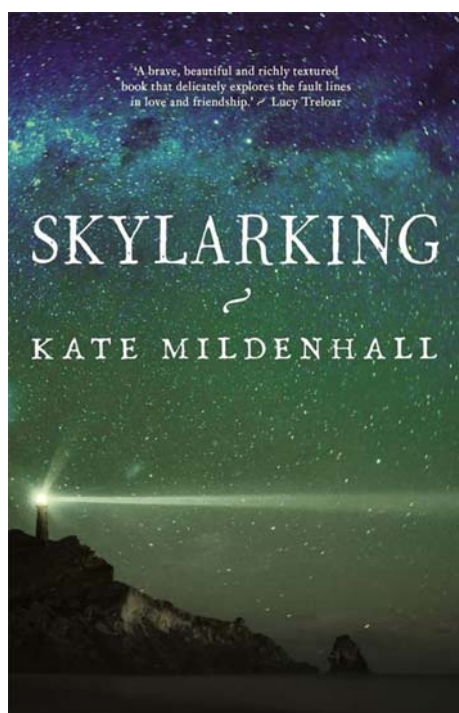


Shining a Light on a Life



Skylarking

Kate Mildenhall

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278 pp

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As writers, we are told to craft our stories with a clear narrative arc, which usually looks like a statistical normal distribution curve. We are also told that in every story something needs to change or the reader needs to be left changed by the story. As a consequence, readers usually expect these elements in the stories they consume.

For much of its 278 pages, the author seems to have ignored this 'how to write a novel 101'. There *is* a narrative arc in *Skylarking*, but it stays low and flat for most of the book, with some undulations, then rises sharply after more than 80% of the story has been spun. I applaud an author willing to do things differently.

As I ambled through the book, it came across as a captivating exposition of life in the mid-1880s on a remote

cape on Australia's south-east coast, inhabited by three families looking after the lighthouse there, told from the perspective of the head lighthouse keeper's eldest daughter, Kate – she is in her mid-teens. It is an isolated place. There are encounters with a few Aborigines, and interaction with inhabitants of a nearby settlement and the regular though infrequent supply boat from Melbourne.

Kate is observant and thoughtful, painting a life of her expectations, explorations with her closest friend, Harriet, domestic chores and her dreams about a life in the wider world, reaching as far as Europe. There are perturbations in the lives of the girls, some of them involving encounters with males and others in Kate's fertile imagination.

Then suddenly, bang! The inner and outer peace are shattered by a terrible event, made all the more shocking by the 'ordinariness' of most of the events up to that point.

Kate Mildenhall has based her debut novel on historical events, using what is known from the records as the skeleton on which she builds her imaginative fictional flesh. In the process, she has avoided obesity in her storytelling, but neither is it underweight. The reader is given a vivid picture of aspects of Australian life at the time and, in particular, life at the lighthouse. She is also a sharp observer of human interactions, emotions and longings, and of the environment.

Kate Mildenhall touches on aspects of the often fraught interactions between the Aborigines and the 'interlopers' from over the sea. There was mistrust and curiosity on both sides as well as hints of the richness the Aborigines had to offer that was not understood by the new settlers – and still not properly understood today.

This is a surprising novel, in its structure, in the subject matter and in the event that marks the sharp turn in the narrative – how quickly someone's life can be upended and all the person's dreams and aspirations come to nought. Yes, things certainly change in the unfolding of the story and I was left changed by the reading of it.

Kate Mildenhall is to be commended for not painting the isolated lives most of the novel's characters live as anything but ordinary within the context of the period. Kate is shown as possibly unusual in her craving for a life outside the expectations of marriage and domesticity. She dares to dream and bridles at those expectations loaded on a young woman some 130 years ago.

As an aside, the cape where the historical lighthouse existed (it is now a ruin), was in 1915 surrendered by the NSW government to the Commonwealth of Australia, so that Canberra, the national capital, would have access to the sea, and the laws of the Australian Capital Territory generally apply. Although most of the Aborigines of the cape would have been taken to Christian missions settlements in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in an ironic twist part of this territory was given back to the local Aboriginal community by the Australian Government in 1995.