

AUSTRALIAN LITERARY JOURNALISM AND 'MISSING VOICES': how

Helen Garner finally resolves this recurring ethical tension

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Every interviewer, every journalist and non-fiction writer and documentary-maker has a personal cache of missed chances...

Helen Garner

Abstract

*Australian author Helen Garner has written three of the most debated literary journalism texts in Australia in the past 20 years. All book-length, all literary in articulation, all dealing with traumatic legal cases – but all with crucial missing voices. Choosing to write into trauma as both witness and story-teller, Garner creates a certain inter-subjectivity throughout her work: her voice is witness to others' traumas; and as a character within the texts, story-teller of those traumas. But there is a recurring component of voicelessness in each of the three texts which will be delineated and discussed in this paper, with the principal focus on her latest text, *This House of Grief: The story of a murder trial*. How does Garner manage to tell the story ethically when the main protagonists refuse her interview? With this absence of voice, is this text still an ethical rendering?*

Keywords: Australian literary journalism; ethics; Helen Garner; long form narrative; trauma; true crime; missing voices

Introduction

Perhaps the most controversial of Australian author Helen Garner's texts to date, *The First Stone: Some questions about sex and power*¹ catalogues a sexual harassment case against a Master of Ormond College, University of Melbourne, by two young women, students at the university. When Garner researches the text, both young women and their advisor, an academic at the university, refuse to be interviewed. The second controversial non-fiction text produced by Garner, *Joe Cinque's Consolation, A True Story of Death, Grief and the Law*² also hinges around a court case, this time of the manslaughter of a young university student by his university student girlfriend. And again,

Garner's attempt to interview the accused is thwarted, presenting mainly the family of the victim's point of view, as well as her own. Both texts generate heated debate on a number of levels but one of the most volatile debates and the notion explored in this paper, concerns failure to interview protagonists from both sides of the narrative.

With a comparative glance at her first two long form non-fiction texts, this paper will look at Garner's most recent offering, *This House of Grief: The story of a murder trial*³ to interrogate how she manages this text alongside the absence of central voices, once again. How does Garner manage to tell the story ethically when the protagonists refuse her interview? With this absence of voice, is this text still an ethical rendering? Something Garner says as keynote at the Bedell's NonFictionNow Conference in 2012 catches my attention. She tells the audience:

Loneliness, of course, is the natural condition of the writer. After 40 years of it, I've learnt to tolerate and even to enjoy the miserable introversion that seems to be part of the deal. But what's less easy to put up with though is the feeling before I start a new book that I have no accumulated competence, that what I learnt while writing my earlier books won't travel with me across the gap; that I have to start again from scratch every single time (Garner 2012).

I tend to disagree with her final statement here. I believe with this last non-fiction text, she finally finds a way to navigate around the 'missing voices' discourse her narrative struggles with in her two earlier texts. But I feel she does this by default; it was not her intention when she set out but one she settles into, eventually. I fully believe if Garner had managed to get one or other of the main protagonists in *This House of Grief* to agree to interview – either the mother Cindy Gambino or the father, accused Robert Farquharson – she would have interviewed them. Only one; or both – whoever she could convince. But both refuse her requests. And so do members of both families. By doing so, Garner is seemingly liberated to indulge the immersive, observant, articulate, poetic and lyrical writing of subjectivity which is a common thread throughout all her work. As McDonald writes: "She arranges words like still-life paintings on the page" (2011: 162). But this subjectivity is

perhaps the second most critiqued notion of her writing, coming closely after the accusations of imbalance. And I infer her fictional texts here as well, as many if not all are drawn from real-life, albeit fictionalised, narratives. As James Ley writes:

There is an affinity between Garner's fiction and her non-fiction in that, regardless of genre, she always brings to her task a novelistic intelligence – which is to say, she is seeking, quite explicitly, to understand events not simply in a narrowly rationalistic sense but in an empathetic way. She is interested in the intricacies of personality and psychology. Her work is drawn to the often fraught dynamics of interpersonal relationships and what she describes in *This House of Grief* as those 'excruciating realms of human behaviour, where reason fights to gain a purchase, and everyone feels entitled to an opinion'. Where her writing touches on political or ethical issues, they are invariably interpreted in this light, and in an important sense subordinated to the more intimate concerns of her work (Ley 2014).

