

Helen Garner

A proprietor of the truth*

*According to Garner

On a crisp autumn morning in 1973, Victoria's State Library stood, proud as ever, among heaving crowds of peak-hour commuters. In their midst was a slight woman, her windblown face barely visible behind a stack of notebooks clutched haphazardly to her chest. Breaking ranks from the suit-clad current, The Woman made a beeline for the library's entrance, slipping through the foyer and into the depths of the monolithic building. Here she spent hours upon hours poring over her tattered notebooks, or to be more specific, tattered diaries. The Woman had been keeping them since she was 15. Some of the material was boring: "*What I ate today...*". But some was intriguing: "*Today, I left my husband*". When the natural light filtering through La Trobe Reading Room's stately glass ceiling faded, The Woman would depart her creaky booth and make her way home. The next morning, after dropping her daughter at kindergarten, she would return and do it all over again; it had been this way for months. As the sorting continued, a story began to form that would go on to constitute The Woman's first novel. This work would deliver success and scandal in equal measure, laying the foundations for the influential, if not controversial, household name she would become.

The Woman in this story is the illustrious Australian novelist, journalist, and screenwriter, Helen Garner. Born in Geelong in 1942, Garner grew up as the eldest of six children and was understandably eager to fly the nest. At 18, she relocated to the state's capital, where she undertook a Bachelor of Arts at The University of Melbourne (Leaver 2006). As a child, Garner was a self-proclaimed compulsive writer; she recalls a deep-seated need to record and the delicious satisfaction that came with crafting the perfect sentence (The Guardian, 2021). But Garner grew up in the '60s, and the prospect of writing in any greater capacity, particularly as a woman, was largely unheard of. This saw her passion confined solely to her notebooks, her musings assembling themselves into daily diary entries for her eyes only. Upon completing her arts degree, Garner took a job as a secondary school teacher, where she worked for seven years. Her career was cut short when she was fired in 1972 for facilitating an impromptu sex education class (Eggins, 2004). Unemployed and a single mother, Garner fell back on what she knew: writing. In 1977, she published her first novel, a work of fiction by the name of *Monkey Grip*, and so began her celebrated career.

Much to the envy of anyone who has ever had to put pen to paper, Garner claims to have never suffered writer's block; in fact, she often finds her need to write overwhelming, inconvenient even (Sydney Writers Festival, 2018). Her plethora of works, including 17 books published after *Monkey Grip*, stand as testament to this. Spanning fiction, non-fiction, and at times blurring the two, her writings confront the prickly facets of life, delving into love, loss, grief, death, and the human psyche, and that's only grazing the surface. It is not hyperbole to say that Garner's position among the greats of Australian literature is unanimous. Her name is inscribed on various awards, including the prestigious *National Book Council Award* and, most recently, the Authors Society Award for outstanding contribution to Australian culture (Australian Society of Authors, n.d.). One would hope the shelves in her pool room are securely fixed.

But of course, with all success comes a little controversy. To quote Garner herself, “Who could ever be silly enough to imagine you could be an artist and a nice person?” (Sydney Writers Festival, 2018). Despite *Monkey Grip* being widely celebrated, with over 100,000 copies snapped up in its first few years, it simultaneously provoked impassioned criticism. One reviewer suggested Garner was merely “talking dirty and passing it off as realism” (Steinberg, 2021), whilst others criticised the novel for the exact vulgar language that Garner, the school teacher, was fired for in 1972 (Steinberg, 2021). Some of these slights can be chalked up to the novel’s unconventional content. The story follows Nora, a single mother navigating the freewheeling, drugged-up, community living scene of the 1970s. Awry with themes of female sexuality, motherhood, and addiction, it is no wonder that a few conservative eyebrows were raised. Today, Garner’s text can be read as progressive, a brazenly honest work produced in a period still grappling with the “liberated woman”. However, some qualms hold validity. *Monkey Grip* was published as fiction and accordingly dominated the category in 1978’s awards. Yet Garner is not shy in admitting that the novel, in essence, is an embellished recount of her diaries: characters, events, and relationships all drawn from reality. The characters’ names, altered for anonymity, are perhaps the most fictional aspect of the novel. This prompted Garner’s legitimacy as a writer to be called into question, with some suggesting that she lacked any form of craft, having merely regurgitated and published her diaries (The Guardian, 2021).

