



★ Theory & Practice

Michelle de Kretser

Catapult (Feb 18, 2025)

Hardcover \$25.00 (192pp)

978-1-64622-287-2

In Michelle de Kretser's novel *Theory & Practice*, a Sri Lankan graduate student completes her thesis while embroiled in a love affair.

In 1986, a woman takes rooms in Melbourne to research her thesis on Virginia Woolf. She wrestles literary theory and enters an amorous entanglement with Kit, who is already in a relationship with Olivia. Meanwhile, a passage in Woolf's diary reveals to her the admired feminist writer's disruptive racism: Woolf, the student learns, would have scorned her for her Sri Lankan background.

Befitting its academic setting, the novel uniforms itself in theoretical jargon and references prominent literary theorists, including Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Michel Foucault. Nonetheless, its prose is heartfelt, featuring self-aware melancholy and intellectualism. Recalling her shared laughter with another girl after being molested during a piano examination, the narrator makes a harrowing admission: "The shame that issued from our mouths ballooned and ballooned, and the beloved adults who believed, held, comforted, and even magically avenged us were now also trapped forever in the enormous black balloon of shame."

The narrator's feminism is troubled. She confesses that her jealousy toward Olivia over Kit's fickleness is filled with "treacherous, rivalrous, trite, uncool, unfeminist feelings," transforming "female solidarity into a scold's bridle." Motherhood also remains paradoxical for her. She acknowledges Woolf's contributions as "Woolfmother" to voicing the experiences of women but cannot reconcile herself to Woolf's exclusion of people of color. With poeticism, she expresses comparable resentment toward her own mother's bold embrace of their Sri Lankan ancestry: "What did my mother get when she chose heartfelt, unassimilated colours that added lustre to her face? A daughter who bared her wolfish, assimilated teeth."

Thoughtful and pensive, *Theory & Practice* is an intimate novel about love, racial identity, and motherhood.

ISABELLA ZHOU (January / February 2025)

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