



# The Grass Castle

*Karen Viggers*

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## **The Grass Castle** Karen Viggers

A moving and captivating story of displacement and belonging, love and forgiveness from the bestselling author of *The Lightkeeper's Wife*.

The daughter of a pastoralist, Daphne grew up in a remote valley of the Brindabella Ranges where she raised her family with her husband, Doug, in a world of horses, cattle and stockmen. But then the government forced them off their land and years later, Daphne is still trying to come to terms with the grief of her departure from the mountains and its tragic impact on her husband. It is during a regular visit to her valley that she meets Abby, a lonely young woman shying away from close contact with others, running from a terrible event in her early teens. But Daphne is a patient mentor, and slowly a gentle friendship develops between them.

While Abby's family history means she tries to ignore her feelings for journalist Cameron, Daphne struggles with her own past and the long shadow it may have cast over the original inhabitants of their land. Both women must help each other face the truth and release long-buried family secrets before they can be free.

*The Grass Castle* is a sweeping rural epic that reflects the strength which resides in us all: the courage to grow and learn from the past.

## **The Grass Castle Details**

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Author : Karen Viggers

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## From Reader Review The Grass Castle for online ebook

### Susan Barnes says

The Grass Castle by Karen Viggers is an enjoyable story set in an Australian context that I'm very familiar with. I liked reading about places that I know well. The book is quite descriptive in places which did slow the pace of the story and I did wonder whether this could have been handled better. However I found the story engaging so persisted through these passages.

Abby is a university student who meets Cameron an ambitious journalist through her research work on kangaroos. Daphne is an elderly widow trying not to be a drain on her family. I liked the unlikely romance between Abby and Cameron and the friendship between Abby and Daphne. These characters and their relationships were relatable and insightful. Both Abby and Daphne were burdened by issues from their past but they are able to come to a better place of understanding and acceptance through the book.

A kangaroo cull is a dramatic part of the story. This was a difficult but well-handled part of the story. Both sides of the controversy were shown and explored. Aboriginal land issues were also touched upon but not investigated to any large extent. It added to the backdrop without being a distraction.

Overall a thoughtful story with much to offer.

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### Monique Mulligan says

I won this in a Goodreads First Reads giveaway - thank you!

Karen Viggers' The Grass Castle explores a number of themes, including forgiveness, making peace with the past and redemption. Once I realised it was mostly set in the Australian Capital Territory (the Brindabella Ranges in particular), with some trips to the gorgeous High Country in Victoria, I was keen to get stuck into this book, because they are area I remember well (and miss). It's always nice to read novels set somewhere close to your heart – there's that instant sense of familiarity. For me, the descriptions of these places were the stand-out aspect of the book – Viggers captured the essence of the area well.

Abby, a scientist and PhD student, studies kangaroos in the Brindabella Ranges. It's solitary work, but it suits Abby fine; she's not really interested in having friends, a bustling social life or a relationship. The loss of her mother some years before has left a gaping hole in Abby's heart, her father's remarriage has rubbed salt in the wound, and her brother's struggle with depression worries her. When she meets Cameron, a journalist following the story of planned kangaroo culls, Abby puts all thoughts of a relationship out of her mind, but the inevitable happens and Abby soon finds herself pushing Cameron away, scared of getting too close.

Daphne, an older woman who grew up in a remote valley Brindabellas, meets Abby and the two form a friendship. Daphne shares her story of growing up with a controlling pastoralist father, raising her family in the high country with her husband Doug, and later being forced off the land by the government. It was a move that had tragic consequences for Doug, and Daphne's never gotten over it. As she reflects on this, she can't help recalling the Indigenous people who were forced off the land, and connecting this to the kangaroo culling plans now under way. As the women share their stories, fears and regrets they help each other realise that sometimes letting go is the only way to be free.

Underlying this story of relationships, forgiveness and making peace with the past, is the issue of displacement. Viggers examines this in a number of ways, beginning with the displacement of Indigenous people, then the pastoralists and now the kangaroos. Viggers does her best to bring balance to a loaded and multi-layered issue, using a number of different characters including a scientist, a journalist and an Aboriginal elder. I found this aspect fascinating and thought-provoking on a number of levels. Viggers' research and aptitude for detail came to the fore here.

