

Better a beaut bloke than a great guy

IT was the good news every first-time Australian author hopes for: an American publisher eager to buy the US rights to my novel, *Listen*. I probably should have expected what followed: “They want to make a light line edit, just to Americanise any sayings or words.” No cause for alarm, especially when I’ve heard of some authors being asked to change the setting of their book from Australia to the US. (In 1980, the US distributors of *Mad Max* insisted on dubbing the whole movie, convinced that American audiences would not be able to cope with Australian accents, let alone slang. “No worries” became, nonsensically, “Don’t worry”, and not even in Mel Gibson’s voice, which must’ve been galling for an actor born and raised in Peekskill, upstate New York.)

As it happens, I spend half my time in the US. A handful of American friends have already read my book and it’s true that occasionally a word or expression has stumped them. “What is an arvo,” one asked, “and where can I get one?” Our use of pissed to mean drunk is completely baffling, since in the US it means angry.

It’s true too that, as my Australian agent Fiona Inglis grumbled, “We have had to work out what sidewalks and sophomores and jelly donuts are, can’t they use a bit of nous and work out our expressions?” But since it’s not my intention to baffle any reader, I was sanguine about this light line edit.

It’s exciting to have your novel published overseas, writes **Kate Veitch**, but changing Aussie expressions and customs for local markets can get out of hand

So why did my bottom lip start trembling when I got the edited manuscript back from my editor in New York and saw that “big-noting yourself” might become “bragging”, that a beaut bloke could turn into a great guy, or that a strong man might lose his Mallee and become simply fit as a bull? It’s not as if all the characters in *Listen* speak dinky-di Strine, but they are Australian, and I like the way Australians speak. The world is homogenising fast enough.

Don’t get me wrong: I love my American editor, Allison Dickens, at Plume, a US imprint of Penguin. How could I not love someone who in her first email to me said: “*Listen* is exactly the novel I wanted to buy when I came to Plume last fall. Thank you for writing it for me!” I’d met her, I knew she “got” my book, with all its many characters and their complicated lives. I wanted to make things easy for her. But not to the extent of allowing “sooky” to become “emotional”.

Then there was the title. My German publisher, Heyne, had said simply that *Listen* didn’t work as a title there, so they renamed it

Ein Leben Lang: A Long Life, but having the sense too of lifelong. I understand that a title that works in one country may not work in another. So when Allison told me she was getting less than enthusiastic responses to *Listen* in-house at Plume — “a little quiet” and, more brutally, “flat” — I knew we’d have to come up with something new. A hundred back-and-forth suggestions later, the US title is likely to be *Without a Backward Glance*, a phrase that Allison lifted from the text: apt, evocative and (we hope) memorable. On this matter at least, everyone seemed happy.

