



Renée: warmth and wit among the dark deeds.

# The secrets of families

A new Renée mystery blends warmth and wit with dark deeds.

by CRAIG SISTERTON

**BLOOD MATTERS**, by Renée (*The Cuba Press*, \$40)

Seeing her estranged grandfather for the first time in three years was even worse than Puti Derrell feared. Standing outside his 1950s bungalow in Porohiwi, Puti questioned how much she really wanted the books her beloved Nan had left for her, books her bully of a grandfather didn't even tell her about for years after her Nan's funeral, and now wanted her to pay for.

But then there was Mainly Crime, the secondhand bookshop in Porohiwi that Puti had inherited from her sister, Ana, along with the guardianship of 10-year-old Bella Rose. Life changes fast. So Puti walked up to the side porch and prepared to speak to Matthew Derrell, a strict Christian with decidedly unchristian attitudes, for the first time in 30 years.

But they never shared a word. An unanswered door, a call to Puti's cousin, Auden. The police arrived, then the locksmith. An aroma of vomit and shit. Her grandfather's body in the sitting room, rope twisted around his neck, stark white mask of Judas, the betrayer, covering his face.

Ōtaki author Renée wonderfully blends "Golden Age" touches with modern

sensibilities in her engaging second crime novel. A classic setup from the days of Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh is the unlikable victim, offering plenty of reasons for various people – suspects and red herrings – to want to bump them off.

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Matthew Derrell certainly qualifies, even before Puti learns of other family secrets and moral failures.

However, there's no Poirot, Marple, or Inspector Alleyn-like singular sleuth here. Instead, Renée's Porohiwi mysteries spotlight a wider cast who live, love and die in the small town.

In her previous book *The Wild Card*, it was former state ward Ruby investigating the long-ago drowning of her friend Betty while they were in care. In *Blood Matters*, it's Puti along with Bella Rose, who wants to be a private eye, and frenemy PC "JoJo"

Jones who are searching for answers.

When Puti is followed, threatened, and then another death hits close to home, it's clear the danger didn't end with Matthew Derrell's death. Can Puti and her pals unmask the killers?

Renée spins a yarn that's full of warmth and wit among the dark deeds. She effortlessly soaks readers into Porohiwi, offers a fascinating cast of characters, and showcases her love for the crime genre. Comments on classics as well as modern authors including Ian Rankin, Val McDermid

and our own Vanda Symon are delightfully included. Another lovely and sometimes laugh-inducing touch: snippets of community news to kickstart each chapter.

Unsurprisingly, given Renée's oeuvre, big issues such as misogyny, child abuse and racism – blunt, casual and systemic – are canvassed.

Overall, there's a great balance between dark and light, and *Blood Matters* is a very fine read. I look forward to more Porohiwi mysteries. ■