McDonald writes of Garner's leaning towards Jungian psychotherapy, explaining:

...the unflinching exploration of her own thoughts and feelings is Garner's signature as a writer. She is the narrator of the intimate, of the domestic, of the personal. Her self-appointed role is to investigate her own subjectivity in the hope that her honesty will resonate with reads and create a space, in turn, for their own reflections (McDonald 2011: 169).

But according to Muller, ethical journalism engagement establishes "an implicit contractual relationship with the community. This relationship contains promises about factual and contextual reliability, impartiality and separation of factual information from comment or opinion" (Muller 2014: 3). Publishing long form narrative with 'missing voices' makes a dubious claim at ethical practice. This next section discusses this claim further, offering up the notion of 'transparency' as

remedy, a technique which is a well-honed trade mark of Garner's, and as mentioned above, one her critics constantly return to.

Transparency as ethical intervention

Giles and Roberts claim that one method of circumnavigating 'missing voices' in non-fiction texts is to escalate transparency by the author. They cite Garner's *The First Stone* and Anna Krien's *Night Games*,⁴ where the authors fail to access both sides of their true crime renderings. While Giles and Roberts conclude that both stories are "one-sided" and "incomplete", they write: "The narrators...approach the difficulty of maintaining fairness, despite the absent complainants, by increasing their attention to transparency; and both are exemplary in their openness" (Giles & Roberts 2014: 8). They continue: "Garner and Krien can both be characterised as professional journalists who bring fairness, transparency and compassion to their respective accounts...they also abide by the principles of accuracy and independence" (ibid: 9). But simultaneously, they ask: "But can a journalist be too transparent?" (ibid: 8).

This notion of "too transparent" has dogged Garner for the past 20 years, and one her most vocal critics return to time after time. She herself seems perplexed. Ironically, in the same keynote where she shares some of her process, Garner talks of the interview as "the heart of the non-fiction enterprise" (Garner 2012). And perhaps here we see the heart of her own previous practice, frustrated in *This House of Grief*. She says:

I should've spoken about boundaries. I should've spoken about how writers often don't have any and writers go into interview situations naked – well, you need to go in – not exactly naked but perhaps very undefended, with your defences down – and into you floods this tremendous tidal wave of agony. If you sit there and bear it and if, later, you come back for more and you develop a relationship with the person that you've been interviewing, that intimacy in itself can be a very difficult thing to manage. It's not exactly friendship, it's

something else. But because we don't seem to have language for it, people try to deal with it by means of the sort of social manoeuvres that we know are useful in friendship. I have found that a difficult thing to deal with. I don't know how you can withdraw from that kind of shocking intimacy (Garner 2012).

And as Ley writes "the more intimate concerns of her work" are:

... one of the things that makes her writing so compelling, but it is also what gets her into trouble. For Garner does not simply write about complicated and sensitive legal cases in a subjective manner; she also interleaves her accounts with moments of radical self-exposure, in which she voices confusions and doubts and admits to her own regressive impulses, and treats these personal revelations as a measure of her comprehension (or lack thereof). Her personal investment in what she is witnessing is constantly forcing its way to the surface, compromising her notional role as a disinterested reporter (Ley 2014).

According to Ley, too much transparency and subjectivity compromise her role as 'disinterested reporter'. But she is not a reporter and has made no claim to be, interested or disinterested. Giles and Roberts claim her as "journalist" (Giles & Roberts 2014: 8) but while her fact-gathering practice may be deemed journalistic in nature, her writerly practice is not, at its heart, journalistic. It moves more towards personal essay with degrees of autoethnographic deliberations. She herself tells Voumard:

I've never worked as a newspaper journalist. By the time I get to the thing, a lot of the factual stuff has already come out in court and been reported in the press. What I am trying to do is get to the juice of the matter (2012: 7).

And by so doing, Garner inserts herself into these narratives of trauma as both witness and story-teller, creating a certain inter-subjectivity throughout her work: her voice is witness to others' trauma; and as a character within the texts, story-teller of those traumas. The late academic John

Tulloch challenges Tom Wolfe's⁵ view that the use of first-person is limiting. He claims Wolfe's "...argument has great limitations. In dismissing the first person he also consigns to oblivion its immense advantages: directness, immediacy and an intimacy that invites the reader to identify with the writer" (Tulloch 2014: 630). Tulloch explains that one of Wolfe's biggest aesthetic issues with first-person narration "may lie in boring the reader with a single, much-polished voice. But this is to underrate the flexibility and inherent dramatic qualities of the single voice" (Tulloch 2014: 637). Truthfulness of practice is the deciding factor which forms the foundation of trust in this type of writing, according to Tulloch, not objective truths of its observation.

