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Being in the archive: affect and scholarly distance

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ABSTRACT

Working in the archives of living writers provides exciting possibilities for extended interpersonal research as well as ethical challenges. This article explores the author's experience of working in Helen Garner's restricted archives and negotiating the demands of scholarly objectivity with an increasingly felt empathic engagement. The author traces a chronological path through the archives relating to Garner's three substantial works of non-fiction: *The First Stone* (1995), *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004) and *This House of Grief* (2014). She draws attention to some of the ways in which distance and objectivity can be influenced not only by contact with a living writer but also by the space in which the archive is encountered. With a deliberate focus on the lived experience of researching, rather than a scholarly examination of archival theory, the author offers a case study of how the interaction of archives and living subject can shape research and publication.

KEYWORDS

Biography; living writer; affect; empathy; Helen Garner

It was in August 1996 that Helen Garner chose to make her initial deposit of select papers with the National Library of Australia (NLA). She added to that collection with significant deposits in October 1988, June 2005 and May 2006. The current 7.23-metre archive includes early drafts of, and correspondence about, *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992), and a wealth of research materials, process journals, draft manuscripts, reviews and correspondence relating to *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* (1995) and *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004). Garner placed significant restrictions on access. Series 1–6, which deal with *The First Stone* and *Cosmo Cosmolino*, are closed until 1 January 2022. Permission is thereafter required for research during Garner's lifetime and that of her daughter, Alice. The embargoed date for series 7–9, papers relating to *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, was set at 1 January 2012.[1] Although that time is now past, permission is required for research during Garner's lifetime.

Helen Garner is one of Australia's best-known and, some would say, best-loved writers. Over a period of 40 years she has authored 13 books of fiction and nonfiction, two screenplays and a multitude of articles, essays and reviews. Her writing sells exceptionally well. It is reviewed in most broadsheets and journals and has gained increasing recognition abroad. Why then was Kerryn Goldsworthy's *Helen Garner* (1996) the only dedicated study of Garner's writing?[2] The slim monograph was published just one year after Garner's

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controversial and polarising *The First Stone*, a story about alleged sexual harassment at prestigious Ormond College, University of Melbourne. That book alienated scores of readers and infuriated members of the academy, some of whom refused to read or teach Garner's texts ever again. Arguably, residual hostility towards Garner and her work has contributed to the paucity of critical scholarship. In 2014, I decided that it was time for a comprehensive study of Garner's oeuvre. A quick search of the NLA catalogue revealed Garner's papers spanning a 15-year period of her writing, 1990–2005.

In June 2014 I emailed Garner telling her I wanted to write a book about her body of work. I requested access to her embargoed files. She was anxious about what was in the archive and wished to discuss its content, and my intentions. Why didn't I come to lunch? She would make soup. I flew to Melbourne, somewhat taken aback by Garner's immediate generosity in inviting me into her home and preparing a meal. It was the first of many such invitations. Had I thought about the situation more deeply, I should not have been so surprised. In Garner's life and work, a shared meal at the kitchen table is a central form of both hospitality and connection. In her early fiction, characters come together at the communal table for house meetings, for meals and even for massages. In *Cosmo Cosmolino*, the shared meal takes on sacramental importance. In 'Some Furniture', an essay in her most recent collection *Everywhere I Look* (2016), Garner asks: 'What can happen at a kitchen table when you haven't even got one?' The essay concludes with Garner and her friend slugging vodka, leaning their elbows on her table and resuming their 'endlessly interesting, fruitful and entertaining conversation'.[3]

Garner established at the outset that she did not want a biography written. Equally, I did not wish to write one. However, while I did not know what shape my book would take, I knew from the outset that the intersection and indeed overlap between her life and art made discussion of the biographical essential to the understanding of her work. After a long conversation Garner granted me access to all her files at NLA. She had previously given permission for the filmmaker Sotiris Dounoukos to examine her *Joe Cinque* collection. I was the first person to gain access to the entire archive. Over the following years, Garner answered every question I put to her and sent me additional documents that I requested, even intensely personal documents such as the eulogies written for her parents' funerals. In 2016, she went so far as to give me the key to her Melbourne office so I could work on the materials she used for *This House of Grief* before they were sent to NLA for cataloguing for her next deposit.

The First Stone

In September 1992, when Garner began to follow the legal proceedings brought by two young women against the Master of Ormond College, she fronted up to the Melbourne Magistrates' Court with her notebook. That first court notebook later grew to a series of five process journals, kept over the two years of her research. Because the journals were never intended for publication, they became a form of diary; a daily account of Garner's thoughts, emotions, speculations and discoveries, along with contact details and appointment times for interviewees, transcribed interviews, conversations and, fascinatingly, her dreams. These journals then provided the basis for the book's narrative shape.

