

Grenville Kate 320 compress.mp3

[00:00:00] Interviewer

Welcome to the Inner West Library Speaker series. Before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation on which this podcast is produced and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging from across all lands this podcast reaches.

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*, *Dark Places* and the Orange Prize Winner *The Idea of Perfection*. Her most recent books are two works on non-fiction, *One Life: My Mother's Story* and *The Case Against Fragrance*. She has also written three books about the writing process. In 2017, Grenville was awarded the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature. She currently lives in Melbourne. What if Elizabeth Macarthur, wife of the notorious John Macarthur, wool Baron in the earliest days of Sydney had written a shockingly frank secret memoir? And what if novelist Kate Grenville had miraculously found and published it? That's the starting point for *A Room Made of Leaves*, a playful dance of possibilities between the real and the invented. Marriage to a ruthless bully, the impulses of her heart, the search for power in a society that gave women none. This Elizabeth Macarthur manages her complicated life with spirit and passion, cunning and sly wit. Her memoir lets us hear at last what one of these seemingly demure women from history might really have thought. At the centre of *A Room Made of Leaves* is one of the most toxic issues of our own age the seductive appeal of false stories. This book may be set in the past, but it's just as much about the present where secrets and lies have the dangerous power to shape reality. Welcome, Kate.

[00:02:14] Kate

Thank you very much, Kathy. And I'd like to just acknowledge the Elders of the Lands on which I am recording this, which are the Lands of The Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation

[00:02:25] Inter

Wonderful. Kate, I believe *A Room Made of Leaves* took you 20 years to write.

Kate: Ah yes.

Interviewer: What was it that was holding you back?

[00:02:35] Kate

Well, a book takes its own time. I came across I mean, I grew up learning about the Macarthurs particularly John, of course, who was, when I grew up, described as the father of the Australian wool industry. In fact, of course, it was his it was his wife who was the mother of the Australian wool industry, if there is such a thing. So I'd grown up knowing about her, but finding her fairly boring. She was always portrayed as the loyal, hardworking helpmate to her, much more famous and, you know, clever husband. But in 2000, I was doing research for *The Secret River*, my first book about the earliest days of white settlement in Australia. And I started to read some of her letters and I realised that there was something going on. Yes, the public image of Elizabeth Macarthur is very dull and bland. No one would want to read a book about someone as kind of perfect, really, as she is portrayed to have been. But now and again, in the letters I glimpsed somebody else, I saw that the letters were, in fact, which is kind of the only documents she's left. The letters were a mask which occasionally slipped and gave a novelist a chance to see that, actually, behind the Pollyanna facade, there was a very much more interesting and probably much less kind of perfect woman, a woman, in fact, that I think most of us today could relate to. So that's it's quite a big ask. I mean, in that twenty years, I also wrote let's see, five other books, so I wasn't exactly twiddling my thumbs, but the others seemed more urgent to write and also I couldn't quite figure out how to approach the story of Elizabeth Macarthur. So I'm very glad that I finally one morning had a bit of an epiphany and woke up knowing how I could tell her story, which is by telling by pretending she's telling her memoirs.

[00:04:34] Interviewer

Well, your readers are surely grateful for that. I'm telling you now. Can you talk about the words 'do not believe too quickly' that has now become a mantra to people who read your book?

[00:04:46] Kate

Yes. When I came across those letters back in about 2000, I was struck by the fact that people had taken Elizabeth Macarthur's letters at face value. You know, she appears to be this perfect, the perfect wife, the perfect, uncomplaining, compliant 18th century wife. And the more I began to realize that that was not the case, could not have been the case. The thing is, the letters are bland and boring. Her life was clearly tumultuous. When you read the history, you realize that her life was first of all, she was married to this incredibly difficult bully of a man. But also, you know, she had been plucked from a respectable kind of background. She was the daughter of a well-to-do farmer in England and dropped into what was then the most probably barbaric place on the planet. That is Sydney Cove, which had just been started as a violent penal colony. So her life was anything but boring. And it was in that gap that I could see that there was a story to put right this this terrible, bland stereotype of her and of most women of the 18th century. So that's why at a very early stage, probably the very first draft I thought of the title of the book as being 'do not believe too quickly' because, you know, don't believe those letters too quickly. She was actually really writing fiction when she wrote them, in my view.

