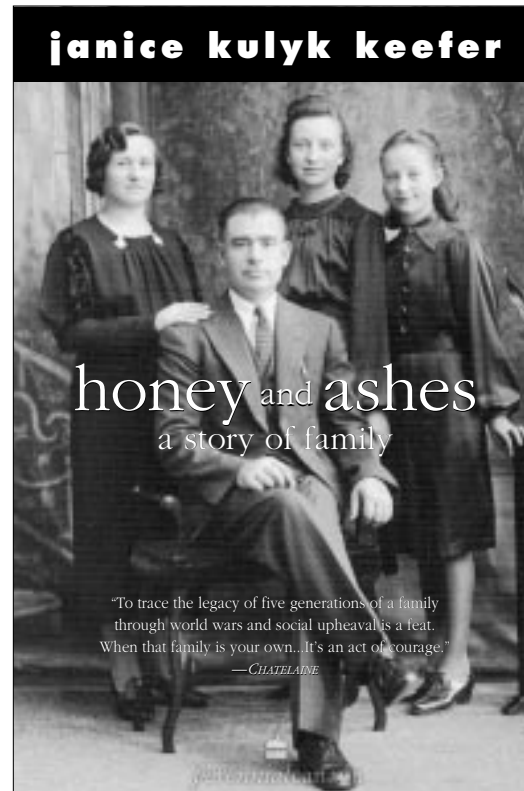


HONEY AND ASHES

A STORY OF FAMILY

BY JANICE KULYK KEEFER



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JANICE KULYK KEEFER



Janice Kulyk Keefer was born in Toronto to immigrant parents of Ukrainian background. She was educated at the University of Toronto and at the University of Sussex, England, where she obtained a doctorate in English literature. She has lived in England, France, Spain and in Nova Scotia as well as Ontario, where she currently makes her home.

Kulyk Keefer has been widely praised for her writing which includes her novels, *The Green Library*—nominated for a Governor General's Award—*Rest Harrow* and *Constellations*. She has also written several collections of short fiction, including *The Paris-Napoli Express*, *Travelling Ladies* and *Transfigurations*, and non-fiction, including literary criticism, *Under Eastern Eyes*—also nominated for a Governor General's Award—and *Reading Mavis Gallant*. Kulyk Keefer is also noted for her poetry, especially *White of the Lesser Angels* and *Marrying the Sea* (Brick Books), a collection released in the spring of 1998. Simultaneous with the release of *Honey and Ashes* from HarperCollins, Coteau Books published *Two Lands New Visions: Stories from Canada and Ukraine*, an anthology of short fiction which Kulyk Keefer co-edited.

Kulyk Keefer has lectured throughout Canada, Europe, Australia and the United States. Her writing has been translated into Spanish, Dutch,

Italian and German. She is a two-time winner of the CBC Radio Literary Competition and the National Magazine Award.

A professor of English at the University of Guelph, Janice Kulyk Keefer lives in Eden Mills, Ontario.

ABOUT HONEY AND ASHES

“...what I'm about to tell you is a love story from a world where bread is hard and sour, honey rare as amber.”

—Janice Kulyk Keefer in *Honey and Ashes*

Honey and Ashes is the author's compelling quest to explore questions that have haunted all those who live in two countries of the heart and mind. Janice Kulyk Keefer was born in Canada, a country where her immigrant family felt as free as the future itself. But she was also born into the history of her family's homeland, receiving both the gift and the burden of a past that often seems “an equal spill of beauty and blood.” Now she has set out to build a bridge of worlds between present day Canada and the old world village of Staromischyna, once part of Poland, now located in Ukraine.

Honey and Ashes recounts an immigrant experience common to many individuals, especially Canadians. In this book, Kulyk Keefer retells the tales that obsessed her as a child—tales she wanted to write down for her own children who are strangers to the “Old Place.” In so doing, she has immortalized the struggles of displacement, loss, love and war that have been passed down by so many—stories that many Canadians could immediately recognize as their own.