Applying Tulloch's conclusions to the writing of Helen Garner in *This House of Grief* more so than her other two texts, her subjective perspective constitutes one of the main techniques of her writerly practice. Garner comes to her texts immersed in the narrative and the subjects of the narrative. She uses journalistic technique blended with fictional technique inserting herself at the core of her tale. She knows no other way. Wyndham writes:

When *The Spare Room*⁶ came out, a stranger accused Garner of always pushing herself into the centre of other people's trauma. Taken aback then, she says now, 'What I'd like to think I do is to take their trauma into the middle of me and contemplate it and brood over it in some useful way that's not just a lot of screaming and shouting about evil' (Wyndham 2014)

Although there is neither global nor national agreement on terms, this is what I choose to define as creative non-fiction firstly, nestling within one of its sub-genres: literary journalism as true crime (Joseph 2009: 82). Rosenstiel claims: "The proper question is not whether someone calls himself or herself a journalist. Anyone can be a journalist and some may be, whether they like it or not. The question is whether their work constitutes journalism" (Rosenstiel 2006). This is more an argument developed since the advent of the internet and 'citizen' journalism, but using this lens to analyse Garner's writerly process, there can be no doubt that her output in all three texts discussed here, are regarded and read as literary journalistic artefacts; sometimes tagged true crime. Perhaps it is

exactly the often criticised subjectivity and constant moral grappling with universal notions of horror, and her questioning of the extent of moral human capabilities which creates the literary-ness of her journalism. So while neither a 'reporter' nor 'journalist' as such, what Garner renders is idiosyncratic artefacts of Australian literary journalism. When asked how she terms her own practice, Garner says she always answers the same way: "I just say I write books and journalism. If anyone presses for further details, I say I write fiction and non-fiction" (Joseph 2011: 42).

The following section of this paper is the necessary backgrounding to the narrative which constitutes *This House of Grief*.

***House of Grief* Back Story**

Robert Farquharson is a name which makes most Australians balk when they hear it. His crime will be catalogued forever in the annals of Australian history as one of the worst, purely because of the overt nihilism of it; the betrayal of it.

It is Father's Day, September 4, 2005, just after 7pm when Farquharson drives his car with his three sons – Jai, 10; Tyler, 7; and Bailey, 2 – off the road between the Victorian towns of Geelong and Winchelsea, through a fence and straight into a local farmer's dam. He escapes. His three boys do not. Rather than attempt to go back into the water and save them, Farquharson walks to the side of the road, dripping, and hails down a car. He wants to be taken to his ex-wife Cindy Gambino's home in nearby Winchelsea, to tell her their sons are dead. He tells the driver: "Take me back to Cindy's house...I've got to tell the missus that I've killed the kids" (Norris 2013).

A tiny piece of the horror of this tragedy becomes public property the next day with the page 3 headline 'Three children feared drowned in dam accident' (Evans 2005: 3). The article says: "Police divers found the car in seven metres of water, with its nose still pointing down. They were 'reasonably certain' the children were in the car" (ibid). Garner tells Susan Wyndham:

I suppose it struck me in the way it struck everyone who saw it, with a terrible gong of horror. I imagine it was a two-beat response in most people – at first a complete numb horror at the thought of children drowning and then, was it an accident? (Wyndham 2014).

Within two days, another headline runs: 'Police interview dead boys' father'. Farquharson is held for three hours and questioned by *homicide* detectives before release. Note the words *homicide detectives* – a not so veiled signifier to the public of what was eventually to come. The article claims:

Initial police investigations have found Mr Farquharson was not speeding and was not affected by alcohol. Police have found no skid marks and are baffled about how the car ended up in the dam. They are conducting detailed mechanical tests to check if the car's steering or brakes failed (Silvester & O'Connor 2005: 1).

