LILIAN’S STORY
by Kate Grenville

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About Kate Grenville

I WAS BORN IN SYDNEY, Australia, in 1950. I did a BA honours degree at Sydney University, majoring in English Literature, and then went to work in the film industry, mostly editing documentaries. I thought I wanted to write, but kept being discouraged by comparing myself with the great writers I’d studied.

In the late 1970s I went to the UK on a working holiday for six months, and ended up being away for seven years. I started to write while I was living in London and Paris, supporting myself by various film-editing, writing, and secretarial jobs. Something about living as a foreigner in other countries gave me the freedom to try my long-suppressed dream of writing.

While I was in Paris I met American writers who introduced me for the first time to contemporary American fiction, and in 1980 I went to the University of Colorado at Boulder to do a Masters degree in Creative Writing. While I was there I put together a collection of short stories (later to become Bearded Ladies), and wrote a novel which later became Dreamhouse. As a Teaching Assistant at the university I also taught Composition and Creative Writing to undergraduates.

In 1983 I returned to Australia with an unfinished novel which became Lilian’s Story. Bearded Ladies was published in 1984 and the next year Lilian’s Story won The Australian/Vogel award for an unpublished book. Dreamhouse was published the following year. Joan Makes History was commissioned by the Australian Government as part of its Bicentennial activities and was published in 1988. As an extension of the teaching I was doing, I published The Writing Book in 1990, and collaborated with Sue Woolfe on Making Stories in 1993. A companion novel to Lilian’s Story, about her father, had been brewing slowly for ten years and was published as Dark Places (Albion’s Story in the USA) in 1995.

I teach, write reviews and do other paid work, but my writing has been made possible in great part because of the support of the Australian Government through its arts funding body, the Australia Council. I am extremely grateful for this support.

I live in Sydney with my husband and young son and daughter, and am engaged in the long but satisfying process of learning to play the cello.
On writing *Lilian’s Story*—Kate Grenville

**Research**

*Lilian’s Story* is very loosely based on a famous Sydney eccentric, Bea Miles. She was an old woman when I was a university student and I often saw her (from the safe distance of a bus) sprawled on the church steps at Railway Square in army greatcoat, tennis visor, and split sandshoes. Like everyone growing up in Sydney at that time, I knew a few things about her; that she was from a respectable middle-class family and had gone to one of Sydney’s top schools; that she had briefly gone to university but had dropped out under mysterious circumstances; and that she made money by offering recitations from Shakespeare (sixpence for a sonnet, a shilling for a scene from a play).

There were enough contradictions in this story to be intriguing. A nicely-brought-up university student with a love of Shakespeare had somehow turned into a huge, loud, uninhibited eccentric, living on the streets, with no fear of what people thought, no sense of what she ‘should’ be. What story could make sense of that?

Bea Miles herself was only a starting point for the book. I wasn’t terribly interested in finding out the exact details of her life. The few facts I knew about her could form the basis for a story that was really about bigger issues, such as:

- What was it like to be a clever woman born at a time when women were not even supposed to go to high school, much less university? What effect would that limitation have on you?

- What does it mean to refuse the life-story that has been prepared for you, and choose another of your own making? Bea Miles should have grown up to be a sedate wife and mother, and had forcefully re-written a new life-story for herself, of her own choosing.

- Was there significance to her enormous size (I’d seen photos of her as a young girl, slim and lovely)?

- Once you step outside the social norms, and can re-create your own values, your own choices from day to day, what structure or aim gives you purpose? In rejecting money-making, motherhood, politeness, organised religion, etcetera, what might you put in their place to give your life meaning or value?
I didn’t do any research about Bea Miles, because I felt I didn’t want to know too much about her—I only needed her story as a catalyst. I was afraid of not being able to explore the issues I wanted to, if I knew too much about her—I needed the freedom to invent a character who suited my purposes.

The book took about two years to write, part-time, around a part-time job. It wasn’t quite finished when I submitted it for The Australian/Vogel prize—I was 34, and it was the last year I’d be eligible. While the judges were deliberating, I finished the book.

When I learned I’d won, I could hardly believe it. I’d written several other unpublished novels and published a collection of short stories before, but this was the first time I’d written a book ‘just for me’—without any thought of pleasing a readership.

*Lilian’s Story* has been filmed, starring Ruth Cracknell as Lilian and Barry Otto as her father.

