

‘Ordinary Readers’ and Political Uses: Re-Examining Helen Garner’s Non-Fiction Writings about Filicide

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HELEN Garner’s work occupies a privileged position within Australian letters. She has attracted significant popularity, critical acclaim and increasing academic interest, having won the inaugural Melbourne Prize for Literature in 2006 and the prestigious Windham-Campbell Prize in 2016 for her non-fiction. She was ranked eighth, the highest literary writer, in a 2005 *Sydney Morning Herald* poll of ‘Australia’s Top 100 Public Intellectuals’. She is the subject of an Oxford University Press monograph by Kerryn Goldsworthy, and a more recent biography by Bernadette Brennan. Her book *The First Stone* (1995) threatened her popularity within a literary and academic culture sympathetic to the ideals of an emergent third-wave feminism. However, in recent years, with the publication of less controversial works such as *The Spare Room* (2008), her collected non-fiction writings, and short stories, her reputation as a beloved Australian literary icon has been cemented.

The focus of this particular reading of Garner’s work will be on her writing about filicide cases. Garner’s literary non-fiction book *This House of Grief* (2014) examines the trial of Robert Farquharson who, in what was considered an act of revenge against his former wife, drove his three children into a dam where they drowned. This essay also examines two essays, ‘Why She Broke’ (2017) and ‘Killing Daniel’ (1993), both about cases of parents who murder their own children. I argue that her writing about these cases ultimately acts as a politically regressive intervention into public discourse about these events. In the second part of the essay, I extend this reading of Garner’s non-fiction writings about filicide by engaging with the recent work of Rita Felski, particularly her argument that academic engagements with texts should pay greater

attention to the actual ways that ‘ordinary readers’ use them (*Uses of Literature* 102; *The Limits of Critique* 49).

In the three pieces under consideration, Garner is writing in the recognisable mode of literary non-fiction. Despite conforming to many of the accepted conventions of journalism, such as factual courtroom reporting and a focus on current affairs, Garner consistently entertains a ‘subjective perspective’ which, Sue Joseph argues, entails that ‘her writing practice is not, at its heart, journalistic’ (732-3). Whilst Garner’s writing is not straightforward reportage, it is identifiable within a school of journalism with its roots in the 1960s known as New Journalism, famously associated with entertaining subjectivity and narratorial intervention, and spawning some of Garner’s literary antecedents such as Joan Didion and Janet Malcolm. But Joseph’s point is taken; Garner’s writing about these crimes is not the same as orthodox journalistic reportage about events of this nature. In *This House of Grief*, for example, we are given detailed insight into her own emotions about the case and are told anecdotes about her own grandchildren (93). Garner’s quasi-theological investment in the meaning and implications of the acts of those involved, and her personal reflections about the reported acts, shift her writing away from conventional reportage and into a more literary realm. To invoke Russian Formalist Lev Jakubinsky’s distinction between practical and poetic language: practical language exists purely for the pragmatics of communication, and poetic language subordinates the communicative function to creative ones (qtd. in Eichenbaum 871). Of course, Garner is not writing avant-garde sound poems, but neither is she writing for *A Current Affair*; this recognition of Garner’s work as a constructed literary text reminds us that the subject matter is not neutrally or objectively presented but is being used in service of creative and artistic concerns. There is an intentional decision to not write straightforward reportage, which has to do with Garner’s conception of the nature of the subject matter. She claims that she reports on that which ‘only philosophy, religion, or art can handle’ (‘Killing Daniel’ 168).

James Ley argues that Garner’s departure from traditional modes of reporting is an epistemological challenge to the way crimes of such a horrific nature are conventionally thought about by the court and by society. Garner opts for an ‘empathetic’ rather than ‘narrowly rationalistic’ way of reporting (Ley). This ‘empathetic’ style has the effect, according to Ley, of meaning that ‘political or ethical issues’ are ‘subordinated to the more intimate concerns of her work’. Insofar as Garner is concerned with relationships between individual moral agents rather than between individuals and any social configuration or institutional power, her writing is directly engaged with the realm of the ethical. But as Ley points out, and as shall be demonstrated shortly, her writing consistently represses the political.

