Gina Mercer

EXERCISING THE MUSCLE OF CURIOSITY: A CONVERSATION WITH HELEN GARNER

Helen Garner visited James Cook University in May 1997 at the invitation of The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies and the School of Languages, Literature and Communication. She delivered the Colin Roderick Lectures on her chosen topic: "The Art of the Dumb Question." The following conversation took place the day after her final lecture, aboard a Pure Pleasure Cruises catamaran, as it steamed from Townsville out to Kelso Reef. It was a freakishly wet day, so we sat on the upper deck in splendid isolation. All the other passengers stayed downstairs ensconced in the fuggy main cabin watching videos, directing odd looks at us whenever we moved about the boat. Perhaps these looks were prompted by the fact that we were wrapped in ill-fitting sloppy jumpers, jeans and scarves and sat talking avidly just to each other all day. We were slightly cold and damp but we found pleasure in the talking, the isolation from others, the squirrel raids downstairs to collect food, and the sensuous greys and blues of the sky and seascape. It was like being immersed in a huge D.S. Lowry painting all day ...

Gina: Recently you talked about the existence of several Helen Garners, of how different selves were constructed in the media, of how different meanings now attach to the name or signifier "Helen Garner." What effect does this have? For example do you experience a sense of having a fragmented self or do you sustain a sense of that humanist ideal, the unified self, or ...?

Helen: Perhaps I once thought that I could explain my self, and if I did it carefully enough or often enough then my explanation would prevail ... but I don't think that now. It's particularly difficult since I wrote *The First Stone,* which has made me much more of a public figure, so that this has all become much more of a problem. Perhaps that's why I'm finding it so hard ... right now ... to get back to writing fiction. I find so many different versions of me reflected back in the media and other places that I go, that I don't know who or where I am anymore. Writers generally are not particularly stable people. I found it unnerving, being attacked in public, or even being defended by others in public. Whatever their stance, they were all interpreting me in different ways. It's a strange feeling, being so open to others' interpretations of you.

Gina: In one lecture you discussed the writing of non-fiction and biography, and in particular, the debate about putting "too much of the author's self into the narrative." Which self gets performed or represented there do you think?

Helen: Oh, I think maintaining a unified self is much easier when writing non-fiction. No. This is hard. [Pause—we think and watch a rain-scud] You talk about everyone having a wardrobe of different selves that they select and then perform in different settings or situations—but who or what is selecting the appropriate self to put on? In a public situation, I imagine that I'm taking, or stripping, off, phoneyness, trying to get back to some honest self.

Gina: When you perform at universities, you seem to perform a modest self, a self which deflects attack by doing an engaging self-critique, an open confession of what you identify as ineptitude or naivete. Is this a conscious strategy to allay your anxieties about doing "lectures" in a daunting context?

Helen: I do get anxious about performing at universities. I have a poor memory for things. Around people who work with theory I feel as if my head is empty of useful thoughts ... but then I experience that feeling outside of universities too .... Is it a conscious strategy ...? I do have a strong anxiety about being shown up as ignorant in a university setting. It goes back to my experience as a student, when I went to tutorials and I hadn't done the reading, because I was too lazy, and not focused on the work. I was too busy having a good time, and the tutor would ask me a direct question and I wouldn't know the answer. It was humiliating. To avoid this I try to talk only about areas where I feel more confident ... like my own shortcomings [wry laugh].

Gina: Yes, there's that psychological condition where successful women feel that their achievements are the result of lucky circumstances, rather than that they have earned success through merit. Is that something you relate to?

Helen: Yes, it is. Even after selling 70,000 copies of a book, I keep expecting I'll get "found out" one day, someone'll discover that I'm not really "prepared," that I'm not really worth all that attention, and yes, I think it does more often affect women. Most male authors I have known are much more confident than I'll ever be. It's partly to do with the areas in which people engage with each other. For example, I'm not especially interested in politics. Like a lot of women, I'm more

interested in conversations to do with immediate experience and feelings. If others aren't interested in that, then it leaves the area of opinions, where you can clash and clank against each other. As the performance of the opinionated expert is not available to me, and I tend to forget everything when expected to perform in that way, this causes anxiety.

Gina: In the mid-80s I was asked to write about your work and I started, in proper scholarly fashion, by reading lots of reviews, and found that your reviewers consistently used a common group of terms: "housewifely"; "miniaturist"; "slim"; "finely etched"; "modest" and so on. I wrote up these findings to suggest that this was a way of promoting you as a safe, non-disruptive feminist (*Australian Book Review*, 81, June 1986, 26-28). How do reviewers refer to you these days? Have you noticed any shifts in the language and attitudes?

Helen: I remember reading that piece of yours. No, I think that perception has definitely shifted now. Since I've written about crematoriums, morgues and death, they can't dismiss me as only working on domestic, trivial topics. I'm finally seen as touching on the "universal," as if relationships, love and addiction weren't! I think there is a realization that I'm not squeamish. The flipside of this is that some people find my curiosity morbid.

