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**THE ART OF THE DUMB QUESTION:  
FORETHOUGHT AND HINDTHOUGHT ABOUT  
THE FIRST STONE**

*A lecture delivered as part of the Colin Roderick Lectures, at James Cook University, Townsville on Thursday 15 May, 1997 by Helen Garner, at the invitation of The Foundation for Australian Literary Studies and the School of Languages, Literature and Communication.*

I once saw a hand-lettered sign sticky-taped to the wall behind the counter of a sandwich shop in Melbourne. It was a message from the manager to his young employees, and it said:

DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK A DUMB QUESTION:  
IT'S EASIER TO ANSWER IT THAN TO CLEAN UP  
THE MESS YOU'LL MAKE IF YOU DON'T ASK IT.

The so-called dumb question is an article of faith with me, an ideal. How can you learn something if you're too proud or too scared to admit that you don't know it? How many years have I wasted? The so-called dumb question seems to have a lot to do with the non-fiction writing that I do, that is, writing which is based on other people's experiences, and which involves interviewing.

One thing that has taught me a great deal about the ways of the world—about how bad people are at asking the dumb question, and at cleaning up the mess—is a book I published two years ago, *The First Stone*. In this book, as you may know, I tried to examine a set of sad and painful incidents at a residential college at the University of Melbourne, in which the Master was accused by two young women of having made sexual advances to them in the course of a college valedictory party. I'm going to assume that you've got a rough idea of what the book's about and of the angle I took in writing it.

The ethics and politics of the story are very complex. My attitude towards it has enraged some people and interested others. When you've been under attack for having written something, it's hard to speak about it in public without being defensive. I read somewhere recently that "*ego-defence is one of the major obstacles to the discovery of truth.*" So I thought that, rather than tediously defend my book again, I would talk a little about how I came to write the book

in the first place, the techniques I used to gather information, the difficulties I had, and the way the defamation laws pressed upon the book. I'll speak too about how the book strikes me now, after the public outcry—and about certain things I wish I had done differently.

The more I think about it, the weirder it seems to me that I ever wrote a book like *The First Stone*. It's not my kind of thing at all. I'm not a polemicist and I never wanted to be one, not since the earliest days of Women's Liberation, as it was called in the early 70's when it rolled into my life, bringing with it the wonderful excitement one feels at having stumbled on the key to the universe. All the pains and troubles of my life seemed to be explained by the fact of antagonism between the sexes, the injustice of patriarchal social arrangements and so on. It was the first political idea which seemed to have seamless relevance to my personal experience.

My initial elation has become a much more complex set of feelings about feminism, as it has developed; but the basic truth of feminism, its unanswerable justness, I can't see myself every betraying. However, since *The First Stone* was published I have been called, among other things, a traitor to feminism. "Helen bloody Garner has set feminism back by 20 years!" squawked a radio journalist of 25 with blond chook feathers for hair and eyes black with mascara. We shall see.

*The First Stone* was not a project I *planned*.

My interests as a writer had for some time been much more inward. My previous book, *Cosmo Cosmolino*, which seemed to have embarrassed people, was about metaphysical matters—dreams, God, angels, death, certain forms of madness. I have plenty more to figure out in those areas, and I probably would have been still messing about with that sort of thing if I hadn't been diverted by seeing in the paper, one morning back in 1992, a news item about the Master of Ormond College and a charge of sexual assault.

The first thing I did was, in retrospect, quite dumb. I wrote the Master a letter of sympathy.

HINDTHOUGHT #1: would I write such a letter again, today, after everything that's happened? The frank answer would probably be NO—though in a way this is a shame: it's sad how spontaneity gets beaten out of us by other people's responses to it.

What was dumb about that letter I wrote? Its ignorance, and its naive spontaneity. When I picked up the pen that day, I did not think of myself as a

public figure. I just felt shocked and sorry, and dashed it off. I have realised that I can't write letters to strangers any more, without their having a meaning—and a *use*—beyond what I intended—because Helen Garner is not just me any longer: there's no longer a simple link between the words "Helen Garner" and this person that I feel myself to be. Those two words come trailing clouds of meaning from which I can't detach myself—clouds of *projections*—of fantasies projected on to me, or on to my persona, by people who don't know me.