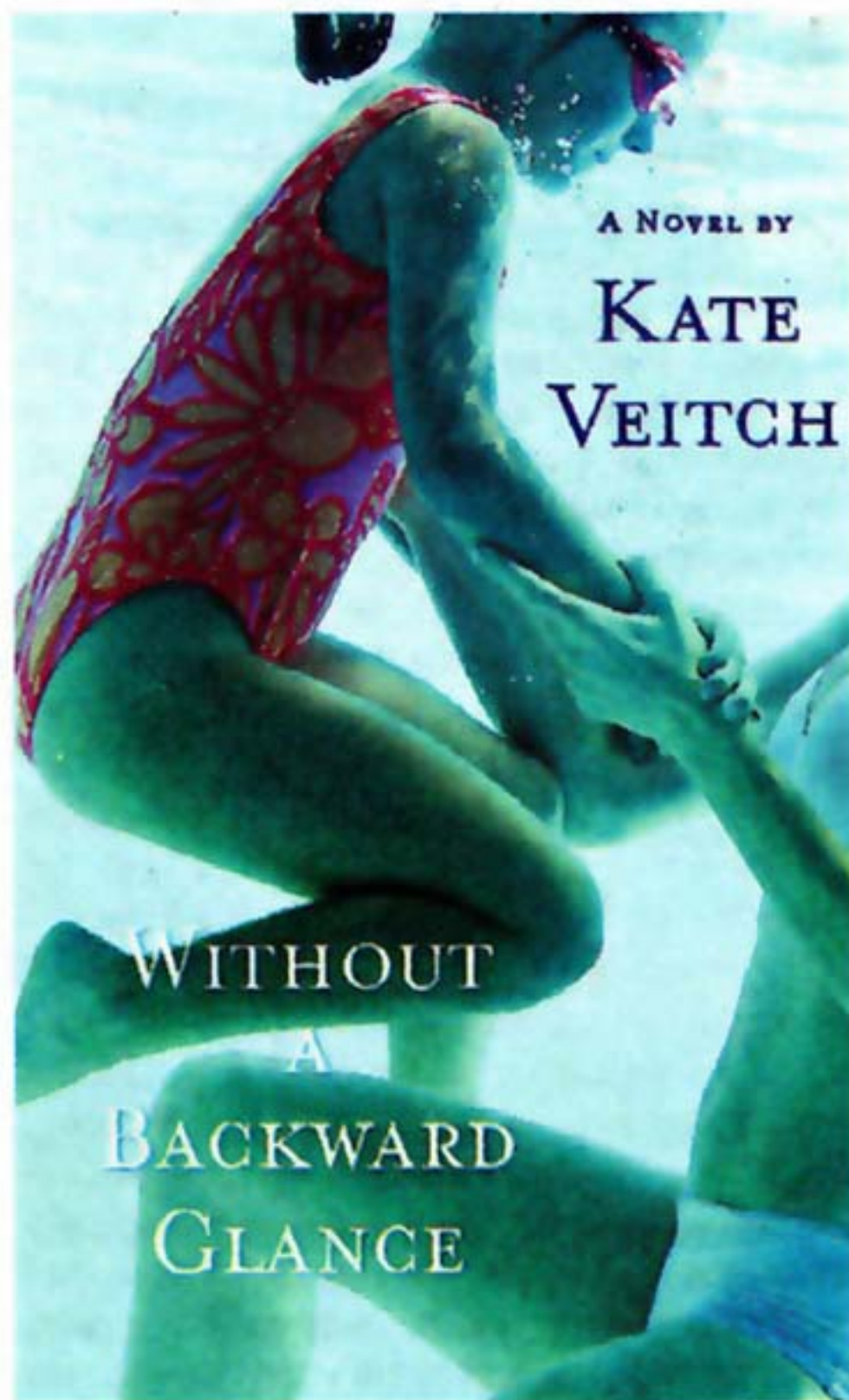
But another, perhaps even bigger issue had been raised; something that had never occurred to me, and no one had commented on before: underage drinking. If you’d asked me, “What about the underage drinking in your novel?” I would’ve said, “There isn’t any; you’ve got the wrong book.” But wait: there are a couple of references to the possibility of underage drinking occurring, at a 16-year-old’s birthday party, for example. And look: on page 355, three teenage girls having dinner with the mother and

a grandparent of one are “allowed a glass of wine each”.

