



## The Woolgrower's Companion

*Joy Rhoades*

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Kate Dowd's mother raised her to be a lady but she must put away her white gloves and pearls to help save her family's sheep farm in New South Wales.

It is 1945, the war drags bitterly on and it feels like the rains will never come again. All the local, able-bodied young men, including the husband Kate barely knows, have enlisted and Kate's father is struggling with his debts and his wounds from the Great War. He borrows recklessly from the bank and enlists two Italian prisoners of war to live and work on the station.

With their own scars and their defiance, the POWs Luca and Vittorio offer an apparent threat to Kate and Daisy, the family's young Aboriginal maid. But danger comes from surprising corners and Kate finds herself more drawn to Luca than afraid of him.

Scorned bank managers, snobbish neighbours and distant husbands expect Kate to fail and give up her home but over the course of a dry, desperate year she finds within herself reserves of strength and rebellion that she could never have expected.

*The Woolgrower's Companion* is the gripping story of one woman's fight to save her home and a passionate tribute to Australia's landscape and its people.

## **The Woolgrower's Companion Details**

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Author : Joy Rhoades

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## From Reader Review The Woolgrower's Companion for online ebook

### Susan says

This was a great story which I enjoyed; my type of storyline with the added interesting inclusion of the Italian POW's.

The characters were believable but sparsely developed, which in this case wasn't an issue- it was almost a feature, and it was told wholly from Kate's perspective. At times, I would have liked to have read Luca's perspective on things!

The one thing that originally drew me to this book was the cover! Beautiful.

My only reason for giving this a 3-star rating was the ending! Not happy with the rather abrupt ending at all...perhaps a sequel is on the cards??

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### Linda Hill says

With WW2 raging abroad, life is tough for those eking out a living on Australian homesteads.

Oh heavens. If anyone were to ask me for an example of a perfect read, The Woolgrower's Companion would be it. I truly adored it. Joy Rhoades seems to have looked inside my heart, found what touches it completely and used every element in her writing so that I am emotionally bereft at having finished the book. I read the last page, burst into tears and took quite a while to stop sobbing! The Woolgrower's Companion broke me completely and I loved it as a result.

The plotting is flawless. This may be billed as a love story, which it is – and an absolutely wonderful one at that, but it is so much more besides. Alongside love there is family, authority, feminism, mystery, violence, grief and pure unadulterated joy. There's prejudice, history and geography too so that reading The Woolgrower's Companion is like being conveyed straight to the 1940s and experiencing every nuance of life at the time. Sometimes Joy Rhoades shocks her reader, sometimes she thrills them, but always she entertains, captivates and entralls them. All life is experienced between these pages. The attention to detail in the descriptions of nature surrounding Amiens sheep station gives a cinematic piquancy that is astounding.

Part of the complete entrancement of this book is that it is impossible not to be involved with the characters. I worried about them all the time, especially Kate and Daisy, when I wasn't actually reading about them. I thought Harry was a magnificent creation. He provides such an effective light relief as well as some of the most poignant aspects and his speech is so natural that I could hear him as if he were by my side. Daisy too has such presence and I was outraged at the prejudice against the Aboriginal people of the time.

It illustrates the fabulous quality of Joy Rhoades' writing that the 'quotations' at the start of each chapter reflect perfectly what is happening without once undermining her glorious storytelling. The inclusion of recipes at the end of the book also helps convince the reader that this isn't a work of fiction, but an account of real people's lives – people whom we care about.

The Woolgrower's Companion is a sublime book. It thrums with emotion and drama and held me completely spell-bound. I didn't want it to end and feel adrift without it. It is amazing and I want everyone to have the

joy (and pain) of reading it.

[https://lindasbookbag.com/2018/06/27/...](https://lindasbookbag.com/2018/06/27/)

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### **Pam Tickner says**

I enjoyed listening and discussing this audio book with my driving companion as it encompassed a wide range of early 40's Australian history. I didn't know Italian POW's were transported from Europe and elsewhere and brought to work on rural farms. Rhoades' explanation of the treatment of Aboriginals was interesting as she tried to give historical reference to the modern reader the poor treatment of non-white Australians. There were many inconsistencies in the story (like the foreman not allowing the POW's to ride a bicycle in case they tried to escape, yet they drove the farm's trucks!). I thought the author's story telling was good, except for the romantic bits, which felt contrived. Her writing about the sleazy bank manager was much better and more realistic.