Ley argues, in a similar fashion to Joseph, that Garner makes a lie of the role of ‘disinterested reporter’. He sees in Garner’s style a questioning of ‘the concept of rationality’ and claims that her work demonstrates that rational understanding itself ‘is tainted by elements of irrationality’. Garner’s court observations are themselves grounded in the epistemological pillar, not of reason, but of feeling. Analysis, rationality and journalistic objectivity are conceptual tools deemed inadequate by Garner to the task of comprehending the nature of these filicide cases; instead, she opens up a space for affective and subjective engagements with her subject matter. Garner’s style itself could thus be seen as a rebuke of the masculinist court’s ‘edifice of reason’, to use her phrase from *This House of Grief*, in which she contrasts the rationality of the court with the ‘wild’ woman Teresa Gambino (18).

However, in practice the rebuke of reason is aligned to a retreat from political analysis, including and especially where that analysis might examine features of women’s oppression – for example her failure to view the Farquharson case from the perspective of male violence towards, and entitlement over, women. In the case of Guode in ‘Why She Broke’, it is the difficulties of the refugee experience and the racism of Australian society and its institutions that are given scant attention. Whilst Ley claims that Garner’s work stages a ‘battle between emotions and the intellect’ and even claims she is ‘respecting both sides’, her irrationalist and ostensibly apolitical perspective on the cases has gone largely without challenge, or even remark. The criticisms which follow are not of the widely celebrated, emotionally complex insights Garner brings to these tragic cases, but of the wholesale retreat from political engagement which is a consistent feature across her non-fiction works.

Rather than entertaining a social, material, or political explanation for crimes of this nature, Garner claims her narratives require an acknowledgement of ‘the existence of evil’ (‘Killing Daniel’ 168). The term ‘evil’ is of course not a neutral one: it disarms political analysis and situates the subject matter within theological terrain instead. One could imagine narrating the events which are the subject of *This House of Grief* (the trial of Robert Farquharson) as follows: a man cannot handle the ‘loss’ of his wife to another man, finds that this humiliates him and threatens his control and power, so he takes revenge by destroying that which is ‘essential’ to his wife as a woman, her children. It is hardly conspiratorial to contextualise this case within a wider pattern of male violence against women, but Garner fails to do so. For Garner, the truth of the case instead ‘seem[s] to reside in some far-off, shadowy realm of anguish, beyond the reach of words and resistant to the striving of the intellect’ (289). Claiming the case is beyond words and intelligibility functions to prioritise mystical and irrational explanations rather than one which sees the tragedy as a result of

ameliorable social injustice, which in this case is male violence. When one is Helen Garner – with the readership and influence that she has – and is writing about a high-profile filicide case, such an authorial decision is consequential.

Garner's engagement with crime is characterised by what Giorgio Agamben describes as 'the prestige of the mystical' (32). For Agamben, to confer upon situations the label of 'unsayable' and 'incomprehensible', as Garner does by situating the significance of Farquharson's crime 'beyond the reach of words', is precisely the best way to 'glorify and adore' them, 'regardless of one's intention' (33). It is true that Garner goes some way towards rejecting the label of the unsayable by discussing the cases at all, yet the conclusions reached, invoking as she does the notion that the events are incomprehensible, import the form of prestige identified by Agamben. Critical appraisals of her work reinforce rather than challenge this mystical prestige. *New Yorker* critic James Wood comments that 'Garner circles around the unspeakable, abysmal horror' of the case. Reviewer Felicity Plunkett writes of the book's treatment of 'mysterious, contradictory, and dark shapes of human motivations and love's ambivalence, graspable better by intuition than by fact-finding'. *The Australian's* literary editor Stephen Romei did not miss the memo, using the word 'unthinkable' in his description of the events which the book takes as its focus.

Brigid Rooney recognises the mystical strain running through Garner's work, arguing that her earlier non-fiction 'reproduces the literary field in its most privileged relation to public space, as a field contoured by and redolent of the sacred' (159). This statement also rings true of Garner's writing about filicide. Her foreclosure of the possibility of intellectual, and by extension political, engagement with the cases is nowhere more visible than in 'Why She Broke', the story of South-Sudanese Akon Guode who drove her children into a lake and left them to drown. We are told of important facts about Guode's situation, for example that she owed \$12,000 to Centrelink and suffered from post-natal depression. Garner realises that such details are not irrelevant to the story, as evidenced by her decision to include them at all. However, the brief mention of these circumstances does not form a part of how she ultimately understands the case, with the last word being given to mystifying explanations: Guode is a 'figure from ancient myth', who became 'lost in her own numbness', and the killing of her children only explicably done 'in a fit of madness'. Garner insists on the essential unintelligibility of the case, its 'madness', arguing that rationality and reason are not fit to understand what has occurred. The law tries in vain to 'fit the dry, clean planes of reason to the jagged edges of human wildness', she claims. The idea of the mother, a 'great thundering archetype', has the power to 'stop the intellect in its tracks'. But the cessation of intellectual explanations has occurred too soon; nowhere has any consideration of structural

factors pertaining to the crimes been allowed into this narrative. Precisely why this is necessary at all should be clear by the fact of Guode's position of social disadvantage and the needlessness of much of her suffering (let alone that of her children), including the fact of her debts to Centrelink and the unavailability to her of public housing.

