

Act of Grace

By Anna Krien

First published in 2019

Genre and Subject

Australian fiction
Post-traumatic stress disorder -- Fiction
Families -- Fiction
Interpersonal relations -- Fiction

Synopsis

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.

Author Biography

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. In 2019 she joined the judging panel for the Horne Prize. As of 2019 she was based in Melbourne, Victoria

Discussion Starters

- What do you think about Krien inhabiting characters from other cultures in light of recent debates about 'cultural appropriation'?
- 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?
- What does the novel tell us about Australian identity? Is there such a thing?
- Talk about the 'acts of grace' in the novel. Are there others beside the reparation made to Sabeen?
- Is Nasim's move to Australia an act of grace? Does Nasim act immorally in the various ways she manages to survive?
- 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?
- 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?
- Do all the characters have an element of something dark in them?
- Why has Krien chosen to include Saddam and Uday in her book? What do they represent in the novel?
- 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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