

Listen

By Kate Veitch

Biography

Kate Veitch is the author of two novels, *Listen* and *Trust*, both published by Penguin in Australia, also published in the USA, Germany and the Netherlands. She also writes essays for the highly-regarded journal Griffith Review. She has lived in the Northern Rivers area for the past ten years, and is currently working on two projects: a new novel and a 'memoir in essay form'.

Short Synopsis

On Christmas Eve, 1967, in suburban Melbourne, a discontented young wife and mother walks out on her dull husband and four squabbling kids.

Fast forward. Forty years later, those four kids are now adults with families, careers, and secrets of their own. They're adept at concealing their shared pain, but as their much loved father develops dementia, the cracks in their lives grow wider and deeper.

A chance meeting in London reunites them with their mother, triggering a series of calamities, revelations and, finally, renewal for the siblings, their parents, partners and children.

The ending, again on Christmas Eve, sees them making their way forward into a family landscape that's vastly different yet more honest, more authentic, than it's ever been.

Long Synopsis

1967. The suburbs of Melbourne, a sweltering Christmas Eve. Discontented young wife and mother Rosemarie stuffs a chook for tomorrow while her four children squabble. Neighbours drop in; like her husband Alex, they're kind but condescending to her. Fish and chips on the patio. Rosemarie's fed up. Later, a car pulls up in the driveway; the kids watch, uncomprehending, as their mum gets in and the car drives away.

Forty years later, husband/father Alex is nearly eighty and his memory is failing. Realising this, oldest daughter Deborah summons her siblings – anxious Robert, artist James, and flighty Meredith – to a family meeting. We get peeks into each of the sibs' problems and secrets: Deborah's tense marriage, Robert struggling with OCD, James's diffidence, and Meredith overly fond of the bottle. We also see how close Deborah's daughter, the self-sufficient 13 year old Olivia, is to her grandfather.

A flashback scene – a party twenty years before at which Robert met his wife while handsome James was seduced in the swimming pool by two eager girls. Present day: Robert taking his father for assessment. Alex is deemed to have 'mild to moderate dementia'.

Olivia hangs out with her cousin Laurence, 17, Meredith's son, at a party for Silver, James's wealthy wife and gallerist. At party's end, the four sibs mull over that long-ago summer of their mother's disappearance.

James and Silver fly to London. At a dinner party, James talks to a woman who knows his mother. He contacts Rose and goes to her home in Somerset – a highly charged, emotional meeting. Soon after, he takes Silver to meet his mother too. Crucially, James decides he won't tell his siblings till he's sorted out his own feelings.

Deborah is bow-string tense about work, her marriage, her father's illness. When an old enemy from her student days calls, she flashes back to their clash. We learn that Deborah wrote often to her mother over decades: letters never sent. We go back one year with Deborah's husband Angus to the school reunion where he met an old girlfriend. Intensely attracted to each other, they began an affair.

Meredith, Daddy's favourite, is in denial about Alex's dementia. She is shocked when events prove it's real, and works hard to conceal his symptoms from her siblings. In Somerset, James and Silver enjoy Christmas with Rose; mother and son both benefitting from this renewed relationship. James still hasn't told his sibs; when Deborah phones unexpectedly, he lies to her.

Olivia begins high school and makes a rare friend. Robert's been promoted to principal, but his OCD is worsening.

Rose assures James she wrote to the kids for years after she'd left. Returning from England, he searches Alex's place for these letters. No luck. Decides he will tell Deborah about Rose but before he can do so, Deborah discovers her husband Angus's affair. Fireworks. Driving home, Deborah impulsively buys a basenji puppy. Olivia the dog whisperer disapproves.

While trying to discover why her parents are fighting constantly, Olivia discovers a hidden box full of letters written by Deborah to the absent Rose. Olivia goes with her Grandpa to an open garden day. Alex's driving is erratic, his behaviour strange. She gets them safely to her aunt Meredith's house. Meredith's messy drunk but cousin Laurence and his mates save the day. Next day, Laurence confronts his mother, who promises to stop drinking. Meredith joins AA, cleans up her life. A few

months in, about to fall off the wagon, she calls on Robert for help. Robert in turn confides about his OCD.

James continues to spend enriching time with his mother, and also continues to make excuses for not telling his sibs that he's found her.

Olivia overhears Deborah arguing with Angus, understands her parents have split up. James returns to Melbourne, resolves to finally tell his sibs about Rose. He calls a family meeting. Cousins Laurence and Olivia walk the badly-behaved basenji while discussing the adults' bad behaviour. Returning to Olivia's they discover these adults in a state of shock: their mother's been found, and no one's happy about it.