However, the story started very slowly and it took me quite a while to warm to it. It ended up being a stop-start read for the first third or so, as I struggled with the pace and found other things to read. Abby's detachment from society transferred to the reader and while it could be argued that this was intentional, it made it difficult to want to be part of her story. As she opened up, I became more interested in her story, but it took a long time. Her hot and cold relationship with Cameron frustrated me; while understandable given her past, I just wanted to tell her to open her eyes and see the man in front of her as the decent person he was. Daphne's story interested me more; on the one hand, I wished there was more input from her, but on the other, I respected that she was stepping back a little for the younger woman.

Overall, I thought this was a thoughtful read, but it fell short of being a great read. The author's love for the country didn't quite transfer through to the rest of the story, which was a bit of a let-down. I did find the writing a bit dry at times and other reviews I've since read would indicate that I'm not the only one. If it hadn't been for the setting, I think I'd have struggled more.

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## **Shelleyrae at Book'd Out says**

The Grass Castle is a quiet, introspective novel exploring the themes of displacement and belonging, grief and healing.

Abby Hunter is a struggling PhD student who prefers the isolation of her fieldwork in the Brindabella mountain ranges to the bustling activity of the university lab. Wary of relationships since her mother's death, she is content with the company of the Kangaroo she is studying, but a chance meeting with elderly matriarch Daphne Norrington, and the gentle persistence of journalist Cameron Barlow, penetrates her reserve and Abby is finally forced to deal with her tragic past.

Unfortunately I found I didn't particularly connect with Abby, she is too passive and reserved for my tastes, and while I had some sympathy for her difficult past I didn't really understand the choices she had made since, nor some of her behaviour during the story. I did admire eighty five year old Daphne, who weathered so much tragedy in her life, including the compulsory acquisition of her home by the government, and the deaths of her son and husband. The friendship between the women develops from their connection to the land and their mutual need for both for a confessor of past trauma and support in the present.

The romance between Abby and Cameron is low key, part of Abby's journey rather than a focal plot point. There are political elements in the novel in regards to the efficacy of kangaroo culling, indigenous land rights and media/political spin. I found them a little intrusive at times, even though I largely agreed with the sentiments.

This is a reflective novel that mediates on the need to accept and learn from the past and though The Grass Castle didn't fully engage me, I could appreciate the way Viggers evoked the setting, in both the past and the present, and the emotions in her characters.

## Dale Harcombe says

Abby Hunter is a young woman who loves being outdoors on her own. She shies away from romantic relationships and is content studying the kangaroos, until Cameron Barlow, a journalist, comes to interview her and write about her work.

It is also the story of Daphne Norrington who raised her family in the high mountain country until she and her husband are forced off the land. When these women meet they strike up a friendship despite the disparity in their ages. Daphne reminds Abby of her Gran who died soon after Abby's mother tragically did. I like books where different generations interact and the development of the relationship between Abby and Daphne comes across well. I have to say I was more drawn to Daphne than Abby. Abby annoyed me at times the way she chopped and changed her mind.

The setting of rural Australia is very much a character in this novel and the descriptions of the land are lovely. However there were some parts of this book, like the killing of kangaroos, I simply could not read. I see these creatures most days around our area, so the idea of a kangaroo cull and the graphic description was all too much for this city born and raised female. As was the idea of eating moths, Bogan or otherwise. I shuddered each time it was mentioned and I occurred a few times.

I enjoyed the story but sometimes I felt it got a bit bogged down in details and backstory. Plus, I really struggled to relate to Abby and her choices. So while I liked it and was glad I read it, I didn't enjoy it quite as much as I expected to. Again, maybe expectations were too high. Sometimes that can affect how we relate to a book. Sadly, I didn't love it as much as some other readers I know did. So maybe, try it and make up your own mind.

