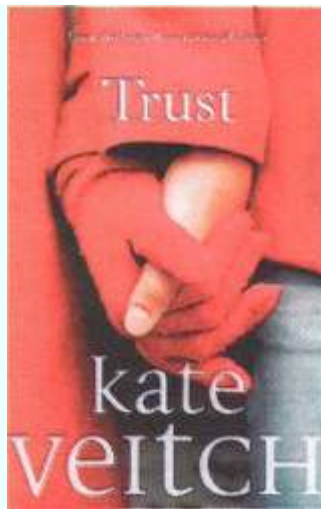


## REVIEW OF THE WEEK

Kate Veitch  
Penguin, \$32.95

Reviewer: Patricia Maunder



There's a surprising postmodern moment in Melbourne author Kate Veitch's second novel, *Trust*, when two central characters attend a book-club meeting. The topic of discussion is her own debut, *Without a Backward Glance* as it was titled in the US, or *Listen* here in Australia.

It's as if the book-club members' contrasting views represent the varying feedback Veitch probably received about her story of a wife and mother who walked out on her family in 1967, and how that family coped.

At first this self-reflexive reference seems indulgent, possibly defensive, but it is soon apparent that Veitch intends *Trust* to be a companion piece to *Listen*. She explores the ramifications of *not* walking out on the family during that era of limited options for women, as well as the complex choices the next generation faces when balancing family and personal needs becomes possible.

Veitch reveals the profound impact such decisions have on three related women, their partners and children. Shifting between the perspectives of this extended family's members, she once again demonstrates her gift for vividly and sympathetically creating a rich domestic milieu.

Veitch generates interest through astute but unobtrusive insights into the characters' personalities, as well as revealing, yet realistic, dialogue and snippets of internal monologue.

Set in present-day Melbourne, the story centres around Susanna. Her escalating midlife crisis is essentially what drives it.

Just as Susanna has always been a "good" daughter — loving, obedient and accommodating — she is also a "good" wife and mother. Dedicated to her family, having long ago reduced her artistic aspirations to teaching at a third-rate institution, she enables her husband Gerry to focus on his career as an architect, and, as it turns out, having "adventures" with the classy career women he encounters.

His infidelity is one of the book's most obvious riffs on the theme of trust: how critical it is to trust oneself and those who influence our lives, but also how difficult that can be to achieve and the consequences of misplacing it. Trust is at the root of whether the individuals and relationships in the story wither or thrive.

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The theme's expression is often subtle, however, as *Trust* is not a melodrama of one-dimensional characters. Gerry, for example, is not simply the bad guy who can't be trusted. Though his charm is strategic, he is in many ways a good family man.

Similarly, Susanna's selflessness, an expression of her need for approval, perpetuates the harmful imbalance in her marriage. When the opportunity arises to mount an exhibition, to rediscover her creativity and assert a little independence, it's a struggle that may be too much not only for her, but for Gerry as well.

With a heatwave adding to a palpable sense of discomfort, this looming exhibition is just one of many pressures setting the extended family up for implosion.

Late in life, Susanna's mother is trying to come to terms with her failure to love her other daughter, Angie, who after a wild youth is looking for acceptance in a charismatic Christian church. The perfect happiness she seeks with the church's seemingly soulful music man is based on deceit, and adds to her young son's anxieties. Susanna's daughter, Stella-Jean, is increasingly worried about this troubled lad she cares for like a brother, while the awakening sexual desire of her real brother, Sebastian, may not be headed in the direction he desperately wants it to.

When tragedy strikes the family, self-images and relationships carefully constructed on shaky foundations teeter and look set to fall. There is denial, shock, resentment, recrimination, tears, bitter words and sex (which is, without gratuity, scattered through the book in an artfully frank manner).

Eventually, some bonds and personality flaws are neatly and perhaps predictably mended, but others are not so easy to repair. Particularly fascinating is the long, slow process towards resolution for Susanna and Gerry — even at the book's perfectly poised conclusion, it's not entirely clear what the future holds for them.

Incidental to the family tragedy around which the plot turns is the roughly drawn backdrop of the 2009



Victorian bushfires. The broader context for the suffering and failures of one Melbourne family is further fleshed out as Susanna, her world falling to pieces, begins drawing graphic images of tragedies she has only heard or read about.

This link is not convincingly executed, however, and muddies the theme of trust.

Overall, there is very little not to like about this insightful, thought-provoking and engaging novel's 350 well-paced pages, which stack up admirably against Veitch's well-received debut.