

The Widow and her Hero

Tom Keneally

Author Background

- Birth— 7 October 1935
- Raised— Strathfield, NSW
- Awards—Man Booker Prize, Miles Franklin Award, NSW Premier's Literary Award, Helmerich award
- Currently—married with two daughters and lives in Sydney

Born in Sydney, Keneally was educated at St Patrick's College, Strathfield. Subsequently, a writing prize there has been named after him. He entered St

Patrick's Seminary, Manly to train as a Catholic priest. Although he was ordained as a deacon while at the seminary he left without being ordained to the priesthood. He worked as a Sydney schoolteacher before his success as a novelist and was a lecturer at the University of New England (1968–70). He has also written screenplays, memoirs and non-fiction books.

Keneally was known as "Mick" until 1964 but began using the name Thomas when he started publishing, after advice from his publisher to use what was really his first name. He is most famous for his *Schindler's Ark* (1982) (later republished as *Schindler's List*), which won the Booker Prize and is the basis of the film *Schindler's List*. Many of his novels are reworkings of historical material, although modern in their psychology and style.

Keneally has also acted in a handful of films. He had a small role in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (based on his novel) and played Father Marshall in the award-winning Fred Schepisi film *The Devil's Playground* (1976).

In 1983 he was made an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO). He is an Australian Living Treasure.

Keneally was a visiting professor at the University of California, Irvine (UCI) where he taught the graduate fiction workshop for one quarter in 1985. From 1991 to 1995, he was a visiting professor in the writing program at UCI.

He is a strong advocate of an Australian republic, meaning the abolition of the Australian monarchy, and published a book on the subject *Our Republic* in 1993. Several of his Republican essays appear on the web site of the Australian Republican Movement.

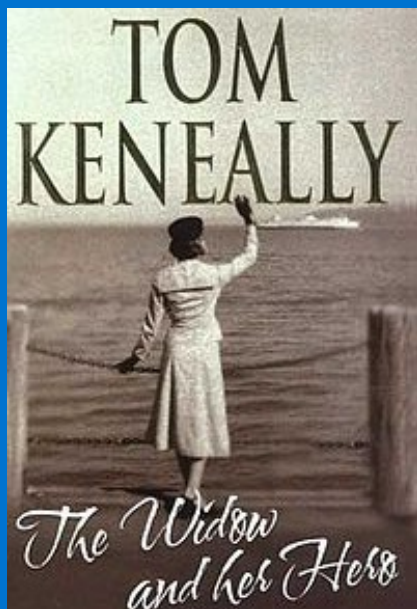
Keneally is a keen supporter of rugby league football, in particular the Manly-Warringah Sea Eagles club of the NRL. In 2004 he gave the sixth annual Tom Brock Lecture. He made an appearance in the 2007 rugby league drama film *The Final Winter*.

In March 2009, the Prime Minister of Australia, Kevin Rudd, gave an autographed copy of Keneally's biography *Lincoln* to President Barack Obama as a state gift.

Most recently Keneally featured as a writer in the critically acclaimed Australian drama *Our Sunburnt Country*.

The Tom Keneally Centre opened in August 2011 at the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts, housing Keneally's books and memorabilia. The site is used for book launches, readings and writing classes.

(adapted from Wikipedia)



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Book Summary

The Widow and her Hero

Tom Keneally, 2008

Vintage Australia

304 pp.

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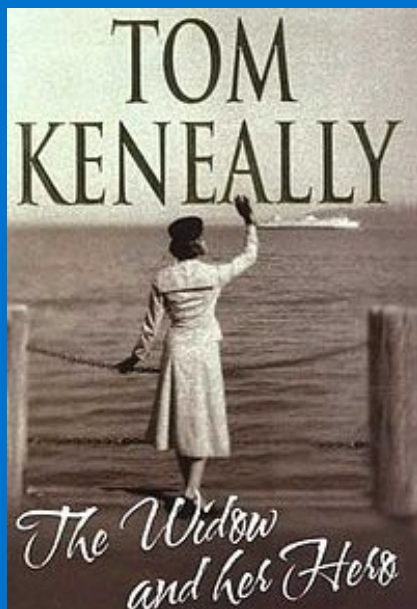
I knew in general terms I was marrying a hero. The burden lay lightly on Leo, and to be a hero's wife in times supposedly suited to the heroic caused a woman to swallow doubt... The Japanese had barely been turned away. It was heresy and unlucky to undermine young men at such a supreme hour.

When Grace married the genial and handsome Captain Leo Waterhouse in Australia in 1943, they were young, in love - and at war. Like many other young men and women, they were ready, willing and able to put the war effort first. They never seriously doubted that they would come through unscathed.

