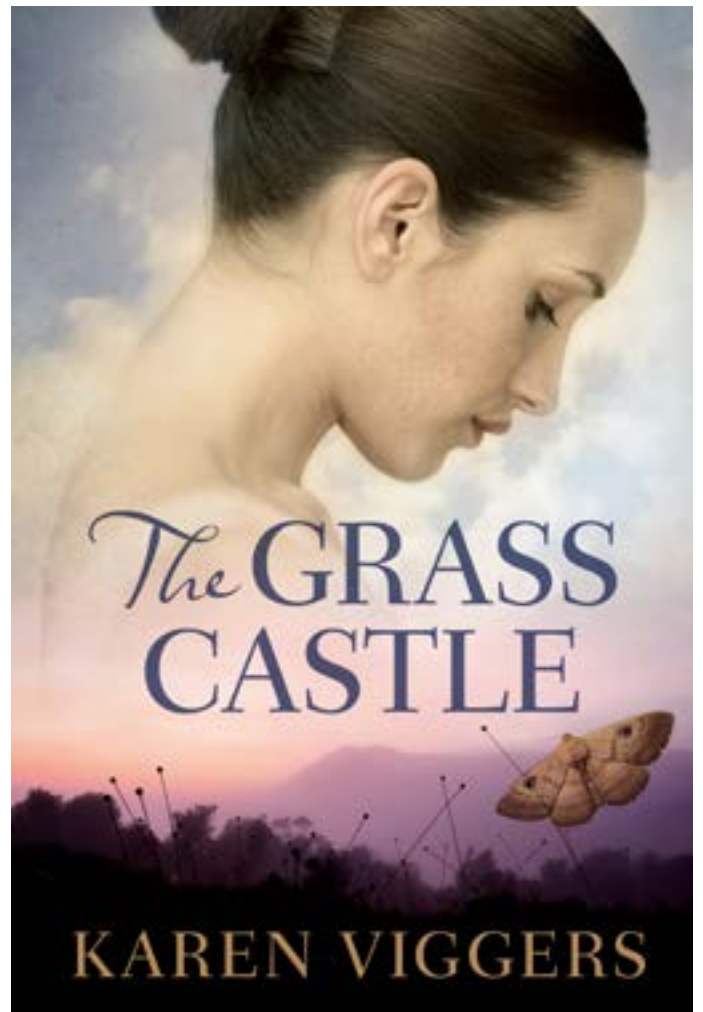


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING GROUP NOTES

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About the book

The story of two remarkable women and their tales of forgiveness and acceptance, from the bestselling author of *The Lightkeeper's Wife*.

Abby is a young woman shying away from close contact with others and running from a terrible event in her early teens which has shaped her life. Then she meets Daphne, the daughter of a pastoralist, who grew up in a remote valley of the Brindabella Ranges. Daphne raised her family in the high country with her husband Doug, in a world of horses, cattle and stockmen. But the government forced them off their land, and years later, Daphne is still trying to come to terms with her departure from the mountains and the tragic impact it had on her husband.

Though years and life experience separate Abby and Daphne, they understand each other, and a gentle friendship forms. While Abby's traumatic past hampers her involvement with journalist Cameron, Daphne tussles with her own family history and the shadow it may have cast over the original inhabitants of the land. Both women must help each other face the truth and released long-buried family secrets before they can be free.

The Grass Castle is a sweeping rural epic that reflects the strength which resides in us all: the courage to learn and grow from the past.

About the author

Born in Melbourne and raised in the Dandenong Ranges riding horses and writing stories, Karen studied veterinary science at Melbourne University before working in practice for several years. She completed a PhD in wildlife health, and since then she has worked on a wide range of Australian native animals, including kangaroos. Karen loves landscapes, wild places, people and animals. She is the author of two previous novels: *The Stranding* (A&U 2008) and the bestselling, *The Lightkeeper's Wife* (A&U 2011). *The Grass Castle* is her third novel. She lives in Canberra with her husband and two children.

Author, Karen Viggers, on writing *The Grass Castle*

'I've lived in Canberra more than twenty years. I love it now, but it wasn't an easy place to settle into. One of its truly wonderful features lies beyond the city: the purple peaks of the Brindabella ranges against the skyline. When I moved here, I found happiness hiking and exploring in the ranges, which are also known as the home of Miles Franklin and the place where Gwen Meredith wrote her long-running radio series *Blue Hills*. Like Abby, one of the main protagonists in *The Grass Castle*, I studied kangaroos here too, and I took shelter on the verandas of old mountain huts and wondered about the history of the region, both indigenous and pastoral.

Ultimately this book was born out of my interest in nature and wildlife, particularly the issue of how to live with the many kangaroos inhabiting the bush capital. But the story grew much larger, into an exploration of local history, the disconnection and displacement of people from their country, and the importance of friendship in healing. Writing it has been a challenging and rewarding journey which I hope shows in the book's heart and energy.'

For discussion

- ☞ 'I survive by forgetting' – Abby, (p. 182). 'I get lost in memory' – Daphne, (p. 118).
Discuss the different ways in which Abby and Daphne deal with their pasts. What do the two women have to learn from each other?
- ☞ 'Country lives in you and you live in country' – (p.400).
In what ways is the idea of home and country important to the characters of *The Grass Castle*? How do the characters cope when they are displaced or disconnected from their homes?
- ☞ What does Daphne learn from Johnny Button? How does their relationship continue to impact her throughout her life?
- ☞ Throughout the book, many of the characters are drawn to the bush as a means of escape. Consider the characters of Abby, Matt and Doug. What does the bush have to offer these characters? What are they escaping from?
- ☞ What does Cameron mean when he says that the debate surrounding the culling of the kangaroos in Canberra has become a 'values' argument? What is your opinion on the issue?
- ☞ Throughout the book, Abby struggles with the idea of being an 'objective scientist'. Do you think his notion is possible? In what ways does Abby struggle to remove past and personal life from her work?
- ☞ Discuss the role of silence in both Daphne and Abby's pasts. Why do you think Daphne's father conceals his knowledge of previous inhabitants? And why is Abby's family never been able to speak about her mother's death?
- ☞ Despite Cameron's efforts, why do you think Abby is unable to commit to a relationship? What changes do you think enable her to consider reconciliation with Cameron in the final scene of the book?
- ☞ In what ways does Daphne struggle with feelings of guilt in coming to terms with her family's settler history with indigenous Australians? Do you think Daphne should feel guilty? How does she seek forgiveness for her family's past?
- ☞ Discuss the importance of apologies in the resolution of Abby and Daphne's stories. Particularly consider the moment between Abby and her father (p.198-203) and the final moments shared by Daphne and the indigenous elder, Betty (p.397-407). Why do you think these apologies are so important to the characters?
- ☞ Have the personal stories told in *The Grass Castle* made you reconsider your understandings about Australia's colonial history in any way?

Suggested further reading

The Lightkeeper's Wife – Karen Viggers

The Stranding – Karen Viggers

The White Earth - Andrew McGahan

Cicada – Moira McKinnon

The Secret River – Kate Grenville

The Power of Bones – Keelen Mailman

Landscape of Farewell – Alex Miller