**Author: Helen Garner**

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Helen Garner has known fame since the 1970’s. On reading *Stories* myself, it became clear why she has attracted so much attention over so many decades. It should be noted that Garner has been receiving awards for her works consistently since the ‘70’s. Her book *Monkey Grip* not only received an award from the National Book Council but was also on the curriculum for high school. How do I know this? I read it for year nine in rural Victoria and I vividly remember while reading it making a mental note to myself to a) not become a heroin addict when I grew up and b) to not fall in love with a heroine addict either.

Garner has written novels, screenplays, short story collections, essays and reports and also works of non-fiction and is touted as one of the best writers in Australia. After an education at Melbourne Uni and a stint as a teacher Garner began writing. Her style was immediately pigeon-holed as grunge lit about urban life with a social realism and directness that could be thought of as confronting to some. Critics just love to criticise her: “she talks dirty and passes it off as realism,” and “she has published her private journal rather than written a novel,” are just some of the comments applied to Garner. But one only has to look at the good reviews to truly understand her: from the New York Times - “Garner’s stories share characteristics of the postcard; they flash before us carefully recorded images that remind us of harsher realities not pictured. And like postcards they are economically written, a bit of conversation is transcribed, a memory recalled, an event noted, scenes pass as if viewed from a train – momentarily, distinct and tantalising in their beauty.” And from Life Sentence - “She has a Jane Austen-like ability to whizz an arrow straight into the truest depths of human nature, including her own.”

Garner has the ability to speak straight to my heart through her ordinary characters who seem to be living extraordinary events and also fairly average days and yet underneath it all is Garner whittling away in the background with her diary/memoir narration; everyday settings; discontinuous, exploding and fragmenting structures; eloquent language; frankness and her incredible ability to show absolutely fully, and never tell. There is nothing sentimental or melodramatic about her work and yet one senses the dramatic in *Postcards from Surfers* about her mother and Aunt Lorna who she is on vacation with: “Late in the afternoon my mother and Aunt Lorna and I walk along the beach…the tide is out…their two voices run on, one high and one low. If I speak, they pretend to listen, just as I feign attention to their endless, looping discourses: these are our courtesies: this is love. Everything is spoken, nothing is said.” And later: “My mother and Aunty Lorna are well advanced in knitting patterns for my sister’s teenage children… conduct their monologues which cross, coincide and run parallel…my father mumbles advice to the footballers and emits bursts of contemptuous laughter…” The scene is set, the love is there, the family come together to spend time with one another, there is drama and ordinariness in her characters. We all know these people. We’ve all lived these scenes with our loved ones. We all know about the spirit of holiday – crafting together, talking together, walking together, watching TV together. We all want it. We yearn for it. Garner knows that and writes in a way that makes you remember the reason you wanted it so badly in the first place. Family life. Ordinariness. Magnificence too.

In *My Hard Heart* Garner writes about her friend Steve who had “driven down from Sydney in a panel van that was so heavy with carpentry equipment that he parked it under a tree outside my house and went everywhere by tram.” As we get into the story we understand that Steve hasn’t had sex for a long time when he confides: “… I’m celibate but I’m not A-sexual. It’s not so bad…I had a heart of stone, I was all black inside, I was grieving over everything, I’d feel an impending relationship and know I had nothing to give, so I’d stop.” Garner leaves the end of this story enticingly up to the reader when she writes: “…upstairs in my room I pulled the curtain open and lay down in a current of night air. The curtain brushed and brushed against the windowsill. I heard a tram go chattering through the intersection, then the street outside was quiet. The little flame stirred in its cage of clay: I felt it shiver and begin to move.”

Garner tells us what is going to happen to her characters and yet doesn’t. She is at once forthcoming and remote, direct and yet evasive, charming and yet a realist, full of detail and yet sparse and her characters are average yet brilliant, full of richness and yet simple. She is gifted at writing about the mystical magic of life and has the awe-inspiring ability to set the scene so accurately as to place the reader in the mind of the character with very little and sometimes no dialogue. A feminist who has remained mostly single, she has endured and persisted in the boy’s club that is the Australian publishing industry. Resilience becomes her. She is entirely deserving of all the accolades awarded to her. I rate this book 4.5 out of 5.

*Linda Maree Malcolm is an internationally published author and poet who has written across all genres and writes well received reviews for her local arts centre. She has taught primary, high school and University students for several years. She is about to launch a writing course for her local community house which will be available online. She is currently studying Masters of English and hopes to one day get back to writing the ten novels and non-fiction books she has begun that sit in her study draw www.lindamareemalcolmauthor.com.au*