Be that as it may, here was a man who was going down the gurgler. Without asking my permission he photocopied my letter and circulated it throughout the university communities of Melbourne. Awareness of that fateful initial letter moves through the text of *The First Stone* like a tidal wave. I'd call some young feminist on the phone to arrange an interview. She'd seem warm and eager to help; but by time I got there, she would greet me with a frozen expression which I came to recognise, in time, as that of someone who'd been shown a copy of my letter to the Master.

HINDTHOUGHT #2: *I don't blame them.* Looking back, I ought to have brought up the subject of the letter whenever that frozen look appeared and the air in the room dripped icicles. I ought to have applied the technique of the dumb question: "why are you speaking to me so coldly, while on the phone you were so friendly and keen to co-operate?" If I'd had the courage to do this, the silent, negative power that accumulated round the unmentioned letter might have been defused, and useful discussion might have followed.

Here we come to a certain psychological matter, a basic truth about life: "*you are never as conscious of what you're doing as you think you are.*" Like most of the big truths about life, this is one which people—Sigmund Freud, for example—can explain to you till they're blue in the face, but which sinks in only under the pressure of painful personal experience, and must be learnt and relearnt, over and over, as long as life continues. No intellectual understanding of this truth will free you from its power. The point is that you can't get conscious by a simple effort of will. Every now and then, in a grand flash or a tiny sharp twinge, you might perceive yourself and your motives clearly: but then the clouds roll over again and you're back to groping along in the dimness. Awareness must lag behind action.

There are moral states, too, which apply here. Some people would call them *vanity* and *pride*. I would be inclined to use those words about myself, when I think back to the years I spent working on *The First Stone*. I don't mean wall-to-wall vanity and pride, or I hope not—but sporadic attacks of these states, mixed with fear, anger and competitiveness.

In my book I give an account of a phone conversation I had with the complainants' chief supporter, a woman called Dr Jenna Mead, who would have to feature as a central force in anyone's account of these events, but whose identity the country's defamation laws obliged me to conceal—a matter I will touch on later. My point here concerns the precise form of expression used by Dr Mead on the phone that day in response to my request for information about the Ormond College events. She spoke to me like this: "Helen, you have been incredibly *stupid*. You have been amazingly, *unbelievably stupid*."

HINDTHOUGHT #3: in my psyche, this was *my father* speaking. On the very next page you can see a faint tinge of my semi-awareness of this: "Nobody had taken that tone to me *since I was a teenager*." But the penny didn't drop till years later, that the rage and pigheadedness which her tone provoked in me was a throwback to my struggles against my father's disapproval. This phone call planted in me the seed of a hostility which had already, unbeknownst to me, been flourishing in Jenna Mead for quite some time. It took root and began to flourish in me, too, and grew, I think, into the unconscious or semi-conscious force that drove the book.

Would it be true to say that I regret this? It is always humiliating to look back and see, years later, how unconscious you were when you thought you knew what you were doing and why. But people are always saying "If only I'd known then what I know now." It's pointless. Action precedes awareness, and remorse can paralyse people. Who knows what, in my behaviour, drove Jenna Mead to *her* unconscious responses? I don't know her well enough—and it would be impertinent for me—to speculate. The older I get, the more it seems to me that people are like icebergs in an ocean, grinding and clashing against each other beneath water level. We know hardly anything of each other. It's like the last three lines of Matthew Arnold's poem "Dover Beach":

and we are here as on a darkling plain  
swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight  
where ignorant armies clash by night

As I said earlier, *The First Stone* was not a project that I planned, but rather one I drifted into.

At first I thought I would write a feature article for the *Melbourne Age*, partly as a way of licencing myself to pick up the notebook and start to ask the troubling questions that kept coming to mind whenever I thought about the case. From fairly early on I started to keep a diary—a daily account in an exercise book, sketchy at first, of what I had thought or done or asked—a record of my efforts to contact people, to find out what it was all about. I did this as a way of

keeping my head—of keeping tabs on facts, but also on my own thought processes and emotional responses.

