereign Indigenous peoples from their lands, heightened by this horrible ordeal of state-endorsed kidnapping, of family rupture and loss, inform the first chapter, which is aptly entitled 'Removed'. No matter how many times such stories are told and heard, the inhumanity that made these actions possible cannot be expunged from the nation's story.

From this point on, however, the narrative is primarily a triumph of family love. It details richly textured lives of hard work and success. Occasionally racism flickers into the picture, but it is incidental to where the heart of this book lies. And that rests in its wonderful tribute to Solonec's father and mother. The author has benefited from access to her father's diaries, written in Castilian and English, which he helpfully worked through during her research for her doctorate. As Solonec points out, this provided a chronology, though she also notes the diary's omission of important events when times were especially tough. Solonec's account benefits further from a storehouse of family knowledge and additional interviews. It is informed by meticulous historical research, including an excellent survey of existing academic and popular literature and archival sources.

Through her richly textured descriptions of place, and by sharing vivid details of everyday activities, Solonec reveals a talent for rendering events multi-sensory and multi-dimensional, with a freshness that makes them memorable. The writing style is easy to follow; it is conversational, and fortunately the editors at Magabala do not restrict the occasional use of informal grammar and non-standard English such as *countrimin*. The text is also assisted by a glossary at the end of the book. Solonec's knowledge of the various Indigenous nations, and of relevant Indigenous terminology, lends an authority to the narrative. Admittedly the reader will sometimes have to flip back and forth to recall who's who among the various interconnected families and friends and exactly where they are located at particular times. The occasional family tree diagram assists.

At one point, Solonec says the children of her family felt Spanish; indeed, their father's heritage was a strong point of difference from wider community members. Yet he always respected Nigena knowledge and, despite her mission upbringing, her mother always knew where she came from, later continuing to revive family relationships with her kin. We learn how Solonec's siblings benefited from Nigena bush knowledge and kinship – helpful attributes for pastoral work. Their parents were practical people, with an impressive range of skills and expertise in everything they attempted. They prioritised independence, investing a huge amount of time, energy and emotion into their property and sheep enterprise, Debesa. It is clear they made a wonderful home for their children there. They also insisted on providing opportunities for their future, investing in a boarding school education and moral lessons.

Reading this book made me wonder why historians ever thought family history was delimited to amateurs or somehow innately unimportant, which was in fact still the case when I was teaching Australian history in the 1980s. Solonec's prose effortlessly integrates oral history insights with those from a wide range of other sources, contextualising the story of her family in a sophisticated opus. Indigenous authors like the pioneering historian Jackie Huggins have ensured that family history has become a key means for the wider Australian community to learn about Aboriginal history, of her people's entwined relationships and resilience. Like all histories, Aboriginal history is family history too. And without books like *Debesa*, we cannot really know the breadth of Australian history.

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