Finding hope *in the* ashes

A decade ago, author Ella Holcombe lost her parents and childhood home in the Black Saturday bushfires. Despite the unimaginable tragedy, **Susan Horsburgh** finds it has inspired healing and hope.

Ella and son Harry at the Kinglake property. Inset: Ella's parents Carol and David had built the timber and mudbrick home.

PHOTOGRAPHY *by* **JULES KINGMA** • **STYLING** *by* **REBECCA RAC**



For Ella Holcombe, much of Black Saturday remains a blur, but she can't forget her mother's final, terrified words before hanging up on their last phone call: "We're in really big trouble". Ella, 26 at the time, was living in a Melbourne share house with her 23-year-old twin brothers, Patrick and Eugene, while her parents were at the family's mountaintop home in Kinglake, an hour-and-a-half's drive north-east of Melbourne.

Living next to Kinglake National Park, Ella's mum and dad had fended off bushfires before – every summer they sent the family photo albums to their daughter in the city for safekeeping – but that Saturday in February 2009 the winds were fierce and the temperatures in the mid-40s. By the afternoon, the siblings knew it was serious.

When they lost phone contact with their parents, they headed for their childhood home, but were stopped short by police roadblocks in Whittlesea. There they joined a panicked, ever-growing crowd of loved ones looking for answers. "We could see the whole top of the mountain on fire," recalls Ella. "Everyone was trying to talk to the police and SES guys. No one knew anything."

They went home to Brunswick that night and worked the phones for two days, flipping between optimism and despair. At one point, a friend whose father had seen the family block told Ella the house was gone, but she refused to believe it. Finally, 48 hours after they saw the flames, police came to their door. "They didn't need to say anything," says Ella. →

Ella and her brothers had lost their mother and father, their much-loved family dog and the timber and mudbrick home their parents had built two decades earlier – the backdrop for all their childhood memories: chasing skinks, poking ant nests, lying under the stars together on the trampoline.

Surrounded by soaring eucalyptus trees, Ella wanders the property today, looking back over the past 10 years and explaining how she has coped with such unspeakable loss.

"It was never even a possibility that we would sell the property," says Ella. "We were just too connected to it. And to not have this place to come to – I just can't imagine ... Even though Mum and Dad aren't here anymore, and our house isn't here anymore, there's still a feeling I get when I drive down the driveway – a feeling of coming home."

A decade on, it's a mild summer day in Kinglake, around 20 degrees, the remains of the morning fog still hovering over the mountain at noon. Still, there are reminders everywhere of the area's awful history – from the blackened tree trunks and modern rebuilt churches to the ever-present FIRE DANGER road signs, indicating the day's rating, from low to code red. Nearby, there's a roadside memorial with a plaque listing the locals who lost their lives on Black Saturday, and a cyclist wipes his eyes as he sits on the wooden bench in front of it. All over the mountain there's an eerie, sombre silence, only punctuated by the occasional cackle of a kookaburra.

The Holcombe property seems part construction site and part shrine, the ruins of the family home and the steel frame of a new one sitting side by side. Ella points out the footprint of the original house, now planted with pear and apple trees and covered with mint and forget-me-nots. The siblings have made what Ella calls "a rambling jungle of memories" by placing charred metal remains throughout the overgrown garden – small objects that survived the fire, like teapots and watering cans, but also an ancient swing their grandpa built, the tank stand where they pretended as kids to be sailors, and a chunk of the picnic table where their parents sat and shared afternoon tea.

Ella and her brothers returned to the property with a police escort as soon as they could, a week or two after Black Saturday, when everything was black, ashy and incomprehensible. "I didn't recognise the street, driveway, the house," recalls Ella. "It was this alien landscape."

Yet it was home – and the place where she felt closest to her parents. "I remember my nana saying at the time, 'Why do you keep wanting to go up there? How can you stand it?'" says Ella. "But we didn't want to be anywhere else." Friends came up on weekends to help sift through debris, and eventually green shoots appeared on trees they had thought were dead.

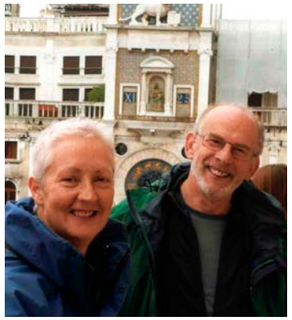
The property has been a source of comfort over the past 10 years, as Ella has wrestled with grief, keeping herself busy at first and then working through her pain with a counsellor. Along the way, she has created a family of her own with partner Dave, welcoming four-year-old Harry and 16-month-old June.

Making peace with the loss of her parents, though, has been a slow process. Initially, she put everything on hold. Although she had published a book of poetry in 2007 and started a Masters degree in creative writing at Melbourne University two years later, she dropped out soon after Black Saturday. For months, she didn't go to her university admin job, either.