Three months later, on December 15, 2005, the public is made aware officially for the first time that the story is potentially more about treachery than tragedy. Robert Farquharson is arrested and charged with the murder of his three sons; a notion unfathomable. In an article entitled 'Dumbfounded' dad to fight murder charges', it claims:

In a police interview, Farquharson said he had a coughing fit and lost consciousness as the car left the road about 7pm on September 4. He said he woke when the car was in the dam. He said he scrambled from the sedan but could not rescue his children before the car sank in seven metres of freezing water. Detectives believe the older boys managed to free themselves from their seatbelts and released Bailey from his child restraint but could not escape as the car sank, nose-first, into the dam...Police have consulted medical and road safety experts who have concluded that Farquharson's version of events is 'highly unlikely at best'. Doctors who examined Farquharson after he was taken to the Geelong Hospital immediately raised doubts about his story. Mechanical experts have concluded that the steering wheel would have had to be turned significantly to the right for the car to have left

the road in the direction of the dam. They say if a driver lost control the angle would have been less severe and the car would have missed the water...The crash was handled by the major collision investigation unit but was referred to the homicide squad when concerns were raised about Farquharson 's version of events. He was interviewed by the homicide squad for three hours two days after the incident (Silvester & Adams 2005:1).

Robert Farquharson is remanded in custody until April 2006 when he is committed for trial on three counts of murder. His 2007 six week trial finds him guilty in October. During this trial, his ex-wife, Cindy Gambino, believes in his innocence. A little more than two years later, in December 2009, three appeal judges overturn his conviction and he walks free on bail, awaiting a retrial. In July 2010, a second jury finds him guilty – this time, Cindy Gambino also believes in his guilt (she changes her mind she says because Farquharson refused to see her when he was in jail). In December 2012, the Victorian Supreme Court rejects an appeal he makes in May. And in August 2013, Farquharson seeks special leave to appeal to the High Court of Australia. This too is rejected.

Robert Farquharson is to spend at least 33 years in jail – three concurrent life sentences for each of the lives taken of his three sons.

True Crime and Helen Garner and Missing Voices

All three of Garner's texts of long form narrative constellate Australian courts and their proceedings. Additionally, *The First Stone* forensically analyses the manner in which closed institutions – in this case, a university – handle complaints against its staff by students; the management of such complaints. Although it is about an alleged crime, *The First Stone* is concurrently about power, institutional and hierarchical; multi-generational feminism; and about two young female university students, who are not deemed credible, neither by their own institution nor the court system, after they take their complaint to the police. The Ormond College Master is acquitted of all charges and

Garner can persuade neither of the two female University of Melbourne victims, nor their advisor, to talk to her. Garner's remedy, albeit advised by her publisher's counsel, is not to use the advisor's name but rather, invent six feminist characters from the one person. She is severely criticised for this practice and when the book is re-printed, a disclaimer is situated at the beginning of the text, explaining this flaw.

Less than 10 years later, while researching *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Garner believes she has secured interviews with 'both sides' this time. Maria Cinque, Joe's mother, agrees to talk to Garner; as does Anu Singh's father. He tells her his whole family will speak to her, including his daughter, the accused, Anu Singh. Garner says at the time:

So this was right back at the start. I thought, 'Wacko! This isn't going to be like *The First Stone*, I'm going to have access to both sides of the story, and I've made personal contact with both sides, and I haven't taken a side, and I'll be able to write a balanced account of this.' Of course, this turned out to be the most incredible piece of grandiosity I've ever been guilty of (Garner in Forster 2004).

Indeed, the Cinques go ahead with their agreement to talk to Garner, and do, at length. They become friends. The Singhs finally renege, leaving a deep and incisive hole in her text (despite a brief visit to their home and recreation of the scene in the text). At that point, Garner attempts to pull out of the project and writes to the Cinques to tell them. She says:

I wrote the letter, and I said, 'I can't go ahead with this, Mrs Cinque, because it would be too unbalanced and I can't balance the story.' And I think that was one of the most grossly insensitive things I've ever done in my life because if somebody gives you a story like that, in all its pain and detail, and if they reveal to you the depth of their suffering, you can't just change your mind. You can't just say, 'Well thanks very much but I can't do anything with this story so I'm giving it back.' You can't do that...she wasn't going to live with that, and

she's a very tough woman. I greatly admire and respect and love her. Actually, I've come to be close to her. I'm not making any secret of that and obviously it would be absurd to pretend that I had any objectivity about this story but ... I couldn't say that she forced me to do it. I felt that there was a moral obligation on me to tell the story because I'd asked her to tell the story. It's not as if she'd approached me saying, 'Here's my story; do you want to do something with it?' I'd asked her for the story and she'd given it to me in good faith. So I had to find a way to tell the story without access to the other side (Garner in Forster 2004).