Robert seeks help for his OCD. James and his father visit Alex's rural boyhood home, now deserted. Olivia's parents have separated; she fights with her mother who wants Alex to go into a home. Next day, Olivia runs away with her grandpa to the old place in the country. Alex wanders off and is discovered down an old mine shaft, miraculously unhurt. On a tip-off from Olivia, James confronts Deborah, who produces the letters he'd been looking for: the ones Rose had written to her kids, for years. Proof that she cared; proof Deborah hid from her younger sibs.

An exchange of emails between each of the sibs and their mother. Rose comes to Australia, meets each of her kids and their families, in turn, then Alex, her first husband. Tangles of emotion. On Christmas Eve, the whole family gathers, with all their extensions. Rose worries that it may all go terribly wrong – but it doesn't. Ends with Olivia, looking to the future.

Author Statement

Why would *Listen* make a great adaptation to the screen?

As well as strong sales (close to 100,000 copies) and great reviews across the board, *Listen* evoked a powerful personal response. Many readers contacted me, saying things like: 'You have created a world that feels so familiar, so recognisable, so full of complex characters. I loved the way you wrote young people who had their heads screwed on rather than relying on cliches of peer pressure, drug use and so on. And James and Silver – when can I meet them? I LOVE them!'

Listen is an ensemble piece, told from the points of view of eight main characters. Better suited to the small screen than the large: a television series of six or eight episodes. Think *The Slap* but with the trigger event being, not a slap, but the abrupt abandonment of four children by their mother. 'I'm just going to get some lights for the Christmas tree,' she says, and they don't see or hear from her again for forty years.

These aren't characters who hang around in coffee shops or stare endlessly into the middle distance. They're people with demanding jobs and kids to wrangle. They're trying to deal with their aging Dad's dementia, with OCD habits getting out of hand, with a compelling love affair, with an unacknowledged alcohol problem. They're talkers, and doers. They're bossy, loyal, loving, frightened, warm-hearted and immensely flawed individuals, just trying to do their best. Their dilemmas haven't dated in the ten years since *Listen* was published.

Intense reader engagement with the characters and what happens to them made *Listen* a hit in Australia, the United States, and Germany. Again and again I heard those magic words 'I couldn't put it down'. Viewers will respond just as strongly.

How would I like to be involved in the adaptation and pitch process?

One of the best bits of writing, for me, is the editing process. After all that solitary work, at last some collaboration! A good editor (and I've been lucky enough to have superb editors) can see how to make your story the best it can be. Why would you fight them?

I can imagine a similar collaborative process with a good screenwriter. I don't know how to write a good screenplay – but they do. What I know is these characters: their motivations and hidden curly bits, the toys they had as a kid, their favourite tipple, you name it. To say I'd welcome the opportunity to work with a screenwriter is way too understated. Leap at the chance? With open arms? That's more like it.

As to the pitch itself – sure. Nervous when speaking in front of people? Not me. Especially if I've had some tips, some *training* even in how best to make an effective pitch. Oh yeah – let me at it

Key Character Breakdown

ALEX

Aged 80, retired engineer and keen gardener. Physically fit but diagnosed with 'mild to moderate' dementia. Never remarried after his wife Rosemarie walked out in 1967. Has always relied on oldest daughter Deborah to take charge of family matters. Courteous, loves his family but values his independence.

ROSEMARIE/ROSE

Late 60's, lives in England with second husband Roland. Successful freelance fashion designer. A warm, attractive woman, resilient but impulsive. Rose has low tolerance for boredom or frustration.

DEBORAH

Close to 50, loves her demanding job as adviser to a Labor state government. Classic over-functioning oldest child: bossy, controlling, impatient. Snappy with her easygoing husband Angus, but adores her younger brother James. Her father's growing dementia, something she cannot control, terrifies her.

ROBERT

48 year old school principal, straight, conscientious, devoted to wife Vesna and their two daughters. Prone to anxiety; has OCD habits that he's ashamed of. Clashes with older sister Deborah, but stalwart ally of younger sister Meredith.

JAMES

Lucky James – good looks, rich wife, artistic success. But his achievements mask profound emotional disconnect. The kind of guy who'd run out of a room rather than face any emotional conflict, or pretty much any intense emotion at all. Seems sociable, but his key activities – swimming and painting – are both solitary.

MEREDITH

Mid-40's, determined to maintain role as baby of the family. Meredith's been drinking too much for decades, which forces her 17 year old son Laurence into being her parent. Closest to her brother Robert and to her father (who she still calls Daddy). Has considerable artistic talent, which she's always downplayed.

ANGUS

A nice guy who just wants a quiet life as family man and suburban lawyer, he's baffled by his wife Deborah's snappiness. Loyal (despite the fact that he embarks on an affair) and closer to his daughter Olivia than her mother is.