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### **Janel says**

If you're a fan of historical fiction, I highly recommend you read this historical drama set against the backdrop of WWII. The war is coming to an end, but for Kate, the fight is just beginning. Rhoades' writing brings this story to life in a captivating way, through her detailed descriptions of the climate, so atmospheric, the political stance of society and the historical accuracy – I had no idea Italians were POW in Australia. What really stood out for me was the strength of Rhoades writing, how she handled sensitive subject matter, such as Kate's father's mental health, and the treatment of the Aboriginal people, among other things – it was never dramatic or sensationalised, instead it felt like a true account. One I believed in, one I was invested in.

Kate is a brilliant character, while I loved the setting of this novel, The Woolgrower's Companion is very much Kate's coming-of-age – in love and in life. There's a kindness and a determination to her character, and as the story progresses you quietly see Kate come into her own. I say quietly because much of this novel is subtle, it's realistic and has you believing in it. Kate is human, and you see her flaws, but you root for her, to save the farm, you also root for her happiness. I'm not a huge fan of romance but I loved the way it was written in this novel, like the rest of this novel it was subtle – a forbidden love, where the risk is high – from the offset, you're hoping for a happy ending for Kate, but nothing is simple in love and war...

The issues of race and class were expertly handled in this novel; it was interesting to see how Kate's character evolved within these constraints. Also to see her fight against the patriarchy, for no one believed a woman could save, and run, a farm. Equally interesting was the character of Daisy, a young Aboriginal maid, I'll say nothing more about her character, as it's for you to discover for yourself, just know my heart was with Daisy throughout.

The Woolgrower's Companion took me by surprise, in that I wasn't expecting to love it as much as I did. You can see the thought that went into penning it, the care that went into its delivery, the heart that brought it to life. It is an extremely impressive debut. There's so much more I could talk about regarding the plot, but I think you should just read the book and discover it for yourself. The Woolgrower's Companion is a coming-of-age novel, a novel of survival, a novel of forbidden love, a novel of endurance, and most importantly, a novel you need to read this summer!

\*My thanks to the Joy Rhoades, Sian Devine and Vintage for providing me with a free copy of this book\*

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### **Susan Hampson says**

It wasn't as much of reading this book as it was experiencing the life changing transformation that took place of Kate Dowd. Kate really had been the little woman who was taken care of in every way possible to the point of, to put it blankly, being pretty useless at most things. Kate lives with her father on the family sheep ranch in Australia, it is 1945 and they have just taken in two Italian POW men to help out on the farm during one of the worst droughts they have ever lived through. Kate's husband is away in the army and her widowed father's health isn't at it's best. When the bank come knocking on the door Kate has to either roll over and give in roll her sleeves up and find out what she is really made of.

What a tremendous story this is. It was like Pygmalion in reverse because the lady of the house really had to learn how to be one of the boys if she was to save the day. I loved this new Kate that was terrified inside but just kept coming back. It had the elements that make me be involved with the punch in the air victories but with paragraphs on the same page that you could have knocked me down with a feather because of the injustice of it all because she was a woman.

Although a love story, this is a book more about a woman finding a passion inside her not only for a man but for life, for the farm, the animals and injustices of racism. Joy Rhoades brings to life the blood sweat and tears of her characters and harsh realities of an era full of prejudices in a land that refused to be tamed by any man or woman. I am delighted that a second book is promised too. There is so much more that I want to know about Kate's life and where it will lead her to.

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### **Claudia says**

It's a very good Australian story. I truly enjoyed reading. But it wasn't gripping me. And while I read it I wasn't terribly keen or committed to the story. And so it will take 3 stars.

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### **Amanda - Mrs B's Book Reviews says**

\*<https://mrsbbookreviews.wordpress.com>

4.5 stars

The Woolgrower's Companion is a historical fiction novel, penned by debut novelist Joy Rhoades. It is an immersive pastoral tale that combines a hint of romance and a touching coming of age story, along with serious issues that plague the sheep station of Amiens, the central setting focus of the novel.

