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## Surviving life out West with crazy aunt

Julie Mayeda

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If the Creek Don't Rise

My Life Out West With the Last  
Black Widow of the Civil War

By **Rita Williams**

HARCOURT; 322 PAGES; \$23

"Don't never take nobody else's child to raise, **Rita**. You'll be sorry if you do," Aunt Daisy admonishes her motherless niece, whom she was raising. Perhaps Daisy is sorrier now for not having shown more compassion toward her little charge. For **Rita Williams**, all grown up now, has written an affecting account of her young life with Daisy, "If the Creek Don't Rise: My Life Out West With the Last Black Widow of the Civil War."

Let's first clarify what this book is not. It is not about the Civil War, save for the fact that Daisy had married a buffalo soldier nearly 60 years her senior. It is not a rancorous tell-all by a wounded child, although some bitterness does seep through. It is not a literary memoir generously seeded with penetrating reflections, though **Williams** will at times cogitate on the nature of racism.

It is more an old-fashioned memoir, using memoirist Judith Barrington's definition of the genre, "a kind of a scrapbook in which pieces of a life were pasted." Fortunately for the writer **Rita** -- unfortunately, perhaps, for the child **Rita** -- growing up African American, poor and motherless high up in the Colorado Rockies with only a border collie for hugs and a crazy-making

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aunt for upbringing has given her plenty to scrapbook.

The telling begins with the adult **Williams** fielding an SOS phone call from her oldest sister, "Daisy say she's fixin' to die." It turns out to be another of Daisy's false alarms, but **Williams** decides to travel to Steamboat Springs anyway, as Daisy is 91, and "even she can't live forever." A few days later she arrives at Daisy's doorstep, though not at the house she grew up in. She knows it to be Daisy's from the sweet stench of powdered milk cutting through the other odors of urine and Pine-Sol. **Williams** writes, "Some part of me said, Turn around. ... There's still time." Nonetheless, she knocks on the portal and enters "the vortex of Daisy's chaos." Her childhood closes in on her.

Four-year-old **Rita** hated powdered milk, but Daisy insisted she drink it. One day **Rita** couldn't help herself, she gagged the milk back up. Daisy told her, "Mama had to wet-nurse every one of that landowner's kids, come home with no milk in her titties for her own. ... You puke up that milk ever again and I will lock you in the cellar. I mean this. You gon' be strong when I git through with you, **Rita**."

**Rita** couldn't have comprehended it at the time, but behind Daisy's harsh and irrational admonishments lurked the harsher and even more irrational lessons she'd learned firsthand as an African American living in the Deep South. Daisy survived because she was tough and wily, and she was determined to stamp those same traits into **Rita**, whatever it took. Apparently it took withholding affection while piling on cutting remarks.

Yet Daisy also set out to improve **Rita**'s mind, despite her own refrain that "a n -- a n -- and a mule's a mule, and you can't make nothing out of neither one of 'em." Daisy paid for **Rita**'s private German lessons and piano lessons with money she earned from picking strawberries. She scrubbed the floors of a nearby private school to pay for **Rita**'s education there. Then she placed **Rita** in a boarding school -- not out of love but because she needed to unload her.

It was after **Rita** first stood up against Daisy that she overheard her aunt on the phone. "Father Funk, I've got to git rid of Reeter Ann. ... Now she's got a mind of her own. I won't stand for it." **Williams** recalls her confusion. "A tiny voice inside me pondered this conundrum: How could I get an education and learn to think for myself, as she was always admonishing me, if I couldn't have a mind of my own?"

Daisy's solution to all of **Rita**'s troubles was to "get rid of Reeter Ann." After **Rita** survived a suicide attempt, Daisy bundled her off to another boarding school. When **Rita** got pregnant, she was placed in a home for unwed mothers.

That **Williams** survived her rudderless youth is a testament to her resilience. That she could write about it with such unblinking forthrightness is admirable.

"I think she [Daisy] was confused to find herself not liking me much, even as I was accomplishing the very thing at which my mother and sisters had failed," **Williams** concedes. "We reminded me of the way aspens grow, in dense family stands. ... Sometimes a sick old tree will collapse against the saplings that stand close to it, and the saplings in turn grow malformed, spindly and fragile in too little soil."

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