She continues:

I came bang up against a feeling of obligation which I didn't know how to handle, and I knew from my experience with *The First Stone* that to keep on pestering people for interviews who don't want to talk to you and have made it clear that they don't want to take part in your project; that it's a waste of time, it's counterproductive, it just makes everyone angrier and it makes things worse. But I did feel that I was too far in to back out. It would have been an act of cowardice to back out, a kind of gutless weakness ... 'Well, I've hit the wall here. I don't know what to do. The possibility of writing a balanced account of this is now lost, it's over. So I've got to find some other way of telling the story' (Garner in Forster 2004).

Interestingly, Garner finds her way into the text through a family video she watches in the Cinques' living room. Watching Joe Cinque on the video, juxtaposed against the traumatic and cavernous gap his death leaves within the Cinque home, convinces her she can write this text; she decides to go in search of the dead son, this young man who is simply gone. And so she writes the opening of *Joe Cinque's Consolation*:

The first time I saw Joe Cinque among his friends and family, the first time I ever heard his voice, was in the living room of his parents' house in Newcastle in the winter of 1999. By

then, of course, he'd already been dead for nearly two years. This is the story of how I got to know him (Garner 2004: 3).

Garner says:

...sometimes you write a first page and it acts as a kind of a touchstone, and every time you get lost and you can think, 'Yes, yes, this is what I'm trying to do with this book.'...So whenever I got hopelessly lost and thought that I couldn't do it, I went back to that sentence...This is the story of how I got to know him. And in a sense that enabled me to move on from that block where I realised that all fantasies of even-handedness was over, it was a lost cause. I thought, 'Okay, well I'll try to find Joe' (Garner in Forster 2004).

The Department of Prosecutions at the time hands her a case file with the court transcript but which also contains a plastic album with photos in it. These are crime scene photos. Garner admits she should not have looked at them. She says:

The police photographer had gone into the room where he died and had taken photos of him lying there. And there was one photo of him lying on the floor, you could tell that the photographer was standing over him pointing the camera down, almost straddling the dead body, and he looked very lovely. His face was beautiful, it was calm, and you couldn't tell he was dead. He looked like someone who was asleep or dozing on a beach. And I was terribly moved by that photo and I used to ... I got a bit weird about the photo I think, and I used to prop it up in front of me while I was reading the transcript, trying to find him in there. Because the person who's dead; they sort of disappear. I mean, obviously they disappear, but they disappear from the story. And I used to prop the photo up, and every morning I'd get there, and this sounds pathetic but I used to say, 'Hello Joe, here I am. I haven't forgotten you.' I wanted to steal the photo. I wanted to take it with me but I didn't, I applied tremendous self-discipline and ethical constraint. I didn't take it, but I used to think

afterwards, 'Who would I have been robbing if I had taken the photo?' (Garner in Forster 2004).

In all three cases, Garner has complete access to court transcript, as well as attending court herself. And in the first two texts, she is granted access to one side of the case: in *The First Stone* to the accused, later acquitted Master of Ormond College; and in *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, the Cinques, but mainly Joe's mother Maria. In hindsight she reflects in a *Meanjin* article on her inability to present both sides. She says in relation to attempting to gain interviews with the two young women and their advisor in *The First Stone*:

...if you keep on pestering people it becomes counter-productive. They think, Here she comes again. You realise that you've crossed a line and they're never going to cooperate...The fact that I crossed a line wasn't what stopped them talking to me. I just hadn't grasped how determined they already were not to talk to me. I went on pestering them, but my letters to them, the ones I quote in the book, have a more and more perfunctory tone—as if I'm saying, 'I know you are going to say "no" but I feel that I have to keep asking.' It's not just that my book would have been a better book if they had talked to me—which of course it would have. I didn't want them to think that I didn't care what they thought. I did care very much what they thought. They believed that in writing a letter to the Master [of Ormond College at Melbourne University] I'd taken a position, and that nothing that happened would ever change it, so why would they talk to me? There came a point where I realised there was nothing I could do about it, so I had to write my way around it (Garner in Voumard 2012: 5).

