

***Lighting Dark Places: Essays on Kate Grenville.* Ed. Sue Kossew.
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Kate Grenville's prominence as an author has become as much about her persona away from the page as about the words she writes on it. In fact, Grenville has become a phenomenon of sorts, generating debates and discussion on feminism, Australian identity, the role of creative writing in academia, the actual craft of creative writing itself and, most prominently, the nature and roles of history and fiction.

As the historian Inga Clendinnen commented in her article, 'The History Question: Who Owns the Past?'¹, Grenville was singled out for the debate on history and fiction, 'not because she is the worst offender, but because she has thought hard about what she is doing and is ready to talk about it frankly.' It follows then that *Lighting Dark Places*, the first collection of essays compiled on Grenville and her work is, and has to be, a balanced analysis not only of Grenville's fiction but her non-fiction, her impact as a literary personality and on the debates for which she was the impetus.

After the success and controversy of *The Secret River*, the most renowned aspect of Grenville's work is the relationship between history and fiction. Grenville cannot escape the imbroglio of the 'history wars' and with the collection's epigraphs focusing solely on the nature and roles of historic and fictitious writing, it seemed as though she would be trapped once again. However, the essays in *Lighting Dark Places* go beyond the obvious paradigms to look widely at the scope of Grenville's work and her role as author and social commentator. As Brigid Rooney, in her essay 'Kate Grenville as Public Intellectual', notes,

... the present collection of essays about Grenville exemplifies the tightness with which literary reception and public intellectual status can be coupled in Australia. [...] Indeed, literary works are themselves public interventions. The controversies they generate can reach both the literary academy, with its professional interests in post-colonial and national debates, and a broader, educated mass of readers attuned to national cultural debates in the quality mediasphere. (34-35)

Although this statement relates to Grenville's involvement with the 'history wars', it can also apply to Grenville's role as public intellectual in relation to feminism and creative writing both as a craft and as a part of academia. In 'Author! Author! The Two Faces of Kate Grenville', Elizabeth McMahan examines the different guises of Kate Grenville and how her commentary and involvement in varied arenas has rejected an exclusive definition of her, 'exclusive' both in the sense of a singular concept of her as an author, but also in the imagined divide between authors who can innately create and those who cannot. McMahan's essay provides a fresh look at how Grenville's extensive non-fiction works, including instructional creative guides and memoir-like insights into her creative process and the role of fiction, have impacted on the literary academy and the wider society. These non-fiction writings have opened up a dialogue between Grenville's work and Grenville the woman and

¹ Clendinnen, Inga. 'The History Question Who Owns the Past?' *Quarterly Essay Issue 23*, Black Inc. Melbourne (2000): 16.

author and how they locate Grenville in the 'gendered and embodied everyday world (as a woman, mother, daughter) and within the growing academic field of creative writing' (xv).

What becomes prevalent in Grenville's writing is the democratisation of subject and thought; the everydayness in her approach to writing—a theme that is identified throughout the collection of essays. Grenville pointedly establishes herself not only as an author, but as a woman, a mother and a daughter. McMahon notes that

Grenville's claim to many and conflicting roles is also in keeping with the times and the ways 1980s feminism sought to grant women permission to be contradictory and various—to contain multitudes—which is a theme of her fiction ... but is also embedded in her conception of writing itself. (49)

There are several essays in *Lighting Dark Places* that deal with Grenville's contribution to feminist literary discourse. In 'Reading Feminism in Kate Grenville', Susan Sheridan gives an overview of Grenville's 'feminist anger at the denigration of women and the compromises women are forced to make (and the way Grenville asks) new questions about the world (that) inevitably involve writing in new ways' (1-2). Sheridan reveals the link between Grenville's personal feminist experiences, the shifts within the feminist movement over the decades and the varying feminist perspectives Grenville adopts in her earlier novels.

Ruth Barcan, in 'Mobility is the Key: Bodies, Boundaries, and Movement in Kate Grenville's *Lilian's Story*', furthers the feminist reading of Grenville's work giving a spatial analysis of *Lilian's Story* and a discussion on the role and limitation of the female body through society and the way in which Lilian escapes abjection in the narrative. It is an essay that looks at the physical and psychological boundaries in the narrative and the way they are blurred and crossed.

Lighting Dark Places is noticeably partial to essays on *Lilian's Story*, yet manages to present fresh and varied perspectives on this novel. Alice Healy's "'Impossible Speech" and the Burden of translation: *Lilian's Story* from Page to Screen' analyses the universalising translation of Grenville's novel into Jerzy Domaradzki's 1995 film in relation to Judith Butler's theory of 'excitable speech'.