OLIVIA

13 but mature and self-sufficient beyond her years, Olivia is devoted to her pets, sanguine about having few friends, and quietly determined to run things her own way. She has no qualms about eavesdropping on adult conversations, believing it's 'better to be well-informed than good'. She's close to her grandpa, Alex.

Five page extract from *Listen*

This extract is from about two thirds through the novel (pp 214 – 218 inclusive).

Easter Saturday: 13 year old Olivia has got up early and gone to see her grandfather, Alex. He proposes a visit to a garden called Golden Grove, open to the public that day only. Unaware of her grandfather's developing dementia, or that his driving capacity is diminished, Olivia agrees.

He gripped the steering wheel hard, staring ahead with utmost concentration, but within minutes they copped a blast of the horn from a car which then swept past them. Pretty soon the next car behind was tooting and flashing its lights at them as well.

'Bloody maniacs!' Alex said, clearly flustered. 'What's the matter with them?'

'You could go a bit faster, Grandpa,' suggested Olivia. 'This is a sixty kay zone, I think.'

'I'm going fast enough!'

'You're only doing,' she leaned across to look at the gauges in front of him, 'thirty.'

'*That's fast enough!*' he shouted. 'How bloody fast do you want me to go?'

Olivia flinched and said nothing. Grandpa never spoke to her like that. He did drive a little faster for a while, but then slowed right down again and other drivers continued to get cross. She was very pleased to reach Golden Grove, well marked with signs. There were cars already parked for a long way around. As they walked toward the entrance, she noticed that his hands were shaking.

'Grandpa,' she said. 'Are you all right?'

'Sorry, darl. Just upsets me, all those rude so-and-so's on the road these days. They've got it a name for it too, you know. I just can't think what it is.'

'You mean road rage?'

'Could be. Something like that. Never mind,' he said, making a visible effort to calm himself, to smile. 'That's modern times, eh?'

They paid the entrance fee, Alex graciously accepting the request to donate something extra to the orphanage in Burma, and were given a map of the property.

'Devonshire teas being served all day in the gazebo, that's marked here, near the michaelias, d'you see?' said the woman on the gate, indicating the spot on the map.

'Thank you. A cuppa might come in very handy, Thirsty work, this!' said Alex gamely. They went in and strolled around for a while, admiring this and that, but Olivia could tell her grandfather was still unsettled. She spotted a garden seat temptingly located in dappled shade, and there, somewhat further away, was the gazebo.

'Grandpa, see that seat over there?' she said. 'How about you bags that while I go and get you a cup of tea?'

'That's a good idea, Ollie,' he said gratefully, fishing his wallet out of his back pocket. 'Here, you get a lemonade or something, too, won't you?'

It took her ages, absolutely *ages*, to get served. Olivia was starting to feel anxious. As she made her way back to the garden seat carrying a laden tray, she was relieved to see that her grandfather was still there. Maybe he was dozing: his shoulders appeared to be slumped, and his head was tilted to one side. But as she came closer, she was shocked to see that tears were rolling down his cheeks, his mouth open in unabashed distress.

'Oh, Grandpa,' she cried. 'What's the matter?' She sat beside him and he took one of her hands, sobbing. There was a hankie in the pocket of his shirt and she took it out and shook it open, pressing it into his hand. He mopped at his face, still crying. *What should I do?* she asked herself desperately. *Should I get help? But Grandpa would hate that.*

Finally he spoke. 'I'm terribly worried about my father,' he said. His voice sounded like something had broken inside him, it caught at her heart. 'I've been thinking about him and it doesn't seem like I've heard from him for such a long time.' He looked at her with a sad, piteous hope. 'Do you know where he is?'

'Your father, Grandpa?' she asked. He nodded, gazing at her. *Oh, what should I say? The truth, I suppose; what else can I say?* 'I'm afraid your father's ... dead, Grandpa. He died quite a long time ago, when Mum was just little. She told me. Maybe ... forty years ago now.'

'Dead?' Alex said. He looked down at his lap and gave a long shuddering sigh. 'Yes,' he agreed sadly. 'Yes, I suppose he is.'

'I think ... I think you might have had a dream about him, Grandpa. Maybe you had a little nap here on the bench and had a dream about him.'

'Yes. I suppose I did.' He sounded completely worn out.

'I went to get us a Devonshire tea. See? How about you drink this cuppa? I think it'll make you feel better.'