Gina: Maybe the representation of you by reviewers as modest has changed, but the modest Helen Garner whom you perform at universities hasn't. This interests me because I enjoy your work most when you bring to bear an immodest, powerful and thoughtful gaze upon things or people that others either don't notice, or would rather not notice ... everything from prizewinning marmalade to child abuse. What do you think about this?

Helen: If you go into situations like the morgue, where you're watching people cutting up bodies, being self-effacing is very useful and most likely to produce an open response. If I'm self-effacing then people tend not to be defensive and that means I can get closer. If I show that I'm not marching in with lots of loud opinions, preaching, that I don't have a line to run, it helps my research. But when I'm performing at a uni, I still don't have a line to run, so I feel I have to entertain, to hand over a pound of flesh. I want to operate on the personal level, it's what I do, all I seem to know is what I've personally experienced, so I find I'm slicing off bits of myself. I do it to please people. I cut off a piece of myself and throw it out, and it keeps people away.

Gina: My image of you involves seeing you sitting with your head slightly to one side, persistently asking immodest and challenging questions. Some people never seem to want to question things, can you say what helped you to learn this art, or what compels you to do it?

Helen: I'm told by my husband [Murray Bail] that I'm a narcissist, that I'm too interested in my self and my own responses to things. I hate feeling trapped in that. I've learnt a lot from watching how *he* asks questions. He's quite brilliant at it, and it seems to come naturally to him. It's slowly dawned on me that other people's lives and obsessions are at least as interesting as my own. But I've had to learn that curiosity—to apply myself to it. Questioning people closely was not the done thing in our household when I was young. It was thought rude.

Gina: I always find people who complain of being bored profoundly irritating. I automatically, and probably unfairly, condemn them as being lazy and apathetic, so I was interested in your idea that curiosity can be developed like a muscle. What is it that motivates people to develop that muscle do you think?

Helen: Strangers that you meet, a lot of people really, don't publicly show curiosity. Yet they greedily guzzle magazines about other people's lives, so clearly they do feel curious at some level. Maybe it's a lower middle-class genteel thing, that old idea that you mustn't discuss sex, religion or politics, with the aim always being to smooth over, and make all social intercourse harmonious. It's very weird. I think people often read curiosity as intrusiveness. It's squashed in small children—with all those rules "Don't stare," "Don't point." But if you take time to be with someone and to just be yourself, then you can ask intimate things and people don't mind.

Gina: How do you feel about being interviewed these days, after the experiences you went through after the publication of *The First Stone?* Once I think you talked about enjoying it because you discovered things and ideas during the process of being interviewed? Is that still the case?

Helen: Some interviewers are dingbats. You never get anywhere with them. Others want to have an interesting conversation—maybe that's more often the case with women. I hate T.V interviews: I constantly worry about how I look. They plaster you all over with make-up and do hideous things to your hair, and you feel you're not "you" any more. Radio's fun. If it's online, you don't have to look at the person. You can

crack jokes. I enjoy it if the other person is genuinely interested in the sorts of things I'm interested in. If someone tries to do a probing sort of interview I tend to try to disarm them by not having any secrets, by being very open.

Gina: You said in one of your lectures, that you were grateful to the Demidenko scandal because the media attention given to that took some of the heat off you. Why do you think both your case and hers attracted such scorching attention in the media? Do you think the gender of the authors involved made a difference? Or was it more to do with that desire for true stories, the desire for certainty, on the part of the reading public, which made both situations so volatile? That both you and Helen Darville were seen to be messing around with "the facts" in ways which were unacceptable, that made people feel ripped off or betrayed?

Helen: I think that last point could definitely be true. David Marr was talking about Pauline Hanson the other day, and he said that she's getting the coverage she's getting because she's a woman and she's sexy. When women breach protocol it gives a *frisson* of sorts. Helen Demidenko was a pretty extreme case because she dressed up and changed her name. My book was seen as breaching protocol because it was called non-fiction but it didn't come out with a clear "truth" and its investigations didn't reveal X,Y & Z about its subjects ... and also because I put my self up front and made my feelings a part of the story.

I think an opportunity for a series of slugging matches between women over sexual harassment was always going to attract attention from the media. It's exciting to see somebody recant, which is what a lot of people thought I was doing. People are scared, they have a fantasy about ferocious feminists, they like to see others dishing it up to them, saying the things they'd like to say but are too afraid to. And for a woman to say those things made it appear that these views were somehow "true," that I had the "inside" story.

Gina: So why did you call the book which you published after *The First Stone, True Stories?* Were you being ironic?

Helen: The title was actually thought up by Michael Heywood, my publisher at Text. I didn't know what to call it, and he came up with that. He thought it might exercise people to think about the nature of "true stories." I didn't choose it in any challenging way. I decided to ignore

its ironic overtones. I just wanted to signal in some way that this was my journalism, which I think of as only slightly truer than my fiction. I do enjoy irony in conversation and jokes, but I'm also wary of it as a defensive mechanism which hampers my efforts to peel off and get underneath the persona.