[00:06:13] Kate

And then that idea extended and expanded to, you know, do not believe really any of the stereotypes and myths that we've we've accepted, particularly about the past. And the people there. Don't believe that all those women were the way they appear in those photographs, you know, demure, prim, proper, sexless, don't believe any of that. And then I realized that, of course, in the context of Australia, the biggest do not believe too quickly subject is that of the white people's early relationships with the Indigenous people. You know, the white people devised all kinds of myths and stereotypes about what happened back then, the whole pioneer myth. And again, I realised that this was a way of exploring that version of Do Not Believe too quickly as well. Let's deconstruct some of those stories that the white settlers told each other and that we've been telling ourselves we white people like me for the last two hundred and fifty years. Actually, there's a truth behind it, which is much less comfortable. But let us investigate. Let's not really take anything at face value. It's more essential than ever in this day of massive misinformation on on the internet, on social media particularly, it's more important to take everything to stand back, and have a look at it and think, well, who is telling this story and are they telling the truth?

[00:07:47] Interviewer

Kate, why did Elizabeth have an impulse to burn the letters. Without them, we wouldn't have her story, especially during a time when women's voices were meant to be silenced.

[00:07:58] Kate

Well, when she reads the letters, the book starts with Elizabeth Macarthur. This is my fictional Elizabeth Macarthur of course. She's sitting down because her son wants her to write a family history, basically, or a history of herself and her husband in the early days in the colony. And to do this, he's gathered together all the letters that she's ever written and handed them to her. And basically his assumption is that she will just use them to construct a more detailed version of the Macarthur myth. Well, she looks at them and what she realizes or what she knows is that they were not written in any truthful way. She wrote the letters. Letters in those days were public things. They were not private. You didn't tell the truth necessarily in letters, and particularly women who were supposed to be so kind of demure and pious and perfect. So the letters were a kind of benign fiction. And she and that's why she looks at them with a kind of a nausea, really, because she realized that they are telling a terrible lie and that if people in the future believe those letters, they will have a completely wrong idea, not only of her, but of that moment of history that she's living through.

[00:09:09] Kate

So that's why she wants to burn them. But of course, she then decides that she can do something more cunning, which is to write not the memoir that her son wants her to write, but a much more a much more scandalous, much sexier, much more interesting memoir, which she will write and hide in the roof space. So no one will read it in her own lifetime, in which finally the impossible happens. An 18th century woman is able to leave in writing what she really thought about things as opposed to what she was supposed to write and what she what she what she could write. You know, they were very limited in what they could write those women. It was partly self-censorship, but it was partly that they lived in a profoundly misogynistic society in which women were not supposed to have a voice. So she thinks about burning the letters and then she realizes that it's actually more interesting to leave this kind of record of the lie. And then the memoir,

which I pretend just to have found and transcribed, the memoir is the Truth Behind the Lie of the Letters.

[00:10:19] Interviewer

Who was the easiest to write about John or Elizabeth Macarthur and why?

[00:10:25] Kate

Oh, Elizabeth, by far.

Look, John Macarthur, you know, I'm sighing because I feel as if I've known many men like John Macarthur, a bully, a blowhard needing to win at all costs, loving manipulation. And, you know, the politics of a moment, personal politics, not necessarily national politics. You know, everything's manipulating. Everything's a game. Everything's a power game, basically. And although that's that's quite interesting. I mean, Shakespeare would write brilliantly about John Macarthur. Could we bring back Shakespeare? But for my own purpose, I found Elizabeth Macarthur far more interesting because her story is so hidden. It's very, very difficult to imagine your way back into the life of an 18th century woman. We only have these stereotypes, these terrible stereotypes, either of the kind of Jane Austen variety or the kind of, you know, plucky pioneer wife variety. So as a writer, it's always much more interesting to delve into the unknown rather than the known, because that way you can get beyond the stereotypes and you can actually kind of tell the truth about a situation.

[00:11:38] Interviewer

John Macarthur took every chance he could to mansplain, Elizabeth. It was always his way or the highway. Elizabeth was very clever in how she spoke to her husband and somehow managed to influence major decisions to seem like it was all his idea in the first place. Can you talk about their married life together?