This critique reflects an interesting trend among readers and critics that sees a tendency to diminish the diary as a valid literary text due to its perceived lack of artfulness. This is a perplexing standpoint when you consider the synchronous existence of the writer and the diary. Take Franz Kafka, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, and most recently, our very own Scott Morrison; if I were to continue, the list would exceed this page. It is disappointing, then, that the relationship between the diary and the creative writer remains so grossly under-researched (Alexander, Brien, & McAllister, 2015). Preliminary investigations indicate that diary-keeping can enhance memory, imagination, emotional processing, intuition, and creativity (Alexander, Brien, & McAllister, 2015). The renowned American essayist and novelist Susan Sontag credits diary keeping as a seminal tool for honing her style and distinguishing the inner idealised self from the outer real self. Or, in simpler terms, her “voice” (Maunsell, 2011). Diaries: Are they literature? quasi-literature? Call them what you like, but the practice itself appears undeniably beneficial.

Having published three volumes of her own diaries, I would hazard a guess that Garner would agree with this sentiment. If you were to listen to Garner recount her diary-writing practices, you would catch an endearing fondness in her voice as she divulged in detail her unwavering routine that sees pen put to paper first thing every morning and then again, each night before bed. Describing this as a calming practice, free of goal or objective, Garner writes until satisfied or she has run out of words, though this seems unusual for the author, and then simply stops (Sydney Writers Festival, 2018). Perhaps it is this practice, this prolific diary writing, fuelled by a penchant for actuality, that has shaped the raw, honest tone that permeates Garner’s novels. Garner’s name is often accompanied by adjectives such as “prickly”, “gritty”, and “bold”. But it seems to me that what this is really saying is that Garner’s texts are ostentatiously honest, a mirror of her worldly impressions reflected back to the reader.

With such a passion for fact, it is no real surprise that today Garner dwells almost exclusively within the bounds of non-fiction, specifically narrative non-fiction. Her name would likely ring a bell among those working in Australia's judicial system, with three of her novels covering major nationwide murder trials. One of these is *Jo Cinque's Constellation*, which follows the death of an ANU student and the subsequent trial of his girlfriend for murder. It was during her research for this novel that Garner found herself most at home. She would travel to Australia's capital every weekend and leaf through thousands of court documents, later sitting in on months of emotionally gruelling court session (Sydney Writers Festival, 2018). Garner recalls that, as she sat perched on the polished courtroom benches, it was as if all the different parts of her became integrated, became one (Sydney Writers Festival, 2018). This is no surprise if you consider Garner's drive to record, write, and report the truth; not only was she writing about real events, but her subjective experience of their fallout. Perhaps in another life, Garner would have made a fantastic barrister, but as selfish readers, we can be grateful she stuck to the pen.

I currently live with a paralegal who absorbs anything crime-related like a sponge. One sun-soaked afternoon as we lay on the beach, I asked her what she was reading. It was *Jo Cinque's Constellation*; her choice of casual reading seemed morbid compared to my "chic lit" beach read. I pointed this out, to which she replied, "The detail is fantastic, but she's very dramatic," a pause, "It's also half about her [Garner]". This made me laugh at the time. She was exaggerating, but she had unknowingly captured what gives Garner's voice its exquisitely moreish quality: Garner speaks to the reader as though they were a confidant, there is almost a hint of conspiracy within her passages as she divulges not only the hard facts, but also her own interpretations, quips, and quirks.

Today, Garner resides back in her hometown of Geelong, where she spends her free time caring for her chickens and cheering on her grandson's AFL matches. With a five-decade career under her belt, you would be forgiven for assuming Garner might be inclined to put down the pen. However, if you just happened to be strolling along the quiet suburban streets of Greater Geelong, and just happened to glance over at a certain bay window belonging to a certain weatherboard home, you would see, seated behind a grand mahogany desk, the very same – albeit slightly less windblown – face from 1972. The Woman, now a little older and undoubtedly much wiser, wouldn't notice you passing, her eyes firmly planted on the display in front of her, fingers darting across the keyboard. She still pens her diaries, but this next work is not about herself but rather her grandson's AFL team. Even in her free time, Garner continues observing, imagining, and recording.

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