**How it was written**

With earlier books, I’d made plans in advance, and had found that although a plan is reassuring it can also stifle real creativity. With this book I decided to write in a much more unstructured way and see what happened. I used the few facts I knew about Bea Miles like navigation markers—peaks of known events—and I’d invent scenarios that would link these markers and make a journey. I didn’t start at the beginning—each day I’d plunge into the story at whatever point was interesting to me on that day. I used a lot of ‘triggers’—photos of Sydney at the period of Bea Miles, my personal knowledge of places in Sydney she’d frequented, stories I’d heard about her. I also found I could incorporate some details from my own life and give them to her—for example the school yard has a lot in common with my own primary school. I discovered the great freedom of writing about things I knew about, like that school yard, without having to write about myself.

As I wrote, I found that, in order to make sense of what I knew about this character, an event of some kind of abuse was coming out as part of the story. It’s not quite spelled out, but there is a power struggle between Lilian and her father which culminates in some traumatic event. I hadn’t planned that, but it made sense of everything, and brought into the open a lot of issues about the power relationships between men and women.

When I had about a hundred pages of these often quite short fragments, I put them in rough chronological order and found to my surprise that one led to the next quite naturally. That gave me a rough outline—then I could fill in the gaps, to make a narrative.
I tried in one draft to join the short fragments up into conventional longer chapters, but somehow it lost its energy, so instead I gave each fragment a title. I used the model of a film, which is a series of scenes, often with big leaps of time or place in between. Thanks to film, writers no longer have to tediously describe every transition, and get their characters from A to B. They can just ‘cut’ from one event to the next.

Reviews

Sydney Morning Herald—Elizabeth Jolley
Lil’s Story: facts, fat, frailness

Lilian’s Story is Kate Grenville’s first novel and with it she won the The Australian/Vogel Literary Award in 1984. Modern writers often develop Tolstoy’s text that ‘all happy families resemble one another, but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way’. Among other things, Lilian’s Story is an account of an unhappy family.

. . . This very moving and sometimes funny novel is written in a series of fragments, each with its own heading. The surprises in the story are not the events in themselves, for the horrors of family life and adolescence are not new. The surprises and flourishes are in the evocative and poetic writing of the episodes, every one of which reveals some detail of human frailness, and many include the daily crucifixions in the playground, at the family meal table, at birthday and tennis parties and during those unsparing moments of forced or cruel choice between individuals.

The dialogue is spare, carefully selected as if distilled. The characters leap from the essence of their own words sprinkled as they are throughout the narrative. The unusual use of italics adds power to these snatches of speech. He was such a skinny boy, and inept. Is he beaky now? (Aunt Kitty about Albion to Lilian’s mother with sinister overtones.) Kitty is constantly pickled (Albion about his sister Kitty), John do not gnaw like that . . . (Albion to his son) and perhaps the naetest reference to the onset of menstruation ever written: Go to Matron at once (Miss Vine to Lilian).

There are several lives shown in the glimpses as Lilian moves through her life. Kate Grenville presents with sympathy, alongside the clumsy developing Lilian and her peers, the perplexities, the patience and impatience, the acceptance and the horror of those forced to gaze upon the results of their rather one-sided (Albion’s) waxed paper intimate meetings.
The fragments are welded by sophisticated spacing and much is made clear to the reader without being actually stated. The ‘small tinny noise like rats’ feet’ as Albion drops his cardigan and becomes yet again part of the ‘desperate machine’ of incest is just one example.

It has been said in legends that man creates best from that which is the rejected part of him. In Part Three titled A Woman, Lilian, still dreadfully fat and still acquainted with grief, after a lifetime of being despised and rejected, laughed at and misunderstood knows what she really wants and what other people are missing in their conventional lives. She accepts herself. She finds solace with others whose needs match hers. She becomes what is known as a tolerated, even loved and respected by some, eccentric living in a stormwater drain, wandering in city parks, offering during her many tram rides recitations of Shakespeare for a shilling.

The novel ends with Lilian’s final taxi ride. ‘The story of all our lives is the story forward to death, although each of us might hope to be the exception.’ After all she has endured Lilian is able to say: ‘I have seen much but would not claim to have seen everything. I would not mind another century or two, to see some more.’

**Australian Book Review—Peter Craven**

Among the Australian novels of the last twenty years, Lilian’s Story by Kate Grenville must have as high claims as any to be considered a classic. This story of a fat little tomboy who cheerfully survives the beatings of her father in childhood only to be plunged into madness by his ultimate violation of her when she is a young woman is one of the grander pieces of Australian writing since the heyday of White and Stead.