In *The First Stone* Garner crafts a roller-coaster, radically unstable narrative of personal anguish and ambivalence that mirrored her psychological and intellectual turmoil.

Repeatedly, she fluctuates between fury at and respect for the complainants' silence. She persistently changes her position and her allegiances, she charges forward, she digresses, she retreats, she comes back for more. Her blazes of fury, reversals of sympathy and repeated fits of despair are laid out in the pages of her journals. The rawness and immediacy of her frustration, anger, hurt, self-doubt and, at times, self-loathing jostle alongside her intellectual engagement, creative wrestling and breakthrough moments of palpable relief.

In the book, Garner identifies the moment when she knew she should 'put the whole thing down and walk away'. She claims that for 'some obscure reason' she could not do so. That she was 'haunted' by this story.[4] Her journals give deeper insights into the reasons for, and character of, that haunting. Crucially, they offer context for some of Garner's more controversial positions. For example, in *The First Stone* the young complainants were unjustifiably swept up into Garner's rage which was inspired predominantly by her battles with the academic Jenna Mead, the complainants' solicitor, the Women's Officer and those responsible for smear campaigns against the Master of Ormond and the Melbourne University counsellor. Garner labelled these people, the 'priggish, literal-minded vengeance squad'.[5] Reading her journal, it is obvious that they became associated in her mind with writers like Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly. She records reading Dworkin's *Mercy*, being aghast at Dworkin's 'horror about sex', and appalled by the 'grinding, gnarlish, brutish ugliness of her world picture'.

In September 1993, Garner and her husband Murray Bail headed to New York for Garner to take up a position teaching creative writing at New York University. She took her process journals with her and wrote the first draft of the book over three months. The journals reveal not only the extraordinary amount of material that she needed to distil and shape, but also the emotional turmoil she was experiencing at the time. She wrote the draft in a kind of fury. New York did not give her the necessary distance from the events and emotions stirred up in Melbourne over the previous year. Sexual harassment was a dominant topic of conversation in the United States. The newspapers were reporting debates sparked by Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas at the Supreme Court confirmation hearings in 1991. David Mamet's divisive *Oleanna* was playing to full houses off-Broadway. Katie Roiphe's *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus* and Naomi Wolf's *Fire with Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*, both published in 1993, were receiving considerable attention. Garner put together a bulging file of stories about sexual harassment. She underlined and copied out reviews relevant to her research. All these are in the archive. The majority of them espouse positions similar to the stance she would later take in her book.

Also in the archive are the multiple drafts of what became *The First Stone*. They narrate an important story about how the book took shape. So too, the folders of legal opinions that map out how Garner was forced, against her strongest instincts and belief, to split Mead's character into six different people in the book. Garner understood well the contract between the nonfiction author and the reader. She had also paid close attention to the journalist Janet Malcolm being found liable for defamation in June 1993. In her copy of the *Australian*'s report of Malcolm's trial, she highlighted the comment by Wallace Shawn, the late editor of the *New Yorker*: 'We do not permit composites.'[6] In her first draft, she gave characters other than the complainants their real names. The lawyers advised on substantial changes, which Garner made. They were then deemed insufficient. Another round of legal advice insisted that a radical rewrite was necessary in order to avoid defamation proceedings. Garner worked through the manuscript renaming characters, changing singular pronouns

to plural and inserting her mix of names for Mead. She stated in her draft Author's Note that Australian defamation laws had led to a device that 'distorted core truths of the story'. The published Author's Note is less clear in its mention of 'obstacles' to her research that forced her to 'write a broader, less "objective", more personal book'.

While conducting research for the book, Garner was chastised by both Mead and the complainants' solicitor. In almost identical prose they told her: 'Helen, this story is *not* being played out for the benefit of *your* finer feelings.'[7] Yet the archive reveals that is precisely the approach Garner adopted. The succession of draft manuscripts demonstrates that her decision to centre the book around her intuitive responses to the core events was a very conscious and deliberate strategy. Repeatedly, the manuscripts show that she breaks up blocks of interview transcripts with notes, 'more me here', 'weave me in and out', and with irony, 'poor me here'. *The First Stone* benefits from being read as a performative text.

The archivists at the NLA have maintained Garner's arrangement of papers, and retained most of her file titles. Her arrangement weaves a gripping story. The archive begins with her journals – three spirex and two bound notebooks – written in large cursive script. The first entry is dated, '3 November 1992. Cup Day!' Following these are two large ring-binders of documents, in roughly chronological order, beginning with Garner's requests for interviews and closing with the legal correspondence about defamation risks. Further folders of legal documentation are included. Then comes Garner's voluminous research materials, a multitude of reviews and other public responses to *The First Stone*, and finally 508 letters from readers.