Gina: Years ago I gave paper about women writers and the way their fiction has frequently been read as being "only autobiographical." You were in the audience and publicly supported that argument. I sense that this still produces a bristle response in you as the dumbest, and most frequently asked, question i.e. "Is your work autobiographical"? Are you still being asked that question? Are women more likely to be asked that than male authors?

Helen: I don't feel quite so bristly about it now. Since I've written non-fiction, I've moved out of that line of fire. I still don't understand, though, why so many readers these days need a guarantee of authenticity. There was hostility lately towards an American writer called Kathryn Harrison, who published a very good book called *The Kiss,* about an affair she had as a young adult, with her father. The book was presented as autobiographical, but once I started to read it, I stopped caring whether it was "true" or not—because the book was such an excellent and sophisticated piece of writing. She lifted the whole thing right up onto an almost mythological level—on that level it was "true," but people in magazines kept on hammering away about veracity, and trying to trace the identity of the father and so on. I found this annoying and beside the point. I do notice, by the way, that writers are much less bothered by these questions than readers are.

And yes, I do think women are more likely to strike this question about autobiographical writing. My husband, for example, is deeply suspicious of women's first person writing. "Therapeutic poeticising" is his term for it. But I'm fascinated by accounts of other people's experience, specially well-written ones. I don't want to be a god-like, omniscient, creative author/writer figure—not all the time anyway!—though I think a lot of male writers do.

Gina: In one lecture you talked about how people have one story in them which they tell repeatedly in various versions, or which profoundly shapes them. What is that story for you?

Helen: I suppose it would have to be the story of me fighting with my father, and of course, by extension, fighting all others who represent the

father-figure to me, like big institutions, powerful men, expert knowledge and theory and all those sorts of things. But the nature of that single and singular story is that you're not conscious of it. Others can see it, or when you're old you might be able to look back and see it.

Gina: You write about the marmalade & cake competition stand at the Royal Melbourne Agricultural Show and about overhearing a woman saying that "plain cakes are the hardest thing to do because you can't hide behind anything." This really resonates with me ... what is the "plain" thing which is the hardest for you to do?

Helen: Minimalist writing is something I'd equate with that kind of "plain work." It is writing with no flourishes, you have to get the ingredients in absolutely perfect balance. You can't put icing over the flaws, or cut it in half and stuff it with cream. *Cosmo Cosmolino* is the most ambitious writing I've done stylistically. It didn't come off because the sentences had been so overworked, to the point where they became stiff, and somewhat purple. The shape was the most problematic part of that. It's in three hunks. I always felt that arrangement was not quite right. I wanted it to be simply a novel but I couldn't get it to stop being awkward and stiff. It never achieved the plainness I wanted it to have.

Gina: Do you like Japanese aesthetics then, because of their tendency to be minimalist?

Helen: No, not especially, that kind of super-controlled aesthetic strikes me as being a bit rigid at times. I do love Japanese food, but the very idea of a tea ceremony can make me feel like rushing around banging off the walls. But once, at a university in Japan, I was taken into a room, which had a wall consisting of a floor-to-ceiling window. In the corner, on the windowsill, which was also the threshold, someone had placed a pot containing a flowering plant. It was placed there with an air of apparent casualness, but it gave such a feeling of bliss, that placement of the flowers.

The Scandinavian aesthetic appeals to me a lot more, all that pale wood and light curtains. Perhaps that's a reaction to the closed-in feeling of the houses in Melbourne. In the two movies I wrote, that was something that really didn't satisfy me in the way they were made. *Two Friends,* that was alright, but in *The Last Days of Chez Nous* they got the house completely wrong. It needed to be a Melbourne house with

that particular closed-in quality, in order to bring out the intense feeling I wanted to convey, of an enclosed space where complex games and intrigues were being played out. The Sydney house, in Glebe, where it was filmed, didn't suggest that feeling at all.

Gina: You speak of going back to church recently, could you talk about that?

Helen: It's the Anglican church that I go to now. I was brought up, not in that faith, but alongside it. I was never baptised as a child, but went to an Anglican school and university college. I was baptised when I was 22. I go to an Anglican church in Darlinghurst, near where I live. I haven't been in Sydney all that long and I get lonely there, and homesick: so I like being part of a congregation. I like my church because the community it serves is so rough and full of trouble that there's no room for bullshit. Drunks and crazy people stagger in sometimes. Early on Sunday mornings someone has to get down on their hands and knees outside the church building and carefully pick up the used syringes. The vicar is the sort of man who can talk about despair and really mean it. There are long periods when I don't go to church at all. The politics of it I hate and find boring. But the communion service is very useful to me. I like the idea of blessing. I don't actually know what blessing is, but I need it.