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Garner, Helen - *This House of Grief: The Story of a Murder Trial*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 2014 ISBN: (Paperback) 9781922079206

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This House of Grief is the most recent nonfiction work by Australian author Helen Garner. It is a notable expression of literary journalism, a genre embraced by some of the most well known Australian writers/journalists. It is a genre that is – as it is the case of Latin America for example – thriving and producing some of the best contemporary journalism.

Published in 2014, Gardner's *This House of Grief* follows the Supreme Court case and appeal motions of Winchelsea man, Robert Farquharson. Robert Donald William Farquharson was tried and convicted of murdering his three sons on Father's Day in 2005 by driving his car into a farm dam in the state of Victoria, Australia.

Helen Garner's immersive journalistic background allows her to utilise court transcripts, court observations, television stories, newspaper content and snippets of conversations at a coffee cart outside the Supreme Court of Victoria. They weave a subjective account of the events over five years as they relate to Garner's opinion and personal life. Garner pieces together a narrative asking the question: did Rob Farquharson premeditate the murder of his three boys, or was he innocent?

This House of Grief reads as a crime novel, although it is a work of reportage. Garner succeeds in muddying the reader's preconceptions of a now-closed case that was so pervasive, so newsworthy, so polarising and decided upon, by utilising reportage within the narrative. Garner's succeeds in characterising the physical toll of grief, guilt, or both, upon the human subject. Stylistically she relies on fiction writing devices to construct a powerful piece of reportage.

Robert Farquharson was a single father, recently divorced from his wife Cindy Gambino, the mother of his three children, ten year old Jai, seven year old Tyler, and two year old Bailey. He was suffering depression, was taking Zoloft and Avance antidepressants and worked for a mediocre wage as a cleaner, passing up weekend shifts to spend time with his kids. On Father's Day in 2005, a year after splitting from his wife, Robert was driving his three children home to their mother when his VN Commodore veered off the road. After suffering a coughing fit and alleged blackout, the vehicle clipped a tree and plunged into a seven metre deep dam off the Princess Highway near Winchelsea. Within seconds, the vehicle became fully submerged and the three boys perished. Farquharson escaped and proceeded to engage in erratic behaviour, including not calling 000, behaviour that has been interrogated ever since. Particularly chilling was Garner's account of Victoria Police evidence that described the crime scene from the perspective of a police diver, Senior Constable Rebecca Caskey. Garner begins:

“ Oh god, this could only get worse. I sneaked a look at Farquharson. His lips were white, his mouth very low on his face. Like a child he ground his knuckles into his eyes.

Casey dived again. In the mud at the bottom, working blind, she felt her way to what she guessed was the driver's side of the vertical car.

'The first thing I noticed on the driver's side was an open door, just above the level of my head. Its window was closed. I felt around the edge of the door.'

Again, eyes shut and palms exposed, she mimed her fumbling search.

'And then', she said, 'I felt, slightly protruding from the car, a small person's head.'
(46) ”

Garner follows on in similar fashion; there is a trial proceeding, a gruesome detail, a subjective observation and a comment on how this may influence the verdict. It is almost methodical. Garner attends the Supreme Court starting in 2007 with her niece Louise. Alongside the account of the trial, Garner constructs a subjective narrative that occurs inside and outside the courtroom at a local coffee cart. It is here that she and Louise share witticisms, exchange jokes with other journalists and try to engage Cindy Gambino's parents.

The unusual world of the courtroom is a spectacle for Garner to observe. The reporter becomes a voyeur. There is the colloquial, explosive Peter Morrissey, Farquharson's barrister, the dogmatic winner of unwinnable cases. There is the suave and composed barrister Jeremy Rapke, interrogating sparsely, endlessly composed. There is the overseeing Justice Cummins, his every movement scrutinised for deeper meaning, his presence respected:

“ Even the usually expressionless men would turn to him, smiling, like students of a teacher who had earned their trust (191). ”

The case and subsequent appeals were finally concluded five years after the incident in 2010, finding Farquharson guilty.

The case oscillates between Garner's observations of Rapke and Morrissey, battling it out in court over Farquharson, and Cindy Gambino, her parents, Farquharson's sisters and parents in their various stages of composure, or lack thereof. It is a compassionate read, outlining how truly emotionally exhausting the process of a trial can be for the accused, their family, the jury and the press. Garner's familiarity with Melbourne, her casual conversations with lawyers, barristers, friends and family, provides wider context for her story.

The relationship between Farquharson and his ex-wife Cindy Gambino is central to the plot. Garner flips back and forth between thinking that their divorce snowballed into depression, medication and counselling. This may or may not provide enough evidence of a troubled man capable of a vindictive, jealousy-fuelled murder. To counter this assumption, Garner poses a much larger philosophical question throughout the text – about the will of man as being inherently good or evil.

The humanity of the reader is tested, the 'innocent until proven guilty' ability of a population so enthralled by this case. Garner doesn't go quite far enough to articulate this thinking. Various parallels are drawn between her life as a loving grandmother, her impulsivity, lapses in memory and judgement, but they don't quite go far enough to substantiate her argument:

“ This testimony filled me with scepticism, yet I longed to be persuaded by it- to be relieved of the sick horror that overcame me whenever I thought of Farquharson at the dam, the weirdness of his demeanour, the way it violated what I believed or hoped was the vital link of loving duty between men and their children (178). ”

The majority of the text is written in dual sympathy for both Gambino and Farquharson. Sympathising with a convicted murderer with a 33-year sentence was Garner's unique angle, which is executed well. It does share similarities to earlier work by Garner. Her fixation on relationship breakdowns, death, drugs, loss and human struggle is apparent here as it is elsewhere. Garner focuses heavily on the physical decline of Farquharson throughout the trial:

“ His face was ravaged, beseeching, his teeth bared, his cheeks streaming. (37)
”

It also becomes apparent that Garner was personally invested in the outcome during the writing. There are

numerous times where the severity of the evidence, or similarity to her own life, manifest in observable outbursts:

“ I thrust out both arms, elbows stiff, wrists in shackled position. Offended, the woman and her companions move away. Why on earth was I angry? Did I think I owned this story? (147) ”

The driving force for the text is Garner's genuine undecidedness on such a high profile, highly publicised and unusual murder accusation. Garner's first person narrative flips to and fro, at the mercy of those to whom Garner speaks, how tired the jury looks, what happens in court that particular day.

The strength of this book compared to Garner's other work is that there is no direct, personal involvement with the characters; there are merely facts and Garner's perpetual inquisition into innocence. The prose still succeeds in being emotionally affecting based on the nature of the content that is dealt with, in a manner that is approachable in a nonfiction style.

About the reviewer

Sarah Barratt is an Honours student at RMIT University, Australia. She is researching the Australian women's voice in contemporary literary journalism.