There, in the quiet of the NLA reading room, some 20 years after the events, I sat with long, moving missives from playwright Joanna Murray-Smith and writer Anna Maria dell'Oso, along with shorter, heartfelt messages of congratulations and support from a raft of Australian writers and filmmakers: Elizabeth Jolley, Amy Witting, Kate Grenville, Hazel Rowley, Rosemary Dobson, Shirley Hazzard, Jane Campion, Gillian Armstrong, Elizabeth Kirkby, the list goes on. I read the letters from hundreds of female readers who felt compelled to express their gratitude. One after another, the correspondents said they read through the night, that they could not put the book down, that it exorcised their feelings of guilt for their passivity in past experiences. They wrote unguardedly about how their passivity or politeness had led to ongoing shame and guilt. These voices differed greatly from the public outrage I had come to associate with *The First Stone*.

In their book of the same name, feminist researchers Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman and Ann Vickery write about working in what they call 'the intimate archive', defined as the 'collections of private and, in some cases, highly personal papers that have found their way into public collections'.[8] I found myself working in a very intimate archive. Historian Penny Russell has explored the 'tension between the imperatives of biography and the imperatives of history'. She observes pertinently that in '*being* in the archives reading letters, diaries and other personal material, seeking the contours of a life, the constructions of self, the moments of dramatic or intense emotion', the researcher of historical subjects, in the 'act of reading, can enter fleetingly into relationships of affect and empathy with those long-dead chroniclers of sorrow and joy, anger and embarrassment, pleasure and pain'.[9] I entered into such a relationship with an author available at the end of a text message or email. That apparently easy connection, combined with the ethical necessity that what I was reading could not be shared openly, intensified my sense of intimacy. Could I maintain sufficient

scholarly distance? Ultimately, I believe that I could. But I was affected by reading Garner's journals and letters.

Time in the archive is always time of 'now'; a reconstructed past present. For some weeks, I was immersed in the vitriolic backlash against Garner and her text. I read about her increasingly fragile mental health, the repercussions of her hysterectomy coinciding with the many strident assertions that she was envious of young women and their sexual allure, the toll taken on her marriage. I discovered that Rosi Braidotti's emotional and, I would say, inaccurate tirade against Garner, included in Jenna Mead's edited collection *bodyjamming: Sexual Harassment, Feminism and Public Life* (1997),[10] marked the lowest point for Garner in the fallout from *The First Stone*. She slipped into a deep depression. She was devastated by Braidotti's essay, largely because it cast doubt on her fierce loyalty and love for her students. Publicly, she said nothing. She wrote to Braidotti, but never posted the letter. In the top corner she scrawled: 'not sent – written for relief only'.

Shortly after finishing my first read-through of *The First Stone* files, I met with Garner. She had moved on from much of the pain from that time. I was feeling it acutely. We spoke about events, responses and publications, many of which she had forgotten. This situation would recur frequently throughout my research. Garner was living in the present, rightly so; I was engaged in the past, as was essential to my intellectual exercise.

Joe Cinque's Consolation

As a Sydney-based researcher I needed to organise my time at NLA in extended blocks. Nursing no preconceptions about what was in the archive, or what I would make of the material, I began at the beginning and worked my way through it methodically. I would later return to cross-check files and reread important documents. By the time that I had closed the last file of series 6, I was hooked. The lure of Garner's diarised voice drew me straight back to Canberra to begin work on the *Joe Cinque* archive. Again, up front were Garner's process journals, this time recording her research and the years where she struggled to find the right shape and voice to tell the story of Joe Cinque's death.

Most of the papers in this series were retained in their form from Garner's original filing system. Garner's labels, titles and other identifying notes have also been maintained. The archivist needed only to place a few loose research papers in the folders. The archive spans the five years Garner spent researching and eventually writing *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. In 2006, she added a cache of letters from readers and a cassette recording of journalist Phillip Adams's *Late Night Live* interview with Joe's killer, Anu Singh, and the Cinque parents from 25 August 2004.

Over a thousand pages of heavily annotated, highlighted and tagged court transcripts precede witness statements, police interviews, psychiatric assessments, and copies of tendered police evidence. In *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Garner explains that in the years following the trials she began each day by scouring the newspapers, scissors at the ready. She was drawn to stories about 'murder, trial, punishment', and 'collected horrors, pointlessly, fanatically, in a sort of secret grief'. She writes: 'My files bulged with cuttings that did not enlighten me.'[11] The volume of that collected material is daunting. In addition to the newspaper and journal cuttings, there are interviews with psychiatrists and psychologists, legal theory papers, and judgements on negligence and duty of care. Garner made separate folders for research on forgiveness and punishment.