Opening in the year 1945, The Woolgrower's Companion zones in on the story of one woman, Kate Dowd, living on her family's expansive sheep station property in the north of New South Wales. Although the end of the war is looming and Kate's life has remained sheltered since the outbreak of war, a change occurs when Kate's father's health takes a turn for the worst. Suddenly, Kate is thrust in a very different position on her family's property in order to maintain their livelihood. With the help of a book, The Woolgrower's Companion, a guide of sorts, Kate begins to take charge of Amiens. Kate's life also changes when two Italian POW labourers are sent in to help the failing Amiens, which has been subject to drought and fledgling profits. One of the POW labourers, Luca Canali, begins to capture Kate's heart, which offers complications for this young married woman. As Kate continues to plough through in an effort to save her family's legacy

from utter destruction and bankruptcy, she is also faced with a number of personal crises.

I am going to sound like a broken record, but I will say it again. Often the best stories, especially in the historical fiction genre, are those drawn from real life experiences. These lived experiences allow the lines of fiction and real life to blur. The end result is often a superior historical novel, rich in experience, authenticity and honesty. This is the case with *The Woolgrower's Companion*, the impressive debut novel by Joy Rhoades. *The Woolgrower's Companion* is a novel drawn from the first hand experiences of the author's grandmother, who lived on an agricultural property in outback Australia during the war years. *The Woolgrower's Companion* is carefully composed and it is also inspired by the struggles faced by the author's grandmother. It adds much weight to this compelling tale.

There are a number of resounding themes in this novel. Firstly, Rhoades diligently works to highlight the Australian female experience of World War II, which is not often brought to the floor. When the book opens, we get the feeling that Kate is a carbon copy of women in this era and how they were expected to conduct themselves. Kate is a dutiful daughter and wife. She immediately comes across as naive and sheltered. She is not expected to voice her opinion, or step on the toes of the men around her. However, *The Woolgrower's Companion* is a novel that explores the coming of age story of a woman who must step into the shoes of a man and perform duties that are outside the role of women at this time.

Other aspects of this superior historical novel that are thoroughly deserving of our attention is the treatment of indigenous Australians in *The Woolgrower's Companion*. Through a sub character, Kate's maid Daisy, we gain a greater understanding of the plight of Aboriginal women in this era. Rhoades touches on the stolen generation and the treatment of half-caste individuals. It is a cruel history lesson, but an important one to highlight. Linked to this are the social mores and attitudes prevalent in relation to the POW labourers and the Italian people by Australian citizens. This aspect of the narrative represents another scathing history lesson.

Rhoades also focuses her novel on issues of PTSD, still largely unrecognised at this point in time. Kate's father is clearly suffering the effects of PTSD from his time in the Great War. His condition seems to be exacerbated by his wife's death, the state of affairs on his property and his failing memory. Rhoades works hard to illuminate this sad experience for the reader.

The beacon of light in *The Woolgrower's Companion* comes in the form of Kate's and Luca Canali, the POW labourer sent to work on Amiens, relationship. Rhoades handles their interactions well; she captures the forbidden romance, sexual tension, dependence and sense of longing that passes between the two characters. It is a bittersweet romance and memorable exchanges between the two drew me further into the pages of this novel.

Readers will find Rhoades excels in her presentation of the time period and pure Australian setting. Rhoades peppers her first novel with rounds of stunning descriptive prose, evoking the arid landscape, as well as the common fauna that inhabits rural Australia. Rhoades also takes us deep into the heart of the outback through her writing, which accurately represents the harsh conditions, heat, sparseness and the dry conditions, where you are constantly battling the elements. The setting aspect of *The Woolgrower's Companion* impressed me greatly.

Before I make my closing comments on *The Woolgrower's Companion*, I must acknowledge the physical composition of this novel, which I appreciated very much. Each chapter opening begins with an introductory quote from *The Woolgrower's Companion*, a book that acts as a bible to Kate when she must take the reins of Amiens. It was a lovely touch that added a sense of originality to the novel. I also urge you to read the Author's Note and even try the wholesome Country Women's Association recipes contained at the back of

this book.

The Woolgrower's Companion is a poignant tale that encapsulates a short-term, ten months in the life of a determined young woman and her fight against the land, as well as the establishment. It is a soulful and touching tribute to Australia's past, its people and the land.

