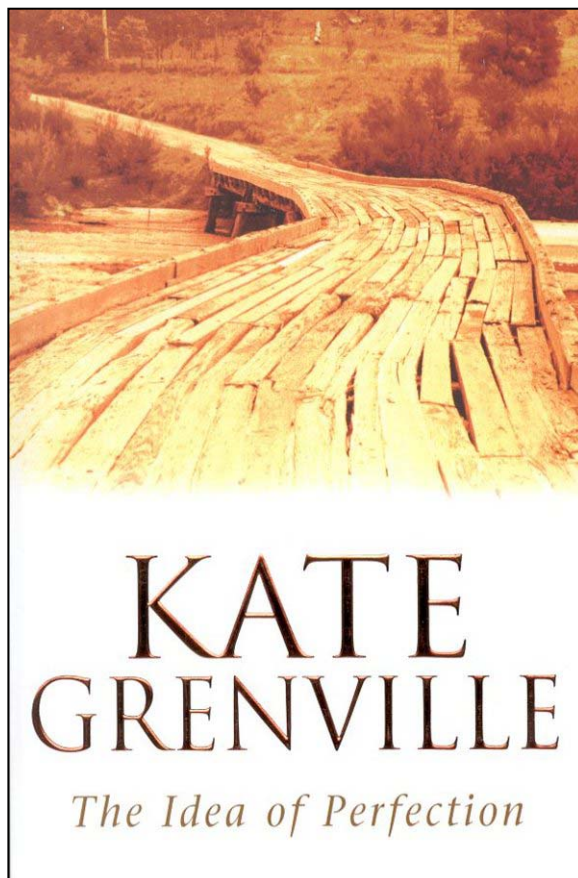


PICADOR AUSTRALIA

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

Kate Grenville

THE IDEA OF PERFECTION



WINNER OF THE 2001 ORANGE PRIZE FOR FICTION

Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

CONTENTS:

- Thematic & Plot Summary
- Writing Style & Techniques
- The Author
- Questions for Discussion

THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

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

Communication is at the heart of this book, which celebrates in often hilarious fashion the unpredictable joys to be found in discovering a new relationship. It's about grasping the connection with those we care for, even if it's just *'a fraction of a second of simple love'*. (p. 377)

The novel is set in Karakarook, a little country town dying on its feet. The people of Karakarook are divided on a heritage issue: the old Bent Bridge. Floods have pushed this bridge into a question-mark shape: it had *'chosen to bend rather than break'* (p. 62), and some of the townspeople think it should be pulled down. Others think it will bring much-needed tourist dollars to the town.

Douglas Cheeseman is an engineer sent to demolish the Bent Bridge and replace it with a concrete one. Harley Savage is in Karakarook to advise the local heritage committee about a museum they plan to establish. From the first page, Harley and Douglas are on a collision course.

Both of them are haunted by the idea of perfection - they're painfully aware of their own inadequacies, and this creates seemingly insuperable obstacles to developing relationships with other people. In the course of their month in Karakarook, both of them undergo profound changes. They come to terms with their own inadequacies and faults: as Harley comes to see: *'She was only that most ordinary of criminals, a human being'* (p. 353) Having forgiven themselves, they can also forgive each other, and come together at last.

Set against this story of accepting imperfection is the sub-plot of Felicity Porcelline, the bank manager's wife. Felicity would rather be dead than not be perfect. She's determined, for example, not to allow her face to develop the slightest suspicion of wrinkles, and carefully rations the number of times she smiles each day. *'Smiling did such immense damage'*. (p. 111) But the more fiercely she tries to control the world around her, the more chaos erupts and threatens to destroy her.

'How do people get on?' (p. 216) is the question which impels Douglas out into the streets at night to peer into people's windows, and it's one which all the characters ask as they consider the baggage of their pasts. Harley carries with her the accusing fact of her third husband's horrific suicide. When that happened, it confirmed her in the self-doubt that was born in her as a child, when she felt she was the dud of her high-achieving artistic family. Harley feels, deeply, that she's no good - worse, that she's dangerous. The closer people want to get to her, the more she needs to push them away: *'Being adored was something she had come to mistrust.'* (p. 40) Over the years she's developed an abrupt, abrasive manner; she's a woman whose *'eye-teeth looked like fangs'* (p. 10)

But she's capable of love - that's proved by her relationship with her three sons. *'Children adored you, but in their case it was not a test. There was no need to get anxious about not being perfect. No matter how unlovable a mother you were, they still loved you. She had not had any choice but to love them too. She did not need them to be perfect.'* (p. 42)

Douglas' life has always been overshadowed by the fact that his father was a famous war hero, killed in action before Douglas was born. His dead father, perfect in the way that only the dead can be perfect, is a permanent reproach. Douglas '*was not stupid, but he knew his face often looked stupid*'. (p. 214) His ears stick out, his nose is a big sunburned beak, and he can never find the right words. Cruellest twist of all, he's that laughable creature, an engineer who suffers from vertigo, condemned to a lifetime of small jobs that are close to the ground.

