

Unsettled book club notes

Book description

As Kate Grenville drives north from Sydney/Gadigal into Dharug and Darkinjung country, she takes us on a journey into her own understanding. A 'pilgrimage', she calls it, as she travels through landscapes, thoughts, and her family history.

As she heads along the river, she is following her forebears' colonising path. Generations back, her ancestors were 'settling' land that was occupied by First Nations people. They were claiming ownership, or given ownership by the Government, as if the people who lived there already had no connection with country. Grenville is reminded of the images we see on the news of the looting that happens during civil unrest – 'men running out of smashed-open shops cradling televisions in their arms with a look of astonished glee. Look what I scored! (p. 147).

This pilgrimage isn't so much about finding a historical truth. Grenville openly speculates on how things might have been in the past rather than recording fact and she acknowledges that it is easy for things 'to get misrecorded, misunderstood, misremembered. For the truth of things to be lost' (p. 113). Rather, she is searching for answers to the question of 'What do we do, now that we know' (p. 3). No matter what thoughts cross her mind on this journey, she always comes back to the question – how does one live on stolen land?

And yet she declares that there are no answers. She frequently tells us of the limits of what she is doing, and what she is thinking about. She wonders if it is enough, but it is what she can do, and so she does it.

About the author

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*, *Lilian's Story*, *Dark Places*, the Orange Prize winner *The Idea of Perfection*, *A Room Made of Leaves* and, most recently, *Restless Dolly Maunder*, shortlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction. Her works of non-fiction include *One Life: My Mother's Story*, *The Case Against Fragrance* and *Elizabeth Macarthur's Letters*.

Questions

1. Grenville begins her book with its core questions: 'What do we do with the fact that we're the beneficiaries of a violent past? If we acknowledge that we're on land that was taken from other people, what do we do about that?' (p. vii). Do you think Grenville answers these questions – to which she declares there are no answers (p. viii)? If so, do you agree with her? If not, do you think there is an answer?
2. As well as the difficulty in talking about these questions because they can end in a 'stalemate', Grenville writes that 'another reason not to take on those questions is that it

puts us non-Indigenous Australians at the centre' (p. vii). Does this book put non-Indigenous Australians at the centre? Is that a valid thing to do?

3. Grenville wonders whether it matters if her forebear Solomon Wiseman picked up a gun and concludes that 'in the big picture, it doesn't make all that much difference' (p. 18). What do you think? Is there any difference for non-Indigenous Australians with direct ties to people who were violent colonisers and those without?
4. When thinking about what happened in the past, Grenville uses words like 'imagining', 'conjuring up' and 'speculating' on how things might have been. 'This loose, open-ended process is the only way I seem able to approach the past and puzzles that it creates for the present' (p. 42). She explicitly likens this to her approach to novel writing. What do you think of this as an approach to writing history? Is it possible to write history without imagining, conjuring up, and speculating?
5. Grenville regularly quotes from the family stories passed down through generations that her mother repeated to her. How do you respond to these stories? Have you got similar stories in your family? Have you rethought them over time?
6. Grenville often explicitly questions and ponders the words people have used now and in the past. Talk about how language both exposes and hides the past.
7. If you have read Grenville's historical fiction, have you rethought your response to these novels after reading *Unsettled*? Do you think Grenville might write something like *The Secret River* differently now?
8. When starting on her pilgrimage, Grenville feels that it is 'a private, exploratory thing' that she wants to leave 'unarticulated' (p. 29). And yet she creates a narrative from it. What do you think is left unarticulated?
9. There are some moments in her journey when Grenville experiences what she recognises as fear. Where do you think that fear stems from? What is she trying to tell us by writing about it?
10. Grenville only briefly touches on reconciliation. Why do you think this is?
11. Do you agree that acknowledgment of country is 'a way of looking away from ourselves [non-Indigenous people] and what we've done' (p. 29)?
12. Grenville describes using First Nations names as 'a gesture towards acknowledging the insults and exclusions of the past' and then immediately wonders if such a gesture is nothing more than 'the politics of the warm inner glow' (p. 185). What do you think? Is one more description truer than the other? Is *Unsettled* such a gesture?
13. Writing about the photo of Mary Ann Bugg and the way its title 'Thunderbolt's Gin' is often omitted from display, Grenville wonders: 'Maybe we shouldn't pick and choose among the relics of the past and only display the ones that don't make us uncomfortable' (p. 216). What do you think?
14. At the end of the book, Grenville describes the 'price to pay for being who I am' as being the feelings of 'shame, disgust, horror' as well as 'grief, sorrow, a longing for it to have been different' (p. 143). Is this the right price to pay? Is it too high or low? If you are non-Indigenous, what is *your* price to pay?
15. Have your thoughts about how to live on stolen land changed after reading this book?

