

A warm, home-cooked read

Trust

By Kate Veitch
Viking, \$32.95

AT A pivotal moment in Kate Veitch's second novel, the central character, Susanna, serves up grilled lamb chops, boiled potatoes and "a lettuce and tomato salad", enjoyed as a "plain-cooked meal". It's a scene that captures the essence of Veitch's appeal as a writer, in both her debut, the contemporary family saga *Listen*, and *Trust*.

And at a time when our culture worships youth and modishness more than ever, "plain and unremarkable", middle-aged, middle-class Susanna stands out, with her old-fashioned warmth and grounded self-possession.

A journey of self-discovery and reinvention is at the heart of this novel, as is fairly standard for "hen lit": books for and about middle-aged women that prioritise storytelling over literary themes and flourishes.

But what's really refreshing about *Trust* is that this heroine's transformation doesn't involve a new wardrobe, an exotic holiday or even a new man.

It's an interior journey, and Susanna grapples for fulfilment in a far more satisfying way than trying on a sexy new persona.

Susanna works part-time as an art lecturer, but truly defines herself as a wife, mother, sister and daughter.

Mother Jean is her "best friend"; they are "as familiar with each other's kitchens as their own". Husband Gerry, a brash, career-focused architect with Robert

Redford looks, loves his family life but also cherishes his extra-marital "adventures". He's the kind of man who says things like "it's a pretty big goal for us to kick" and ruminates on how much he likes his own genitals.

Meanwhile, Jean struggles with her conflicted feelings about her younger daughter, "peaches and cream" pretty Angie, a born-again Christian single mother to tormented oddball Finn.

Susanna represents a certain kind of woman of her generation. She aims to please, having grown up assuming "approval . . . is love", routinely putting her family's needs before her own.

When she reconnects with her creativity, having long ago "forgotten how to be an artist" in the face of her more practical role as a teacher, she finds it hard to discard the notion of making space for her creative work as "selfish".

But as she begins to revel in her newfound outlet for self-expression, she discovers her situation is by no means unique ("I didn't realise I'd become part of . . . a syndrome").

Gerry's prioritising of constant affirmation from the outside world over meaningful engagement with those closest to him is most evident in the family home, a "seventies brown brick eyesore". ("Don't you think it's weird?" says daughter Stella-Jean. "Our dad's this, like, world-famous architect, but we live in a daggy shoebox.")

By contrast, the concessions Susanna makes to impressing others are motivated by her desire to connect with them more

meaningfully.

Formerly a "tech-free zone", when she realises she's out of touch with her "post-digital" students, she teaches herself about the online world, with their help, and shares her experience to help others like her.

Various characters discover the perils of choosing not to notice inconvenient truths about their relationships. While some learn forgiveness and acceptance, others learn when to let go. Early in her new embrace of her artistic side, Susanna says, "I want to draw what I see. No: I want to see who I am".

While her sister and husband

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flinch in sympathy from an exacting self-portrait of her naked middle-aged body, it represents the beginning of a journey of introspection and increasingly courageous self-acceptance. Her visibly age-marked, exposed self is not a site of camouflage or reconstruction, but of strength. This quiet dignity pervades the novel.

Trust is a lovingly prepared "plain-cooked meal". While the prose is unashamedly no-frills, the story is nourishingly warm-hearted and ultimately satisfying.

Jo Case is books editor of *The Big Issue* and associate editor of *Kill Your Darlings*.



Kate Veitch's second novel involves a satisfying interior journey.