Bill Ashcroft's, 'Madness and Power: *Lilian's Story* and the Decolonized Body' is a linking essay between Grenville's early feminist work and her later work that challenges national mythology and archetypes, and reinterprets the past. In this way it is a good companion piece to Sue Kossew's essay 'Constructions of Nation and Gender in *The Idea of Perfection*' which also reveals the links between gender roles, power relations and violence. Drawing the parallels between Albion's power over Lilian's body and the British settlement of Australia, Ashcroft mounts a convincing reading of the novel in which '... Australia's entrapment in the discourse of the Empire, its conventions and its wars, and the slow struggle to live its own history mirror the struggle of the woman.' (57)

Lilian's Story and *The Idea of Perfection* begin Grenville's involvement in national discussions on Australian identity, and the representation and interpretation of history. Ashcroft points to the power of language as a way of re-conceiving the 'colonial space (and) reconstructing, re-visioning the (female) body as a site of difference' (65). Grenville's belief in the power of writing to re-conceive Australia echoes Brigid Rooney's essay and her emphasis on Grenville's sentiments that 'it takes the voice of fiction to get the feet walking in a new direction.' It also points to Lynette Russel's piece 'Learning From Each Other—

Language, Authority and Authenticity in Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant*' that shows the significance placed on language and story in Grenville's writing as a means of reflection and understanding. Ultimately Grenville sees the re-working of story and language as a means of self-reconciliation and reconciliation with others.

In Sue Kossew's essay, we see how Grenville persists in challenging Australia's national myths and gender stereotypes that Australians cannot live up to. Kossew examines the ongoing theme of Grenville's democratisation of history and experience showing how Grenville debunks the individual heroism of the rugged outback by proposing a 'history of the everyday (that) draws attention to the idea of history as the collective memory of ordinary folk' [157].

Lighting Dark Places gives a real sense of Grenville's progression as a writer and intellectual. As the collection comes to analyse Grenville's most famous and most discussed work, *The Secret River*, and its companion novel, *The Lieutenant*, there is a sense that these works were inevitable. They do not mark a departure from Grenville's earlier work but rather contribute to those established overarching themes: the fallacy of national myths, the roles of history and fiction, and the importance of language to create empathy and understanding. Sarah Pinto, in her essay, 'History, Fiction and *The Secret River*' poses the question, 'what was it—and what is it—about this novel that has made it the focus of so much attention?' (182). She explains that the difference in *The Secret River* is the novel's internal and external narrative contexts. *The Secret River* explores the terrain of first contact in Australia in a way that tapped into a larger national debate on the construction of Australian history and what form this history should take. It continues to tap into a collective feeling of white guilt and question the basis of Australian identity in a highly relevant way providing possible answers to these concerns. Pinto regards the polarising debates on the nature of history and fiction that surrounded *The Secret River* as a missed opportunity for historians and authors of fiction to negotiate a new space for historical knowledge of the past. The negative controversy stymied any acknowledgement that 'it might be possible to situate historical work in Clendinnen's "ravine," but also that opening the space to do so might be productive, particularly given that this seems to be precisely the kind of space Aboriginal historians, writers, and activists have long argued warrants historical legitimacy' (195).

It is clear that the spirit in which Grenville's work is read, especially *The Secret River*, becomes just as important as what motivated it and the content within it. In 'Poison in the Flour—Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*', Eleanor Collins rereads the novel 'through the lens of tragedy' that helps create a fresh understanding of the work as fiction and a way of confronting the history it dramatizes (167). In doing so, she is able to look past historical discrepancies and focus on Grenville's aim of creating emotive truths about the past, not analytical facts. Collins notes how Grenville situates the reader between narrative and social contexts insisting on an empathetic reading, however ambiguous that empathy may be. Analysing Grenville's use of Thornhill as a conduit for narrative experience, Collins suggests we can see *The Secret River* as a tragic love story between Thornhill and his true love, the land, but also a journey of catharsis that deals with the guilt of white settlement in Australia.

Once again, we see Grenville challenging national myths, specifically those of the English convict, the pioneer and first contact. The third myth holds the most significance for Collins, who sees its power in its inappropriateness as a national myth; it is a myth that does not unify a nation: '... the stories of first contact with which white Australian history must begin are almost always stories of division: of misunderstanding and fear, or brutality and suffering'

(169). *The Lieutenant* also uses the historical archive to re-evaluate first contact and continues Grenville's belief that the tragedy of Australian history largely relates to language and miscommunication. In 'Learning From Each Other: Language, Authority and Authenticity in Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant*', Lynette Russel meditates on the different forms of language and language's transformative powers. As with Pinto, Russel argues that the reader must stray away from literal interpretations of Grenville's writing and view it as an interpretation, not documentation of first contact. Through this reception of Grenville's work, we can 'get a glimpse of a colonial past where interactions across the cultural divide were more complex than many historical accounts have presented them as' (210).

Lighting Dark Places is a valuable collection of essays because it provides a comprehensive insight into Grenville's varied guises and creations as well as the discourse prompted by them. Grenville's significance goes beyond mere literary impact and lies instead in her engagement with historical, political, academic and everyday Australia. At the collection's conclusion the reader is left with not only a new understanding of Grenville's work, but an understanding of how they feed into the larger picture of Grenville as a literary phenomenon.

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