



A Room Made of Leaves

Kate Grenville



Author Background

Kate Grenville was born in 1950 to a District Court judge and barrister (father) and a pharmacist (mother) and grew up in Sydney, earning an Arts degree from Sydney University. She worked for Film Australia before travelling to Europe and the USA to work and study. After completing a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Colorado, Kate returned to Australia where she worked for SBS as an editor of subtitles and then became a freelance writer, reviewer, and teacher of Creative Writing.

In 2006 Kate won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for *The Secret River* which was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.

Kate was awarded the Lifetime Achievement in Literature from the Australia Council in 2017 and received the Order of Australia in 2018.

Kate has published 16 books, a mix of fiction, non-fiction, biography, and memoir.

Book Summary

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 novel, a starting point encouraged by Elizabeth Macarthur's recommendation not to believe too quickly...

Elizabeth Macarthur, wife of the notorious John Macarthur, wool baron in the earliest days of Sydney, seeks agency in a society that gave women none. Elizabeth manages her complicated life with spirit and passion, cunning and sly wit. Her memoir lets us hear - at last - what one of those seemingly demure women from history might really have thought.

At the centre of *A Room Made of Leaves* is one of the most toxic issues of our own age: the seductive appeal of false stories. This book may be set in the past, but it's just as much about the present, where secrets and lies have the dangerous power to shape reality.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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*?
- ❖ At the end of her 'memoir', Elizabeth reflects that behind the dispossession, cruelties, and murders of the Gadigal, Wangal, Cameraygal and Burramattagal 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?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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?
- ❖ 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 Mr Dawes the only ones conscious of this shadow in *A Room Made of Leaves*? Are non-Indigenous Australians today conscious of this shadow?

References

- ❖ Kate Grenville: <https://kategrenville.com.au/>
- ❖ Kate Grenville: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kate_Grenville
- ❖ Text Publishing – Kate Grenville: <https://www.textpublishing.com.au/books/a-room-made-of-leaves>. Includes links to several interviews.