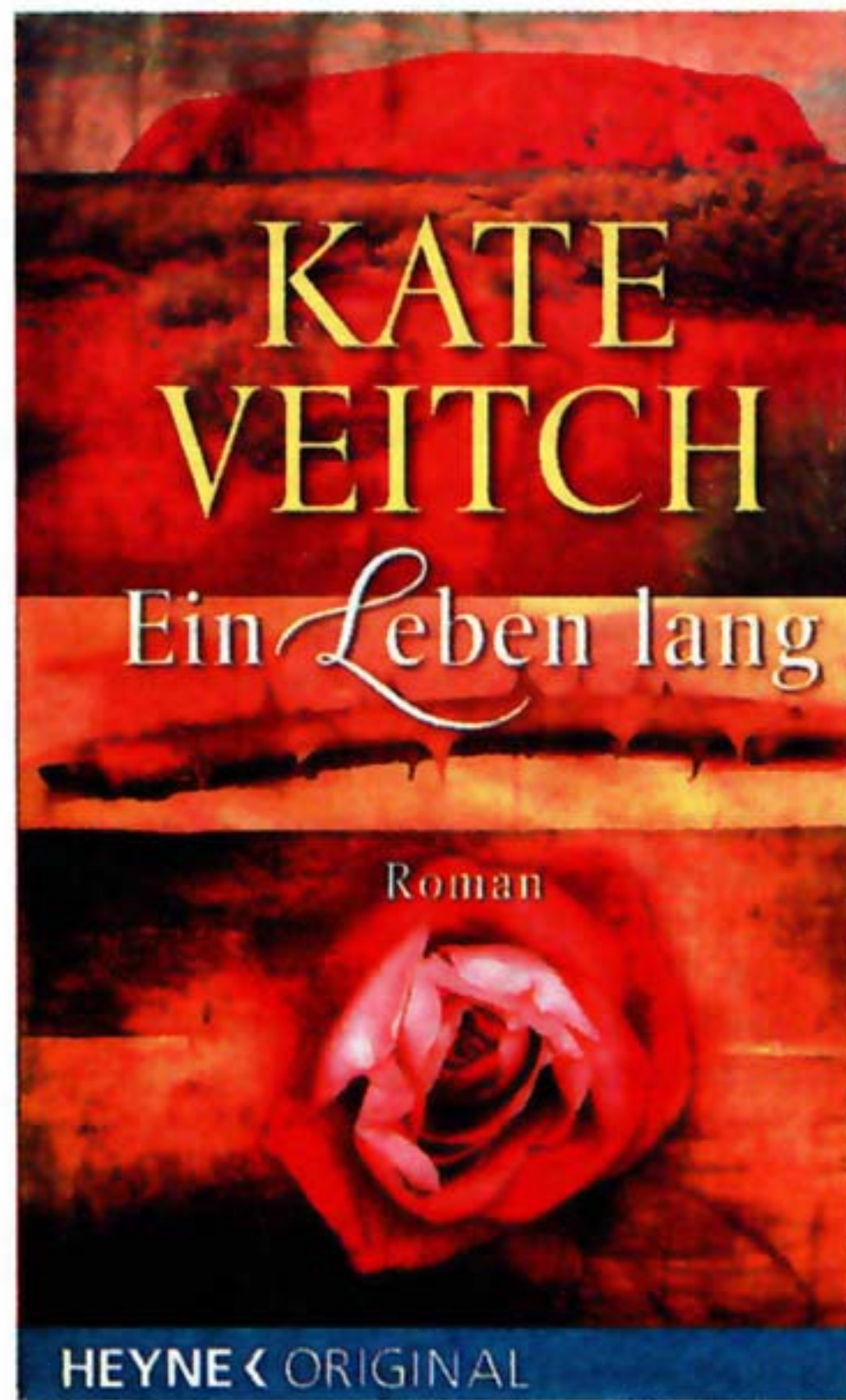
My American editor wanted to remove every one of these references. In the margin beside one where a teenager is offered a glass of wine (which she refuses) by her aunt, Allison had written, “Let’s take this out, since it wouldn’t happen here.” But, I thought, it isn’t set here. It’s set in Australia, where it might very well happen, so let’s leave it in. The more I thought about this, the more peculiar it seemed, especially since the equally glancing references to pot-smoking and the several fairly detailed sex scenes had gone unremarked.

Then someone told me that a mother in Virginia was jailed for 27 months for having supplied beer and wine at her son’s 16th birthday party. She’d taken the keys of any guests who arrived by car, so there could be no driving: everyone was to stay the night. No one got drunk; indeed, many of the kids, when tested, had no alcohol in their systems. No one got hurt, and this woman had no previous record of any kind, not even a traffic fine. She was originally sentenced to eight years in jail, reduced to 27 months on appeal. And if you look online at any of the numerous blogs and chat sites presently discussing this matter, you will see that many Americans are of the opinion that “she got what she deserved”.

None of this, may I say, had been any kind of



issue for the German publishers, and I note that on the appropriate page of *Ein Leben Lang*, “die Madchen happily ein Glas Wein trinken”. True, every word had to be translated and “chook” was clearly not going to make the cut, and



probably not “daggy” either. Their cover also features a photograph of Uluru, a little odd for a novel that only manages to get as far out of Melbourne as Wilsons Promontory, with occasional visits to a farm in Somerset, England.

Translated: Kate Veitch’s novel, left, and its German version

My German publisher was a little sheepish about this, but swore she knew what she was doing, and clearly did, because in May, its first month of release, *Ein Leben Lang* sold 12,000 copies.

In New York, still debating the alcohol references in my novel, I asked my US literary agent for her opinion. “When it comes to kids, people here are uptight,” she said. “In the end, do you want to risk losing even a single book sale just to keep the scenes in?” A perfectly valid question, to which my unhesitating answer was “yes”. I put this to my editor, who (and this is why I love editors) said, “This is your decision, what you change or don’t change. I always say, it’s your name on this book, not mine.”

She also suggested a glossary for Australian words and expressions that just could not be replaced, or which I couldn’t bear to lose. It’s not a long one, but at least my American readers will now have the opportunity to find out what an arvo is, and a wowser, a bunny-rug, and a shag on a rock. And I feel quietly confident that they’ll be better, happier people for it.

Kate Veitch is the author of Listen, published in Australia by Penguin, in Germany by Heyne as Ein Leben Lang, and forthcoming in the US by Plume as Without a Backward Glance.