

Black Inc. Book Club Notes

TITLE: Snake

AUTHOR: Kate Jennings

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SUBJECT: Fiction

About the Book

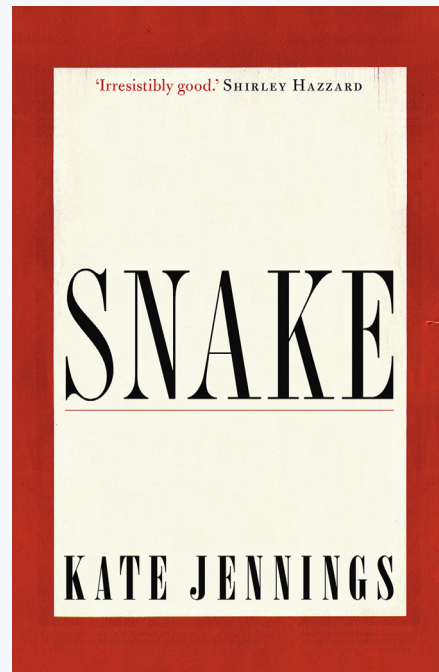
With exquisite control and language at once poetic and restrained, Kate Jennings portrays a marriage gone sour from the very beginning: the husband and wife suffocated and oppressed by the other; the children growing up inheriting their mother's vitriolic contempt for their father, to whom they are 'foreigners'. Short scenes build up to give the texture of the years as they pass. Disappointment and dissatisfaction prevail.

Snake is set in post-war Australia, on the cultivated irrigation lands of New South Wales near a town called Progress. This is not the idealised Australian outback of so much Australian literature. The novel evokes Henry Lawson's *The Drover's Wife*, but Irene is far from the stoic figure of that short story.

Rex and Irene are mismatched from the start: he a country boy and returned soldier who dares not visit his imagination; she the daughter of 'snobs' who is always yearning for stimulation, whether from men or music or something that she can't identify. Rex's family is wordless, and he is unable to talk to Irene. She, on the other hand, "unknitted her lips and words poured from her, black as pitch" (p43).

The novel is divided into four parts, the first gives us a glimpse of Rex's past; the second shows the couple's wedding day; the third, and longest part, documents their marriage, while the fourth takes us into Irene's future.

Things end badly – the novel has been leading up to an unhappy ending. Rex drives



into the Murrumbidgee after Irene leaves for the North. She finds no satisfaction there either. We never find out what happens to Girlie and Boy.

Snakes slither through the text, as real creatures lurking in the undergrowth, as threats to be killed, as inhabitants of Girlie's fearful imagination, as the crown of snakes atop a Fury in Antony and Cleopatra (referenced in a chapter title), and of course as the title of the book.

The chapter headings – references to poems, novels, songs, Shakespeare, and religious texts – place this novel in a conversation with other works and traditions. A book of contrasts and similarities, *Snake* is, despite its leanness, rich and ripe for discussion.

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About the Author

Kate Jennings is a poet, essayist, short-story writer and novelist. Both her novels, *Snake* and *Moral Hazard*, were *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year. She has won the ALS Gold Medal, the Christina Stead Prize for Fiction and the Adelaide Festival fiction prize. Born in rural New South Wales, she has lived in New York since 1979. Her most recent books are *Stanley and Sophie*, *Quarterly Essay 32*, *American Revolution* and *Trouble: Evolution of a Radical*.

Praise for *Snake*

‘Irresistibly good.’ – Shirley Hazzard

‘The story is told with such restraint and dry humour that it is a pleasure to read’ – *Herald Sun*

‘The work of a powerful imagination’ – Carol Shields

‘A wonderful balance between deft, dry comedy and genuine heartbreak’ – *Sunday Times*

Questions for discussion

1. Kate Jennings is a poet as well as a novelist. How is this apparent in *Snake*?
2. The novel starts with Rex’s perspective. Did this make you more sympathetic to him than Irene? Do your sympathies change throughout the novel?
3. Why did this unhappy marriage continue for so long? Should Rex have left Irene? Should Irene have left earlier than she did? Was the situation beyond their control?
4. Are we meant to feel any sympathy for Irene’s attitude to her children? Is the way she treats Girlie understandable? Would Girlie have annoyed you as she does Irene? Did you have any affection for either of the children?
5. What is the effect of the second person narration in Part 1 and Part 4 of the novel?
6. What is the effect of the short chapters with their sometimes cryptic headings?
7. Snakes appear throughout the novel. Discuss the different meanings they take on. Why is the book titled *Snake*?
8. Discuss some of the other symbols in the book: for example, the fleece the children find with maggots underneath; the pigs Rex has always wanted; the death of Emma in the car boot.
9. Is this a feminist book? If so, in what ways?
10. What is the significance of Irene’s garden, especially the fact that, before her time, she plants natives?
11. Exposure to music and the arts is usually an improving influence on characters in novels, but ‘culture did not sweeten Irene, or make her wise. Instead, the more she was exposed to it, the more crabbed her spirit became’ (p77). Why has Jennings chosen to portray this effect?
12. There is a series of natural disasters and plagues, each described very briefly, and obviously a reference to the biblical plagues. Is God at work here? What do the plagues mean in *Snake*?
13. Are there any positive relationships in this novel? If not, what are we to take from their lack?
14. If Rex’s family’s way of life is “intolerable” (p9), why does he want to be on the land? Is his new existence any better?
15. Is this vision of the Australian landscape familiar or alien?