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## Sharon says

Abby Hunter is a struggling student who is studying kangaroos. Although her training may not pay very well Abby still loves tracking these beautiful big creatures. Just being able to watch them graze, sleep and interact with one another is more than enough for Abby. Having grown up on a farm in Victoria, Abby also loves being outdoors. She couldn't imagine being stuck in some stuffy office all day.

Cameron Barlow is a journalist and has been sent out to visit Abby to do an interview about the kangaroos. He wanted to meet in a cafe, but Abby wouldn't hear of it. She wanted him to get a clear understanding of what she did and to see the kangaroos in their own environment. Abby first impressions of Cameron was that he was a city boy who had no idea about how to drive on country roads. She showed him around and answered his questions and once he left he said he would keep in contact. And Abby was hoping he would keep he's word although Abby has always been a loner she did enjoy having Cameron there.

One day whilst Abby is out checking her kangaroos in the Birndabella Ranges she meets an elderly lady by the name of Daphne Norrington. Abby soon discovers that that this lady is the original owner of the deserted homestead in the area. Abby and Daphne will soon become close friends and they will share with each other their life long secrets. This is something that Abby has never done before as she has spent a lot of time on her own. The only other person she has ever opened up to was her gran who passed away when she was a teenager. But should some secrets and memories stay in the past as reliving them could do harm to those who are still here.

I absolutely LOVED this story. I loved all the characters especially Daphne. What a beautiful, sweet old lady. And I really enjoyed the friendship that Abby and Daphne shared as it reminded me of someone I use

to know who was very close to me and we to shared a very special friendship. I also enjoyed reading about the kangaroos and the description of the countryside made you feel like you were there amongst it all. For me this book was a very enjoyable read and I didn't want it to end. I HGHLY recommend this book. This is a beautifully written novel by an Aussie author and one in which I will remember for a long time.

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### **Sandy says**

I really enjoyed this book. Daphne was just a delight and Abby had just so much to try to overcome. A very engaging tale.

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### **Mac says**

The characters and the country in this novel crept up on me. I thought I was reading a pretty standard novel then I realized how much I had seen these people, experienced them in friends and friend's families. I am probably biased living in Canberra and experiencing the wonder of the bush around here, the feeling not only of ancientness but of recent trials and tribulations of settlers. Viggers lays this out and it is that back ground that is the strength of the story , the feeling of place of the people that have come and gone.

The young set of Canberra are well portrayed as well as the rural families and sadly the Aboriginal past. There are many issues tackled here, loss and grief - suicide the pain of it not understanding it and the healing balm of country. It's a difficult quest to cover all but it is done almost under the radar. The only drawback was a lot of back story which bordered almost on tedium the way it was delivered but to me it was rescued by the sheer beauty of the description of country and connection with country.

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### **Sue says**

I won this in an Allen and Unwin giveaway. A free book is always a treat. Although I doubt that this book will win any awards, I nevertheless enjoyed it as a light holiday read. Fits well into the Chicklit genre. Set in the Brindabella ranges, around Canberra, it is a narrative about Abby, a struggling university student who is tracking kangaroos as research for her PhD, and Daphne, and elderly lady. Both are struggling with tragedies in their past. The story discusses some deep issues including Aboriginal land rights and the emotive subject of kangaroo culling. The characters were likeable. It is a story of acceptance of self and other, forgiveness and belonging. A light enjoyable read.

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### **??Jülie ? says**

I recieved this book as an uncorrected proof from The Reading Room and Allen & Unwin.

I really wish I could say I enjoyed this book more than I did as I was really looking forward to reading it after noting several other reviews.

I don't mean to sound too critical as I thought the book was well researched and had lots of potential. I just found it very hard to get a feel for the actual story as it seemed to be wandering in several directions and then

drifting off again into another area which I was unable to link to what I thought was the main storyline. It just seemed that there was so much going on but not really leading to any definite thread...like loose ends. About half way through I was still not sure where things were going and felt frustrated that I couldn't get into it more, and although it was not a difficult book to read, I felt it was missing some vital sense of intrigue or 'promise'.

I'm afraid to say that, to my mind the story didn't start to engage me until part 4 which was well towards to back of the book, and not until part 5 did it really start to pick up pace before ending on a befitting note.