But Leo never returned from a commando mission masterminded by his own hero figure, an eccentric and charismatic man who inspired total loyalty from those under his command. The world moved on to new alliances, leaving Grace, like so many widows, to bear the pain of losing the love of her life and wonder what it had all been for.

Sixty years on, Grace is still haunted by the tragedy of her doomed hero when the real story of his ill-fated secret mission is at last unearthed. As new fragments of her hero's story emerge, Grace is forced to keep revising her picture of what happened to Leo and his fellow commandoes - until she learns about the final piece in the jigsaw, and the ultimate betrayal.

(from the publisher)

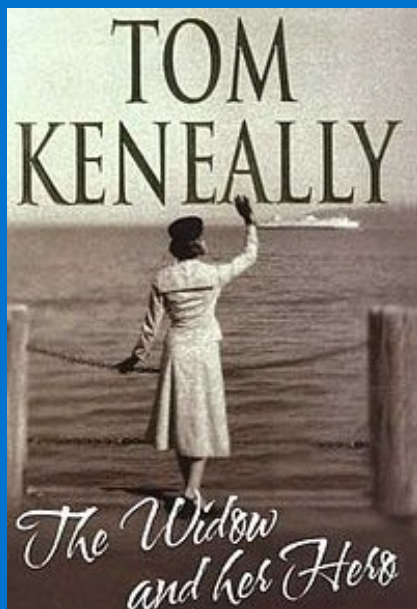


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Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the book's title? What does it mean in the context of the novel?
2. The novel is written as a private memoir for Grace's granddaughter and, as such, Grace is immediately familiar with the reader. What difference does this make to the way we experience the emotion of her story.
3. A memoir told in the first person can be very one dimensional. Keneally uses diary and letter extracts to try and convey other characters' experiences and opinions? Does he succeed? Does it effect the flow of the story?
4. Does the author, a 72 year old man, write convincingly as a woman? Does he successfully capture the voice of the idealistic young woman and the older grieving widow?
5. The novel has a lot to say about the cult of heroism. Grace claims that women were "*hopelessly and frantically attracted...to beautiful, doomed boys*" ^(p6); that "*the legendary state traps not only the hero himself but exercises magnetic pull on other men*" ^(p18); that "*women have our part in relishing the warrior myth*" and could "*feed the immolatory furnaces*" ^(p88); and that "*the heroic pose is not designed for ultimate domesticity*" ^(p297). Has this novel challenged or changed your ideas of heroism? Does the cult of heroism still exist today?
6. Grace suggests that the men didn't fight their charges during the trial because of Stockholm Syndrome, and then because "*the silence of honour locked [their] tongues*" ^(p217) and finally because they sacrificing themselves to save the innocent Malays who had been blamed for their previous raids ^(p288). Why do you think they accepted their fate without a fight?
7. On p 227 Grace says "*It seems to me that people required a repeated disinterment of Doucette's men, Leo not permitted his quiet grave, and I deprived of a fixed and stable widowhood.*" As well as the many well meaning researchers, Rhonda Garnish, Hidaka and Creed all intrude on Grace's widowhood for their own ends, yet it not until she is in her 80s ^(p286) that she finally stands up for herself saying "*All that stuff you try to lay at my door, you'll have to take all that with you when you leave...I'm not here to help you feel easy about 1944.*" What role did her own sense of guilt play in allowing her life to be continually trampled by others digging up the past?
8. After Creed's final visit ^(p285) Grace declares "*The ghost is satisfied, the ghost has had its explanations, the ghost has departed the scene.*" Why do we so often need to have answers to let the dead "go in peace"? How do we see this need play out in modern day tragedies?



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Reviews

Tom Keneally's latest novel, his best in many years, is loosely based on two operations mounted during the closing phase of World War II against Japanese warships and merchant vessels moored in Singapore Harbour. "This is not meant to be a roman a clef of those times and characters," Keneally writes in his author's note, yet many of his readers - especially those with an interest in the war in South-East Asia - could well identify the prototypes for several of the novel's vividly drawn fictional characters.

Most of this accomplished and highly readable book is narrated by the eighty-something Grace, a former teacher and a poet of some renown, the widow of the title. In the early 1940s, Grace, who was born in Braidwood and was working as a secretary in sleepy Canberra, met and eventually married a young man named Leo Waterhouse. Leo had spent much of his childhood in the Solomon Islands, where his widowed father held a government post until his capture and imprisonment by the Japanese.

Grace's marriage was delayed because of Leo's involvement in a hush-hush operation with his "Boss", Charlie Doucette, a temperamental Eton-educated Irishman with a penchant for derring-do adventures. That mission, Grace came to learn, had Leo and his mates sneaking into Singapore Harbour, attaching limpet mines to the hulls of Japanese ships and watching with glee as all that tonnage went up in smoke.

