

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Act of Grace

AUTHOR: Anna Krien

ISBN: 9781863959551

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SUBJECT: Literary Fiction

Book description

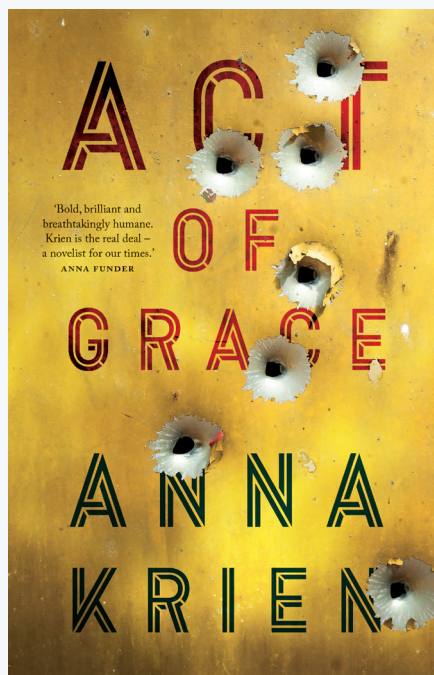
In her non-fiction book *Night Games*, Anna Krien explored the culture surrounding AFL football, identifying part of that culture as treating women as 'not fully human'. She also wrote about what she called a 'grey zone' between rape and consent. In *Act of Grace* she again looks at masculine cultures and grey zones.

This is a novel though, and Krien has more freedom in imagining different perspectives than she did in *Night Games* – she can stay true to the characters she has invented rather than having to represent real people. Indeed, she inhabits several characters in this novel, from an army veteran to an Iraqi pianist, to a young girl with Aboriginal heritage.

Krien's novel is being published at a time when debates over 'cultural appropriation' are intense. No doubt some of your discussion of this book will centre on Krien's decision to write from the perspective of non-white characters. Perhaps Krien nods to this when she has Robbie, an Aboriginal woman, dress in an abaya and a head covering – what does it mean to inhabit another's identity?

But there is much more to talk about. *Act of Grace* is about the effects of what is often termed 'toxic masculinity' on both men and women. It is about the connections within families – their strength and their fragility. It is about the effects and meanings of memory. It is about identity, including gender identity and racial identity. And it is about what we inherit from families, trauma and memory.

The title comes from payments made to Iraqi victims or their families by the Australian military. Toohey feels



betrayed by this reparation being made. The act of grace is what allows Nasim to escape Iraq. Krien is asking us to question what grace is, and who has the power to grant it.

About the author

Anna Krien is the author of the award-winning *Night Games* and *Into the Woods*, as well as two Quarterly Essays, *Us and Them* and *The Long Goodbye*. Anna's writing has been published in *The Monthly*, *The Age*, *Best Australian Essays*, *Best Australian Stories* and *The Big Issue*. In 2014 she won the UK William Hill Sports Book of the Year Award, and in 2018 she received a Sidney Myer Fellowship.



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Quotes

'*Act of Grace* is bold, brilliant and breathtakingly humane. Anna Krien makes riveting the sweep of history and the lived price of war; at the same time she reveals, with great insight, the intimacies of daily love and tiny, splintering acts of violence in families. She is both wide-angle and close-up, and there is redemption in every line. Anna Krien is the real deal – a novelist for our times.'

—ANNA FUNDER, AUTHOR OF *ALL THAT I AM*

'Masterful – a far-reaching tapestry of a novel. Nuanced and whip-smart, this is a work of profound empathy – a book of and for our times. As *Act of Grace* unfolds with precise muscularity, Krien's inhabitation of each character approaches the divine.'

—PEGGY FREW, AUTHOR OF *THE ISLANDS AND HOPE FARM*

'*Act of Grace* is a work of stunning virtuosity. Krien has taken a huge leap of creative faith, and from the very first page to the last I was ready to follow her anywhere.'

—CERIDWEN DOVEY, AUTHOR OF *IN THE GARDEN OF THE FUGITIVES AND ONLY THE ANIMALS*

'An ambitious and compelling study of trauma and how it's transferred and inherited ... a nuanced consideration of the different forms and ethics of activism.'

—BOOKS+PUBLISHING

Discussion Points

1. What do you think about Krien inhabiting characters from other cultures in light of recent debates about 'cultural appropriation'?
2. How much are characters defined by their gender and race? Does this reflect the degree to which real people are defined by their gender and race?
3. What does the novel tell us about Australian identity? Is there such a thing?
4. Talk about the 'acts of grace' in the novel. Are there others beside the reparation made to Sabeen?
5. Is Nasim's move to Australia an act of grace? Does Nasim act immorally in the various ways she manages to survive?
6. How far is Nasim able to reinvent herself at various times through her life? What identity suits her best? What of Robbie telling her that she has a name, a life and a story that is hers and can't be taken away – it's ironic but is it also true?
7. Do you have any sympathy or empathy for Toohey? Does Krien help us understand him? Is he irredeemably bad? How might he have been different if he hadn't been in Iraq and killed Sabeen's baby?
8. Do all the characters have an element of something dark in them?
9. Why has Krien chosen to include Saddam and Uday in her book? What do they represent in the novel?
10. At the end of the novel, Nasim sees Robbie as 'a girl who thought she knew so much, but knew nothing'. Is she right? Does Nasim know more and is her knowledge somehow superior? Why isn't Nasim's love for Robbie and Sidney enough for her to overcome this feeling? In what other ways is Nasim wrong about Robbie? What do their assumptions about each other tell us?

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11. What does Robbie learn from the way people treat Mrs Kowalski, the Babushka? And what does she learn from 'Mrs Fucking Eckersley'? What assumptions is Mrs Eckersley making when she tries to help Danny and his family? Is she as racist as someone like Toohey? Are there degrees of racism?
12. How could Danny understand and inhabit his Wurundjeri identity when his foster parents told him he was Italian? And how does Danny's lack of memory due to his dementia affect his identity?
13. Is Danny right to warn Robbie that it's not worth claiming her heritage when he suggests she tell people she's Italian? Why does Robbie want to experience the hostility she feels when she dresses in a hijab?
14. What is the significance of the sorry rocks and Robbie's art project?
15. Talk about the various acts of rebellion in the novel. Which, if any, are successful?
16. At the Mexican border, Gerry hates himself for his 'weakness'. How far is Gerry subject to traditional concepts around masculinity, and how far does he challenge those concepts? Discuss the last scene in the book: Gerry walking away from Toohey symbolises his rejection of his father. Is it also his rejection of Toohey's form of masculinity? Is it more broadly symbolic of a future in which young men reject that form? What kinds of models will Sidney see and inhabit?