I recommend this as a useful habit, for anyone who's engaged in what might become a long writing project: keep a little record of what you feel you learnt each day—the way you are thinking and feeling about the project: hopeful, irritated, despairing and so on. Because it's a spontaneous thing not meant for publication, you find it a relief and even a comfort to write it, and for that reason you are likely to find, much later, that you have tossed off a real, usable insight without having realised its usefulness or point at the time of writing it.

During the whole process I hadn't much of a clue where it was all heading. I didn't take an advance from a publisher until very late in the piece, more than a year after I'd started trying to research it, because I knew there was such a risk that it would come to nothing. I kept on earning my living by doing film reviews and, later, teaching writing for a semester in New York. I thought till well into the book that if I couldn't get the two complainants to talk to me, I wouldn't have a book. And my editor (Hilary McPhee) thought so too. As it turned out, though, their refusal to speak to me (and contrary to what some critics have said, I still maintain that they had every right to refuse to speak to me) was what provided me with a structure for the book.

I slogged on, month after month, knocking on doors and finding some of them opening wide and eagerly, some opened only a crack with a suspicious face peering out, and others slammed forcefully in my face. At first I used a tape recorder. I went out and bought a special little unobtrusive one, so I wouldn't have to set up a great boom-box on the table when I went to people's houses and offices, or met them in cafes, to interview them. I did the first three long interviews on tape, but then of course came the problem of transcription. I was dimly aware that the really big-time non-fiction writers of the world have whole office blocks full of hacks who do their transcribing for them, and often a lot of their interviewing as well. It is simply not possible, for instance, that Norman Mailer himself could have done all the interviews for his massive and brilliant book about the murderer Gary Gilmore, *The Executioner's Song*.

But this kind of professionalism requires money. I hired someone to transcribe the first two interviews, but it was too expensive, and more importantly, hiring someone else to do it caused me to miss out on something crucial—the *brooding stage* that comes after an interview—the memory of the speaker's expressions, the memory of the mood in the room—all the brooding on meaning and emotion and psychology, the stuff that moves and shifts behind the words, and which happens of its own accord while you're engaged in the mechanical task of writing up an account of an event. I realised I was going to have to do the whole thing myself.

I rang up John Bryson, who wrote *Evil Angels*, a wonderful book about the Lindy Chamberlain case, and asked him for advice about interviewing. He told me he'd had the benefit of immense court transcripts, which was something I didn't have, because the Ormond charges had been heard in too low a court. But he gave me one invaluable tip, which he said he'd learnt from the American journalist Martha Gellhorn.

Don't use a tape recorder. Take notes. Train your memory. Write down the key words. And when you leave the interview subject's house, write up the notes straight away. Don't even wait till you get home. Write them up in the car parked outside, or on a park bench or in a cafe.

I took this advice and it served me well.

When you interview with a tape recorder, you can—and are likely to—maintain eye contact with the interviewee throughout the conversation. I used to think this was an advantage, but I think now that the opposite is the case—that people (almost like patients in psychoanalysis)—are relieved by *lack* of eye contact. They don't feel quite so put on the spot. They feel less pressure to perform, to entertain. If you use a notebook, while you're scribbling away they can take a little breather, have a little think. If they let a silence fall, it feels to them not as if they've failed in their duty to keep the flow going, but as if they are permitted to behave with generosity and sympathy: they aren't drying up or resisting your questions, but kindly pausing to let you catch up. This process lets a bit of fresh air, a bit of ordinary social relaxation into the room. Thus the interview begins to feel not like an interrogation but like a common endeavour.

I'm aware that this could sound cynical, like a series of smart tricks to get the jump on someone. I was on a panel once down in Melbourne alongside the American journalist John Berendt, who wrote *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. In my prim way I was shocked to hear him announce quite blatantly that when he was interviewing people he sort of lay in wait for them to betray themselves. He said he let them unconsciously fall into his trap while he sat there thinking, Aha! Gotcha! Then he'd hurry home cheerfully with the goods.

