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In the autumn of 1992, two young women students at Melbourne University went to the police claiming that they had been indecently assaulted at a party. The man they accused was the head of their co-ed residential college. The shock of these charges split the community and painfully focused the debate about sex and power.*‘This is writing of great boldness and it will wring the heart... an intense, eloquent and enthralling work...’*—AUSTRALIAN

‘This was never going to be an easy book to write, its pages are bathed in anguish and self-doubt, but suffused also with a white-hot anger...’—GOOD WEEKEND

‘Travelling with Garner along the complex paths of this sad story is, strangely enough, enjoyable. The First Stone [is] a book worth reading for its writing...’—SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

‘... Garner has ensured one thing: the debate about sexual harassment... will now have a very public airing. And it will have it in the language of experience to which all women and men have access...’—AGE

The First Stone: Some Questions of Sex and Power Details

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From Reader Review The First Stone: Some Questions of Sex and Power for online ebook

Leanne Clegg says

It has been some twenty years since my first reading of Helen Garners' 'The First Stone' and still her excruciating honesty about the interactions that occur between men and women still cause me such mental discomfort.

This second reading, occurring as it does, against a backdrop of continuous and escalating levels of violence against woman at the hands of men, has made this book come to life again - as it did so many years ago in my youth - with its brutal analysis of power, and sex, and harassment.

I cannot recommend this book more highly and leave you with a quote from its final pages that force me.....

Still

.....to stare my own beliefs squarely in the face and quiver.

“....I know that between ‘being made to feel uncomfortable’ and ‘violence against women’ lies a vast range of male and female behaviours. If we deny this, we enfeeble language and drain it of its meaning. We insult the suffering of women who have met real violence, and we distort the subtleties of human interaction into caricatures that can serve only as propaganda for war. And it infuriates me that any woman who insists on drawing these crucial distinctions should be called a traitor to her sex.”

Alice Kimberley says

I struggled with this one. I love Garner, but found many of her thoughts here confronting. It's good to be challenged and some passages had me re-evaluating my own ideology, but I couldn't shake a visceral feeling of shock and betrayal that Garner could hold views so opposite to my own in parts.

Librariasaurus says

This book made me hate Helen Garner. Written about a terrible act of abuse by a man of power, this book is written by someone who claims to be an old school feminist, but she takes the exact opposite position, instead siding with the abuser and constantly berating the female victims who chose to complain to police about sexual harassment rather than keep quite about it 'like she had to do back in her day' Pathetic, should never have been published, do not read it. This is the first book I have ever thrown across a room in disgust.

Sky Mykyta says

Atrocious book. The one where Helen Garner irreparably shredded her feminist credentials.

David says

My first reaction to this book was one of disgust. That was in 1995, but I picked it up again recently and decided to give the book another chance. I read the title, the epigraphs, the first chapter. I was still disgusted. I've now finished the book, and the disgust stays with me still.

As a work of feminism, this could have been spun from the ‘naive’ questions of the FAQ on Finally, a Feminism 101 Blog.

As a work of journalism, this is a legal and ethical disaster, an example of what not to do on almost every level.

As a work of non-fiction, this is replete with non-facts.

As a work of anti-intellectualism, anti-imagination, and anti-empathy, as a work that is ‘appallingly destructive, priggish, and pitiless’, this is a success.

Yet as I read, I became enamoured with Helen Garner’s writing. She can write. But what is it that she has written?

In her keynote speech to the inaugural Stella Prize, Garner talked about how she ‘can’t stand the taxonomical thundering about whether one has the right to call one’s book a novel’. It seems to me that her critics and supporters (and the 1995 Miles Franklin judges) got the wrong end of the stick. This is assuredly a novel.

Yes, read for its ‘archetypal features’ and melodrama, this is a novel. Read for its textual games with names and documents, this is a novel. Read for its femme fatales and estranged society, this is a novel. Read through the lens of forty years of writing about unreliable narrators, this is most certainly a novel.

