

The Lieutenant

By Kate Grenville
(Canongate)

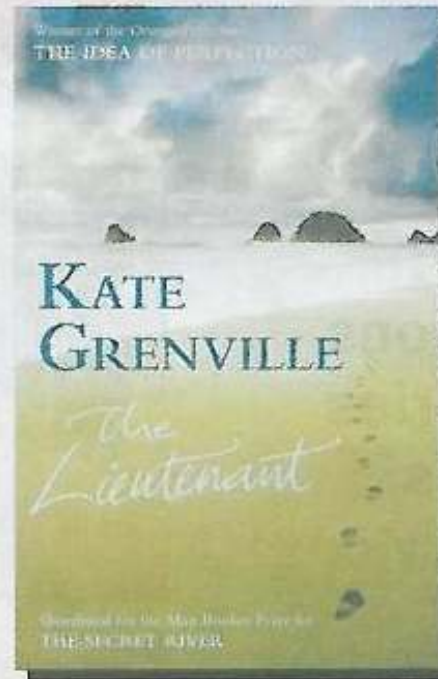
THESE DAYS Europe is almost fanatical about border control. So much money and energy is spent strategising on how to keep the influx of immigrants in check, especially from Africa.

Kate Grenville's *The Lieutenant* unwittingly presents us with what I consider the genesis of this thorny issue: that is, the dim and shadowy period when Europeans embarked on their one-sided scramble for Africa and other distant lands (it never occurred to them that the natives might one day make a reciprocal visit).

Set in the late 17th century, *The Lieutenant* tells the story of Daniel Rooke, who joins the marines for the chance of being left alone to follow his dream of charting the stars.

As a young boy growing up in Portsmouth, Rooke was a mathematical prodigy and ultimately became an astronomer. This is how he finds himself aboard the vessel *Sirius*, with her cargo of convicted criminals, heading to the then uncharted shores of New South Wales, Australia – a land simply commandeered by the British with no regard for the indigenous people or culture.

But this novel isn't primarily concerned with the implications of European migration. Rather, it pur-



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sues a deeper purpose – that sometimes one is culpable by association, but the choices made thereafter will determine how life pans out.

Rooke becomes friendly with some of the local Aboriginals, forging a deep bond with a child that eventually is instrumental to his life-altering decision to dissent from the British governor's order to kill six Aboriginals for one Briton that the natives have speared. Rooke refuses to obey the order, even though it could cost him his life. It's a choice that eventually leads him halfway around the world to Antigua, where he works to emancipate slaves.

Grenville, a renowned and skilful writer, uses an evenly paced narrative to stimulate one's thoughts to see with the naked eye what a telescope cannot. Also, her mastery of the English language of the time truly evokes the serene and the sterile, the beautiful and the bleak all at once, illustrating the duality of the landscape of life. The idea of seeing all beings as celestial bodies, all insignificant in the greater scheme of things, is edifying, but the reality is that the fittest always survive.

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Ifedinma Dimbo, originally from Nigeria, is the author of She Was Foolish? More details about her work and the Irish Writers' Exchange can be found at www.irishwritersexchange.com