

**Kate Grenville. *Restless Dolly Maunder*. Text Publishing Company, 2023.
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Restless Dolly Maunder follows the life trajectory of Kate Grenville's grandmother, a novelisation mostly spanning a time now outside living memory and therefore in a field of imagined possibilities. The past can be a playground for the ideas and thoughts that exercise a writer in the present, like this novel's attempt to understand women's place in the society of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Grenville does this through imagining the entirety of her grandmother's life and thereby, perhaps, attempting to uncover the impact of this person on subsequent generations. The novel is a creative exploration of the shifting and slippery family foundations of our existence that time so efficiently obscures. It is a recapturing and linking of three generations of women, each a product of their time and experience but questing at the ends of their lives to work out the mysterious ties of family, familial love and the deep impact they have on each other's lives.

In this fictionalisation of Dolly Maunder's life, she is given thoughts and psychological motivations to make sense of the selected signposts of her life for a contemporary writer and audience. In the short chapter on "Grandma" at the end of the novel Grenville discusses the genesis of the story and the perturbing impression her grandmother left upon both her daughter and granddaughter. It is only at the end of the book that the reader is informed that the story is a depiction of a life informed by the fading memories the author has of her grandmother, long dead, and the family stories associated with her. Using this preconceived film of knowledge about an ancestor, means this is a novel that does not aim to present a disinterested understanding of the woman behind the family mythology. The family context also reveals the novel's themes grounded in an existential desire to understand the matrilineal "other" and its deep impact on a person's psyche. Grenville's novel is a study of a past life, an attempt to explain it so that it can be understood by subsequent generations.

This kind of psychological re-imagining of an historical figure mirrors Hilary Mantel's depiction of the inner life of Thomas Cromwell in her novel *Wolf Hall* (2009). Mantel presents a fully developed character whose personality, consciousness and perspective makes sense of the things Cromwell was purported to have done, providing a far more sympathetic portrayal of this pivotal figure in English history than had been previously offered. Patricia Snow argues that the psychological portrait of Cromwell was a construction that enabled Mantel to work through her own personal backstory; he was "her alter-ego and ideal self" (27). It is arguable whether Grenville's portrait of her grandmother is as sympathetic as Mantel's is of Cromwell, however she has delivered a cohesive construction of a character that provides an explanation of the person Dolly appeared to be in life.

Compared with Mantel, Grenville's connection to her historical protagonist is much closer, the time lapse she needs to bridge much smaller and she has the benefit (or hindrance) of firsthand knowledge of the subject of her novel. Dolly is genetically a part of the author and experientially a part of the author's life: Grenville is a living remnant of Dolly Maunder's life. Grenville's justification for writing her grandmother's story is given in a reflection on her own mother, in her last days. Grenville's mother asks, "Why did my mother never love me?" (239). "I can see now that Mum's question came out of her own experience, but the answer to it had to be found in Dolly's. In a way this book is an attempt, after all this time, to come up with an answer to Mum's painful question" (239).

Thematically, the book attends to family relationships and how family members impact one another. The lost opportunity for love and connection with those who are meant to be closest to us is also reflected in the comment Grenville subsequently makes when she writes:

“Perhaps it is also a different answer to the question Grandma asked me” (239). This refers to a childhood encounter Grenville had with Dolly which she recounts. Her dominating grandmother stood over her in her backyard as she played in the dirt and demanded to know whether her granddaughter loved her. Grenville’s childhood answer was, No. Grenville possibly has her own regrets around her past perception of Dolly, as she goes on to postulate about her grandmother: “Like everyone else, she longed to be loved and was unsure enough to have to ask. She was looking back over her life and—as surely we all do—feeling the pain of regret” (239). Here, Grenville imagines her grandmother’s regret, which could be her own regret transposed onto this mostly unknowable other. Is it not likely that Grenville, in this deep dive into her familial past, is really seeking to better know herself? Drawing on the personalities of our past ancestors to understand how we evolved into the people we are is what propels a widespread fascination with family history that multiple television shows and ancestry websites have tapped into. Grenville’s grandmother is a relic from another age, “aloof,” “frowning,” “cranky” (236), and to a child, a forbidding and unknowable creature, but significant as a figure Grenville’s mother both complained about and cried over (238–39). Her significance lies in the imprint she left on Grenville’s mother, and how that imprint might have left its mark on Grenville herself.