My appreciation of the archive was enhanced by various conversations with Garner. I was struck by the things Garner discovered in her research – for all three nonfiction books – that within her ethical framework she chose not to reveal in the published works. On one loose A4 page she had written: 'The things one knows but cannot say.' Fortunately, we were able to discuss some of those discoveries. I was also able to clarify facts, test out my readings of material and, at times, get a clearer understanding of Garner's thoughts on particular issues. I offer just one example: in an email outlining topics for an upcoming discussion about punishment and forgiveness, Garner said she would like to talk about the South Korean movie *Secret Sunshine*.[12] As a consequence, our discussion about pain and forgiveness, within the context of Joe Cinque's death, developed into a broader (layperson's) philosophical consideration of forgiveness, emotions and human fallibility. The archive was the starting point for research that gave me a deeper understanding of Garner the writer and individual.

Garner has commented in interviews that she grew a thicker skin after the fallout from *The First Stone*. The truth of that statement is on display in some of the later drafts for *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. Repeatedly her editor, Judith Lukin-Amundsen, cautions: 'You're vulnerable here.' Each time Garner pencils in: 'Yes', 'Ok' or even, 'don't care'. Invariably, these were the moments in the book upon which the critics would later seize. Other comments clarify her intentions and offer insights about her method: 'I want to own this spite rather than projecting it outwards', 'I've reworked this trying to convey a sick whirl of thoughts that's going nowhere', 'I want it to sound not like a reasoning voice, but like an incredulous slightly gossipy voice' and, regarding the 'Joe Cinque is dead' that tolls through the book: 'I want this to keep striking like a gong. Am prepared to risk people finding it monotonous.'

In 2005 Garner added to the archive with a donation of video and cassette tapes relating to *The First Stone*. The videos included Garner and Mead appearing on *7.30 Report*, *Four Corners* and *A Current Affair* from September 1995, and *An Evening with Helen Garner*, an address Garner delivered to an audience in Orange that same month. The recording was of Garner speaking to author Cassandra Pybus and interviewer Ramona Koval on ABC 'Books and Writing' from 14 April 1995. A significantly edited transcript of that discussion was later published in *Australian Book Review*. Staff at the NLA advised that I could not listen to or view these materials unless they were first digitised. The Library offered a digitisation service at a cost of $165 per recording and the possibility of an 18-month timeframe. The ABC could complete the process for a similar price within a shorter time. This issue of availability will be an ongoing issue for writers, researchers and archivists.

By the time Garner was collecting her material for *Joe Cinque's Consolation* she was using CDs. These could have been viewed on-site in the Library but it turned out that some were missing. The labelled covers were there, but not the discs. The archivists, always so diligent and professional, took this absence very seriously and contacted Garner immediately. Fortunately, the material on them was duplicated in typed transcripts included elsewhere in the archive.

The archiving 'I'

Jennifer Douglas has noted that in 'the literature on personal archives, little attention has been paid to the knowing and controlling role of the donor'.[13] Douglas draws attention to the ways in which the archiving 'I' constructs an archive, and therefore a version or

versions of the self, through 'cleansing the archive of its more personal elements'.[14] To an extent, Garner succeeds in circumscribing the amount of personal material available in her archive, but the archive is never wholly self-contained. I went searching for evidence not directly under her control.

Garner's letters and postcards populate the private and public collections of writers in Australia and around the world. Recently, the writer David Malouf was organising material to deposit in his open-access archive at the Fryer Library. He came across nearly one hundred postcards from Garner. He read each one, laughed all over again and sent them off. Garner's correspondence in Murray Bail's archive, on the other hand, is embargoed until 20 years after Bail's death.

Axel Clark's papers in the NLA include 188 letters from Garner – or 'Fordie' as she was known in younger days – each with envelope attached. These letters, sent largely between 1962 and 1967, and 1985 and 1986, were invaluable for my research. As a 20-year-old, Helen joked to Axel: 'One day these letters will be famous – "The Life, Loves and Letters of Helen Ford"'.[15] She did not envisage her later fame nor that Axel would preserve and later archive her early correspondence with him. Again, Garner authorised my access despite the intensely personal nature of this material.

Maryanne Dever has argued that:

> letters do not give unmediated access to the writing self, but offer instead discrete instances of self-representation. They are occasions for the projection of 'ideal selves', fleeting – or flirting – masks adopted according to the demands of the recipient and circumstance, opportunities to fashion and perform a particular self for a chosen audience.[16]

In contrast, Janet Malcolm asks:

> Why do books of letters move us as biographies do not? When we are reading a book of letters, we understand the impulse to write biographies, we feel the intoxication the biographer feels in working with primary sources, the rapture of first hand encounters with another's lived experience.[17]

Garner's letters to Axel fall somewhere between these two perspectives, but I would argue considerably closer to Malcolm's position.

