

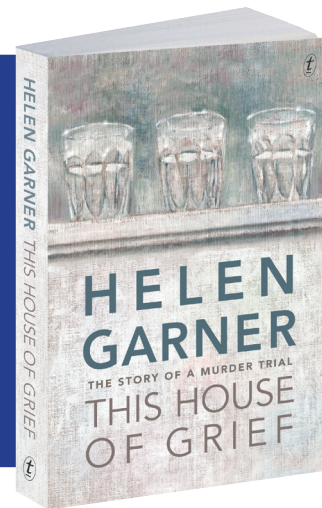
# This House of Grief

Helen Garner

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## Praise for *This House of Grief*

'*This House of Grief* has all the trademark Helen Garner touches: harrowing scenes recorded without restraint or censorship; touching observations of characters' weaknesses; wry moments of humour. And also customary with Garner's work, her words, and the boys' fate, will haunt us long after we've turned the last page.' *Guardian*

'*This House of Grief* is a magnificent book about the majesty of the law and the terrible matter of the human heart...If you read nothing else this year, read this story of the sorrow and pity of innocents drowned and the spectres and enigmas of guilt.' Peter Craven, *Australian*

## About Helen Garner

Helen Garner was born in 1942 in Geelong. Her first novel, *Monkey Grip*, came out in 1977, won the 1978 National Book Council Award, and was adapted for film in 1981. Since then she has published novels, short stories, essays, feature journalism and major works of non-fiction. Garner has won many prizes, among them a Walkley Award for her 1993 article about the murder of two-year-old Daniel Valerio. In 1995 she published *The First Stone*, a controversial account of a Melbourne University sexual harassment case. *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004) was a non-fiction study of two murder trials in Canberra. In 2006 Helen Garner received the inaugural Melbourne Prize for Literature. Her most recent novel is *The Spare Room* (2008).

## A reader's introduction to *This House of Grief*

When the car that Robert Farquharson was driving left the road and plunged into a dam, killing his three sons, headlines wrote themselves and opinions on the man's guilt or innocence, and his motives, formed without full knowledge of the facts. Helen Garner follows the trial and retrial of Farquharson, taking us beyond those headlines as she looks at the 'human anguish', including his own. We see that full knowledge of the facts might be impossible, that to understand this man's motivations is not simple, and that opinions can shift.

The story Garner tells is Farquharson's, but it is also in part her own. Garner writes about her reaction to the boys' drowning, her feelings and judgments about

Cindy Gambino, Farquharson's ex-wife and mother of the drowned boys, throughout the trial, and her experience of the workings of the justice system.

Garner's portrayal of the trial and her writing raise just as many points to talk about: the acuity of her observations; her interpretation of events and motives and of the gender politics at play; the tension between her pity for Farquharson and her conclusion that 'if there is any doubt that Robert Farquharson drove into the dam on purpose, it is a doubt no more substantial than a cigarette paper shivering in the wind, no more reasonable than the unanswered prayer that shot through my mind when I first saw the photo of the car being dragged from the black water.'

## Questions for discussion

1. The book begins with the line 'Once there was a...', with all its connotations of fairy tales and fables. Why has Garner chosen to begin her story this way?
2. The first time Garner sees Farquharson in person she describes him as 'scared, and small, and terribly lonely' (7). Later she uses words like wretched (14, 209, 283) and pitiful (37) to describe him. She acknowledges that her heart aches for the 'hunched and humiliated figure in the dock' (31) and that she pities him during the retrial for having to sit through the evidence again (290). But she also describes his self-centredness—he sounds 'petulant' (67) in a police interview—and she is eventually convinced of his culpability. At one point she calls him a 'little tame bear' (201). Discuss Garner's portrayal of Farquharson. Why has she chosen the words she has used?
3. Garner and her 'gap-year girl' Louise pity Farquharson even when they believe he is guilty. The seasoned journalist does not believe he deserves pity. What do you think? Does Garner ever sympathise with him as well as pity him? What is the difference between sympathy and pity?

4. The grief counsellor's testimony fills Garner 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). Earlier she has felt something like shame when she becomes convinced of Farquharson's guilt (92). How have these feelings influenced the way Garner has told the story?
5. When Garner first tells people she is covering the trial the 'general feeling' is that 'a man like Farquharson could not tolerate the loss of control he experienced when his wife ended the marriage ... Either that or he was evil. Pure evil.' (5–6). Another common response, especially from men, is that his survival proves that it wasn't an accident, because a loving father would save them or drown with them. Why are these beliefs so common? Do you share them?
6. Garner talks of a 'missing piece' (199) and a possible 'nub of the matter' (284) as she tries to understand Farquharson and the trial. Are there such things? When Garner imagines a divorced man who gets to know his children and their lives, who needs to put an end to his exile from them, and forms a 'dark contemplation', she sees the idea 'firm up, like a jelly setting' (251). Is this, ultimately, what Garner sees as the ultimate cause of Farquharson's actions?
7. Did your opinion about Farquharson's guilt and culpability change as you followed the ebbs and flows of the trial?
8. Garner contrasts Farquharson with his 'bossy big sister' (19) and level-headed [ex]-wife' (15), with him cast as a downtrodden husband, and a coddled son and brother. 'If he doesn't fight back, a treasured boy can wind up as a man with women in his face,' she writes (146). What is Garner saying about gender relationships and roles in this book? (There are plenty of other gendered descriptions relevant to this discussion point, such as the dam as feminine (3), a concrete pour as 'intensely, symbolically masculine' and the subsequent reference to Camille Paglia (38–9), and men as desperate to impress their male peers (94).
9. One morning, Garner 'was shocked to catch myself thinking: you poor bastard. Was there something about him that called up the maternal in women, our tendency to cosset, to infantilise?' (186). How do you think Garner's own conception of men and women affect her reaction to Farquharson?
10. 'Jurors sit there presumably weighing evidence but in actuality they are studying character?' Helen Garner quotes from Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer* (256). In her account of the trial, is Garner like a juror studying character rather than weighing evidence? Should she be doing one rather than the other? Why?
11. Garner wants to ask her barrister friend about gut feeling – 'Wasn't it really a kind of semi-conscious reasoning, shaped by many weeks of evidence? A lightning-fast, instinctual matching up of the phenomenon in question against every similar one you had ever come across, in all your life's dealings with other people?' (190). Garner also describes her 'shit-detector' going off (69) What do you think gut feeling is? Is it reliable? Does it form the basis of Garner's conclusions?
12. Garner describes Gambino's media interviews as being 'reported in the tabloid language that can reduce the purest human anguish to a pulp' (209). How does Garner render human anguish? Is she exploiting other people's pain or illuminating it?
13. Discussing Farquharson's silence and Justice Lex Lasry's comment, (which echoed her own thoughts) that only Farquharson knew what happened in the car, Garner says 'We, his fellow citizens, could not live in such a cloud of unknowing. The central fact of the matter would not let us rest.' (261). Do you feel this way? Do you feel that you need to know the truth about this case? Contrast this with what Louise says after she has talked to her friends about the case: 'The only thing they wanted to know was, "Well? Did he do it?" The least interesting question anyone could possibly ask.' (115) Is it the least interesting question. Why? Do humans have an intrinsic desire to know the truth?
14. Garner brings her own experience into the narrative very early on, noting her divorce and her childhood in the second and third pages, and continues to refer to her past and her feelings as she observes the trials. Do you enjoy having insight into an author's experience in non-fiction, or do you think they should remain objective?
15. Garner notes that jury does not get all the information that may give it insight. How do you think Garner judges the justice system?
16. Why do you think Garner dedicated the book to the court?