'Yes, I'll do that,' he said. They sat, Alex drinking his tea quietly, Olivia the lemonade. *Auntie Meredith's place is just near here*, she thought. *And hopefully Laurence'll be home, too. We just have to get there and then we'll be okay.*

It took Meredith so long to answer the door, Olivia was about to go round the back to see if Laurence was in his bungalow in the backyard. But there she was, leaning against the doorframe, and the alcohol fumes coming off her were so strong you could practically see them.

'Hello Daddy!' she said with bleary enthusiasm. 'Hello Ollie, sweetheart! Whadda lovely surprise.'

'Hello,' said Olivia uncertainly. Her aunt looked shocking, as though she'd slept in her clothes, if she'd slept at all. 'Can we come in?'

Meredith bumped into the wall twice as she lead the way to the combined kitchen and living area at the back of the tiny house. She sat down heavily at the table. Alex sat beside her. He still hadn't said anything, and Olivia looked at him anxiously. The short drive there from Golden Grove had been alarming; it had seemed as though he barely knew how to drive a car at all.

Now Meredith suddenly burst into tears. 'Oh, Daddy!' she wailed. 'I've lost my job! I just got into work a lil bit late last night,' she held up thumb and forefinger to show just how little a bit it had been, peering at the gap, 'and they *sacked* me.'

Oh, wonderful, said Olivia to herself. She went to the sink, filled two glasses with water and carried them back to the table. Her grandfather, to her surprise, seemed to have come good. He was looking more alert, patting Meredith's shoulder and making soothing there, there noises.

'Drink this water please, Grandpa,' Olivia told him firmly. 'Auntie Meredith, sit up and drink this glass of water.' Both of them did so. Meredith was still sobbing and looked even worse than when she'd opened the door, but at least she wasn't actually bawling, and Grandpa was definitely starting to look better.

'Is Laurence home?'

Meredith looked completely baffled. Olivia felt like snapping *Come on, this is not a hard question!* Instead she just said, 'Never mind. I'll go and see.'

When she knocked on the door of the bungalow Laurence shouted 'Yo!' and she went in. He was slouched on the couch with a couple of other guys, playing a video game. A girl was sprawled on the bed flipping through a magazine. Olivia had met them all before but she couldn't think of their names. Wait, the girl was Crystal, the one who'd come to look at Auntie Meredith's journals that time.

'Hey, Ol, how ya doin'?' You guys know my cousin Olivia?' They all nodded in a friendly way and said hi. She went over and sat on an arm of the ancient couch. The boys were playing Super Smash Brothers. She smiled; you couldn't help but like those little guys and their little yelping cries as they jumped around.

'Wanna play?' Laurence asked.

She shook her head. 'Nuh.'

'So what's happening?'

'I've just been out with Grandpa. It was pretty weird.'

'Weird? What sort of weird?' Laurence looked over at her now, briefly, his fingers still madly working the controller. He'd really changed a lot this past year, he looked like a guy now, not a kid. He was in his last year of secondary school and she was only in her first, but he still treated the same as he always had, like she was a normal person, not some kind of weirdo or anything. His friends were nice, too. She liked being around them a lot more than being with kids her own age, except for Fleur.

'Weird like ... he lost it, kind of. Gor really upset.'

'So where is he now?'

'In the kitchen, with your mum.'

Laurence snorted. 'Huh. She's a complete write-off today.' He handed the controller to the guy next to him on the couch. 'Thrash 'im for me, Tris,' he said, putting on a mock-Cockney accent. 'Let's get this little lot sorted, eh?'

In the end, what happened was that Laurence's friend Tristan, who was eighteen and had his licence, called his older brother. The brother came round in his car and followed behind while Tristan drove Alex's car back home with Laurence and Olivia and their grandfather. They stayed around for a while to make sure everything was all right. Olivia assured them that it was: Alex just needed to have a nap, and she would ride her bike home.

Back at his own place, Laurence told the other guys casually, 'I'm just going to get some corn chips and stuff together,' and they headed back to the bungalow while he went into the house. Just as he'd suspected: Meredith was passed out at the kitchen table. He got her to her feet, hauled one arm over his shoulders, and half carried, half dragged her to her bedroom. He dumped her on the bed and stood there for a moment.

'Ma,' he told her snoring form, 'you are a fucking mess.'

Olivia felt like it had been days since she'd ridden off to her grandfather's, not just this morning. She'd said in the note for her dad that she'd be back mid-afternoon, and she wasn't even late. So it was quite normal, she had to remind herself, that when she arrived home Angus was sitting at the outdoor table eating a toasted sandwich, the picture of relaxation. It gave her a strange feeling in her stomach. *This is how it works*, she thought. *People can be sitting there perfectly relaxed and happy and meantime someone they love is freaking out. And then they get the news.* She hugged Mintie the collie, then went over and hugged her dad.