Garner anticipates, and proactively wards off, criticism of this sort. In an article in *The Monthly* about the nature of writing about dark subjects, she derides the demand for writers to engage with her subject material 'with moral guns blazing' ('The Darkness in Every One of Us' 2). It is not moralism that is missing from Garner's writing, but politics. That is to say, what is missing is an enlightening rather than mystifying understanding of the subject matter, one which recognises the existence of injustices and inequalities which are socially – not divinely – produced and thus amenable to change. One may contest, as Garner presumably would, that the subject matter of her writing is not evidently political. However, it is a result of a series of decisions Garner makes in her presentation of the subject matter, rather than any essential quality about the subject matter itself, that encourages a view of them as inappropriate for political analysis. As seen in the case of Guode, there are an abundance of moments where what Garner calls 'moral guns' are more or less demanding to be drawn. That Farquharson 'couldn't afford' to see the psychiatrist in Colac as a result of underfunding mental health services in rural areas is yet another example (*This House of Grief* 52).

Garner's understanding of the filicide cases from the perspective of what could be called theological moralism ultimately reveals the reactionary function of her writing. Within the first two sentences of each of Garner's works we learn that Farquharson is a 'hard-working bloke who lived in a small Victorian country town' (*This House of Grief* 1), Guode lives in an 'outer-western Melbourne suburb' ('Why She Broke') and Aiton is a 'tradesman' ('Killing Daniel' 162). The consistency of the way Garner frames these narratives reveals itself as classic bourgeois vampirism: injecting the lives of (largely inner-city, middle class) readers with a perceived vitality that only horrific stories of extreme (working class) human experience can provide. Her statement that there is 'something savage that persists in people despite all our enlightenment' ('Killing Daniel' 168) is reflected in the Freudian psychologising of her subjects, her impulse to analyse that which is beneath our conscious, enlightened, rational selves. Garner speculates about Farquharson's psyche, for instance, with a writer's imagination and a psychoanalyst's authority, postulating that he is 'underneath it all . . . seething instead with incredulous vitality' (69). There is, however, a pattern to her location of this 'wildness', which she ascribes to Guode, or the 'destructive urges' and 'deeper rage' she identifies in *This House*

of *Grief* (45, 51): it is the working-class and, in Guode's case, racialised subject that is constructed as being beholden to the savage or wild unconscious.

A solely political and rational understanding of these cases, attributing their cause to only, for example, the existence of patriarchy, or the state's racism toward refugees, is indeed reductive. However, to entirely disengage from this lens of analysis does not just make for an unconvincing narrative but is negligent. Opting to identify a 'secret darkness' ('The Darkness in Every One of Us' 42) behind the tragic cases, rather than engage with the social and material causes of them, confers the 'prestige of the mystical' and pretends that this subject matter is beyond any ability for political engagement. Garner retreats into mystification at the precise moments where politics is demanding to enter the picture.

In an article responding to the furore caused by her first non-fiction book, *The First Stone*, Garner castigates those who:

read like tanks. They roll right over the little conjunctions and juxtapositions that slither in the undergrowth of the text. It's a scorched-earth style of reading. It refuses to notice side-paths, the little emotional and psychological by-roads that you can't get into unless you climb down from your juggernaut and take off your helmet and your camouflage gear and your combat boots. ('The Fate of the First Stone' 195)

To argue, as I have done, against Garner's emotionally intricate, subjectively rendered literary investigation of filicide cases for its retreat from political analysis seems precisely the sort of 'scorched-earth' kind of reading she once discouraged. More than just prioritising the rational over the emotive, the kind of reading proffered thus far, with its thoroughly secular demands, has clashed with Garner's 'timeless world of myth', her vision of 'dark regions of the soul' ('The Darkness in Every One of Us' 41, 42) – in short, with her claims about the enchantment and mystery of life.

