

Evading serious issues

The Idea of Perfection by Kate Grenville, Pan MacMillan Australia, ISBN 0-330-36206-2

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Kate Grenville is a critically acclaimed Australian novelist who briefly worked in the film industry before taking up writing seriously in the late 1970s. Most of her books attempt to explore inequality between the sexes in relationships, family life and society in general.

Grenville's best-known novel is *Lilian's Story* (1985), based on the life of Bea Miles, a well-known Sydney eccentric. The book was praised by Nobel Prize winning Australian novelist Patrick White as "dazzling fiction of universal appeal" and was made into a feature film. Other works include *Bearded Ladies: Stories* (1984), *Dreamhouse* (1986), *Joan Makes History: A Novel* (1988) and *Dark Places* (1994).

Her latest book, *The Idea of Perfection*, is, according to Grenville, an examination of what draws people together. Set in Karakarook, a fictional Australian country town with a population of 1,734, the book is about two Sydneysiders—Harley Savage and Douglas Cheeseman—finding themselves and each other.

Savage is a tall, bulky and reserved middle-aged woman. Married three times and with three adult children, she works in textiles and has been commissioned to help establish the Pioneer Heritage Museum in Karakarook. The old mining town has virtually no industry, except for a few barely surviving small local businesses. The aim is to establish the museum as a major tourist attraction in order to save the town from financial ruin.

Cheeseman is an engineer who suffers from vertigo and is therefore assigned to the most boring jobs. He is sent to Karakarook to help reconstruct the old Bent Bridge. Passionate about bridges and cement, he is middle aged, plain looking and jug-eared. Having bored

his wife into leaving him, he is also divorced. The novel traces Harley and Douglas' transformation from awkward and emotionally stunted individuals into a couple comfortable with their imperfections.

Douglas is attracted to Harley and begins a clumsy but sincere effort to ingratiate himself with her. Harley is psychologically scarred from previous marriages and reluctant to become involved. A relationship of sorts develops until Harley brusquely calls it off when she realises they have become the talk of the small town. Several incidents occur, however, which draw them back together.

Karakarook has several quirky characters. The Cobwebbe Craft Shoppe is run by Coralie, a bit of a gossip with a heart of gold, who forms a friendship with the taciturn Harley. Freddy Chang, the local butcher whose family has lived in the area for five generations, is an inveterate womaniser and has an affair with Felicity Porcelline, the bank manager's wife. Felicity, who is eager to shake off all memory of her working class background, is obsessed with maintaining her looks and a clean and tidy home for her husband and son. She decides at one point that smiling increases facial wrinkles and resolves to limit herself to two smiles a day.

While Harley and Douglas encounter some mild opposition from the locals to their plans for the commissioned projects these problems are resolved amicably. The museum is a success and Douglas restores the bridge with wood.

Harley and Douglas bump into each other again and renew their friendship. She breaks down and tells Douglas about the dark memories of her marriages that she has been repressing. One husband left their home

and never returned. Another tried to throttle her, demanding to see “deep into her eyes.” Her last husband, a doctor, fashioned an elaborate means of decapitating himself in the garage. What precipitated this macabre suicide is not examined. In fact, Grenville seems to have created the event as a plot device to liberate Harley’s repressed memory and bring the couple together on a deeper level. After recalling this tragic incident, she and Douglas form closer bonds and become a couple again. The novel ends with Harley wondering how their relationship will develop after they return to Sydney and the difficulties of urban life.

The Idea of Perfection contains a number of interior monologues as the protagonists recall their childhood and how family expectations and their own experiences shaped their personalities. It also includes some colourful descriptions of the surrounding countryside. But Grenville seems excessively preoccupied with literary technique and secondary details. There are distracting italics to stress clichés and colloquialisms and changes in style whenever different characters speak. This gives the novel a self-conscious and artificial tone—a world inspired not by real people or events but pieced together from literary sources and history books. A town is created, some characters loosely sketched and a few incidents used to try and pull the whole scattered thing together.

Speaking to the *Compulsive Reader* about the book, Grenville says that Harley and Douglas “learn that the idea of perfection can be a tyrant you should overthrow, to gain your freedom. Luckily, they both learn a few things in the course of the book, one of those things being that physical beauty comes in all shapes and sizes, including a lot that the women’s magazines have never even thought of.”

This rather commonplace view underpins the novel. Although Harley and Douglas’s journey towards “self-discovery” is marked by tragedies and social and filial alienation these events are passed over fleetingly and consequently have little impact on the reader. The tragic death of Harley’s last husband and other events seem like a prelude to an epiphany and then a happy ending.

The Idea of Perfection is a regression for Grenville, who seems to have concluded that life is an unfathomable mystery and therefore people should not trouble themselves too much. One should be at peace

with one’s own shortcomings. Previous novels, such as *Lilian’s Story*, possessed an underlying seriousness and genuine curiosity and compassion towards her characters and their problems. While her writing style was light, it was engaging when addressing more serious questions. In turning away from these, Grenville’s lightweight technique dominates, highlighting the work’s insubstantial content.



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