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[Holland-Batt, Sarah](#)

(2019)

[Book Review] 'Act of Grace' by Anna Krien.

The Monthly, p. 88.

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<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2019/october/1569376696/sarah-holland-batt/act-grace-anna-krien>



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Krien, Anna. *Act of Grace*. Black Inc., \$32.99, 322 pp, ISBN 9781863959551

Sarah Holland-Batt

While it is true that many of the twentieth century's finest novels were written by journalists, it is also true that not all journalists write great novels. For great writers like Greene and Hemingway, the novel form proffered a powerful staging ground for the human complexities of global conflicts that were not always easily captured in column inches.

Now that the golden era of the foreign correspondent is over, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent breakout novels by Australian journalists such as Trent Dalton's *Boy Swallows Universe* and Jane Harper's *The Dry* have tended towards generic storytelling rather than geopolitics. And in the current climate of increased skepticism about who has the right to tell the stories of marginalised groups, there are few incentives for novelists to wade into the ethical quagmire of Australian foreign policy. For these reasons, journalist Anna Krien's debut novel, *Act of Grace*—which plunges headlong into the aftermath of the Iraq War—feels provocative and risky, but also refreshingly ambitious.

Krien is well-known for her scrupulous long-form reportage, where she has covered subjects such as climate change, alcohol abuse in remote communities, and rape culture in football. *Act of Grace* refracts many of these interests through a cast of characters whose perspectives rotate: there's Toohey, a traumatised Iraq War vet prone to PTSD-induced violence; Robbie, the wayward artist daughter of a Stolen Generation survivor; Nasim, a resilient Iraqi refugee who survived Saddam's purges and landed in Melbourne; and Gerry, Toohey's son, who rebels against his father's toxic masculinity by joining the activists protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline.

Krien's simultaneous evocation of so many hot button topics could have easily overwhelmed the novel's focus, yet *Act of Grace*, if on the longer side, is mostly propulsive and energetic, vivified by jolts of shocking violence. Most compelling is Krien's incisive character portraiture, which is marked by complex moral ambiguity. As the disparate storylines coalesce around an 'act of grace' compensation payment to a woman whose infant was killed by Australian forces in Baghdad, Krien teases out her characters' hypocrisy and complicity in the senseless cycle of violence and prejudice, leaving none unscathed. It transpires that Nasim has gained asylum using the alias of a woman she exploited during the last gasps of Hussein's reign; Toohey, an erstwhile liberator of Iraq, left a 'blossom of blood' in a mother's arms in a brutal instant; Robbie blithely dons an abaya in an attempt to

empathise with her neighbour Nasim, but is wilfully naïve about what the garment represents to a woman who once wore it compulsorily. All struggle to forge a sense of identity without demonising an ‘other’ in the process.

The conditions that fomented the Iraq War—kneejerk retaliation, misplaced moral righteousness, stunted cross-cultural communication, and an entrenched ‘us and them’ mentality—are all alive and kicking in its wake, Krien suggests. *Act of Grace* offers no answers, but asks all the right questions.