Tall tales

Crouch End author Pony Louder explains how – thanks to her debut novel – the Highgate oaks have been admired in places as far-flung as Canada and Pakistan

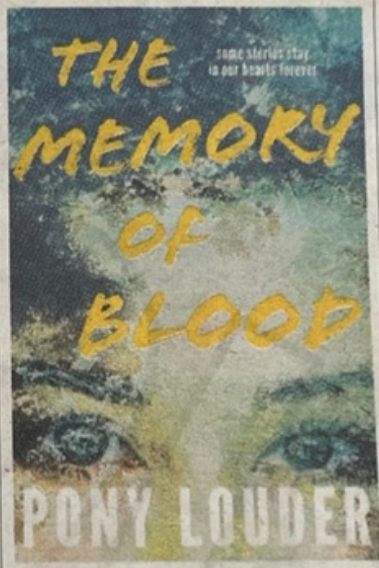
My novel, *The Memory of Blood*, is set both in 1900s London and modern-day Sydney. Mina has been stolen from her farm to work as an indentured labourer in one of the first English cotton mills in 1811. Two centuries later, Evie has just found out her world-famous father is dying. She must race from her North London flat to see him in Australia. Finding out what connects the two women is exciting. It's literary, but I wanted it to read like a thriller.

▲ Author and Crouch End resident Pony Louder

As you'd imagine, this proved difficult to illustrate in one cover image – especially for a debut author. What's fun to read was proving challenging to illustrate! The novel was finished, everyone was happy with it, but the cover was becoming hilariously problematic. We needed something beautiful, but also eye-catching and memorable. The cover needed to appeal to both men and women and give some sense of the sweeping storyline and historical scope. As well as London and Sydney, there was post-revolution France. Mina travels from a dirt-floor cottage to the most important rooms in the British Empire. Evie's storyline involves one of the most celebrated men in the world.

We tried drawings, photographs of St Paul's and parliament – lots of different portraits. Birds, figures in silhouette, the sea! Hundreds of treatments, what felt like thousands of images. At one point, we were wondering if there was any way we could get Keira Knightley involved. Editorial budget ruled that out quite quickly!

Nothing we tried worked.



We collaborated with different designers and artists. Then, one afternoon, I was walking through Highgate Woods. It was such a beautiful day. The sun was dappling through the leaves. I stood for a moment, just listening to the wind rustling through the treetops, and realised that what I was looking at had hardly changed for centuries. The oak I was standing under was hundreds of years old. Had she come here, Mina would have seen what I was looking at. I started taking pictures on my iPhone.

Months later, those photographs of the oaks, overlaid on a woman's face and designed into a book cover have travelled all over the world. I've had emails from readers in cities as faraway as Ontario and Islamabad.

It makes me so proud, because Highgate Woods is hands down my favourite spot in London. One of the reasons I love living in Crouch End is because it's so close to such beautiful green spaces. We North Londoners are rightfully smug. With Highgate Woods, Queens Woods, the Parkland Walk and Alexander Palace on our doorsteps, who would ever want to move?

'The Memory of Blood' is out now. Available from good bookshops and Amazon. To find out more visit: ponylouder.com