Douglas has been told, especially by his ex-wife, that he was '*no good with people*' (p. 52) His idea of himself has been eaten away until now, in his fifties, '*Sometimes he felt the urge to apologise simply for existing.*' (p. 48) He sees the strength in Harley as well as the weakness, and loves her for both: '*She was flesh and bone together, bending without breaking. It was what he loved about her.*' (p. 334) It takes a moment of crisis for him to discover a strength in himself that allows him to get close to her.

Felicity knows no way of getting on with other people except with the surface of herself. With her long-suffering husband Hugh, she's cordial enough. She even allows him two smiles per day. Her little boy is just another thing in her life that has to be perfect, so she tries to mould him into the shape she wants. She's obsessive about housework, and spends a lot of time worrying about getting wrinkles (the problem is, worrying about wrinkles gives you more wrinkles).

Finally, the lid of perfection that she's tamped down on herself breaks open and she embarks, catastrophically, on an affair with the butcher. It's nothing as deep as love, it's simple lust: nothing more than skin, rubbing up against another skin. His photos are symbolic of her love affair with her own perfection. The affair with Alfred Chang is just one more in what seems to be a long line of what she euphemistically thinks of as '*little awkwardnesses*'. (p. 112) Felicity is clearly on a path to disaster.

As well as the humans, fretting in their different ways about their lack of perfection, there's a dog that attaches itself to Harley as soon as she arrives in Karakarook. The dog isn't troubled by ideas of perfection. Like a mute guardian angel, it attaches itself to Harley and doesn't let go, in spite of her discouragement. Finally, painfully, she comes to accept what the dog, like Douglas, is offering: the gift of uncritical love.

The city and the country are constantly juxtaposed. '*This is the bush, they do things differently here*'. (p. 127) Country is a foreign landscape in which Harley and Doug are strangers. '*It was another planet out here. The city became merely a dream, or as distant as something you had read about in a book. The country made the city and all its anxieties seem small and silly,*' (p. 32) They are 'foils' whose 'idea' of the country is based on naïve unfamiliarity with it, '*There was a tremendous emptiness of the air here in the country. It was so pure it almost hurt.*' (p. 37) The nights are filled with noises unfamiliar, and these two babes in the wood are bemused by the strangeness around them, '*It did not sound like frogs, but it must be, unless there were people out there, hitting sticks against cardboard boxes in the darkness.*' (p. 44) But, as Doug finds out in his frightening encounter with a herd of cows, even the country is deceptive. '*It was not Nature. It was actually property. What he was doing was not exploring. It was trespassing.*' (p. 91) Nature is not as comforting or as benign a landscape as he had first supposed. Nor is it as neat as the paintings of it which Harley's father created. And for people like Felicity it can be a living hell. '*There were times when the light in the country seemed bright enough to burn the flesh right off your bones.*' (p. 339)

The issue of failing country towns is also evoked strongly. '*You could see that Karakarook had once taken it for granted that it had a big future.*' (p. 45) The town has suffered social and economic changes, but the townspeople still have hopes for it, and that is indeed why both Harley and Doug are there. Thus, the novel suggests that a town too, may be founded upon an idea of perfection. '*The founding fathers who had wanted to show off their classical education would never have guessed that the river would silt up, the new roads leave them marooned and the price of wool make it hardly worth shearing the sheep.*' (p. 46) And the present inhabitants still have dreams and hopes for the place. They still believe that it is possible to make something approximating perfection from what they've inherited; that they still have options, if they are willing to embrace them.

'How do people get on?' (p. 216) There is one couple in the book that understands this from the very beginning. Henry Henderson - known to everyone as 'Chook' - is all in favour of knocking down the Bent Bridge. His wife Coralie, however, is the driving force behind the Heritage Committee, determined to save the bridge. But their public conflict has nothing to do with the private reality, which is that Chook and Coralie know how to love each other in a way that goes beyond disagreement.

THE IDEA OF PERFECTION is a book of opposites and paradoxes. The Bent Bridge itself is one such paradox: it's been damaged, and badly. But, paradoxically, '*the damage was the very thing that made it strong*'. (p. 62) The patchworks that Harley makes is another: they're made of scraps, left-overs, rejects of fabric, and yet when they're put together they make a thing of beauty. In the same way, the Heritage Museum isn't full of silver teapots and lace christening robes, but the ordinary, workaday things that people have improvised out of poverty - and those are the things that are now priceless. Another kind of paradox is provided by the concrete that Douglas loves so much. It's a despised material, so ordinary no-one gives it a second glance - just like Douglas, in fact. But the way he sees it, concrete is the most miraculous of materials: a fluid medium that simply takes up the shape provided for it rather than imposing its own, and in the end, concrete is the key to his ingenious plan for saving the Bent Bridge.

A quote from Leonardo da Vinci provides the epigraph for this book: '*An arch is two weaknesses which together make a strength.*' Leonardo was talking about bridges, but **THE IDEA OF PERFECTION** takes the idea and plays with all its possibilities. Human beings are weak, but together in a relationship, they can make a strength for each other. Each can provide the equal and opposite force the other needs. It's a matter of working with weaknesses rather than against them.