The letters are not arranged in strict chronological order. They give an impression of having been gathered together and deposited as a whole. Yet there are significant absences. For example, the story 'Recording Angel', which appeared in *Cosmo Cosmolino*, referenced the time when Axel had undergone surgery to remove a brain tumour. As I noted in *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and her Work* (2017),[18] the publication of this story hurt him deeply. He wrote Garner a long, angry letter and told her to stop writing about him. She told me that she sent a curt reply. A year or so later, she wrote an apology to Axel and asked for his forgiveness. He replied that forgiveness was neither appropriate, nor required. Neither of Garner's letters to Axel are in his papers. When I told her this fact she replied, 'I probably have a copy of them here. But I am not going to show you.'[19]

In the course of my project, Hilary McPhee, Garner's long-time publisher, editor and friend, also granted me access to her restricted papers in NLA. Here I discovered another wealth of correspondence: letters and emails that passed between McPhee and Garner over a 24-year period from 1981 until 2005. McPhee had launched *Cosmo Cosmolino* in March 1992, speaking of her relationship with Garner as one of the 'rich seams' of her life. It had been less a process of editing than one of continuing a long conversation about:

> children and men … our marriages … female friendships … betrayal and forgiveness and getting over things. We've wrestled with what we suspect are male notions of genius and the female life of art. We've talked about the arrangements of words and the meanings they convey – until we got older and braver and came at last to the thing we call the soul.[20]

The letters between these women canvass such topics. From my (perhaps naïve, even sentimental) perspective, I felt they read as love letters to a long and complicated friendship. When I suggested as much, each woman dismissed the idea unequivocally.

It was in McPhee's papers that I struck researcher's gold. The early draft manuscript for *Cosmo Cosmolino* not only revealed that the book was intended to be a collection of seven short stories about spirituality and the soul – rather than the three stories of uneven length that were later published – but also contained an unpublished story titled 'A Visitation'. I emailed a query to Garner. She did not remember the story and asked what it was about. I gave a brief outline. She responded: 'Oh yes now I remember. Gosh it sounds so overblown and gothic. Which would be why I never published it.' I asked if she would like me to get one of the Library staff to copy it for her but she declined the offer. She remained unconvinced about the story and did not want to look at it. I discuss this story and its implications for understanding Garner's work at some length in *A Writing Life*. Of relevance here is that the discovery triggered a new line of questioning and research that uncovered aspects of Garner's life and thinking I may otherwise have missed. It may also have spurred Garner to recover a short, related version of the story, 'My First Baby', which she included in 2016 in *Everywhere I Look*. I expressed surprise on seeing 'My First Baby' included in that collection, given I had been searching for its origins for some time and neither Garner nor McPhee could remember details of its publication. Garner replied that she had found it in the back of a dusty filing cabinet!

Further archives and living creators

Additional open-access archives provided essential research material. The McPhee Gribble and *Scripsi* archives held at the University of Melbourne Archives contained correspondence, manuscripts, song lyrics, photographs, stories, reviews and ephemera from the late 1970s through to the early 1990s.[21] Of crucial importance in the McPhee Gribble archive was Garner's original screenplay for *The Last Days of Chez Nous* (1992), and her considerable correspondence with filmmaker Ken Cameron when he was preparing his film *Monkey Grip*. Elsewhere, the minutes of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, held by the National Archives of Australia in Sydney, revealed that in August 1984 Tom Shapcott, as Director, wrote to Senator Barry Cohen, then Minister for Home Affairs & the Environment, noting that there would be two vacancies arising on the Australia Council Board in November of that year. The Board nominated Garner to fill one of the positions. Cohen, 'not attracted by any of the names suggested', responded with his own recommendations. Shapcott replied:

> I would have thought [the Minister] would be aware that Helen Garner is considered by many highly qualified specialists to be the most interesting younger novelist in the country. David Malouf, for instance, would rank her as perhaps the best novelist to have appeared in this country in the last half dozen years.

In September 1984, a 10-week federal election campaign got underway, delaying consideration of the matter. On 12 March 1985, Shapcott wrote again to Cohen, stating:

> The Board unanimously resolved that Helen Garner's name be resubmitted to you as being the Board's strongest recommendation for a new member. This recommendation is on the basis of Helen Garner's literary ability and experience, her reputation as the outstanding woman fiction writer of her generation, her high esteem among her fellows, and the glowing reports on her terms as writer in residence in places as diverse as the University of Western Australia and universities in Tokyo.[22]

Garner and the writer Angelo Loukakis were appointed to the Literature Board for a three-year term from 27 April 1985. It was interesting to find that Garner enjoyed such strong support amongst her peers at that time.