The kind of engagement with her work for which Garner seems to be advocating, or indeed even prescribing, is one where the text, rather than being read at the level of its ideological content or political message, is a companion to the reader's emotional life. This rebuke of the 'scorched-earth style of reading' resonates with a wave of recent scholarship which goes by the name of post-critique. Garner's characterisation of critique as militaristic and oppositional echoes a prominent theme in works such as Eve Sedgwick's 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading' (2002), Bruno Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?' (2004), and Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), the latter

of which popularised the term postcritique. This article does not traverse the entire terrain of postcritique – which has now become something of a school of its own within the literary studies academy – but will extend the reading of Garner presented above through engagement with the ideas of one prominent critic in the field, Rita Felski. In particular, I will be looking at Felski’s call to pay greater attention to ‘ordinary motives for reading’ (*Uses of Literature* 14).

Rita Felski’s recent and influential intervention argues that critics should ‘face up to the limits of demystification as a critical method and a theoretical ideal’ in order to ‘truly begin to engage the affective and absorptive, the sensuous and somatic qualities of aesthetic experience’ (*Uses of Literature* 76). A foundational principle of Felski’s later work is that the social lives of literary texts are more diverse and less political than left-wing critics would want to claim. For Felski, it is the actually existing engagements of readers with texts that should serve as ideal guides, as affective parameters, for intellectual or academic engagements. Currently, according to Felski, contemporary scholarship is too heavily invested in critique to have an accurate sense of the practices of ‘everyday’ or ‘ordinary readers’ (*The Limits of Critique* 37, 66). It is for Felski a problem that ‘one person immerses herself in the joys of *Jane Eyre*, while another views it as a symptomatic expression of Victorian imperialism’ (*Uses of Literature* 12), arguing that political critique is a mode of engagement predominantly reserved for academic readers, irrelevant to the reasons why most ‘ordinary’ people read. These claims have critical implications for literary study, including for the academic reception of popular and acclaimed writers such as Garner, and for the kind of reading which has hitherto been put forth in this article.

The notion of the ‘ordinary reader’ for Felski is intimately connected to what she sees as ordinary *uses* of literature. Her 2008 work, *Uses of Literature* is motivated by a dismay, which reverberates through her later work, at the difference between ‘academic criticism and lay reading’ (12); as such, it seeks to redress the perceived lack of attention given by the academic discipline of literary studies to the ways that ‘ordinary readers’ engage with texts, and the uses they make of them. It does so by focusing on the roles texts play in the lives of their readers. The four uses of literature which Felski outlines – shock, enchantment, recognition, knowledge – she sees as more faithfully tracking ‘ordinary motives for reading’ than what ideological criticism would have us assume. The effect of this intervention is to inaugurate a shift in attention away from the ‘symptomatic expression’ of political forces in a work to the ‘joys’, ‘sensuous and somatic’, of reading that work.

What, then, are the uses to which Garner’s work is put by readers? Let

us follow Felski's injunction to engage with these uses, but along the way expand the conception of what counts as a 'use' and challenge some assumptions about the nature of the practices of the 'ordinary reader'. It is unremarkable to observe that Garner's non-fiction writings enjoy an especially privileged and socially connected role in the Australian literary and even non-literary cultural landscape. In a 2018 ABC interview, Gillian O'Shaughnessy calls her 'an Australian writer widely recognised as being among the best in the world'. Her prominence, status, popularity and reach might alone justify a more suspicious stance, but here I will explore some more specific ways that her work is received by certain audiences that make these critical engagements relevant.

Bernadette Brennan's chapter on *This House of Grief*, in her biography of Garner, reveals the strong connections that Garner's work has to legal and political institutions. We discover that whilst writing *This House of Grief*, Garner ran workshops for judges and magistrates on legal writing and reasoning (Brennan 276). The Victorian Chief Justice at the time wrote Garner a letter in which she called the book 'utterly riveting', and three other QCs involved in the trial sent Garner praise for the book (278). Perhaps most remarkably, the New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services Child Death and Child Protection review team wrote Garner a letter, saying that her writing 'has inspired the work of this team' (280). Clearly, Garner's writing has a privileged access not only to the public conversation but also to policy and decision-makers. This admission raises questions about the category of the 'ordinary reader' to which Felski's work appeals. Is a Chief Justice an 'ordinary reader'? They are not a critic or literary scholar, and so one could assume that they qualify for membership of the ordinary readership category, but in terms of their proximity to institutional legal power, they are in no sense ordinary or representative. These examples raised in Brennan's chapter evidence multifarious uses to which Garner's writing has been put, and the extent to which these uses are deeply embedded within a social and political world. Felski's claims about the nature of non-scholarly literary engagements are also put under pressure here, for these particular readers are not using the work only to experience 'shock', or 'recognition' or any other of the uses Felski describes, uses which revolve primarily around leisure and individual fulfilment: they are also using this work to inform an understanding of the crimes, an understanding which they could then (consciously or not) bring with them into their professional lives.