Kate Grenville's other books take as their theme the obstacles that come between men and women and prevent them understanding each other. In the past, she's explored some of the darkest places of the human heart. In this book, she's found a way of marrying the 'light' and the 'dark' so that they make a harmonious whole. Conflict, the working of opposites against each other, isn't denied, but transformed into something positive, something more like a conversation.

Like one of Harley's patchworks, **THE IDEA OF PERFECTION** is a richly-patterned whole made up of many small and intricately-crafted details. In the foreground, the main characters make their journeys of discovery, in among the complex lives of a vivid cast of minor characters. Behind them all is the landscape: Karakarook, a little country town brought to life in a wealth of precisely-observed details, and the countryside around it, drawn as sharply as a photograph: and arching over it all, that big, generous, forgiving country sky.

WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Irony and Humour are used deliberately. eg During Harley's tortured conversation with Coralie at her 'billet', '*Outside somewhere, a crow made a long agonised noise like someone being slowly strangled.*' (p. 13) The scene in the butcher's shop when Alfred presents Felicity is deliciously full of sexual innuendoes. Discuss other instances where the underlying meaning is more than what is being said. eg '*There was a lot to be said for being boring, and it was something he was good at.*' (p. 61) Douglas and Harley's awkwardnesses, and Felicity's obsessiveness, give the writer great scope for humour. However there's a sympathy in the portrayal of the characters that means that the humour is never scornful or cruel. We can probably all relate to Douglas's encounter with the cows, for example, a wry account of a city man out of his depth in the country. What did you find most amusing?
2. Dialogue is masterfully written in a hieroglyphic, clipped style which is exactly descriptive of real conversational exchanges. Many such exchanges contain underlying 'sub-text'. Discuss examples.
3. A great many interviews & reviews of Kate Grenville's works, have mentioned her use of italics - what purpose do they serve?
4. The structure is intricate. Threads 'pulled' early in the novel, are eventually woven into its dramatic resolution and climax. eg Both Doug's vertigo and Felicity's burn-offs hint at something to come later. Discuss other aspects of structure which impressed you.
5. Characterization is conveyed via symbolic devices eg 'heart' (emotional damage); Douglas's enthusiasm for concrete (his ability to see the miraculous in the ordinary); Felicity's housecleaning (obsession with perfection). Did you find these devices powerful?
6. Binaries or repeated thematic motifs are used, eg Light/Dark; the sleepout at Harley's grandmother's, echoed at Lorraine Smart's house, when Harley sleeps there, because it's half out and half inside the house; the quilt based on the one she slept under at her grandmother's house, its pattern modelled on the light and dark patterns underneath the bridge. Do you find this sort of repetition of motifs effective?

THE AUTHOR

Kate Grenville is an acclaimed writer of literary fiction, born in Sydney in 1950. *LILLIAN'S STORY* was winner of the Vogel/Australian award, and *DARK PLACES* won the Victorian Premier's Prize. Other books include: *JOAN MAKES HISTORY* and *DREAMHOUSE*. Two books have been made into films and all are published in the UK and the US. She lives with husband, son and daughter in Sydney, and has also published books on the art of writing. **THE IDEA OF PERFECTION** recently won the prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction, the first time an Australian novel has been shortlisted, much less won.

She says of this book that 'it gave me the deepest pleasure to be able to write a love story, but not a falsely sentimental one. To me, this book is about the truest kind of love - not love between gorgeous, witty, brave people like the ones in movies, but between people like the rest of us, flawed in all kinds of ways. I loved being able to write about a country town, too: I love all the tiny distinctive details that make a place like Karakarook absolutely our own - Australian and unique. The Bent Bridge itself was a gift from the gods who watch over writers - the real Bent Bridge was knocked down, but it lives on in the book.'

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The bridge is the thematic core. What does it represent?
2. The country as presented as being more honest than the city. Is this a realistic or a romantic view?
3. Doug is convinced by his first sighting of Harley that she is a '*a real country sort of woman.*' (p. 101) Felicity thinks Alfred loves her, but his flirtation with Harley at the barbecue makes it clear that he's not. Do we assume people are what we want them to be?
4. '*The world simply did not go by in Parnassus Road, Karakarook.*' (p. 15) Would you find the 'quiet' of such a town bleak or comforting?
5. Grenville is adept at conveying the complex games which people play to masquerade emotions. Do you think we all camouflage emotional insecurities?
6. Does the book suggest that men and women are a mystery to each other or that they can find some common ground or understanding?
7. Did you find Felicity too tragic to be funny?
8. Do you agree with Harley, that children love their parents unreservedly, and don't require perfection?
9. Felicity's racism is conveyed, 'He was Chinese, no matter how long Changs had been in Karakarook.' (p 16) Is this a typical Australian attitude?
10. Who set the fire at the studio? And why?
11. What are Hugh's feelings for Felicity?
12. Doug and the dog are each vying for Harley's attention. Do you think they are both destined to remain part of her life?

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