[00:12:00] Kate

Yes. Well, the way you have to begin their married life is to explain that John Macarthur was never an attractive marriage proposition. If he were a character in the Jane Austen novel, no one would have even thought of marrying him. He was he had no money. He had no status. He was the son of a draper, which is pretty low class in 18th century England. He wasn't good looking because he'd had smallpox as a child and was fairly badly scarred with it. And he was an unpleasant temperament even then he's described

as haughty and, you know, kind of arrogant. So the big question is then why Elizabeth Macarthur would marry such a man who offered her nothing, no prospect. I mean, he had a he was in the army in the very lowest grade of officer, but because there wasn't a war on at the time, he was on half pay. So, you know, there was no money, there were no prospects of promotion. So, you know, there's no reason why she should have married him. But one night and this is something that I think women are familiar with against her better judgment.

[00:13:04] Kate

One night, midsummer night, she went behind the hedge with John Macarthur and partly out of curiosity, partly out of vanity, because he flattered her and partly out of a kind of reckless adventurousness that I think many of us women have experienced against everything she had ever been taught. She allowed him to penetrate her person. And within a couple of months, of course, she realised that she had been unlucky enough to get pregnant. So it was a shotgun wedding, I think almost certainly in reality and certainly in my novel. The historical record, of course, is tantalizingly partial. But to me, the evidence points towards a shotgun marriage. So from the very beginning, she realised that she was married to this difficult man. There was no particular love on either side I don't think and I think, you know, many women today will recognise the fact that if you're married to a difficult man, you have to kind of tweak his strings, if you can, from behind so that he doesn't realize that what he's doing is, in fact, what you want him to do.

[00:14:12] Interviewer

Your now famous, quote, 'I blush at my error' is such an erotic line, can you talk about how women of the day felt like they were not heard and not meant to express sexual feelings and desires?

[00:14:25] Kate

Oh, yes, look, we would have just hated being a woman in the 18th century or the 19th for that matter, you know, any women today, we would have gone mad with the complete lack of power. As you say, the assumption that we had no sexuality of our own. We were just all for our husbands' convenience and to bear children and to be voiceless. Those women essentially were voiceless. Any of us would go crazy. And I began this book thinking, well, it's true that they didn't know any better, but they could

see that men had freedom. So why would they not have thought? Why would there not have been as angry as we would be in that situation, as frustrated, as bitter and needing to be as clever to try and grasp some tiny bit of power? In other words, I think those women were not that different from us. We think they're terribly different because that's the stereotype that's come down. You know, the stereotype is that they were kind of happy with their lot. I don't believe that. I don't think it's true. And when you read some contemporary writers, for example, Jane Austen, who was a very close contemporary of Elizabeth Macarthur, if you read the books as opposed to look at the movies, you realize that actually what Jane Austen is expressing is a huge rage at the fate of women to be to be voiceless and powerless. Now, that phrase, I blush at my error. You know, I read those rather dull letters of Elizabeth Macarthur. And I said, as I said in the beginning, there were just one or two bits where the mask slipped and that was one of them.

[00:16:01] Kate

She had asked for lessons in astronomy from the astronomer who came with the First Fleet. So this is in the very early days of Sydney, 1790. She asked for lessons in astronomy and he kindly gave her some. Now, he was a young man of few years older than her, and his name was William Dawes. And he has fascinated generations of men and women who have found him an extraordinary character in his empathy with the Aboriginal people. He was the person who wrote down the Gadigal language properly and had respectful and, you know, kind of grown up relationships with many Gadigal friends anyway. Elizabeth Macarthur wanted some lessons in astronomy. She got them, but she found, as others before her have found, that astronomy is actually quite hard. And so she writes to a friend, I had the lessons in astronomy, but I mistook my abilities and I blush at my error. Now, in the context of her boring letters and in the context that she's writing about, you know, the young man has given her the lessons, the erotic charge in those words blazed off the page at me. When I first read them, I thought, this is this is finally a woman stepping out from behind this bloodless, reserved, polite sort of facade. Suddenly, she's a real live woman full of pounding blood in her cheeks. This is a woman who is emotionally engaged with the whole notion of astronomy or as I suspect, the astronomer. So I took the great liberty of allowing Elizabeth Macarthur and William Dawes to find great happiness together.

[00:17:50] Interviewer

Kate, tell us a little bit about the first busybody. Captain Tench I personally found him rather amusing.