"After the fires, I stopped writing altogether," says Ella. "I wanted to write something again, but it didn't feel right. I had to write something about this." It was as if she had to exorcise this chapter before she could move on – and the 10-year anniversary of Black Saturday gave her the impetus to do it.

The result is a children's picture book called *The House on the Mountain*, a touching, evocative tale of three kids – a girl and her twin brothers – who grow up in the bush and lose their house in a fire before moving back up to the mountain with their parents to rebuild. Ella milked her own experiences to write the story and veteran illustrator David Cox even used the Holcombes' family photos to draw the pictures, but the book is much gentler than Ella's reality. It had to be.

"It would have been too much – for the reader and me," says Ella. "Going back to that metaphor of regrowth, I wanted to make something new. This will always be a part of my story, but I'm still here and life's still pretty joyous a lot of the time, so why not put something beautiful out into the world?" Aimed at readers aged seven to 11, the message is one of hope and resilience: "Terrible things may, and probably will, happen, but you'll be okay."







Clockwise from right: the home was a labour of love for David; Ella and the twins had an idyllic childhood; Carol and David on their dream European trip.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULES KINGMA. FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHS SUPPLIED AND USED WITH PERMISSION.



To write the story, Ella had to see Black Saturday through the eyes of a child – something she couldn't have done in the early stages of mourning. "At the beginning, you're in this insular shell of self-absorbed grief, and as time goes on you're able to see the bigger picture," she says. "Like we didn't want to hear anybody else's story – we couldn't handle anything other than what we'd lost. But what would it have been like as a kid, even just losing your house and still having your family? That's what I've tried to imagine here."

"I'm still here. Why not put something beautiful out into the world?"

Ella hasn't been able to make sense of her experience, but she knows dwelling on the past doesn't help. "You've got to go forward and keep living," she says. "Having kids forces you to do that as well, because they're so in-the-moment. Little people to care for and think about – it takes you away from yourself. And you're reminded to look at little things – ants and the wonder of everything."

Having children, though, has also made Ella appreciate – and miss – her parents more. Her mum and dad have been cheated of their grandchildren. It's the one moment in our conversation when Ella can't contain her emotions. "Having a child of my own and them not being there was one of the hardest bits to deal with," says Ella. "It's not the stuff that happened 10 years ago, it's the stuff I'm living now, like being a parent without my own parents. That's the most difficult to talk and think about."

Ella seems annoyed with herself for crying; she and her brothers have shunned opportunities to grieve publicly in the past, avoiding Black Saturday memorials. "Crying in front of people is uncomfortable for us," she explains. "To go to a place where you all do that together never appealed to us."

Ella and I sit chatting on the concrete floor of the shed. A basic corrugated-iron affair filled with op-shop finds, it has served as a weekender for the past six years, while the Melbourne-based siblings have prepared to build the real thing. Patrick, a furniture maker, has apparently led the building process, while Ella and Eugene, a musician, have happily rubber-stamped his decisions.

It will be a simple, two-bedroom house with an open living area and huge windows to capture the spectacular views over the Kinglake Ranges. The location, however, is in the riskiest bushfire category, so regulations require special materials, such as heavy-duty steel shutters.

The Holcombes, though, don't see much of the place in summer. Ella especially hates the hot, windy days. "I used to be sensitive to the smell of smoke or the sound of fire engines," she says. "Now I'm just aware of the conditions and don't come up here if it's over about 28 degrees."

Ella shows me a picture of her parents, Carol and David, taken on holiday in Europe a few months before they died. Both high-school teachers, the pair met when they worked at the same school, after David migrated from San Diego to Melbourne in the late 1970s. When Ella arrived in 1982, the couple brought her home to their Kinglake bush block, where they lived in a shed while building the house, making their own mudbricks.

Ella and her brothers enjoyed a bush childhood with no TV but plenty of books and music. "We spent hours outside," she recalls, but they were also taken to museums and films, jazz festivals and the theatre. These days, as Harry ambles over the block, playing in the builders' sand, Ella sees echoes of her own childhood.

Every year, when the Black Saturday anniversary rolls around, the Holcombes get together for dinner and often don't even mention the occasion, says Ella, but this year feels different because of the 10-year milestone, and her book. Her brothers have read it but haven't said much. "I think they like it," she says with a shrug. "It's hard to say with boys."

The book, she says, is a thank-you to her parents – for the happy childhood they gave her and the sense of home she still has. "They would love that I've written a book and made something new and beautiful out of something that was so terrible and ugly and unimaginable," says Ella. "I feel good about it, I feel happy. I think that's something." **AWW**



The House on the Mountain *by Ella Holcombe & David Cox, Allen & Unwin, $24.99, is available in February.*