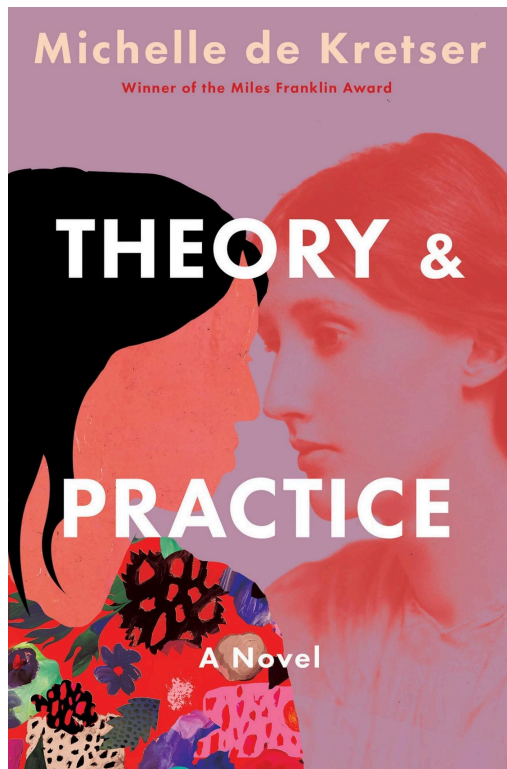


August 2025

Theory and Practice by Michelle de Kretser won the Stella prize in 2025, attracting attention for challenging the form of the novel.



The first few pages read as a conventional novel - a 27 yo geologist thinking about a young woman he met while traveling in Switzerland and remembering episodes from his childhood on the family farm in Australia as a child. And then there's a sudden change of direction... *"At that point, the novel I was writing stalled"*. It becomes a first person narrative by a young Australian woman of Sri Lankan heritage who moves to Melbourne to study an MA in English Literature in 1986. Her thesis is on the later works of Virginia Woolf and she is struggling with applying the dominant French post structuralist theory or Theory which *'had conquered the Humanities'*.

The book becomes thoughts, disjointed diary entries, paragraphs, snippets, poems, memories, ideas about feminism, patriarchy, solidarity, notes from her mother in Sydney, short sections describing interactions at parties, cafe chats, quotes from friends.

The book describes graduate student life in Melbourne in the late 80s with the AIDs epidemic raging with typical concerns about relationships, studying, learning, experimenting with identity, body image. But also challenging the status quo, the patriarchy, who gets the power and why. The author wants to "tell the truth" - to find the form of a novel that doesn't behave like a novel.

We commented on the writing which is efficient and succinct yet so descriptive and evocative. She shows rather than tells what's going on, whether it's the natural world, the city life or the people who crowd it. Her characters are economically drawn but fully realised and she captures subtleties and makes observations that seem to reveal much about the people. She makes fun of her younger self and her earnestness, her passions, hangups and preoccupations. It's fast paced, carefully crafted, word-perfect, vividly evocative economical descriptions, an undercurrent of self-deprecating humour, gently mocking herself but generous to her friends.

But she is also drawing attention to the corruption of the patriarchy, assumptions, prejudice, feminism, racism and double standards. We talked of themes of cancel culture, contradictions, Instagramable images and sound bites, messy coming of age narrative, the powerlessness of women, shame versus female solidarity.

From Sandy: *"I enjoyed Theory and Practice especially after re-reading it on the weekend. The conflicts of feminism and the messiness of human behaviour was well illustrated in the relationship between the protagonist and Olivia. The enigma of Virginia Woolf with her literary brilliance and blatant racism must sting for the author. The often ubiquitous nature of sexual assault was demonstrated for both the narrator and VW. The bleakness of Melbourne and the protagonist's relationship with Kit were a neat fit, very depressing."*

Ratings: Dianne F 4, Kim 4, Nicola 4, Sandy 4, Viv 4, Dianne F 3.5, Dianne H 3.5, Margie 3.5, Jenny 3.5, Pauline 3.5, Janet 3.5, Veronica 3, Silvia 3.

Other Books We Read

The Rest of our Lives by Ben Markovits, 2.5
Universality by Natasha Brown, 2.5
You will be safe here by Damian Barr, 4
A Fine Balance by Rohinton Mistry, 4.5
Moon Tiger by Penelope Lively, 4
The Illuminations by Andrew Hogan, 3.5
We Do Not Part by Han Kang, 3
Annihilation by Michel Houellebecq, 3.5
The Dictionary of Lost Words by Pip Williams, 2.5
The Love Letters of Dylan Thomas by Dylan Thomas, 3
Knife: Meditations after an attempted murder by Salman Rushdie, 4
Until August by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, 4
A Ladder to the sky by John Boyne, 3.5