The Woolgrower's Companion is book #88 of the Australian Women Writers Challenge

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### **Philippa says**

Historical romance with a bit of grit - this is an assured debut from Joy Rhoades and sheds light on a lot of hidden stories from a period in history that doesn't have a lot of diverse voices. The Woolgrower's Companion is set in country Australia in 1945 and its central cast includes young Aboriginal people, Italian POWs and, primarily, a young woman trying to save her family farm as her (somewhat tyrannical) father begins a steady decline. A quite heartbreak tale, as the hardships all the characters face are not shied away from at all, this is a vividly told novel - you can almost smell the dried gum leaves and feel the heat of the Australian countryside as you read. The recipes at the back are a lovely touch too.

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### **Frankie Reviews says**

Well, what can I say about this book, other than; It is incredibly moving and astoundingly good. Really, this book is really too good for words! The Woolgrower's Companion is Ms Rhoades debut and, my goodness what an introduction, this highly talented author is going to go very far in the world of historical fiction. I love the fact that 'The Woolgrower's Companion' is based on the real-life story of one of the author's ancestors, and at the start of each chapter is a little quote from The Wool Growers Companion which fits in beautifully with the way the story and chapter is going. This is an astonishing, emotionally raw and beautifully written book which handles some very difficult subjects, but Ms Rhoades has covered them with the upmost care.

Set during 1945 in North South Wales, Australia where a young woman, Kate Dowd who has always been brought up to be a proper lady by her later mother has had to cast aside her lady-like gloves and behavior to help on her family farm; Amiens along with her increasing worrisome father; who built up the farm from scratch at the end of WW1. With the war nearing an end, the area is dry with drought and lack of able-bodied men, all gone due to the war which including her husband of six months; Jack. Amiens is the recipient of two Italian POW's; Luca and Vittorio her father is very grateful for the help and so is Kate that is until she is given one of them to help her in the kitchen garden.

She becomes increasingly drawn to handsome and gentlemanly Luca, he isn't at all what she expected when they had agreed to take on two POW's. He is polite, hardworking and kind she knows she shouldn't take an interest in Luca and he knows that fraternizing with the local girls is punishable with imprisonment and, yet there is a spark between them. To add to Kate's worries her father has been borrowing money that they can't possibly pay back, and the horrible bank manager is on the war path to take Amiens from them.

This book is simply stunning! Ms Rhoades has a rare gift for story-telling, she entices and enthral's with her articulate writing and rich, atmospheric detail that transports you from your armchair to 1945 Australia. Her

attention to detail is min-blowing, the plot and characters are perfect, the story moves forward in a very natural and at times surprising way, each scene is full of historic details and mood of the times and characters. Rhoades has created a beautiful story that I can guarantee will stay with you long after you close the last page.

There are some very harsh and brutal moments such as racism, bigotry, PTSD and early stages Dementia which, Rhoades deals with it all in a respectful and honest and in a way that leaves a real sense of what these characters are going through. The authors genuine love of the story and her extensive research is evident on every page.

This really is something special, it is a fascinating and moving portrayal of the time from a new author whose career I am looking forward to reading more from.

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### **Carolyn says**

The Woolgrower's Companion is set on a sprawling sheep station in Northern New South Wales, Australia ~ era 1945.

The main character, Kate is left to look after and manage her father's property named Amiens with only The Woolgrower's Companion to guide her. (See the excerpts at the beginning of each chapter).

Her father has borne war wounds from the Great War and has been affected and in doing so has become vague and neglectful of his duties, it is all left up to his daughter, Kate to take over management which she does in her own way.

Kate is independent and tries to be strong in saving the property but along the way she treads through many different paths, some to destruction and hurt.

There are some important factors Kate leaves unseen or cannot foresee.

The descriptions of the Australian birdlife and landscape portrayed in this novel are beautiful.

Read this great new novel, The Woolgrower's Companion and find out.

This is a great Australian read.

I really enjoyed it.

There's a touch of romance with Luca from Italy and some traditional Aussie recipes from The Country Women's Association Cookbook at the back to savour and enjoy!

I'm glad I picked this one off the shelf.