Like much good noir, we have a detective with a very limited literary character but a very great subjectivity to impose on events, and a sense of a calling to do so, no matter the cost to their material situation. She’s the one asking the questions here, and don’t you forget it and try to ask the same questions of her! She writes: ‘Later in March, someone sent the *Truth* cutting to Colin Shepherd in the mail, anonymously.’ I thought: gotcha. No doubt she would demur, but her story changes — skids, as ‘Helen’ would say — as it progresses, to suit her purpose.

With what sophistication should we treat this narrative? It is written four hundred years after Shakespeare, but only a few years before ‘farfetched’ Welcome to Country ceremonies became common. A time when the ‘heavy metal’ heard was probably Nirvana.

Perhaps you are not even prepared to argue that this might be fiction. I can understand that, unlike Garner’s narrator (or is it Garner herself?). In that case, it would be irresponsible of me not to mention the two books written in direct response to this one, Generation F by Virginia Trioli and Bodyjamming edited by Jenna Mead. Irresponsible of me not to condemn, in the strongest possible terms, the idea that women have an essential power to attract sexual ‘attention’ or repel sexual ‘harassment’, the idea that it is natural for men to gaze at women, the idea that the hurt and lack of empathy must continue forever.

Natalie says

Reading this book made me so angry - despite HG's insistence that she wanted to cover both sides, it comes across as a self-entitled attack of the two women (probably due to the fact that they weren't jumping at the chance to be interviewed). Additionally I was appalled at the casual attitude taken on sexual harassment, the petty stereotyping of feminists and her naive support for the accused.

I don't think anyone will ever truly know what happened that night - what is clear is that the situation only went as far as it did because the complaint brought by the women was not dealt with properly by university authorities. But a book like this makes the problem even worse.

Marie says

I have talked at lengths with pretty much everyone I have seen over the past few days about how frustrating this book is. Garner's response to modern feminism seems to me to be paradoxical; she bemoans the complainants for not being assertive enough when they are groped by the master of their college, but she's also critical of when they do take action that they are too angry and radical. And there's a lot of 'why were you wearing that if you didn't want men to grope you?' and invocations of Eros, as a knowledge of Greek gods is the most typical cultural capital of the white upper middle class scholar.

I also found it pretty distressing how she's so doggedly going after the young women. She tells them she wants to write a piece from all angles, which in the end, she doesn't, and the women have a very good reason for not believing. And while she portrays it as a middle-aged woman trying to be bullied into silence by an absence of information, it's not really true, as she *does* talk to a few people connected to the victims. But also, she just keeps on trying to make contact with the victims when they have made clear about a billion times that they just don't want to. To paraphrase a sticker from the book, what part of *No* don't you understand, Garner?

And yet, I really fucking love the style of her writing. Which surprised me because I found Monkey Grip to be so blah, and this work of journalism to be so unobjective, judgy, gossipy, and in some cases just weirdly hyperbolic in this nonsensically bigoted sort of way. But there are some small anecdotes that are really beautifully written and emotionally provocative. It's why I give this book the extra star, even though, by Zeus*, it's just awful. Seriously don't read it unless you like to get mad at things, or you wish to reminisce about the days when you could bone your students, or get away with sticking your hand on a girl's breast simply because she has visible cleavage.

/rant

*an: see what I did there?

Jodi says

In my opinion Helen looked down on the girls and came across as anti feminist because a strong empowered woman does not behave like a tart and then complain about the consequences which appear to be minor in this circumstance. This kind of behaviour gives women a bad name. I am many things but i am not a feminist, give me an apron and a family to care for, I find that more fulfilling than a thankless career and no legacy. There is a photo circulating the web with proud, well dressed women in the 1940s. Then to the right scanty covered young women behaving like tramps. I don't recall the caption but basically the women on the left had no rights but look intelligent and empowered, the women on the right have all rights and look stupid, naive and truly useless. Modern day feminists think it's their right to dress like prostitutes and carry on like a pork chop if a man looks at them sideways. I imagine that is only if an unattractive man looks at them. This is not intelligent behaviour and is quite offensive to many women. I guess my point is there are different extremes to feminism and I think a grown, intelligent woman can assert herself and rectify a situation such as this without trying to destroy a man's career and potentially his life.

notgettingenough says

I just don't know....The trouble with that early 'feminists' is that they often seem quite sexist later. Mind you. The trouble with the later ones is that they seem quite sexist sooner. I don't know...