One of the great benefits in researching a living writer was that I had access to nearly all the key players who had created the archives I was using – Garner, Peter Craven, Michael Heyward and Hilary McPhee. Ed Campion was present at the Literature Board meetings. I was also able to interview of many of Garner's friends and contemporaries from her university days through to the present. Conversely, Murray Bail, Jenna Mead and Alison Clark – important people in Garner's life and story – declined to be interviewed. Others, who may have harboured reservations about Garner and her work, were reluctant to comment.

Having completed my initial sweep of the archives already mentioned, I returned to two restricted oral history recordings at the National Library: Garner's 1982 interview with Hazel de Berg, and her 2005 extended conversation with the writer Sara Dowse.[23] The 45-minute de Berg recording was not available for listening; a 15-page transcript suffices. Garner speaks about her childhood, her time at Melbourne University, Glen Tomasetti's influence on her life and writing, her time teaching at Fitzroy High, her two first books and the offence she has caused writing about friends and family. The 408 minutes of Dowse's interview are embargoed until 2035. By the time I accessed these files, the new Special Collections Reading Room was open at the NLA. Cocooned in a light-filled glass room, I was privileged to listen to hours of quiet, thoughtful conversation between two intelligent women writers. They spoke about family, childhood, marriages, feminism, writing, spirituality, death and the significant people in Garner's life. Much of this discussion shaped and was included in my narrative.

Still the 'archive' was not exhausted. Over my years of research, Garner volunteered further material. As noted, she sent me the eulogies written for her parents. She also sent the eulogy she delivered for Di Gribble in October 2011. When I asked if she had a copy of the address she delivered at St John's Darlinghurst as part of the Women of Faith and Action series in 1998, Garner was surprised that I knew about it. No, she said, she probably spoke off rough notes. She then forwarded her tribute to the minister Bill Lawton, who was forced into retirement that year, and her letter of protest to the Archdeacon dated 24 May 1999. Garner also sent me photographs. Some I was permitted to use; others, which she felt belonged more to her family than herself, I was not. When her sister Sally Ford told me about a mural she and Alice Garner had painted on the side wall of their old communal house in Scotchmer Street, North Fitzroy, my 'archive' expanded to include that wall. The new owners of the house had planned to paint over the mural only to be advised that it held the unique history of a generation of Melbourne writers, musicians and artists. I was able to photograph the mural and publish the images in *A Writing Life*.

This House of Grief

Originally, I thought to structure my book around the predominant spaces that inform Garner's work: bedrooms, kitchens, courtrooms and public institutions. It proved to be an unworkable methodology because, as Kerryn Goldsworthy notes, there is a 'close and immediate engagement in [Garner's] work with the circumstances of her own life, with the time and place in which the writing was produced, and with the representation of that time and place as manifested in the details of material culture and social practice'.[24] In the end, I structured the book, and wrote each chapter, chronologically.

When it came time to write about *This House of Grief* (2014), there was no secondary material at hand. I turned to Janet Malcolm's *Iphigenia in Forest Hills: Anatomy of a Murder Trial* (2011), but found that it was of limited use. Garner volunteered that she had packed up all her research materials, ready to send to NLA. She said she would send nothing until I had had a chance to work on her files. I went to Melbourne. She gave me the key to her office. Here were six archival boxes – three of marked-up court transcripts sporting multi-coloured tags – meticulously arranged. In other words, here was the original archive untouched, and therefore unchanged, by any other individuals. This time I was free to watch the submergence videos, police interviews and recorded *Sixty Minutes* and *Australian Story* programs that examined key people and the Farquharson story from very different perspectives.

I began at the beginning.

There were 10 process journals. As before, Garner kept daily notes of events, court proceedings, her research and correspondence, her feelings and dreams. Often, she would return to her office after a day in court, wrung out, sometimes extremely upset. She wrote about falling asleep on the mattress beside her desk, of feeling distressingly flat trudging up the stairs from her office to make tea or use the bathroom. I too was using those stairs. I worked near her rolled-up mattress, with its adjacent pile of *London Review of Books*. I read Garner's journals sitting at the desk where they were composed. Behind me were her secondary sources, arranged on the bookshelf. On the walls, scraps of paper with relevant quotations. The whiteboard held two important notes about painful details that stayed with Garner from the trials.

On the Monday morning when Garner handed me her key, she said she was worried that I was on my own in Melbourne and would be working alone on this material. She made space in her diary for me to come for dinner midweek. I did not envisage needing company. I had read *This House of Grief* a number of times and written a draft analysis. Surprisingly, by the Wednesday I craved relief from the darkness that seemed to have overtaken me. In her journals Garner recorded being perplexed by the intensity of her 'persistent, aching, leaking sadness'. At one point, she felt that she had become 'porous', absorbing Farquharson's 'states' – 'the endless dullness, the stunned plodding' – and the torrent of emotions thrown up by the current trial. I had a new, very real appreciation of that feeling.