In fact I wasn't only shocked by this. I found it didn't chime at all with my experience of interviewing. My experience is that I don't understand what the person has really been saying—I mean the import of it, its sub-text, its usefulness to me—until I've written up the notes, then typed them up and thought about them long enough to extract myself from my identification with the other person. Sometimes it can take several days for me to regain my separateness. (I wonder, by the way, if this is a *woman thing* or a *novelist thing*, to experience an identification with the interview subject so powerful that for the

duration of the conversation you see the topic through their eyes, and lose your own perspective on it?) Early on in a project, this seems to be a necessary state—specially if you're coming into a story about which you have at best a lively curiosity, rather than a line to run on it. In other words, if you come at a topic cold, as I did with this one, you have to be prepared to spend a HUGE amount of time, till quite late in the piece, fumbling round in the dark. You come away from each interview loaded down with material which seems to contradict everything you've been told in all previous interviews. You lack an overview of the situation which would equip you to make sense of what you've been told. This is very alarming. You tend to flounder and panic. It feels a bit like drowning. You think, My God, why did I ever start this, I must have been crazy.

But there is nothing like this process to teach you to be *patient*. You cannot speed it up and still remain fully engaged with the material: you have to learn how to wait.

Another risk, at this stage, is the *temptation of the byway*. Early on, you don't know which is the highway and which are the byways. As you plod from interview to interview, you run into bizarre characters who have an original turn of phrase or certain fish to fry, or who make you laugh, or who want to press on you a scandalous detail or bit of gossip which doesn't have a connection that you can see with what you think the central thread of the story is—but since you haven't yet figured out what the central thread of the story is, you are scared to reject the temptation of the byway, just in case it turns out to be the highway, or to be a cute little clever back-road that will lead you to the point of it all.

In this way, I got side-tracked for a while, researching *The First Stone*, in the byways of scandals within a certain parish of the Uniting Church. I heard some eye-popping tales from people who had real axes to grind. There's a whole other book in there somewhere, but be assured that it won't be written by me.

Another trap on the road to writing a non-fiction book based on research and interviews is that you get so crazy about doing the research that you never want to stop. Back in the early sixties, I was the worst history student that the University of Melbourne ever had. I failed and failed again. I wasn't even interested. I have always been hopeless in libraries—too embarrassed to ask the dumb question, to admit what I didn't know. My ignorance of history is still a disgrace. So I never expected to find myself in love with the search for facts.

Most of my research for *The First Stone* was a matter of face-to-face interviews; but at a certain point I had to go to the Ormond library and read up the

minutes of the council meetings. Gradually the charm of documents came to me, a sense of the fascination they might exert on a serious seeker of knowledge. I began to understand that even sparse, formal minutes, with hardly any meat on their bones, can be rich sources of information: almost like reading the script of a movie, so bald and blunt on the page that you have to work really hard, with all your instinct and imagination, to perceive the fullness of what the writer knew and wished to create.

As it happened, I had a semester's work at New York University late in 1993. If it hadn't been for this necessity to leave the country, I might still be traipsing around Melbourne University on my bike, interviewing more and more people more and more desperately, addicted to the work of researching and unable to wean myself off its drug. Instead, I packed up all my interview notes and journals, and took them with me to New York.

They gave me a little office and I bought a secondhand electric typewriter, and then I sat there helplessly and stared at the stack of stuff. I had *no idea* how to write the book. I fell back on the journal I mentioned to you earlier. I thought, I'll just plough through this in chronological order and see where it gets me. I used the journal as a basis for the narrative, and inserted the interview records into that text as they came up. Four months later I got back to Australia with a bulky great thing, a baggy monster, massively repetitive—because at that stage I hadn't nussed out that I didn't need to put in every single interview subject's version of events *as a whole*—DUHH!!!

I hadn't figured out that I could tell the story—or let it tell itself, as it were, so as to be apparently just lightly guiding it—in a series of short grabs, keeping it moving forward all the time, rather than grindingly retelling it all, over and over, from each new person's point of view.