[00:17:56] Kate

Yes. Watkin Tench was carried out with the First Fleet? He was a good mate of William Dawes. And he's he's he's one of the five or six people who left an account of the very first years, 1788 1789, of the Sydney settlement. His has been republished fairly recently. It's called 1788 by Text Publishing, and it is a fabulous read. He was a witty, ironic, warm hearted, very likeable man in the in the account that he leaves of the colony, whereas all the others are pretty dull. They're actually just a string of events through Tench's book you can feel his personality. Now, of course, you have to take that also with a pinch of salt. Do not believe too quickly about that, too, because, you know, as Elizabeth Macarthur says, an author is a dangerous acquaintance and an author who's writing a book about their own experiences in their own lives is likely to leave a very nice account of themselves. Very few of us would write an account in which we don't come across as amusing and likeable. So I have always liked Tench as you do, and I think many others, too, have been attracted to to the tone of his his book. But they were just a couple of things. There were just a couple of things about the Tench book that also made me think, well, do not believe too quickly here either.

[00:19:24] Kate

Remember that he's writing this book. He already had a publication contract before he left England. So he knows that he's going to be published and he wants to leave it an account of himself. That looks pretty good. So and of course, he in my imagining, he was a man who probably liked women very much. All those officers had convict mistresses if they wanted one. But I thought it was not beyond the bounds of the possible that Tench had also had a glance at Elizabeth Macarthur, who by all accounts was a lively kind of woman, unlike her letters. So I thought how interesting it would be to construct a little bit of a triangle. So Elizabeth Macarthur is rather fancying William Dawes. She's blushing about him. Tench then is rather fancying Elizabeth Macarthur. And so there's a nice little kind of story of, well, a love triangle, which is not only one of the great sort of solid basis on which to enjoy a novel, but it's also very true to life that many of us find ourselves attracted to somebody who's perhaps not all that attractive to

us. But on the other hand, as somebody who is attracted to us, that we're not interested in that kind of ironic truth about life. I thought I could I could put into the book.

[00:20:43] Interviewer

What was your process for researching the story? The story is set in a tumultuous part of Australian history. How did you navigate Elizabeth's thoughts and feelings as coloniser and also a strong feminist?

[00:20:56] Kate

Well, she, of course, wasn't a feminist in the sense that women women didn't even know that they could hope for things to be different. But certainly she was a strong woman who was not going to allow life to roll over her like a steamroller. I had to imagine a great deal, but it was imagination based on as much robust knowledge of the time and the place and the people as I could gather. So I read everything by Elizabeth Macarthur and a lot of things about Elizabeth Macarthur and John Macarthur, because, you know, her life, her life's shape was dictated by her husband, even though I didn't particularly want to write about him. So I spent a great deal of time, first of all, in the village where she grew up, in Devon in England, I had the opportunity to go there. And that was a bit of an eye opener because, you know, to get to Bridgerule, which is the village where she grew up in Devon, even now, if you don't have a car or probably even if you do, it's an incredibly difficult it's very remote, is what I'm trying to say. So when she came to Australia, certainly it was even more remote here, but the notion of remoteness was not altogether new to her.

[00:22:08] Kate

So that was a bit of a that was a bit of a new idea for me, because we do assume that many of those people came from the cities. Many of those first settlers came from the cities and many of them did, but she didn't. So then that told me something about her. And then when I was here, because I had the huge advantage in Parramatta, the house where she lived for many years in which she loved, she much preferred to the mansion in Camden, the house where she lived called Elizabeth Farm, is just outside Parramatta. So I was able to go there. And it is a wonderful historical house where you can actually go and sit in an armchair on the veranda, just as she would have done. You can sit in an armchair by the fire, just as she would have done. You know, you can you

can move around the house. And unlike so many historical houses where everything's roped off, it's very welcoming. It feels like a home.

[00:23:02] Kate

So you can stand in the middle of the bedroom and, for example, look up at the cracks in the ceiling and think, oh, OK, I can imagine a scene where she's, you know, lying in the bed and she's looking up at the cracks in the ceiling. This is suddenly very real. I can I mean, obviously I'm imagining it, but I'm imagining on the basis of a physical reality.

[00:23:27] Interviewer

Kate, can you talk about the Gadigal and Wangal peoples, including the Burramattagal and the Dharug people that Elizabeth encountered during her time in establishing the wool industry within New South Wales lands?