Back in 2011, while immersed in the Farquharson trials, Garner spoke at a Narrative and Healing Symposium I had convened at the University of Sydney. She talked about the ethical obligations that informed her nonfiction. She spoke about bearing witness to the suffering of others, and the shame and guilt attached to her powerful curiosity about people's suffering. She admitted to being worried that she had given the impression over the years of feasting 'bright-eyed on people's pain'. She described being on Darwin radio following the publication of *The Spare Room* (2008) and being taken aback by a comment

from a listener that *yet again* she was forcing her way into the centre of somebody else's pain. Then, she answered the charge as best she could. On reflection, she wished she had responded by explaining:

> I hope what I'm doing in writing is taking someone else's trauma into the centre of *me* where I can contemplate it and brood over it in some kind of thoughtful and intimate way, and then try and shape it into a piece of writing that will respect its complexity and maybe even relieve some of the pain that the existence of the trauma causes to everyone who is aware of it, not just the person to whom the pain has happened.[25]

Garner poured the trauma of the Farquharson murders, and her brooding over them, onto the pages of her process journals. I read these journals more literally than I had read her journals for the previous books. Why had I forgotten that she used her journals as a private canvas onto which she could pour raw emotions and from which she would later fashion her narrative? Why did I not approach these journals with the scholarly distance I had assumed previously? After considerable reflection, I believe my response was influenced significantly by my surroundings. Being in the intimate space of Garner's office affected me in unforeseen ways. I wonder whether, removed from the more impersonal, scholarly space of the NLA, I became too emotionally involved with the material. My first draft chapter on *This House of Grief* was inordinately bleak. Whereas the book was written in a tone of great restraint, my analysis focused heavily on what I perceived to be Garner's sadness and despair. Future scholars may or may not make this same mistake. I sound a word of caution.

How the archive shaped my writing

A Writing Life, which I have termed a literary portrait, is a blend of literary analysis, cultural history and biography. I interweave what I learned from the archives, and interviews with Garner and others, with information on the public record and my readings of Garner's work.

In researching and writing the book I discovered the truth of Robert McGill's observation that 'archival study of living authors' work is not merely textual criticism but a form of anthropology and even of personal psychology'.[26] As I note in my introduction to the book, my approach was inspired by Janet Malcolm's essay 'Forty-one False Starts', in which she constructs a portrait of the American artist David Salle. Through fragmentary entries, Malcolm traverses aspects of Salle's life, his art, published reviews and her interviews with him, adding a touch here, modifying something there. She has a profound respect for the absences, for what cannot be known, or need not be known. I sought to craft a portrait of Garner that acknowledged the impossibility of capturing the full essence of her life. And yet, *A Writing Life* is a biography of sorts; at the very least, it is a biography of Garner's writing.

In 'Biographical Desire and the Archives of Living Authors', McGill examines some of the ways in which publicly accessible archives complicate biographical practice. He argues that while it 'would appear that … living authors' archives may not be properly considered autobiography, they constitute at least an anticipatory framework for biography, circumscribing the kind of "discoveries" that biographers will be able to make'.[27] He is right. Garner has chosen very carefully what to include in, and omit from, her archive. Yet it transpired that I had access to additional material that Garner had not envisaged. She was surprised to hear that Axel Clark had kept her old letters, and, despite giving me permission, she was troubled that I had read them. Similarly, she had no knowledge of what was contained in McPhee's private papers or the other public-access archives I used.

McGill is interested in the 'psychodynamics of the scholar–author relationship', particularly as regards 'the power relationships that develop between living authors and scholars with regard to the authors' archive'.[28] Exploring the soured relations between Alice Munro and JoAnn Craig, he writes about the problems that may eventuate 'when the still-living author reappears to intervene'[29] in the scholar's work. He identifies the possible contest that can arise if and when 'the living author and scholar each claim a privileged relationship to that author function' in the archive. Such a situation never arose between Garner and myself. At no stage did she attempt to interfere with my research and writing. She saw nothing that I wrote until I sent her my completed manuscript. The only hint of any possible contest over interpretation was her response to my chapter on *This House of Grief*.