In Lilian’s Story Kate Grenville does one thing supremely well: she presents a rough and tumble Australian childhood, not in the cat sat on the mat style of naturalism, but in a rich rhetorical style which evokes the sweat and sensuousness of it all. She also links this to the archetypal locus of contemporary dread and fascination: a father’s molestation of his daughter. And beyond that, in the episodic latter part of the book, she is able to present a tragicomic perspective on madness. Lilian both is and isn’t destroyed by her madness: in a substantial sense, she is a great semi-comical character getting her own illuminations from staring too long at the sun.

**New York Times—James Purdy**

Lunacy among the Teacups

This work from Australia is a work of considerable beauty and power. Written in the first person in a sumptuous style, it flows easily, unobstructedly from the birth of its heroine, Lilian Una
Singer, to her old age and approaching death . . . Kate Grenville’s first novel has an uncompromising vision behind it, and is told with honesty and virtuosity.

. . . We laugh with Lil at times, but we never laugh at her, because she is a fully realized fictional creation. So are all the characters around her: Lil’s broken, ruined mother, a woman of lilac and lavender, with countless corsets, who believes in conversation so long as it does not involve communication, love or truth; Lil’s bestial, miserly father, Albion, with his mustaches and squeaking, shiny boots; her blinking, spoiled, tuba-playing brother (he is favored in a family that looks down on girls); compassionate, boozing Aunt Kitty, the only one who truly cares for Lil; the mad old maid, Miss Gash, who wears clothes covered with postage stamps.

. . . Like a silent, sluggish but steadily flowing river, the story of the fat girl moves inevitably through the various stations of her life, resembling as it goes a silent movie in its visual insistence, and adumbrated like those old films with titles to introduce each short section and jog the reader on to the next visual progression of contretemps and disaster.

Fat as Lil is, beaten and shamed by any and all, she remains indomitable and unbowed, upright and unfazed. Indeed, her fat itself comes to be a kind of strength of being, a true aura, the authentic envelope of her soul.

. . . Thus the story of Lil Singer is coming to an end. But she has remained herself through all vicissitudes, unrepentant, in her own way victorious.

The Age Monthly Review—Kerryn Goldsworthy
Female, Fat and Brilliant

. . . It’s a Sydney book, in the way that Christina Stead’s For Love Alone or David Ireland’s Archimedes and the Seagull are Sydney books, but the recollection and evocation of a well-known local character compound and complicate the special appeal that regional writing has, the pleasure of recognition.

Grenville’s first book, Bearded Ladies a collection of short stories, suggested a writer with sharp eyes and a sharper tongue, a stylistically adroit writer whose chief charm was the inestimably valuable knowledge of when to shut up. That confidence and precision of syntax and diction turns up again in Lilian’s Story, although the writing is more relaxed and less attenuated and much, much funnier; what seems to have disappeared altogether between Grenville’s first book and her second is a taste for unhappy and rather nasty female protagonists, apparently determined after the fashion of Jean Rhy’s heroines to have as hard a time possible at the hands of men.
Not that Lilian’s Story isn’t ‘feminist fiction’, insofar as the expression has meaning; on the contrary. But the gender politics of this novel are much more sophisticated: less bitter and more knowing.

The novel, via Lil, traces the consequences of being female, fat and brilliant in a society where, since women can’t help being female, it is generally considered that they could at least have the grace to be slim and dim. Lil is an anomaly in the patriarchal society in which she lives and infuriating to the mad fascist father who personifies the worst aspects of that society—and whose Christian name, Albion, is the neatest and funniest statement of the analogy between the historical relationship of England to Australia and that of men to women that I have ever come across.

. . . It’s Lil’s rejections of these notions in her childhood which turn her eventually, into a fat, eccentric adult; she refuses to accept such masculine assertions and develops various strategies of resistance—one of which is eating. She eats to protect herself from the ultimate in punishment—inflicted on her by the personification of the masculine, her own father.

. . . Closer to home Grenville also makes use of a couple of national literary fathers, David Ireland and Patrick White. The short semi-detached sections of narrative, each with its separate title, are such a trademark of Ireland’s that they suggest him instantly, recalling that this is the storytelling mode of his own usually eccentric narrations, of whom Lil Singer could potentially be one. The suggestions of Patrick White appear in the syntax, the settings and some of the events—notably a scene in which Lil in her old age falls down ill in the street and is helped up by a woman in lilac shantung whom she goggly recognises as her childhood friend Ursula.

. . . Considering some of the horrible things that happen to Lil, and the dead-serious heart of the book—its implication that women who refuse or fail to be thin and thick are likely to be beaten, denied love, sneered at, and/or driven round the bend—it’s consistently and sometimes extremely funny.