Using my working journal as a basis for the story meant, of course, that I, myself, the narrator, would be very far forward in the text. This is one of the aspects of the book which some people have found offensive—even outrageous. Last week I chanced to pick up Michael Shelden's biography of George Orwell. I was relieved and pleased to note that when *The Road to Wigan Pier* came out in the thirties, various writers on the left criticised Orwell for putting too much of himself into the narrative, for what they called "failing to let the facts speak for themselves". Michael Shelden quotes in his biography a description, by the writer Storm Jameson, of the kind of socialist writing that was advocated then, in the thirties:

The narrative must be sharp, compressed, concrete ... The emotion should spring directly from the fact. It must not be squeezed from it by the writer, running forward

with a "When I saw this, I felt, I suffered, I rejoiced..." His job is not to tell us what he felt, but to be coldly and industriously presenting, arranging, selecting, discarding from the mass of his material to get the significant detail, which leaves no more to be said, and implies everything.

And yet Orwell's books, which plainly do not fulfil these stern demands, still surge with life and muscle, over fifty years later. Isn't it because of *his voice*? his presence? Isn't it because he includes himself in the narrative almost as a character, alongside and against whose responses the reader can develop his own?

By putting myself into my narrative, indeed by using my inquiries as the narrative thread of my book, I tried to present the story via the effect it had on a seventies feminist like me and others of my age and experience. It wasn't till some time after the publication of *The First Stone* that I read Norman Mailer's *Executioner's Song*. I was enormously impressed by the way that this famously self-absorbed writer keeps himself, here, right outside the text. It's obviously based on VAST interviews, but he's transformed it—it's all in third person, but it moves from head to head, from consciousness to consciousness, in such a way as to make you keep pulling yourself up short, as you realise with what behaviour and outlooks you have been seduced into empathising. Mailer is present in the text only in the sense the reader has of an organising intelligence behind the colossal mass of material.

If I ever wrote another extended piece of non-fiction, I would try to emulate that. But in *The First Stone*, even if I'd thought of doing it the Mailer way, which I hadn't, I don't know how it would have been possible, without court transcripts, and without the voices of the two young women complainants. And anyway, though many critics have disagreed, I still believe that what meaning I could get out of that story seemed to depend heavily on my personal involvement with it.

Two other writers I greatly admire and respect are the American Janet Malcolm, and the originally Viennese but now, I think, British Gitta Sereny. I didn't read Sereny's great work about Hitler's architect, Albert Speer, till long after I'd finished and published *The First Stone*, but her book is relevant to our question here, of how much a writer should put herself into a text.

What makes Sereny so tremendously impressive is her ability to handle not only the broad picture—a vast range of historical, factual material, the fruits of a lifetime's research and journalistic inquiry—but also the narrow, deep one: the intensely personal, the close interview, the sharp watch she keeps on Speer's mood and tone during massively detailed conversations which extended over weeks and weeks.

Janet Malcolm wrote, among other things, *The Silent Woman*, a book about the competing biographers of the American poet Sylvia Plath. I don't want to take up here her contention that the whole enterprise of the biographer is a form of burglary. For the moment I'm more interested in her particular way of putting herself into the fabric of the text.

She has a habit of writing in unusually analytical detail about the material and psychological aspects of her encounter with the person she is interviewing. Malcolm will describe, for example, the way a woman works in her kitchen in the presence of the writer, or the woman's anxiety about the presentation of a meal she has cooked; and she will draw from these observations a sub-text to their conversation, and to the discussion of the topic in question, which owes a great deal to her fascination with Freudian psychology.

Once I'd read *The Silent Woman* and seen these techniques in action, I realised I'd been holding tools all along, tools I knew how to use and had a lot of practice in using in novels and short stories, but the use of which for non-fiction I had somehow thought were out of bounds. This realisation caused a big rush of energy into the text of *The First Stone*. I'm talking about developing the audacity required to use *imagery*. For example, the sort of fireplace in the living room at the ex-Master's house, which I couldn't help noticing when I went to interview his wife there one evening. The ex-Master's wife was a loyal, kindly, generous woman whose life had been devastated by the events at Ormond. She wept for the entire two hours I spent with her. For days afterwards, I couldn't stop thinking about that fireplace.