I gave it three stars because it was well researched and gave a good insight into the plight of Kangaroos v the argument for culling and the position of farmers and landholders within that argument.

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### **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

'Night spreads its thick blanket over the valley. There is no moon, no light.'

Abby, a PhD student living in Canberra, is researching the movement and habitat of kangaroos. Hers is a fairly solitary existence: alone in the bush, tracking the animals, collecting the data she requires for her thesis. Daphne is an elderly woman, still very much attached to the land she once called home in the Brindabella Ranges. This land was reclaimed by the government and is now part of the Namadgi National Park. Daphne visits when her daughter Pam drives her out into the valley. Abby meets Daphne in the national park one day, and the two of them become friends.

On one level, this is a story about two women, both of whom feel a sense of disconnection, of displacement in the world they each now inhabit. Abby has her own issues from the past, issues that make her wary of others and reluctant to allow people too close. Daphne is mourning the loss of her way of life, the change to living in the city, to which her husband Doug never adapted. There are other regrets, too. Abby meets a journalist, Cameron, and although she is attracted to him she is afraid of becoming too close.

The third major character in Ms Viggers's novel is the country. The Brindabella Ranges have seen waves of dispossession, first of the Indigenous inhabitants and then of European settlers. The changes in land use after European settlement have created a form of paradise for those most efficient of grazing animals, the kangaroos. Controlling the numbers of kangaroos is a topical issue in this area, and kangaroo culling has many opponents. Abby becomes caught up in this, as does Cameron.

I enjoyed this novel. While Abby's contemporary story captured my attention, it was Daphne's story of the past which kept me interested. I'd like to know more about those who lived in the Brindabella Ranges. And I've added Ms Viggers's two previous books to my reading list.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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### **Vivien says**

I read Karen's *The Lightkeeper's Wife*, some time ago and so thoroughly this epic story. Then recently heard Karen's ABC radio interview about her new book, *The Grass Castle* and thought this is really well worth checking out especially as I discovered Karen lives in Canberra and *The Grass Castle* is set in and around

Canberra and so do I!

The Grass Castle tells the story of Abby, a student scientist studying Kangaroos, and Daphne, an elderly lady with a love of the land especially the Brindabella mountains. Abby also grew up on the land in Victoria but is deeply troubled by her past, losing her mother so early. She is swept up in a whirlwind romance with Cameron a journalist, but due to her past history she is not one to be tied down. Her path crosses with Daphne and an easy friendship forms between them. Connected by their love and history with rural backgrounds and the fact Abby's Kangaroos live on property that appears to be Daphne's previously but it now National Park. As they get to know each other, they slowly start to share the history of their difficult and challenging lives.

Both women drew me in with their stories and made me care about them. Their warmth, their different identification with the land, Indigenous issues and their past made me feel like I couldn't put the book down and just wanted to help them through. I felt like I was sitting there with them listening to their conversations, wanting to reach out a hand to comfort them. Daphne's story added extra depth to the novel, a story in a story, and particularly her prior experiences with Indigenous issues and then the course she takes to share her earlier life with Abby.

Interestingly enough, it had me thinking about Kangaroos in a way I never have before. Even seeing a few dead kangaroos on the local roads near my home in Canberra, while reading this book I reacted very differently. This actually surprised me, but thanks to reading this book I won't be looking at kangaroos the same way in the future. I hold a strong interest and passion for Indigenous issues, so I connected so warmly with the Indigenous issues Karen has incorporated into this story.

The Grass Castle was full of surprising plot twists and I loved how everything and everyone was connected in one way or another. It was an engaging, beautifully written story that I can highly recommend. Karen Viggers is a highly sensitive and skilled writer and one I wish to read from - so now I've already started on *The Stranding*!

After reading the Grass Castle I would like to follow up also on *The Moth Hunters* by Josephine Flood and Mark O'Connor's poetry *Where the Body Lay*; *Skiers* and *The Olive Tree Collected Poems* - all referenced in *The Grass Castle*.

Significant quotes - p182 Abby says to Cameron - I survive by forgetting.