Some time after his marriage, Leo joined Doucette in a similar jaunt, but on this occasion the outcome was disastrous. Everything that could have gone wrong went wrong. Some of the men were gunned down on the small islands that surround Singapore. Others, Leo among them, were captured by the Japanese, tried by a military court and beheaded - shamefully, horribly and clumsily - only a short while before the end of hostilities.

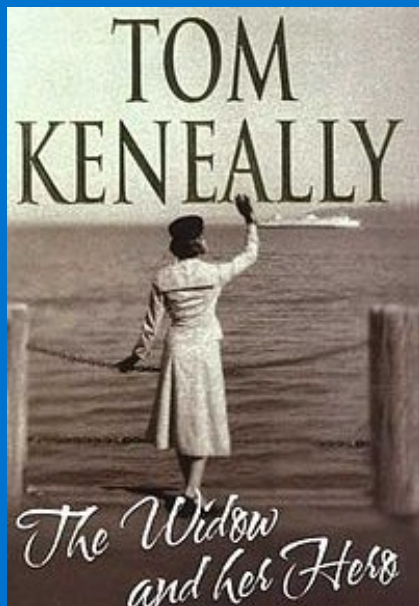
One aspect of Keneally's novel examines currently unfashionable notions of heroism and self-sacrifice. During the early years of her widowhood, Grace came to realise that to "men of a certain kind, not to all men, but to some men in certain circumstances and under the force of certain ideas, bravery was its own end".

For Leo, as for Charlie Doucette and the eccentric Englishman Rufus Mortmain, those forceful ideas emerged in large part from the dream of the British Empire, "a system as eternal and fixed in structure and God-ordained as the solar system".

At first Grace, a well-brought-up daughter of Braidwood, accepted those ideals almost without question. Perhaps she saw herself as another Mrs Miniver, the heroine of a once-famous war movie about the stiff-upper-lip fortitude of wives who tended the home fires while their menfolk marched off to save the world. Yet under the influence of Rufus Mortmain's wife, Dorothy, a scandalously strong-minded, outspoken and sexually adventurous Englishwoman, a minor appendage of Bloomsbury in a way, whom war cast up on the innocent shores of Australia - or the banks of the Yarra to be precise - Grace reached an understanding more subtle and more ambiguous than the simplicities of heroism and wifely fortitude.

Keneally is admirably even-handed about the rival claims represented by Charlie Doucette's world, on the one hand, and on the other by Dotty Mortmain's gin-sodden fury at the idiocy of those who sent her infuriatingly childish husband, for whom her love remained steadfast despite mutual peccadillos and small betrayals, to a hideous and perhaps senseless death.

There is no mistaking, however, where Keneally's sympathies lie. Many pages of the novel are enlivened by meticulous descriptions - whether they are accurate I am unable to tell - of clandestine warfare conducted by means of limpet mines, midget submarines and men with 7



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Reviews (continued)

blackened faces creeping among the vegetation of a tropical islet.

The main emphasis falls, nevertheless, on Grace and on how she achieved an understanding that dominates the last page of the novel: "I didn't want a hero. A person is never married to a hero - the heroic pose is not designed for ultimate domesticity."

Grace's journey to that understanding, expertly charted by Keneally, is marked by several sinister milestones. After the war, she learnt from a smug cabinet minister's adviser that her husband and his comrades had been denied a posthumous decoration because, under interrogation, one of them had betrayed secrets to the Japanese. Years later, she finds that the slowly healing wound of her grief is ripped open by the visit of one of the interpreters at Leo's trial who had kept her husband's journal, written on sheets of lavatory paper, all to himself.

Then, from an ageing American, who had been one of General MacArthur's underlings during the war in the Pacific, she finds out why nothing was done to rescue Leo and the other men before their capture, even though there was time enough to spirit them away from their island hideouts. There, for those who care to seek contemporary parallels, Keneally may be hinting about the perils of an uncritical reliance on the benevolence of our mighty American ally.

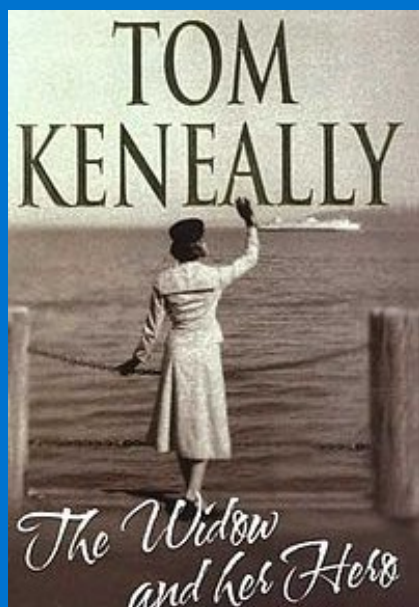
The Widow and Her Hero reveals a writer who has lost none of the skill and talent he has been demonstrating for decades in a seemingly unending stream of books. In some of his more recent novels, however, Keneally has shown a tendency to rely on mechanical plots and stock characters - *An Angel in Australia* is a case in point, I think. In this book he has avoided most of those pitfalls. Even the conceit of a group of prisoners, Leo and his friends, who are facing the prospect of execution, rehearsing a play - a throwback to *Bring Larks and Heroes* - proves to be apt and successfully integrated into the novel's structure.