The fireplace was handsome, but it was badly designed, with an updraft that caused a tremendous burning rate and consumed a huge quantity of fuel without throwing out a commensurate amount of heat: it was always demanding to be fed. It seemed to me an image of Mrs Shepherd's generosity: her uneconomical, exhausting, indiscriminating, selfless good will.

In other words, I saw that I could use physical imagery to sketch character and situation, the way one does without thinking in fiction because this has always been the *preserve* of fiction. I'm thinking, for example, of the way the Master served me sweet biscuits in a cereal bowl, or how the hostile young Women's Officer at the student union inadvertently sat sideways on to me with a glaring window behind her, so I couldn't see anything of her but a silhouette; or the little incident of the smell of moss and the biscuit jar.

One of the people I interviewed for the book was a retired member of the college council, who was also a retired judge. He was famous for, among other things, his toughness, and his hostility to women, and I was nervous about

approaching him at his house in a comfortable middle-class suburb of Melbourne. "As I hurried past the wooden hutch for milk bottles (a rolled-up cheque stuck out of the neck of a sparkingly clean empty) and mounted the concrete path to the door, I picked up a whiff of a delicious plant-smell. It reminded me of something, but I had no time to pause and identify it. Mr R—greeted me at the door, without offering to shake hands." He spoke to me briskly, courteously and at considerable length, but the conversation was almost completely on his terms. I was on the back foot for the whole visit.

A cuckoo popped out of a clock and called the hour. "It's eleven o'clock," said Mr R-, standing up. "I'll put the kettle on." He soon returned carrying a tray of plunger coffee and a jar of home-made biscuits. He took a biscuit for himself and put the jar on the small table beside me. I ate one. It was excellent, the absolutely perfect biscuit. I remarked on this, and took another, then perhaps another. Ten minutes later, without breaking off what he was saying, he got up from his chair, walked over to my table and replaced the lid on the biscuit jar. He was halfway back to his seat when he suddenly stopped, turned towards me, and said, "I didn't do that to keep you out of there!" We both laughed. But I thought, yes you did, sir—you were putting the lid back on what you know: I won't get any more out of you.

And so it proved to be. He was the sort of person who when asked for detail would reply, "Oh, no names no pack drill."

Passing through the garden on the way down to the gate, I caught the plant-smell again and recognised it: a certain moss that grew round the roots of an oak tree in my grandparents' garden. It's a scent that always evokes in me the memory of being young and about to visit someone old with whom I share a tender affection. All the way home I cursed this trick of nature, and my slowness at dragging it up to consciousness. I realised too that Mr R- had told me hardly anything. Like the old lawyer he was, he had skilfully blocked my amateurish questions—and not only that: some instinct had caused me him to play the father to me, in exactly the way that would bring out in me the prodigal daughter: respectful, unchallenging, emptied of girlish rebellion. Disarmed by the smell of the moss, I had walked right into it. It took me days to think clearly about the interview.

If I hadn't read Janet Malcolm's book, I doubt whether I would have felt I had *permission* to draw psychological insights from material like that, although I was filled with a novelist's natural urge to do it. Reading Malcolm was like the opening of a door on to a landscape that I hadn't even dared to imagine was available to me.

The topic of *The First Stone*—sexual clashes and misunderstandings between women and men—was one that touched people (including me) in their deep,

private, inhibited selves. The crossover point between people's public life and their private sexual fantasies or behaviour can be very, very traumatic, and most people have powerful gut-reactions to stories of sexual harassment—even simply hearing them, let alone being involved in them. But at the same time they have a strong urge to keep claiming that their responses are intellectual and rational, rather than personal and psychological. I don't think our attitudes to these matters are formed in a pure intellectual element. It's absurd to claim that our attitudes are unstained by experience, let alone by fear, guilt, shame, and secret memories. But a lot of people will go on pretending that we can work this stuff out in our heads, leaving our bodies' experience out, and without rigorous self-examination.