Given this context of Garner's reception, it becomes relevant then that we notice and indeed critique the ways that *This House of Grief* and *The Monthly* pieces are, in the last instance, validating of these legal institutions. In a biographical piece for *The Monthly* by Erik Jensen we are told, in a kind of free

indirect blending of the journalist's voice and Garner's own which is characteristic of that piece, that for Garner the courts are 'a source of reverence' that 'fulfill her need for order and justice'. A reciprocity is observable here, in which certain works are ultimately validating of the criminal justice institutions about which Garner writes, and an audience drawn from precisely this profession uses in an ultimately validating way the writing about that institution. This instance of the use of her writing by certain readers is less politically innocent, has greater legal and social implications, than Felski's reevaluation of the concept assumes. Taking seriously readers' actual engagements with Garner's writings vindicates, rather than undermines, a critical position which addresses the political implications of her writing about crime.

Amongst Garner's recent work, it is not only *This House of Grief* that plays a certain role for a readership that has identifiable class characteristics. In 2018 Garner began writing a new column named 'The Courts', published in *The Monthly*, in which she sits in various Victorian courtrooms and writes about the events she witnesses. *The Monthly* has published much of her recent work, including the 'Why She Broke' and 'The Darkness in Every One of Us', pieces discussed in this article. One instalment in Garner's recent courts column is called 'A Sorry Procession: A Day in the Life of the Geelong Magistrates' Court'. The structure identified earlier of middle-class voyeurism is evident here too, as Garner illustrates her fascination with the painful, personal, private trials of ordinary people. The demographics of *The Monthly* readership make this point clear. In a 2019 Media Kit, *The Monthly* describes itself as a 'smarter magazine' that 'attracts a premium audience'. Their readers, the magazine states, 'can be found at the very pinnacle of their fields – from business leaders and senior journalists to CEOs and prime ministers'. Polls of their readership confirm these claims: 95% of *The Monthly*'s readers are 'CEOs, MDs, chairs, managers, or skilled professionals', and 82% of *The Monthly* readers are university educated. These facts provide an uncomfortable context for *The Monthly*'s commissioning of Garner to go and sit in a Magistrates Court and report on the suffering of the mostly disadvantaged, working class people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

These figures also provide an occasion to rethink the category of the 'ordinary reader' which Felski mobilises. It could be that the category, to be meaningfully deployed, requires further differentiation according to the demographics which compose it. Perhaps, though, the category itself is doomed to operate as a phantom, a guise under which to argue for the relevance of a particular cluster of practices and affects which have a class character. In the case of Garner's writing, available data on the 'ordinary' readership of the primary outlet in which her journalism is published, tells us that the readers are certainly not

ordinary in the sense of being representative. Garner's writing is clearly fulfilling a function within a specific social milieu, or to put it another way, is being 'used' by a certain demographic; her consistent and enduring fascination with working-class pain and suffering can be viewed as a performance for, if we are to believe *The Monthly's* description of its own readers, an elite readership, substantiating a regressive notion of what crime is and what type of person commits it.

By prioritising mystical explanations over political analysis, Helen Garner's literary non-fiction writings about filicide act as reactionary interventions into the discourse about their subjects. The import of such interventions is especially evident when we follow Rita Felski's calls for academic scholarship to pay greater attention to ordinary reading practices, practices which, as attention to the reception of Garner's work shows, are by no means necessarily politically naïve or entirely reducible to an aesthetic response. In fact, in the case of Garner's non-fiction writings about filicide, a sensitivity to how readers have actually engaged with the work provides an even stronger argument for putting forth responses of critique which challenge the works' assumptions about crime and criminality – assumptions that receive a clear hearing amongst certain class sections of society. Within this space opened up by a focus on the nature of the work's readership and the uses to which it is put by readers, it becomes apparent that Garner's work promotes an irresponsible view of these events that regresses our understanding of them.

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