Garner was my first reader. I sent my manuscript to her with a warning that this was my version of a writer by the name of Helen Garner. By that stage I felt I knew her well enough to predict her reaction. After 36 hours, suspecting that I would be anxious, she sent a short email to tell me she was working her way through it. Late the next day she texted me that she felt it was too biographical. I waited. Understandably, she felt that she had been served 'a massive hit of psychoanalysis and a lifetime of reviews in one go'. Garner read the manuscript twice before returning it with a letter. 'It's been a strange experience,' she wrote, 'I had many moments of exhilaration, & many of the sort of self-dislike & embarrassment that you write about.'[30]

Garner never requested a right of veto, but I gave her one. Her comments on the manuscript, first in pencil then red pen, tell the story of her reactions. When I question her motives for entering her sisters' bedrooms and kitchens armed with a tape recorder, she writes, 'Ouch. This is really good.' On the court cases brought against *Digger*, 'I'd forgotten ALL this!' and, in the margins of my overly bleak chapter on *This House of Grief*, 'I hate all this stress on "grief & despair"'. Garner requested I remove two minor episodes that she felt might offend people still living. I was happy to do so.

I set my own ethical guidelines for this project: I would include discussion only about discoveries that furthered understanding of Garner's writing. I had no interest in exposing hurtful or potentially libellous content, and would not report private details unrelated to Garner's published work. I felt a weight of responsibility owing to the trust Garner placed in me, not as a constraint or a burden but as a constructive challenge to treat the material with the sensitivity that it deserved. I respected Helen Garner the writer, but also the woman who is a mother, grandmother, sister, aunt, friend. Similarly, I was well aware that the people of most public interest mentioned in her archive are alive and deserving of equal respect.

It is true, to an extent, that the figure with whom I 'gained intimacy in the archives is … not a living person but the author function', 'a reified composite' of the Helen Garner who authors texts and 'versions of [her] found in paratexts'.[31] And yet, that theorised division between the living author and the archival 'I' is not so clear-cut when the primary content of the archive is a private journal into which the author has poured her thoughts and emotions. All the more so, when that author has made herself available for open and fearless interrogation by the researcher. Pamela Banting argues that the archive is marked by the author's absence: 'Absence is the mark of her presence.' 'The archive,' Banting writes, 'undermines the author as author-ity. The identity of the body attached to the writing slips away, is erased, in the proliferation of textual marks. The author becomes a chimera of her own signature.'[32] Theoretically, I appreciate the truth of Banting's position. It does not, however,

reflect my experience. If anything, working in Garner's archives made me hyperconscious of her lived existence, her bodily presence, the authority of her signature.

Before I began my research, I had taught Garner's fiction and nonfiction to undergraduate students for many years. I had met Garner twice, on both occasions within the professional context of academic and writer. We were not friends. I admired much of her work but I was not a devoted 'Garner fan'. Kirsten MacLeod observes that archives 'can bring out intense feelings and enthusiasms in the academic – fannish enthusiasms even'.[33] After spending two years in Garner's archive, moving between it, her published works and her private self, my admiration for her writing and my appreciation of her as a person were immeasurably enhanced.

Ascribing motivations

Authors generate records and surrender them to archival institutions for a variety of reasons, 'from financial gain to increased academic interest in their published work and the elevation of their literary reputations'. They may create them as a form of control, 'eager to influence what is known or said about them'.[34] Authors may also have a variety of reasons that determine their choice of institution for their deposits. In 2001, Marie-Louise Ayers noted that John Thompson's study of the NLA's administrative files revealed that:

> the negotiations surrounding … 'the turmoil of the private sensibility against the public claims of posterity' … together with issues of trust, mutual regard, and the need for collecting institutions to demonstrate their gravitas, were at least as important as financial considerations in the business of collecting during the middle half of the century.[35]

Garner may have first deposited her papers for financial reasons: her August 1996 donation to the NLA was made under the Taxation for the Arts Scheme; her papers relating to *Joe Cinque's Consolation* were given under the Cultural Gifts Program in 2005. When the time came for her to consider donating papers relating to *This House of Grief*, however, there was a shift in her motivation and thinking. In February 2016, she spent a day at the NLA looking through *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque* papers. As she wrote to me afterwards:

'I was strangely moved when I saw the way they had been curated/preserved. Such delicacy and intelligent care. I felt a big rush of admiration for the library and decided to hand over the Farquharson material as well.'[36] When Kylie Scroope, the curator of manuscripts, suggested to Garner, 'People would probably think this was peculiar but I have a sense that the collections whisper to each other', she knew she had found the right place for her work.

The very acts of documentation, collection and deposit anticipate a future readership. While we cannot know whether Garner may have envisaged a reader other than herself when she began writing her process journals back in 1992, there are occasions in her most recent journals where she seems acutely aware that scholars will scrutinise and interpret her words and methodology. She labels the pasted-in emails carefully. She redacts certain names that are not for the public record. Significantly, she does not strike out her most personal moments of doubt and despair. I do not know what restrictions, if any, Garner will place on this research material, or what shape new encounters with the archive will take. I do know that having simultaneous access to the original archive and to its living creator affected me in unexpected ways. In affording me unique insights into the methods and motivations of a living writer, the archive, in its many forms and iterations, enriched my narrative.

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