But she does now how to tell a good story, even if it isn't necessarily the right one.

Beth The Vampire says

I don't like reading about real life, because it makes me think of how crappy the world can be sometimes. Take me to a land of dragons, magic, and fairies any day!

My class this semester for my Masters in Creative Writing is Creative Non Fiction. This was a great example of this genre, and helped me inform my final piece, but it's not what I want to write myself.

Emma says

I struggled to rate this book.

When the author said that maybe her happy marriage had weakened her feminism, limiting her capacity to empathise with the complainants in this sexual harassment case, I had to re-read the passage several times. In my mind echoed something a man said to me once, "feminists are just women who need a good shag". I put the book down.

In her pursuit of the complainants and unwillingness to believe that they could honestly refuse an interview I heard, "well she said no at first but I knew she didn't mean it".

In her defence of the accused, her disbelief that if true these allegations should be taken to the police, I heard,

"stuck up bitch can't take a joke. She was asking for it anyway."

In her questioning of why these women are so angry, why so vengeful, I asked "why are you so angry, so angry to write a book about this?"

Are these parallels intentional? I don't think so. The discussion of why the public feels entitled to hear the blood and guts could have been interesting, as could the inclusion and deconstruction of anti-feminism in a more conscious way. The author uses the ubiquitous 'so', that is, 'she was dancing topless so...', 'she was sleeping at his house so...' and I wanted the ellipses removed. So what? Maybe the title is the answer, and if it is it makes me angry.

And what is frustrating is that I think the conversation is worth having, the differences in feminist strands, the importance of reconciliation versus revenge, of a meditation on sex and power. I spent an hour and a half in the car with the radio off just thinking about this book. But these moments just stopped me in my tracks as did the almost complete lack of participation of any of the key players in this book.

Camille says

The First Stone sat unread on my bookshelf for over 20 years. I probably bought it on the recommendation of my Literature teacher in Year 11. That was in 1995 when it was first released, but for some reason it never appealed very much. It was tainted as feminist, and I would never have identified myself as one of them back then, unable as I was to understand the nuances of the feminism movement. It was also non-fiction and a reportage of sorts of an incident and a case that occurred when I was new to high school. Then, the university college setting in Melbourne was probably a little too close to the bone given I lived in a residential college for four years at the end of the century while studying in Melbourne. This case was still being talked about, mostly in hushed voices when passing by the University of Melbourne and their fancy colleges.

In the middle of the #MeToo tide of women opening up about sexual harassment, abuse and assault, I thought I should finally read what Helen Garner had to say about this pioneering sexual harassment case from the early 1990's.

As I read The First Stone, I was shocked to find that it was not the book I expected it to be. Garner was not the angry feminist I had been led to believe, that was instead her portrayal of the posse of women surrounding the complainants in the sexual harassment case against the Ormond College Master who then refused any contact with Garner as they had pegged her as being on the other side and accused her of not being a real feminist. I was surprised to find my thoughts on sexual harassment and feminism very similar to Garner's, and that this book and Garner's relentless looking inwards for answers has helped me to further articulate my own position.

Garner's insight about how women blank out when confronted with unwelcome sexual behaviour, allowing it to happen out of some warped sense of politeness or who play an appeasing role so as to diffuse possible escalation to real danger, is powerful. So many times women suffer through discomfort without saying anything or expect that subtle gestures such as looking away, lack of engagement in conversation or closed body language will be perceived and understood by harassers, when rarely it is.

I also understand Garner questioning the degrees of severity of harassment and while she does at times paint the complainants as having gone directly to the police, this isn't the case, despite not being made known to

the defendant until that time. I can't say that the line I draw between sexual harassment and banter or flirtation is always the same. It does depend so much on context and who it's coming from and how we perhaps got to that point (why are there some people so charming as to get away with saying something outrageously racy that when coming from another it is repulsive?). But I think it's also important to understand the difference between sexual harassment and sexual assault because they are not the same thing - dare I suggest there's a difference similar to that between petty theft and armed robbery.