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“I hope to tell a story that will speak across any number of borders... We live in a time when to be a migrant or refugee is one of the commonest human conditions...and though there are tremendous differences among immigrants...I believe there’s a continuum of experience and, most of all, imagination that can bring us all, however momentarily, together.”

—*Honey and Ashes*, Prologue

Honey and Ashes is novel-like in its sweep of personal and public history, and its ability to draw us into the complex mysteries, anxieties and joys of family. It moves from an extraordinary wealth of stories about life in Staromischyna and Depression-era Toronto, to an absorbing account of how the complex, troubled histories of Poland and Ukraine shadowed these stories. The book ends with the author’s difficult journey back to the place where all the stories began.

Both haunting and lyrical, *Honey and Ashes* weaves together deep family secrets, fascinating characters, poignant memories and the search for identity in a chaotic world.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Forms and images of water are everywhere in this book, from the “flooding” of memory in the preface, to the literal flooding of Poland’s Odra river at the story’s end. What other water references struck you as significant, and why is this element such a suggestive one for talking about the life of this—or any other—family?

2. For most of us, growing up in and away from a family is our first and perhaps most important story, one that critically influences who we are and what we make of ourselves. To what extent does Kulyk Keefer embrace her family’s traditions, values and myths, and to what extent does she reject or transform them into something uniquely her own?

3. “War begins in the family,” says an old Italian proverb. Using the points and occasions of conflict in *Honey and Ashes* for a guide, discuss the nature of that tension or outright hostility which is the flip side of the love that knits a family together.

4. Have you ever considered writing your own family story, for your children, or in memory of family long passed away, or even for yourself, to make sense of who and what you are? What problematic issues does Kulyk Keefer’s family memoir bring to the fore, and, in your own case, would these be reasons for speech or silence?

5. To tell the story, not just of a family, but of the worlds which shape them, *Honey and Ashes* makes use of a variety of devices—photographs, folk songs, paintings, short stories and novels, travel guides, maps, dreams. To what degree is anyone’s life story a solid narrative line, and to what extent is it a collage of disparate and overlapping items that refuse to “fall into line”?

6. The women in this book are all possessed of remarkable powers of courage, strength, hope and ambition. Are the men overshadowed, or do they hold their own and contribute different ways of experiencing the risks and dangers of an immigrant’s life?

7. The structure of this book is like that of a hinged, double frame, with stories of the “Old Place” and Depression-era Toronto filling one side of the frame, and the journey “back” to a part of the world where the author has never been, except in imagination, filling the other. What are the differences of tone and mood between these two “pictures,” and which is the more interesting to you?

8. Kulyk Keefer tackles some extremely difficult and delicate issues in this book, including the traditional hostility between Poles and Ukrainians, and the anti-Semitism which has been such a tragic fixture of Eastern European history. How does she “personalize” these daunting issues and make them part of her family story? Do you feel she succumbs to “the nightmare of history” or does she hold out some hope for the transformation of ingrained prejudice and hostility into new, enlightened ways of seeing those we regard as suspect “Others”?

9. A recurring place and theme in *Honey and Ashes* is the root cellar (in its North American incarnation, the basement). At times this underground place is a source of nourishment and treasure—at other times it becomes “the deep ditch of nightmare.” Can you think of a similar place and theme in your own life story? Do all our most meaningful symbols possess this radical ambivalence?

10. Is it only immigrants and their children who feel uncertain as to what and where is “home”? Or is it a condition of modern life that “belonging” is more a desire than a reality, no matter how long-established we may be in a particular place or culture? If we are all in the process of becoming perpetually displaced persons, how can story-gathering and story-telling give us and those we love a necessary sense of stability and coherence?

PRAISE FOR *HONEY AND ASHES*

“To trace the legacy of five generations of a family through world wars and social upheaval is a feat. When that family is your own...it’s an act of courage.”

—*Chatelaine*

“*Honey and Ashes* is filled with passion and intelligence, and it is gorgeously written.”

—*The Edmonton Journal*

“...a haunting book...rendered with the immediacy of fiction and suffused with love.”

—*The Globe and Mail*

ALSO BY JANICE KULYK KEEFER

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