In the same article, Garner also muses about the Singhs renegeing on their interview with her: "...perhaps it all comes down to the fact that the Singhs were striving to rehabilitate their family, while the Cinques had nothing to lose" (Garner in Voumard 2012: 6). But it is in the third text *This*

House of Grief where Garner is completely confounded which in the end, is a form of literary salvation: no one from either side of the narrative grants her an interview.

This House of Grief

Susan Wyndham claims Garner can neither explain nor remember why or how she became “enveloped” in the Farquharson case. What Garner says is:

I think that there must be a point of self-immersion in a story that is a point of no return. You get far enough in, that the story has really touched you to the core and deeply troubled you and made you unhappy and fearful, and then how do you get out of that? I’m a writer so my way of getting out of that is to write (Wyndham 2014).

Garner opens the text with a fairy tale quality: *Once there was a hard-working bloke who lived in a small Victorian country town with his wife and their three young sons*. Her terminology is biased; there seems an overt sympathy to this man (Robert Farquharson). We learn that the family struggles, surviving on *his cleaner’s wage*. We are told that *out of the blue*, the wife (Cindy Gambino) wishes the marriage to end. We are told that she says he can see the boys (Jai, Tyler and Bailey) whenever he wants; that she wishes to keep the newer of the family’s two cars. We are told that: *The sad husband picked up his pillow and went to live with his widowed father*. We are also told, still in simplistic language conjuring the fairy tale tension, that the wife is soon seen around town with a concreter (Stephen Moules) who has poured the slab for the new home they were *struggling* to build. And then this: *Next, the husband spotted the concreter driving around town in the car he had slaved to buy* (Garner 2014: 1). These three characters, with oblique reference to the three young sons, are depicted with parable-like qualities; with an ambiguous promise of a required moral lesson to come.

On the next page, Garner writes of the *discarded husband*, describing the night of the accident still in dream-like, fairy tale tempo. But then a stark standalone paragraph, with white space all around it seemingly shouts from the page and she shifts immediately into herself as character, as if she is thinking and speaking for the universal 'us' – the Australian people, watching this horror unfold throughout the media, across the years: *I saw it on the TV news. Night. Low foliage, Water, misty and black. Blurred lights, a chopper. Men in hi-vis and helmets. Something very bad here. Something frightful. O Lord, let this be an accident* (Garner 2014: 2). And immediately the fictional fairy tale quality is destroyed and the reader remembers when he or she first heard about this tragedy themselves. Garner's universal prayer – *O Lord, let this be an accident* – goes to the heart of the narrative and to the nation, as it follows the case and ponders the impossibility of a human so damaged – so wanting to damage the woman who had 'discarded' him – that he could deliberately destroy his three young sons. This is riveting writing and is accorded the wave of impassioned reviews all writers dream of. In *The Australian*, Peter Craven writes:

This House of Grief is a book that harrows the soul with fear and wonder. It is a breathless, blinding roller-coaster of a book, full of doubt and nightmare and rank impressionism as Garner dramatises, with the masterliness of a great portraitist who is also a wizard of narrative, the different faces and phases where no one can win except a justice so blind and so austere that an eye is taken for every eye lost (Craven 2014).

The Conversation's Christopher Kremmer writes: "It is a readable, thought-provoking case study of our criminal justice system as viewed from the coalface. Garner's methodology is elegantly simple" (Kremmer 2014). But Kremmer goes on to voice slight dissatisfaction with the conclusion:

...Garner is like a dog with bone; constantly gnawing away in search of some larger meaning, which ultimately escapes her. Still, it's a worthwhile quest, for in its literary alchemy it crystallises fundamental questions that we need to keep asking about our legal system...For

me, Garner's book raised many interesting questions about our legal system, but did not take the opportunity to answer them (ibid).

And the anonymous book reviewer⁷ AF writes in *The Saturday Paper*:

Reading *This House of Grief* is like watching a gifted surgeon labour to return a cadaver to life. The expertise demonstrated is something superb. There is the pleasure, entire in itself, of witnessing natural talent and the discipline of decades bend to the task. Yet the effort is misdirected. No amount of application will reanimate the corpse. In the end, for all the elegance of its orchestration, the thing we come to appreciate most is the futility of the exercise (AF 2014).