P394 after last night's traumas and this morning's release, Abby needs to recuperate now, to take pause in the soothing presence of the mountains and the trees. She's neglected them these past weeks and they watch her with a new untrusting vigilance. Already they've partly forgotten her. That is their wildness. You can gain an edge of familiarity, but instinct is undeniable.

p400 Betty's face is luminous. Country lives in you and you live in country. all one. She sighs as if the weight of life is resting on her shoulders. Betty sighs again. That's what everyone was saying for so many years. That we all died out. But we bin here all along. They wanted to forget us. But we're still here! Betty's story is a patchwork, quilted together from all the little pieces told to her by the old folk on the mission where she grew up

P401 All bin happen long time ago Betty says, a weary smile on her face. I've had plenty of anger but you can't wear your hurt of your sleeve forever. Gotta get on. No point being cut up with it all your life. Anger is for the young ones who got the energy to make change. I'm past it now - My people have suffered, but they've survived. I've seen changes in my time. Lots of changes.

P403 - I want to think of happier time. I got plenty of those good memories too. Fishing down by the river. Playing music, singing all together. Caring, Loving, Getting married, Babies - that's the way forward. Not always beating yourself up over the past.p

## **Brenda says**

Abby Hunter was a struggling student, studying in Canberra and involved in research with kangaroos. Beautiful creatures, the grace and elegance of their movements captivated her continually. She loved working outside; having grown up on a farm in Victoria she had never wanted to work behind a desk. Now her training was taking her to places she loved, working with wild animals – the respect she had for the animals had her working closely with them, but keeping her distance; not invading their space.

The day she met Cameron Barlow, she was waiting for him up in the hills to interview her about her research. Cameron was a journalist, and wanted a human interest story – her PhD supervisor who was an ecologist with a world-wide reputation for his excellence in science encouraged her to meet with the media – it would further her career he said. The WRX Cameron arrived in told her all she needed to know about this city boy, or so she thought.

Abby was a loner; she preferred her own company and didn't do the social situations at all well – her young past was buried deep, and she had no desire to get too close to anyone – she wouldn't risk having to discuss her family or her life. The afternoon she was checking her tagged kangaroos in the Brindabella Ranges near an old, deserted homestead, she was surprised to notice an old woman seated nearby. But when Abby witnessed her collapse, she raced to her side, helping her while she regained her composure. And so Abby met Daphne Norrington, the original owner of the homestead they were beside.

As Abby and Daphne became close friends, they both realized each other had secrets – deep, long ago secrets laden with grief. Daphne reminded Abby of her beloved Gran whom she had lost while she was a teenager – she had loved her Gran and so immediately felt comfortable with Daphne, sensing the old lady needed a friend, as she did. But the trauma of the past was seeking release – Abby was feeling more and more overwhelmed. And Daphne found herself drifting into the past – she couldn't get past the grief which was always there, threatening her sanity. Would these two women be able to release the secrets that bound them? Together could they forgive and move forward?

I thoroughly enjoyed this wonderfully moving story. The characters were well crafted though at times I wanted to shake Abby! Daphne was delightful, a sweet old lady, but I wanted to shake her at times too! The way the past was woven into the present was beautifully done, everything blended and wound its way to a very satisfying conclusion. I have no hesitation in recommending this novel highly.

With thanks to The Reading Room and the publisher for my copy to read and review.

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## **Rochelle says**

I won this in the Goodreads first reads giveaway and would like to thank Goodreads and Allen and Unwin.

In the Grass Castle, Karen Viggers tells an epic story of love and loss and the strength it takes to keep on living after. It is a beautifully written tale that I enjoyed immensely. Karen really impressed me with her writing style and I loved the setting. I love novels set in Australia, but it's even better when it's a location that I actually have been too, or visited close by.

The Grass Castle tells the story of Abby, a student scientist studying Kangaroos, and Daphne, an elderly lady with a love of the land. Abby is deeply scared by her past. She is swept up in a whirlwind romance, but she is not one to be tied down. Her path crosses with Daphne and an easy friendship forms between them.

