

A Room Made of Leaves



Kate Grenville

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PRaise FOR A ROOM MADE OF LEAVES

'Kate Grenville is a literary alchemist, turning the leaden shadow of the historical Elizabeth Macarthur into a luminescent, golden woman for our times. Intelligent, compassionate, strategic and dead sexy, Grenville's Macarthur is an unforgettable character who makes us question everything we thought we knew about our colonial past. A polished gem of a novel by a writer who is as brave as she is insightful. I simply loved it.'

CLARE WRIGHT

'There is no doubt Grenville is one of our greatest writers.'

SUNDAY MAIL

ABOUT KATE GRENVILLE

Kate Grenville is one of Australia's most celebrated writers. Her international bestseller *The Secret River* was awarded local and overseas prizes, has been adapted for the stage and as an acclaimed television miniseries, and is now a much-loved classic. Grenville's other novels include *Sarah Thornhill*, *The Lieutenant*, *Dark Places* and the Orange Prize winner *The Idea of Perfection*. Her most recent books are two works of non-fiction, *One Life: My Mother's Story* and *The Case Against Fragrance*. She has also written three books about the writing process. In 2017 Grenville was awarded the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature. She lives in Melbourne.

A READER'S INTRODUCTION TO A ROOM MADE OF LEAVES

What if Elizabeth Macarthur's letters and journals were a mask hiding her true experiences and emotions? What if the contemporary expectations of a gentlewoman prevented her from writing her truth to anyone but

herself? This is Kate Grenville's starting point for this brilliant novel, a starting point encouraged by Elizabeth Macarthur's recommendation not to believe too quickly.

This exhortation is used as an epigraph, so it is directed at the reader too. We must think carefully about what to believe and what not to believe. *A Room Made of Leaves*, Kate Grenville tells us at the end, is neither history nor pure invention. It is a reminder to question received truths about history, most especially about women and First Nations people. Perhaps Elizabeth thinks, what she thought of as trade was actually a lesson from the Burramattagal in how to do things properly, and how to act with grace, forgiveness and generosity.

Just as it straddles fact and fiction, *A Room Made of Leaves* is as much about the present and the future as it is about the past. We should be equally careful with regard to what we believe about what we are told of the present as we are about what we are told of the past.

But *A Room Made of Leaves* is not just a warning about the difficulties of truth and belief, or a lesson about history. It is an absorbing narrative of a woman's changing self, of ambition and destiny, of learning and doing and being. It is about how a self can shift and change through life, how it is bound and freed through life's stages.

Indeed the novel is so absorbing and feels so real, that it is easy to forget not to believe. It feels entirely believable.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Grenville has previously said: 'My interest isn't in reconstructing the past, but to tell a story set in the past that helps us understand the present.' What are we to understand about the present from this story? Does it also help us to understand the past?

What are the connections between the past that Grenville is writing about and the present that we are living in today?

2. If you have read *The Secret River*, *The Lieutenant* or *Sarah Thornhill*, talk about whether *A Room Made of Leaves* stands as a companion to that trilogy or if it stands alone. What links does it have with Grenville's earlier works such as *Joan Makes History* or *Lilian's Story*?
3. *A Room Made of Leaves* is dedicated to 'all those whose stories have been silenced.' Are those voices being heard more now? If so, how are they being heard? What contribution can a novel make to making previously silenced voices heard?
4. At the end of her 'memoir', Elizabeth reflects that behind the dispossession, cruelties, and murders of the Gadigal, Wangal, Cameraygal and Burrumattagal is 'another fundamental violence: the replacement of the true history by a false one'. Does this violence continue today? Or are we closer to a truer history?
5. Elizabeth has two rooms made of leaves in the novel: the one she shares with Mr Dawes and her private one by the river on the Macarthurs' sheep farm. How are the two rooms similar and different? How do they each contribute to her story?
6. Elizabeth reflects that she was difficult in the sense of having her own will. 'Did I not have the right to feel what I felt, be who I was?' she ponders. What kind of sense of self does Elizabeth come to? How does she negotiate wanting to feel what she feels and being who she is with the different worlds she finds herself in through her life?
7. How does Elizabeth's dissembling through her life tie in with the novel's themes of fact and fiction? Does she dissemble to be truer to herself? How free is she in her choices about whether to be true to herself or not? Is Elizabeth wrong when she feels that she has power and that allowing Mr Macarthur to 'assail' her is her decision? Why doesn't she feel the 'lie' in the event as it happens?
8. The Elizabeth of this narrative speaks more freely of sex than the historical Elizabeth may have been able to. What does Elizabeth's experience of the physical, including sex and childbirth, tell us about womanhood?
9. Elizabeth talks of two 'John Macarthurs [that] ran side by side like a pair of well-matched carriage horses: similar but not the same, close but never quite touching.' What are these two selves, and where do they come from? She also tells us that even when she folded herself up, there was still a 'speck' left. At other times, she watches herself as if from a distance. She talks about meeting and discovering other selves, for instance that 'under the bland courtesies of Mrs John Macarthur lived another woman entirely'. Talk about the different ways the self is portrayed in the book. Are their 'true' selves hidden behind 'false' selves?
10. Elizabeth reflects that her position as woman and wife gave her no power, but she had to take control of her and Mr Macarthur's destinies. Later she sees that 'bold young woman who had thought herself in command of her destiny' as someone else. How much control does she have over their mutual destiny, and most particularly her own?
11. Why has Grenville described a relationship between Elizabeth and Lieutenant Dawes? What does it signify? Does she choose him because he teaches her that 'what might appear to be true was not', and that 'we decide what we think we know...from such evidence as we have'? Is it because it is Mr Dawes who introduces her to the Gadigal? And what are we to make of the reminder from the (invented by Grenville) Elizabeth that the story of their relationship may be a 'mischievous invention'?
12. Elizabeth gradually comes to acknowledge the beauty of the foreign landscape she finds herself in. By the end of the novel, she feels a deep connection with the country and that she belongs, that it is her home. How do non-Indigenous people make a connection with the land? How does it compare with the connection First Nations people have with country?
13. Elizabeth recognises her lack of courage in not being willing to sit with Daringa and the other Gadigal women she knows in town. She also realises that the settlers' 'ownership' of the land is theft. She feels 'a shadow at the edge of my life, the consciousness that I was on land that other people knew was theirs'. Are she and Dawes the only ones conscious of this shadow in *A Room Made of Leaves*? Are non-Indigenous Australians today conscious of this shadow?