And in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Owen Richardson writes:

Some will think the last thing they want to do is relive the Farquharson case, but anyone else who picks up *This House of Grief* will find that it is an exceptional piece of writing and one of those true crime books that bring the genre close to art. It derives a narrative concentration from staying close to the courtroom. There's not much journalistic legwork here: her personal contact with those involved was largely restricted to chats around the coffee cart with Farquharson's parents-in-law. Instead, it records, with great sensitivity to atmosphere and drama, what it was like to sit, day by day, through the performances of the judges and the barristers, the interrogation of witnesses' character and expertise, the confrontation between uneducated people of limited resource and the reach and might of the law; what it was like to try to read the jury, relaxed or distressed or stifling ... (Richardson 2014).

As Garner offers up no answers to the magnitude of the deed, there is some dissatisfaction strewn throughout the overwhelmingly glowing reviews. But it is not her job to give us answers; just to present the facts as she found them. And then to render these facts to the page. The question is, as she herself asserts the interview is "the heart of the non-fiction enterprise" (Garner 2012), how does

she construct her text without an interview with either the accused Robert Farquharson nor his ex-wife, Cindy Gambino?⁸ Additionally, Farquharson's sisters refused interview, as did Cindy Gambino's parents.

The narrative is mostly set at the Victorian Supreme Court. Garner actually dedicates the text to the court and derives the title of the book from the epigraph 'this treasury of pain, this house of power and grief'.⁹ When she was interviewed by Voumard in *Meanjin*, Garner talks of her attempts to access Cindy Gambino:

...I'm thinking about a woman I want to interview for the book I'm writing at the moment. She doesn't want to talk to me, and I'm pretty sure she isn't going to. I've been wondering how I'd handle her if I did get to interview her. She's very angry. Not solely with me, but about the way her situation has panned out legally; and she believes that I'm taking a certain line on it, which in fact I'm not. Even if we talked I don't think I'd be able to convince her that my position is much more flexible and sympathetic than she thinks it is. Your question is making me think about my fear of interviewing someone like that—my fear that they would feel set up and distorted. My fear that they would be set up or distorted. Or—let's be blunt—that I might set them up and distort them (Garner in Voumard 2012: 5).

Denied access to all key players and their immediate families, Garner has to find another way into her story. And this is where the ethical narrative arc connecting the three non-fiction texts discussed in this paper coalesce. Fearful of accusations of partiality again if she only procures subjects from one side of the case, yet denied interview subjects from both sides of the case ultimately, I believe, completely frees Garner and her narrative from the dubious ethical tensions of past texts and the notion of 'missing voices'. She says:

I realised I was going to have to do this a different way. I've had trouble with non-fiction books where I've had access to one side of the story not the other and I had to write my way

around that problem. I thought, I'm not going there again; I'm not going to have a lopsided thing hobbling along and have to devise a series of crutches and props for it technically...At some point I decided to keep it narrowly focused and I'm glad I did that – it seems to give the book a kind of unity. I love interviewing but I had to learn a different skill: I had to learn to stride across some territory which once I would have commando-crawled across, asking 'What do you think?' and 'What do you think?' (Wyndham 2014).

There is now an unfettered quality to Garner's writing as she "strides across" the judicial terrain, lacking any self-conscious apology, stated or inferred, of failing to present an impartial perspective by presenting two sides. Garner depends on her highly developed skills of observation, on court transcript delivered to her every night, on querulous discussions with people from the court room around a coffee cart, on eavesdropping on other discussions, and on gossiping with other media covering the trials to provide the substance and the fabric of her narrative. And of course, on the ubiquitous internal dialogue with herself, day and night, for the six years it takes to complete this text.

Conclusion

Of course, the two main protagonists are eventually heard in *This House of Grief*, where barristers in the court houses or police on video footage are undertaking the questioning instead of Garner as interviewer. Garner is a mere witness to the drama unfurling in the Victorian Supreme Court. And ironically, the fact that court transcript is sent to media electronically every night, frees Garner to do what she does best as she sits, witness to the horror and the trauma: observe and weave throughout her observations her own inner voice, grappling with not just the immensity of the trials and their emotional testimony, but the crucial yet excruciatingly boring technical evidence, given by expert after expert.

Garner pays respect to what she has learnt from the author and social critic Janet Malcolm. She believes from Malcolm she has learnt “the psychoanalytic view of reality” (Garner 2012). It is this “psychoanalytic view of reality” which unleashes her from the strictures of the spoken word – watching body language and minute movement in the court during each trial spread throughout the text like missing parts of the story, animating it – she is our eyes in those court rooms, trying to relate to us how to understand the initial abhorrent action – a father murdering his three young sons as an act of revenge on a wife who had “discarded” him, even though she cannot understand herself.