. . . Grenville’s considerable talent for luminous prose is nowhere so apparent as in the last few pages where Lil confronts the inevitability of her own death.

**Times Literary Supplement—Katherine Bucknell**

**Attention-seeker’s tale**

The narration is direct and simple, well-suited to presenting childhood and adolescence. Grenville’s descriptions are eccentric but concise, and make vivid the conflict between Lilian’s useful desires and the restraints of genteel family life. But as Lilian’s Story develops, its simplicity
seems increasingly a limitation; the range of tones narrows, themes and images are repeated, and the novel becomes relentlessly depressing.

**The Weekend Australian**—Adrian Mitchell  
**Fat Lil shakes and shocks**

Kate Grenville is the kind of writer who makes reading enjoyable. The story of Lilian is gutsy and honest, true to the kind of character she is, which includes being honest about her dishonesties. Lil tells her own story, but it is a story in which, for such an ardent rager, she doesn’t speak many lines. Her story is a kind of internal narrative summary of her experiences at the moment.

. . . There have been a few serious, comic ‘fat lady’ novels in recent years—Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle*, for example, and Leon Rooke’s *Fat Woman*. Kate Grenville’s is a very different kind of work. Her Lilian Singer, who bears a more than tangential resemblance to the famous Sydney eccentric, Bea Miles, is more like a figure from Patrick White—say, a fat Theodora Goodman and Mary Hare rolled into one.

. . . Kate Grenville has written shrewdly as well as colourfully. She has created a full and memorable character, and allows Lil to win our sympathies so well that we hesitate to use the word ‘eccentric’. . . Her irony is swift and light, not overbearing. She delights in playing off the unconventional against the genteel, in shocking with the occasional vulgarity. There is a refreshing impudence in this, and an affirmation of the real, a greediness for experience. The novel ends with Lil telling a taxi driver: ‘Drive on, George. I am ready for whatever comes next.’

It is a novel of memorable images, witty lines and fine phrases. And it reads as though it were a delight to write.

**Some suggested points for discussion**

♦  Lilian is a courageous, pathetic, cunning, raucous and sensual character; she survives her life with a joyous intensity, taking pleasure where she can. What are the moments where Lilian's joy and sense of humour enable her to overwhelm the awfulness of her life?
♦ For years Lilian works at eating, at making herself into a fat person. Why is this and what does her fat symbolise? Lil’s brother John also uses food as a weapon—how does he do this?

♦ Women’s lives have come a long way since Lilian’s, but do some things remain the same?

♦ What drives some people to live outside the social norms? Can this sometimes be more ‘sane’ than staying within the norms?

♦ Was Lilian ‘mad’?

♦ Lilian was an individual within a society that couldn’t accommodate her—what were her choices in this situation? What are our own?

♦ Are there subtle forms of abuse that are not necessarily sexual, that can distort a child’s consciousness?

♦ Where do the rights of a parent to exercise power over a child begin and end?

♦ Marion Halligan described Grenville’s prose as ‘vigorously galloping, lilting vivid prose, that shouts out the power of the imagination’. How do you think Grenville’s language reflects and enhances the story?

♦ What’s the effect of the short fragments? How would it be different if they were joined up into longer chapters?
♦ What’s the effect of italicising the dialogue instead of punctuating it in the conventional way?

♦ The book is seen completely through Lilian’s eyes—what effect would it have if it was told from another point of view?

♦ Is there an ethical problem with taking the life of a real person, and changing it for the writer’s own purposes?

♦ (For those who have seen the film.) What problems would the film-makers have faced in translating the story into another medium? Were there compromises that had to be made? What do you think of the choices they made?

Further reading

Dark Places by Kate Grenville
This is a companion novel to Lilian’s Story. It tells the story of Lilian’s father, including his relationship with Lilian, from his point of view. Many of the same events occur in both books, but are seen very differently. In Lilian’s Story, her father is seen from the outside, as something of a monster. Dark Places allows him to tell his own story.

Joan Makes History by Kate Grenville
This is a book about one of the minor characters from Lilian’s Story, her friend Joan Radulescu. Joan is also seeking to tell her own story—in fact she’s determined to ‘make history’—and she makes very different choices from Lilian. Lilian appears in this book as a minor character.

Lilian’s Story, Dark Places and Joan Makes History form a loose trilogy, with echoes and recurring characters and themes, but because each is from a different point of view, it’s like looking at something in a three-way mirror—surprising new angles can be seen.
The Idea of Perfection by Kate Grenville

Hiam by Eva Sallis

The Red Tent by Anita Diamant

The Water Underneath by Kate Lyons

The Danish Girl by David Ebershoff