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Tom Keneally. *The Widow and Her Hero*. Doubleday, 2007.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 10 March 2007.

I have to admit that I haven't followed Tom Keneally's work much since *Schindler's Ark*, a book which, as I remember, impressed me deeply. So I was expecting something profound and engrossing from his new novel, *The Widow and Her Hero*.

Grace's first husband Leo was a member of a special squad which, by underhand methods, managed to blow up several Japanese ships at Singapore during World War Two. Their first mission was a resounding success, but the second went wrong and Leo and nine of his companions were caught, tried and beheaded by the Japanese.

Telling you that much isn't spoiling the plot, because Keneally foreshadows these events in his Author's Note at the start of the novel. *The Widow and Her Hero* isn't really – or ostensibly – *about* Leo and his adventures, but about Grace's widowhood – how she deals with what happened to him and her reluctant participation in the projects of enthusiasts researching the two missions. These earnest and perhaps well-meaning people insist on keeping her informed of every fact they discover: why the mission went wrong, why the men weren't saved, what they did in their last hours. It is often a good deal more information than Grace is happy to hear and, though she feels ashamed of being an unworthy widow to her hero, she is often beset by helpless rage against those who will not leave her in peace.

I don't believe that *The Widow and Her Hero* is a great book. I admit to finding the action scenes rather tedious, though perhaps for others this might be where the book's fascination lies: much of the book is taken up with minute-by-minute accounts of the heroic exploits of the group, partly narrated by Grace based on what

she has learned, and partly quoted directly from Leo's diaries and letters. The early romance between Grace and Leo is also less than intense, told with coy propriety by an octogenarian Grace, supposedly writing this account for her granddaughter. The most interesting and engrossing scenes are those in the second half of the book when Grace is confronted by persistent reminders of her husband, and has her memories and beliefs about him challenged in various ways.

There is some nuance in Grace's, and by implication Keneally's, view of the heroic. Men, she says, 'become dupes for codes of honour which any sensible woman could see through in a second.' Leo and his friends were 'in the truest sense heroic. By which I mean, in part, innocent and short-sighted as well.' Their 'purpose was to be brave, the purpose was even to be doomed.' I suppose this is even an anti-war book, though the amount of space devoted to the description of heroics might temper that impression.

The thing I really didn't expect was that it would be dull and badly written. Perhaps it's deliberate, purporting to represent the amateurish scribbles of an old lady. But a sentence like 'His father's capture was a phenomenon locked up in the giant nature of the war, beyond any individual input' doesn't sound old-ladyish, just clumsy.

The Widow and Her Hero is based on real events. It reads like a memoir, in Grace's reticence about her marriage and the exhaustive factual detail about the men's training and missions. Keneally might have done better to do one or the other: either to write a compelling factual account like *Schindler's Ark*, or to take advantage of what fiction can do to energise the narrative without worrying so much about making it superficially resemble non-fiction.