James Ley analyses the three texts by Garner discussed in this paper. He writes:

All three books are grounded in the idea that to feel something is a kind of fact. All wonder about the meaning and the status of that subjective fact. In this sense, they might be read as essays that question the concept of rationality. Again and again, Garner enacts her inability to arrive at a dispassionate and thus ‘logical’ understanding of the cases she is examining. Those ineradicable human reactions – emotions, instinct, sympathy – that are consigned to the realm of irrationality, and which are falsely but not coincidentally stereotyped as ‘feminine’ qualities, are not only acknowledged as complicating factors and phenomena of interest in their own right, but granted their priority, recognised as fundamental in a way that mere analytical thought is not (Ley 2014).

But Garner is more simplistic in her view, invoking the writerly process. She speaks of collecting “fragments” of people’s stories, and somehow trying to manage them. She speaks of wanting to give up writing this particular story, *The House of Grief* when she is refused interviews. She says:

And I may fantasise release, but in my heart I know that somehow it’s become my job to get narrative command of those fragmented events. Somebody, for some reason, it seems to me, has to shape their chaos and mystery and horror into that sanity saving thing that

human beings call a story, so that we can contemplate it usefully and bring to bear on it what small comfort that philosophy, or religion, or psychology might have to offer...the story does not exist as a story until a writer makes it. A story is not an object that's been dropped on the ground. You don't stroll past and see it lying there, pick it up, dust it off and put your name on it. What you stumble on is a mess of fragments. It's your task as a writer, indeed it's your duty, your sole function in the universe, to do the labour of shaping inchoate matter into something with a meaningful, pain relieving and aesthetically pleasing, form (Garner 2012).

Previously in this paper I write that Garner says: "...what I learnt while writing my earlier books won't travel with me across the gap; that I have to start again from scratch every single time" (Garner 2012). Desperately hoping to not fall foul of once again only gaining interviews from one side of the case, Garner is refused by both sides. Within this denial, which at first seems like the end of the project, she finds herself ethically liberated to concentrate on the tableaux in front of her, day after day in the court house, night after night in her dreams. She writes of:

...ripples of consciousness... I have to respect them and collect them without knowing what they are. I have to go out of the house and walk around the world porous. I have to wait and wait and wait, no matter how wretched and guilty waiting makes me. If I try to force the unborn thing into some clever shape that my bossy intellect thrusts at me, I'll deafen and blind myself to what's going on around me (ibid).

Relying on herself as both character and rhetorical device (in place of 'the missing voices'), and material that every other person in the court room could use (the missing voices in form of court transcript), Garner has created a narrative that begs the question Tulloch posits when he asks how can "writers ... avoid the inherent danger that self-revelation will collapse the distinction between the creation and creator" (Tulloch 2014: 629). Garner has become what Tulloch would call a 'dramatised' narrator (ibid). And rather than collapse the distinction between the creation – the

narrative – and the creator – Garner the character within it – her positioning creates a stepping stone or arc into a painful national saga. In many ways, by positioning herself between the reader and the day to day reality of the court, Garner creates a form of ethical relief for the reader from the horror; she takes the full brunt or force of the narrative, before rendering it filtered through her in minute personal and subjective detail, to society. We get to experience, through her eyes, a condensed, drama-filled conflation of six years within the Australian criminal justice system of a crime both heinous yet worthy of memorialising within text, if only as a reminder of the frailty of human kind.

Notes

¹ Published by Picador Australia, 1995

² Published by Picador Australia, 2004

³ Published by Text Publishing, Australia, 2014

⁴ Published by Black Inc, Australia, April 2014

⁵ *The New Journalism* by Wolfe and Johnson, 1973

⁶ A novel written while awaiting the Farquharson retrial, published by TEXT, Australia, April 7, 2008

⁷ At the time, anonymous book reviews were a purposeful enterprise on the part of *The Saturday Paper* Editor Erik Jensen, ironically to create more transparency in the review; his decision was met with ongoing debate about the model

⁸ Gambino had agreed to work with Megan Norris on the book *On Father's Day*, published Five Mile Press, Australia, 2013

⁹ from Hungarian author Dezső Kosztolányi's *Kornél Esti: A Novel*, published 1936

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