Read with a homemade Anzac biscuit or a freshly baked scone with jam 'n fresh cream and a good, strong cup of tea.

The Woolgrower's Companion by Joy Rhoades.

Recommended.

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### **Kirsty Dummin says**

Actual 3.5\*

It may be circumstantial but it took me way longer to read this book than most usually do. The writing is good and the story was interesting, but I found it a little long/drawn out at times too.

I think the hardest thing about this book for me was the authenticity of it. I struggled with the injustices that they all faced, particularly the aboriginal characters, and Kate - simply because she was a woman.

I think the ending did the story justice and I'm glad of how it left me: hopeful.

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### **Deborah Ideiosepius says**

This quite fascinating book is a work of fiction (but based on a real life relative of the author) which takes us to the outback station of Amiens, where Kate Dowd and her father are trying, in 1945, to hold the sheep station together with most of the workers shipped off to fight in WWII, and through a vicious drought. Into this Italian POWs come as cheap labour for the station and Kate's reaction to one of them is adding to her confusion.

Kate's world is a complicated one, her mother is dead, her husband is shipped off in the army without having been married for long enough to really know him even. Her father is succumbing more and more to what the reader will recognise as PTSD, but which to Kate is terrifying and mystifying.

Amiens needs her and she battles to provide what it needs, but she is fighting tradition and the social constraints on women as well as her own doubts.

I really enjoyed this novel. I thought the descriptions of a rural town, station and the societies around it were inspired. The 'flavour' and the voices of the people were very convincing and quite fascinating. This book does not shy away from the tough parts of the 40's, the rapid racism that permeated societies treatment of aboriginal people is a facet of the story, as is the rigid social stratification and sexism of the times. Kate struggles against them most realistically, never falling out of the character or the mentality of a girl of her time.

In the early parts of the book, I felt there were character flaws in Kate's behaviour and several plot building elements annoyed me, so it was a bit of a slow start for me. However, the story and Kate redeem themselves, and by the end I was finding it difficult to put down.

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## **Marianne says**

“Mr Harold Kenneth John McGintey was a much smaller man than his name had suggested. Kate had some difficulty seeing much of him at all behind the big desk. He reminded her of an elderly wombat, low to the ground and slow-moving”

By early 1945, graziers in the Northern Tablelands of NSW were in the grip of an unrelenting drought. Coupled with the scarcity of able-bodied men, who were either fighting in the war, or casualties of it, the situation was dire enough that many property owners welcomed the Rural Employment Scheme. Although Italy had joined the Allies, Italian POWs remained prisoners and were forced to work on farms, despite the community’s enormous sense of resentment and distrust.

Great War veteran, Ralph Stimson had worked hard to build up his Soldier Settler Block into a substantial property, Amiens. He is grateful for the arrival of Luca Canali and Vittorio Bottinella, even if his manager, Keith Grimes is wary. Young Harry Grimes, the manager’s now-orphaned great-nephew has arrived on the same train, destined to live in Keith’s cottage.

With her husband, Jack at war, her mother, Janice, who had always discouraged Kate’s involvement in the paddocks, now two years dead, and her father, who handles all the finances, now acting strangely, Kate is concerned. When Alwyn Addison, the officious (and rather oily) bank manager informs Kate that she will need to make plans to vacate the property unless the overdraft payment is made within eight weeks, she discovers just how perilous their financial situation really is.

Added to her worries is the recent skittiness of fourteen-year-old Daisy, their Aboriginal domestic, and the looks and gentle manner of the POW assigned to help her with the garden are distracting, especially to a woman wedded in haste and separated from Jack after a mere six months of marriage. Of course, for the POWs, fraternisation is an offence attracting jail time. And when Kate thinks nothing more can go wrong, the situation worsens.

What a wonderful debut novel! Rhoades captures the mood and feel of the mid-forties farming community with consummate ease. Her descriptive prose is often breathtaking, and Kate’s strong love for Amiens (and her determination to save it from the bank) is well-conveyed. Each chapter is prefaced with a quote from *The Woolgrower’s Companion*, whose text is often quite apt for the events of that chapter. Her extensive research is apparent in every chapter and her characters are multi-faceted, not necessarily behaving quite as expected. Seven traditional recipes are included at the end, along with Book Club Questions.