[00:23:40] Kate

Yes, look, my book actually ends in 1801. So the wool industry was only just beginning then. And the Macarthurs had not yet moved to Camden, which is where they did the the the you know, the big bulk of the well of the taking of land and the and the breeding of sheep. Now, the thing about William Dawes, the astronomer, is that he was a most unusual man. He had an astronomer, an observatory out on Dawes Point in Sydney. And it would have been, in my imagining, out of sight of the settlement. He was quite private out there. And his excuse would have been he needed to be out there to look at the stars. But in fact, he's the one person who sat down with Gadigal and Wangal people and actually learned their language. And in the notebooks in which he recorded his language studies, it's very obvious that he had a wonderfully friendly, affectionate but also very respectful relationship with the people whose conversations he wrote down. Other people just wrote down, you know, sort of useful words so that they could ask for things basically from the Indigenous people. But Dawes wanted to know how the language worked, and that meant that he was interested in something much deeper than just using the Indigenous people as a resource.

[00:25:05] Kate

He was interested in them as as people and as people, very different from anything he'd ever known. But he was not frightened of difference. Unlike many of the early settlers,

he welcomed it. He walked into it. He was humble. He wanted to know so and it was in his company that Elizabeth Macarthur would have met many of those Gadigal and Wangal people who would have come to his little hut out on the on the point. So when they then moved to and she she would have got to know there is a there is a letter which she writes in which she talks about a visit she has from an Aboriginal woman called Daringa. And Daringa brings her baby to show Elizabeth Macarthur. And the tone of Elizabeth Macarthur's prose in that particular letter is wonderfully affectionate and humorous and kind of respectful. You know, she's it's one woman to another and they're both admiring this beautiful little baby. So then she moved to Parramatta with her husband. He was granted 100 hundred acres in the beginning at Parramatta, where they both would have displaced a hundred acres of the Barramattagal People's Land. And that's the point at which I realized that I could do something slightly. Well, do something I wanted to do in this book, which is to say, I had already told one version of the story of somebody taking up land and displacing the Indigenous people in The Secret River.

[00:26:36] Kate

I told that story, but this time what I could do is to tell the story that we told each other about the taking of the land. So not the taking itself, but how we how we made that OK, how we presented the story so that it seemed perfectly legitimate to take over not just a hundred acres, of course, but the entire continent. What stories were we telling ourselves that seemed to make that perfectly All right? So that's that was the opportunity that thinking about the Barramattagal People that gave me the opportunity to explore one story in particular, a thing called the Battle of Paramatta. You'll have to read the book to to you know, I can't go into the detail now, but it was a mechanism for me to say, do not believe too quickly about these stories that we hear about the Indigenous people. In the beginning, they didn't write down their history. So by and large, it's it's been lost because we broke the chain of oral transmission. So that means the whitefella stories are the ones that survived. But let's not believe them too quickly.

[00:27:46] Interviewer

My last question, this year's theme for NAIDOC week is 'always was, always will be'. If your Elizabeth was alive today, what do you think she would say about this?

[00:28:02] Kate

I think she would be wholeheartedly in agreement what the real Elizabeth Macarthur would have been. I'm not so sure. She left a slightly a slightly ambiguous record of her relationship with the Indigenous people. Not surprisingly, many people have varying attitudes to to things as they move through their lives. But my Elizabeth Macarthur ends the book by sitting down beside the Parramatta River in a very beautiful place that she calls her Room Made of Leaves, obviously, where the title comes from, this beautiful place. And she's just realizing that this is home. She never wants to go back to England. She wants to die here so that her, her dust can become part of the dust of this place. That's, you know, that's a very deep love for the place. But she says, I know that this place does not belong to me. This Room Made of Leaves is not mine. And she's very frank about it. She says, I am a thief and a thief every day that I continue to live on what is essentially somebody else's land. And she says, I don't know what to do about that. All I can do is face that fact, look it in the eye and hope that being honest about it and being prepared to acknowledge it will lead me onto the next thing.

[00:29:21] Kate

Which, you know, is pretty much how I feel, and I think that's the point, perhaps we descendants of the white settlers are at now, that we have to, first of all, acknowledge the truth of what happened back then, of what we did. And then hopefully that will allow us to together move into some kind of shared future.

[00:29:43] Interviewer Very true.

[00:29:45] Interviewer

Thank you, Kate, for your time and for a wonderful chat. We wish you all the best with your new book, A Room Made of Leaves and with all future publications. If you would like to purchase Kate's book, please visit Booktopia online or call your favorite bookstore and also to check our Inner West Council library web page for availability if you wish to borrow it. Bye everyone. And thank you for listening and look out for upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library What's on and social media channels.