Above all, though, *The Widow and Her Hero* is distinguished by its memorable portrait of two women: the quiet, thoughtful Grace and the fiery Dotty. They, offspring of Goethe's Eternal Feminine, raise Keneally's new novel to an admirable height of achievement.

Sydney Morning Herald

Commando training, submersibles, limpet mines; the furnishings of Thomas Keneally's 25th novel could make it sound like a conventional tale of second world war derring-do. And, at one level, it is indeed just that; but it is also a subtle examination of the concept of heroism, of what it is that makes young men risk their lives, and why - especially in the climate of that time, although of course in the era of Iraq and Afghanistan, the language of heroism is still very much around.

The story is told by Grace, now in her eighties and the bitter, perplexed widow of Leo Waterhouse, who was beheaded by the Japanese after an abortive attempt to repeat a successful raid on shipping in Singapore harbour. It is told also by Leo himself, whose diaries of both the first raid - "Cornflakes" - and the second - "Memerang" - have conveniently survived, the first found in an office drawer after the war, the second, scrawled on toilet paper during captivity, brought to Grace by the Japanese interpreter who gave some solace to the captured men. Grace herself comments that Leo wrote in the style of a boy's adventure story. True up to a point, but my own feeling was that the toilet-paper manuscript did not quite ring true - too expansive, without the tension that the circumstances would have induced. This strikes a rare false note, for in general the elegance and economy of this novel



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Reviews (continued)

are dazzling - the atmosphere of the late 1940s brought to life through a handful of vibrant characters and their interactions.

Leo looks like Errol Flynn. While he and his comrades are off on their first mission, Grace and the other waiting girls haunt the cinema, their longing for the beautiful, doomed boys nourished by the gung-ho movies of the day. In old age, she looks back with a different vision: angry, puzzled, questioning. It seems to her that Leo met an obscene death "for very little purpose". The military purpose had been to blow up shipping in Singapore harbour with limpet mines. The Cornflakes raid (so

called because the Japanese would not be able to enjoy their breakfast the next morning) was a dramatic success, conceived and led by the charismatic "Boss" Charlie Doucette. The men make their way from Australia to Singapore in a customised fishing boat packed with limpet mines, plant the explosives, watch the resulting carnage in exaltation, and are picked up by submarine for the return to a heroes' welcome - though a subdued one, since this triumph cannot be made general news: a follow-up is intended.

Such missions become legend. Keneally acknowledges in a postscript that his story owes a debt to two real-life wartime operations against Singapore, "Jaywick" and "Rimau", and cites his sources, which he has used deftly - the shadow of the card-index is absent. Rather, he has been able to give the novel convincing ballast, with enough details to stop the reader wondering just how this was done or that avoided, while conjuring up the mind-set of the day by way of his characters. There is decent, daring Leo, the obsessive, half-crazed Doucette, the debonair Englishman Rufus Mortmain, and his wife Dotty, older and more worldly than Grace, who arrives at her wedding "smelling of cloves, lavender and gin". Dotty has literary inclinations; she gives Grace "The Waste Land" to read, thus slipping a telling reference into the novel. Elsewhere Mortmain is found reading *The Odyssey* during the Cornflakes mission, and at the very end Leo and the other doomed men rehearse and perform *The Devil's Disciple* in their prison cell.

The Devil's Disciple is, of course, about selfless sacrifice, and the last section of the novel turns on the evidence that appears decades later, including that wad of toilet paper. Wartime politics intrude - the mistrust between Australians and Americans - when the soft-spoken US Colonel Creed attempts to interfere with the plans for the second and fatal attempt on Singapore harbour. There have been betrayals, some of them self-serving. But, most of all, the assumptions of that time seem as archaic as the complacency of Empire. Grace remembers how Doucette used to recite Tennyson at parties: "Some work of noble note, may yet be done ..." She sees the men as living according to Tennyson, whereas she and Dotty would live in the age of Auden and TS Eliot. She is tormented by the thought that bravery was its own end, that the purpose was to be brave, even to be doomed. This clever, compelling novel asks some uncomfortable questions.

The Guardian