Other novels have been written around the theme of Italian POWs working on the land, notably Susan Temby’s *The Bread with Seven Crusts*, Goldie Goldbloom’s *The Paperbark Shoe* and Fiona Palmer’s *The Sunnyvale Girls*, and there are probably hundreds more stories to be told, but none is a carbon copy, and *The Woolgrower’s Companion* has its own originality. Apart from the treatment of Italian POWs in Australia, Rhoades also touches on the Stolen Generation, PTSD and early dementia. This is a great read and readers will look forward to more from this talented author.

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## **Whispering Stories says**

Book Reviewed by Stacey on [www.whisperingstories.com](http://www.whisperingstories.com)

New South Wales, Australia, 1945, Kate Dowd lives on a sheep farm with her father Ralph Stimson and aborigine housekeeper, fourteen-year-old Daisy. Her husband Jack is off fighting in the Second World War.

Although Italy were now an ally in the war, their Prisoners of War (POWs) are still to be kept as prisoners. They are sent to work as part of a government scheme and the family acquire two men Luca Canali and Vittorio Bottinella to work on their farm.

As well as being wary of the two new arrivals, Kate is concerned about her father who seems to be losing his mind after the death of her mother two years ago. Things come to a head when the bank manager speaks to her and tells her that the bills haven't been paid in some time and that the family has just eight weeks to find the money to clear the debts or the farm will be sold.

This naive young girl who has had no dealing with the running of the farm quickly realises that it is up to her to save their home and livelihood and that means she rapidly needs to learn about the ins and outs of the family business.

I was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed 'The Woolgrower's Companion' I'm not a big historical fiction lover and the idea of the book being set on a sheep station in the Australian outback doesn't scream excitement, but it was actually really enjoyable and addictive. It is essentially a love story too with an ending I wasn't expecting.

Kate is a young woman having to learn to grow up very quickly. Her mother always told her to keep out of the going on to do with the farm, so when she needs to step in and essentially take over it is all new to her, even though she has grown up on the farm. She has also lived quite the sheltered life too so in some situations she was quite naive in the way she thought about things or the way she handled situations.

Ms Rhoades deals with lots of issues that were going on in the country (and in some respects across the world) in the 1940s. From racism to the plight of the aborigine people and also the strict social codes that were in place. These issues were all handled with care and were obviously well researched.

At the back of the book, there are numerous recipes for the mouthwatering food mentioned throughout. There are also questions that have been set by the author for book clubs to use to discuss the story.

Having spent two days sitting in the sun reading this and enjoying every minute of it, I now can't wait until the sequel is released to carry on the story.

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### **Joanna Park says**

I'm on a roll for reading fantastic historical fiction and The Woolgrower's Companion was no exception! It's a fabulous read, full of history detail, heartbreak, endurance and love.

I loved the beautiful descriptions of Australia, in particular the wonderful sunsets. The author so vividly described the rugged landscape that I felt I could feel the heat on my face and the dust in my mouth. It was fascinating to learn more about Australian history during the war and to discover they also had rationing and had a shortage of workers due to men away fighting. I've always thought they were largely unaffected like

America so it was interesting to learn otherwise.

My favourite character was Kate. I thought she was so strong and determined trying to keep the farm going and keep everything together. She obviously loves her father and her home which is very touching to see. When she falls in love I was so happy for her as I felt she deserved it after everything she'd been through.

The love affair was wonderful to read about as it felt so real. It was so tender and sweet which was even more touching when contrasted against such a rugged harsh landscape. It was a great to see Kate let her hair down a bit and get a break from the stress of her life. I was on tenderhooks throughout the book wondering what would happen and hoping for a happy ending.

The Woolgrower's Companion is a fairly easy read which I mean as a compliment. Joy's writing just draws you into the story and makes you care about the characters you meet there. I wanted to keep reading to find out more about them and to discover what would happen to them. I was quite sad to finish the book and leave them behind but I understand that the author is currently working on a sequel so I'll look forward to reading that!

Huge thanks to Sian Devine and Vintage books for inviting me onto the blog tour and for my copy of this book. If you like beautifully written, heartbreaking historical fiction with a wonderful romance at its centre you'll love this book!

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