Choosing to write in first person from the perspective of her grandmother, an often-unsympathetic character in this story, Grenville assumes an authority of understanding regarding the reality of Dolly’s lived experience that she can’t possibly lay claim to accurately. But in doing so she tries on for size the circumstance and experiences of her grandmother. Writing from the perspective of her grandmother becomes an inescapable appropriation of her life and Grenville’s grandmother is in no position to respond to or challenge her depiction. There is a certain power in that. How did the author come to decide what Dolly’s nature and character would be like? Which threads from her own memory, her mother’s memories and the facts of Dolly’s existence did she choose to include or ignore? How did she justify to herself, and feel comfortable about taking the liberty of depicting what her grandmother thought and felt, when she couldn’t possibly know for sure? How does she square with herself the leaping assumptions made when depicting Dolly’s thoughts, feelings and motivations? A writer’s ethical stance in relation to telling family stories is revealed by how they choose to engage with the person they are writing about. In her master’s thesis Charlotte Wood (2009) concluded that writers develop their own personal ethics when writing about people they know. Was Grenville ever uncomfortable about appropriating her grandmother’s life in this way? Did she rationalise it as a desire to understand her grandmother and the lasting impact she had on subsequent generations? By recreating the life of one initially maligned, at least in her own mind as suggested by her childhood rejection of her grandmother, is it a form of restitution for this ordinary woman who had been defined by the prejudiced mores of our past society, or a more personal justification for how she was seen by her own family? Grenville’s reflections in the final chapter of the book allude to these considerations but don’t resolve them, leaving readers to come to their own conclusions. But if we separate the novel from the familial context, do these considerations matter all that much in the end, beyond what the writer herself must wrestle with? The benefit of depicting the past lives of women and writing them back into our history, I believe, provides its own justification for these kinds of stories. Stories of historical women such as Mary Bryant fictionalised in Meg Keneally’s *Fled* (2019) and Iris Webber’s life re-animated in Fiona Kelly McGregor’s *Iris* (2022) are two recent examples that also demonstrate how fiction and fact can be woven together, providing a platform for women’s stories to enter into our collective historical imaginary.

Restless Dolly Maunder offers an attempt to understand or explain how a time and place in society forges the way women have evolved, and more specifically in this instance, how female relatives interact and connect as well as misunderstand each other. The novel

investigates and explores women's place, and women's roles, within the Australian society of the novel's era, and more controversially, what past women possibly thought and understood at the time about these aspects of their lives. Grenville depicts many different experiences of women, and the options and opportunities open to or denied them by society, while also exploring possible responses to these women and what they represented. Of particular interest are those female characters who signified an alternative way of life than was the norm at the time, such as the single and independent Miss Norma St Leon (134). The novel also depicts chinks in the doors of society that were closed to women, which Dolly could lever open for herself and for her daughter. Station, situation, and cultural and family dynamics are proposed as the driving forces that propel Dolly Maunder, although at times this depiction has the feel of a contemporary awareness rather than that of a 19th century woman. Despite this, these stories are important. They represent a history of women's experiences and lives that are otherwise left untold and unexamined. And just as this exercise is important to Grenville on a personal level to understand her grandmother's life and its impact on her own life, it is important that we all understand women's lives from the past and how they have shaped our own. How else to gain a more complete understanding of our past than to include female perspectives? We are all born of mothers, we are all shaped by the women in our lives. The way we tell history is a contested space as the endeavour relies more than other histories on often oral domestic family stories such as this one to access that past and its domino effect on the present. This means that Dolly can never be quite put to rest.

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