

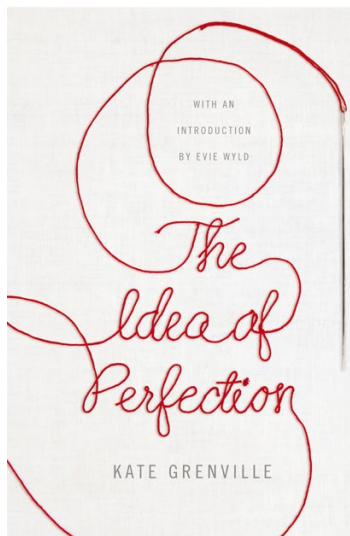


## 2020 WINNER

### THE IDEA OF PERFECTION BY KATE GRENVILLE

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Kate Grenville is one of Australia's best-loved authors and the winner of many prizes for her nine novels. Born in Australia, she's travelled widely, and spent five years in the UK, where she began to write. Her books are set in Australia but their themes are universal. The book for which she won the Women's Prize for Fiction was *The Idea of Perfection*, a book about the human impulse to conceal our weaknesses from ourselves as well as each other, and the fact that life really starts when we stop trying to be perfect. Kate Grenville lives in Melbourne and enjoys the endless challenge of trying – very imperfectly! – to play the cello.



#### PLOT SUMMARY

Harley Savage has come to Karakarook in rural New South Wales to help establish a heritage museum. Douglas Cheeseman, a large-eared, socially inept engineer, has been sent to supervise the demolition of a damaged bridge.

Although apparently weakened, the bridge remains structurally viable, and has become an object of fierce debate in the town. Should the bridge be saved as part of a campaign to preserve the region's heritage, or should it be torn down to make room for a more modern structure? This question divides the townsfolk yet brings Harley and Douglas to Karakarook, a woman and a man who yearn to build emotional bridges but fear that they lack the tools to do so.

Like the bridge, they have endured much in life, but are not yet broken, though their futures are very much in doubt.

A love story about a mature man and woman, neither of whom are without flaws and tons of baggage, *The Idea of Perfection* is a gentle and humorous summary of small towns, normal lives, unattractive characters and their many failings - but also a story about love and redemption.

#### WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

The arid atmosphere of Karakarook, New South Wales, is vivid and brilliantly rendered, making the landscape in *The Idea of Perfection* almost a character in itself. Indeed, the Bent Bridge serves as a metaphor for the damaged nature of the two main characters, who have both wondered whether it's worth trying to salvage their pasts, or to forget it and concentrate on the future. The bridge is also a symbol of a divided community which needs unity and healing, but which also seems to revel in its own discord. Within this divide of preserving the past and embracing the future, or nature versus technology, Douglas and Harley sit at the same juncture, considering the same question, but not necessarily drawing the same conclusion.

Grenville describes all her characters with a compassionate eye for human frailty, whether that be Harley's varied experiences with motherhood and marriage, Felicity Porcelline's cringeworthy awareness of her own racism or Douglas' terrible social skills.

Grenville also considers in *Harley* how those who work to preserve the past may themselves remain haunted by their own personal histories. Harley Savage is a hard woman with a hard name, whose work in preserving folk art and heritage appears slightly at odds with her character and past 'wild' choices. However, who could be more likely to want to preserve something beautiful than someone whose life has been difficult? What are the signifiers of these two sides to Harley in the book?

## DISCUSSION POINTS

A quote from Leonardo da Vinci provides the epigraph for this book:

"An arch is two weaknesses which together make a strength."

Grenville investigates the obstacles that come between people, particularly in the relationships between men and women, and prevent them understanding each other. In this quote, da Vinci was talking about bridges, but how does the quote also make sense for the characters in the book?

In what ways do people come together to make a harmonious whole? How does Grenville explore wholeness and strength?

## QUESTIONS

How do Harley and Douglas come to terms with their own lack of perfection in this novel, and how do they compare with Felicity Porcelline's quest for eternal youth and perfection?

Is Harley a good mother, despite her imperfections?

What does the dog that follows Harley around symbolise?

**“ DOUGLAS AND HARLEY EACH HAVE A MOMENT OF INSIGHT WHERE THEY'RE ABLE TO FORGIVE THEMSELVES FOR NOT BEING PERFECT, AND IN THAT MOMENT THEY'RE ALSO ABLE TO ACCEPT THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING LOVED ”**

KATE GRENVILLE,  
AUTHOR

## NEXT STEPS

Harley Savage's craft work is patchwork, a lovely metaphor for healing: Harley is making something new and beautiful from the leftover scraps of other things. Douglas and Harley themselves could be considered other people's rather unlovely 'leftover scraps' who, nevertheless, find love with each other.

Find a good selection of text sources you don't mind damaging, like a few old books, magazines, and so on, and cut them up so that you can 'patch' them together into something new. Juxtaposing bits of text next to each other gives unexpected combinations: see what you get! A theme might suggest itself straightaway, or you could decide to impose a theme and look for the words you need. Cut out the parts you want and stick them onto a blank page in a way that pleases you. Have you made a poem, a statement, a story, a manifesto? See what happens when you vary your source text. Does your next piece change?

For a big project, make a patchwork quilt which somehow represents love, healing and unity. In many traditions, patches can often include embroidering words onto the quilt, so you could consider adding on text in some way onto yours – names, quotes that have meaning for you, dates of birth and death of loved family members, etc. A quilt can be a kind of documentation of a life or a family, but it could also record an important event or even something in the news you want to draw attention to, so decide what or who you want to document, and be creative!



## BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

*THE SECRET RIVER* BY KATE GRENVILLE

*THE SHIPPING NEWS* BY ANNIE PROULX