

Miles Franklin Literary Award 2007
Longlist

The Unexpected Elements of Love

Kate Legge

Viking (Penguin Group)

Australia's landscape and climate provide a background to this remarkable cross-generational story.

Janet Gladstone is a 40-something year-old weather reporter with a Sydney television station. But she is not just a face on television, as her awareness of the increasing changes in climate somehow seem to infiltrate every aspect of her life. She is also a wife and mother. She wonders what has happened to her relationship with her husband Nick and if they will ever have time to pause and catch their breath. Their daughter Mel is a dream child, easy-going and patient. Mel definitely takes after her father. Her brother is a different story. Harry might have Attention Deficit Disorder or he might not, but even if he doesn't he's a handful - unruly in the classroom, clumsy and tempestuous and, ironically, he has a terrible fear of violent weather. Janet worries about Harry, who might need counselling or medication, but she's trying to avoid labels for his behaviour - perhaps because she sees some of herself in his skittish excitability.

At 74, Beth has a witty crack for most situations, including the physical failings of her own body (she can only get around with a walking frame) and her husband Roy's absentmindedness. But some things she can't laugh off. Her successful psychologist daughter Dale is just realising that she's left it too late to have a baby, and Beth can't quite believe that her once drug-addicted son is now clean. Roy is a noted sculptor, working on his latest project - a massive public commission, but this creative streak is more erratic than usual. Beth wants to believe his actions are just an indication of the genius at work, but if she's honest she knows there's something more sinister going on. Roy feels the first splinterings of dementia but he is too scared to acknowledge it to Beth, and after 50 years of marriage they know they can't let anything come between them.

The weather is the other great force in this book. From melting days and smoggy skies to autumnal crispness and near-apocalyptic storms, Australia's urban and outback climes seep into the domestic dramas of the characters.

The beautiful dual narrative of *The Unexpected Elements of Love* explores many potent and timely themes: a working mother's need to deal with the demands her career makes on family life; the burden of elderly parents and the moral decisions that may impose, including assisted suicide. And of course, weather in all its manifestations. This is a novel that reflects and challenges readers' worlds.

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About Kate Legge

Kate Legge edited *Farrago* at Melbourne University in 1981 and has worked as a journalist ever since, covering politics and society in Australia and America. In 1994 she was the Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year for 'the quality and variety of her writing' and in 2003 she won a Walkley Award for a magazine story on a case in the life of a Family Court judge. The story also won the Victorian Law Society's inaugural Tony Smith Award. She edited *The Australian's Review of Books* in 1997. She is married with two children and lives in Melbourne where she is on leave from *The Weekend Australian Magazine* to complete her second novel.