Connected by the land Abby's Kangaroos live on, they slowly start to share the history of their tragic pasts.

These women will draw you in with their stories and make you care about them. They were so well rounded, as were the secondary characters, that you felt like you were sitting there with them listening to their conversations, wanting to reach out a hand to comfort them. Daphne's story added extra depth to the novel, a story in a story, which I loved. It was told in captivating snippets that had you waiting impatiently for the next one. Times were hard in Daphne's day and I am so glad I didn't live in that time.

Interestingly enough, it had me thinking about Kangaroos in a way I never have before. I don't have much experience with them, I think of them as the cute creatures you see in wildlife parks and places like that, hopping around harmlessly, letting you go up to them and pat them and feed them and things like that. It was definitely a unique story line, adding yet another interesting layer to this complex tale.

The Grass Castle was full of surprising plot twists and I loved how everything and everyone was connected in one way or another. It was an engaging, beautifully written story that I highly recommend. Karen Viggers is a very talent woman and it is clear why she is a bestselling author.

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### **Sharon says**

Thanks to Allen and Unwin for this First Reads copy of The Grass Castle!

I'm not normally a huge fan of stories about Australia, as they are often be full of stereotypes and things that people from other countries want to hear about this country. I'm also not usually a fan of present tense narration, but somehow The Grass Castle wove its magic and won me over. Viggers writes characters with life-sized dimensions, and watching them interact against the stunning backdrop of the Brindabella Ranges is something to behold. It's always nice to read a novel set in a city you know, but even if I didn't know Canberra, the descriptions of the crisp autumn air and the nightlife, in sharp contrast to the sacred ground of the valley, are beautifully crafted and evocative. Central to the novel are relationships, particularly family ties, and the things that break and bind them. But what really brings this novel together is the complex friendship that blossoms between Abby and Daphne, which touches on difficult issues through two clear, poignant voices. A highly recommended read for an insight into rural history and life, the complexity of families, the power of the past and the surprising places forgiveness can be found.

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### **Hamisoitil says**

Je découvre pour la première fois la plume de Karen Viggers à travers ce beau roman qui m'a transporté jusque dans les plaines australiennes, où une belle amitié va naître entre une étudiante et une femme âgée... Abby est étudiante en biologie et doit faire une thèse sur le comportement des kangourous. La solitude et la nature lui procurent l'apaisement qu'elle recherche depuis que sa mère s'est suicidée, il y a dix ans de cela. C'est ainsi qu'elle fait la connaissance du journaliste, Cameron, envoyé par son directeur de thèse, lui-même, espérant par cette occasion montrer une belle image de ces grands marsupiaux. La rencontre ne sera pas au beau fixe pour Abby, faut dire qu'il l'agace un peu malgré son charme distingué, un poil arrogant et ses bonnes manières ; quant à lui, complètement charmé par cette belle étudiante, il espère la revoir. Hélas, la jeune femme va tout faire pour l'éloigner, et plus elle va le fuir, plus il va s'accrocher. En parallèle de cette histoire, Abby fait la connaissance de Daphne, une veuve qui vit dans ses souvenirs, qui pleure encore son mari et l'enfant qu'elle a perdu. Une amitié forte va s'installer entre ces deux femmes malgré leur différence d'âge. Pour Abby, Daphne lui rappelle à un certain moment la mère partie trop tôt et pour Daphne, l'oreille attentive qu'elle a tant besoin.

L'auteure a coupé l'histoire en quatre parties où nous allons suivre l'évolution/l'échec sentimental(e), l'amitié, les blessures cachées, les kangourous, avec une intrigue qui s'installe petit à petit au fil des pages, pointant du doigt les terres volées par les blancs aux aborigènes. Du coup, les non-dits et les secrets vont remonter à la surface. Et les personnages secondaires apportent également un souffle à l'histoire.

J'ai sincèrement adoré la plume de Karen Viggers, très poétique, intelligente, à tendance écolo, et parfois cruelle par des scènes très dures... Mais dans l'ensemble, l'essentiel est là et c'est le plus important ! A découvrir !

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