This is why I was so moved by the hundreds of letters I received from readers of *The First Stone*, people who were amazingly prepared to re-examine their own experiences in the light of things I said in my book, and to tell me, a total stranger, what they had done, suffered, or felt guilty or outraged or confused about.

Obviously the book was a seething site of defamation anxiety. Leaving aside the attempts some people made to prevent me from researching the thing in the first place, there were constant rumblings about defamation writs from very early on in the proceedings. This had never happened to me before, and I didn't know how to deal with it.

The first lawyer my publisher engaged to check the finished book for defamation risk took one look and freaked out. He wanted me to rewrite it from scratch. After all that labour? Fat chance. So the publisher found a more adventurous and imaginative lawyer. The main change I was obliged to make concerned the identity of one of the young women's chief supporters within the college. It was put to me forcefully that in order to minimise defamation risk, I should divide this person into half a dozen or so different characters. Simply, whenever Dr Jenna Mead appeared in the story, I called her by a different name.

One effect of this strategy, the use of which I deeply regret—not least because it prevents me from being able to state unequivocally that the book is "non-fiction", is that—in some people's opinion, anyway—it creates an impression of a feminist conspiracy against the Master. I think this objection can be sustained only if one imagines that Dr Mead was the sole feminist in the university who supported the young women: clearly a grotesque and untenable belief. But I do consider the strategy a flaw in the book, one the necessity for which should compel examination of our defamation laws.

A short time before publication date, the two young women complainants, who claimed to believe that I had identified them and defamed them, went to court to get preliminary access to the manuscript, every draft of it, all my notes and journals—the whole box and dice. The judge denied their request on grounds of freedom of speech, and pointed out that defamation proceedings were available to them after publication. This attempt of theirs, another example of the legalistic tendency which seems to have dominated their thinking and that of their advisors, was counter-productive, in that it brought about the kind of publicity that notoriously sells a lot of books.

The attacks and fierce criticisms of the book in the media, which seemed to go on forever, have created a perception of the book which continually astonishes me. Even two years after its publication I keep getting letters from people who say, "I didn't read the book sooner because the publicity put me off—but now I've read it and I'm writing to say that it wasn't anything like what I'd been led to believe it would be."

When I gave a lecture to defend the book against some of its critics, Gerard Henderson described me—favourably, in his terms—as "a good hater." That description made me break out in a sweat of horror. A good hater is the last thing on earth I want to be.

But if I do hate anything, it's the idea that you can't say what you see as the truth about a phenomenon, just in case its enemies get hold of what you say and use it in the wrong way. Of course there's the problem, specially with a book like *The First Stone* which is full of questions rather than answers, that people read it through their own ideological spectacles and come up with weird interpretations of it. One well-known critic, for example, said it was anti-Semitic. Worse, there are sleazy men who not only think that every sleazy thing they do is the woman's fault but who are now cheerfully convinced that *I agree with them*, on the basis of their sloppy, half-blind, self-serving reading of the book—readings which I cannot prevent or control, but which I deplore.

But to finish—a paragraph from the writer I love more than any other—Chekhov—the least head-tripping, least ideology-bound writer in the history of literature. This comes from a short story called *From a Casebook*. Whenever I feel like despairing about people's tendency to over-simplify things, to divide the world into rigid classes of monsters and victims, I have another look at this sentence of Chekhov's. I love it because it's so subtle, and so respectful of the complexity of power relations, which these days, all round us, are travestied and caricatured.

The strong must be an impediment to the life of the weak, it is a law of nature, but it can be understood and easily fitted into a system of ideas only in newspaper articles and textbooks, whereas in the chaotic muddle of everyday life, the tangle of trivialities from which human relationships are woven, it is no longer a law but a logical absurdity, when both weak and strong alike fall victims to their mutual relationships, involuntarily submitting to some directing power, unknown, standing outside life, and alien to man.

22