I'd like to think that things have changed since 1991 when the incident, around which *The First Stone* is written, occurred. But when it comes to differences in power and sexual harassment in situations where there is a significant and important power gap, I don't think anything has changed.

The First Stone is still so very relevant now, in 2018, and it is a thought-provoking read on sexual harassment, power, the consequences everyone faces and feminism.

Nicholas Cavenagh says

Helen Garner has an out-of-control empathetic ego. She feels she has the right to tell the women's story without having interviewed them because "after all, I am a woman". Ultimately no-one around her is allowed any emotional experience outside of her own. She also naively expects all strangers to trust her and is self-righteously angry when they don't. Apart from this, her subjective approach is honest and refreshing. She raises good points about gradation of crime.

Cherise Wolas says

I find myself entranced by Helen Garner's nonfiction, not solely because of the true story she is telling, but rather because that true story is very complex and I enjoy reading how she makes her way through the myriad tangles, all the voices that either want or don't want to be heard, and how she analyzes - not in some easy way, but really wrestles with the meanings underlying that true story. *The First Stone* is about what happens when two college girls accuse the Master of their college with sexual harassment. Reading this book, about an Australian case in the early 1990s, in light of what has been happening in the US this year, is especially fascinating. She doesn't write like a journalist exposing "the truth," but rather as a writer trying to understand what those truths might be.

John says

In 1992, two female students at Ormond College, a residential college at the University of Melbourne, made complaints of sexual harassment against the college Master, Dr Colin Shepherd. One woman claimed that Shepherd had groped her breasts during a dance at a student party; the other that he had made unwelcome sexual comments to her during a conversation in a private room after he had locked the door. After the university's internal disciplinary board sided with Shepherd, the women hired a barrister and brought criminal charges of indecent assault against him. The first magistrate's trial found him guilty, but the verdict was reversed on appeal due to insufficient evidence. Shepherd later resigned from the college, his reputation in tatters. The complainants reached an out-of-court financial settlement with the university, the details of which were confidential.

Australian journalist and writer Helen Garner followed the story from its beginnings, attending the indecent assault hearing and interviewing Shepherd and some of the lead players. The experience shocked her. "I was finding out things that would cause an upheaval in my whole belief-structure, particularly where men and women were concerned", she wrote. Her resulting non-fiction study, *The First Stone*, is her attempt to track and understand the complicated ethical questions the Shepherd case raised about sexuality, power and the nature of retribution and punishment.

The First Stone is a strange shaggy beast, inflammatory and contradictory. On one hand, it's a rigorously reported account of the case, in which Garner interviews Shepherd, the complainant's solicitor (though not the complainants themselves – more on that later), and dozens of interested onlookers. It's also an unashamedly partisan piece in which Garner sides with Shepherd and condemns the "puritan feminists" at the university who she accuses of leading a *Crucible*-style war of attrition against the male powers that be.

Unsurprisingly, the book created a huge furore when it was published in 1995, at least as big as the case itself. Supporters praised Garner for not taking the obvious line of supporting the women without question. Critics condemned the book for its apparent lack of objectivity and accused Garner of being an apologist for the culture of sexual harassment. Garner acknowledged the controversy, but was still adamant about the importance of writing the book: "These are the stories that need to be told," she argued, "not swept away like so much debris, or hidden from sight".

The most fascinating aspect of *The First Stone* lies in Garner's early participation on the case, which she freely admits compromised her later attempts to cover the story objectively. Garner first read about Shepherd's trial in a newspaper. Thinking "Has the world come to this?", she immediately wrote a letter to Shepherd - a man she had never met - expressing her sympathy for his troubles and saying that the case should never have been handled in the criminal justice system. It was a move that proved divisive when she came to research the book later. Shepherd, assuming that Garner was his supporter, circulated the letter, which created an impassable barrier between her and "the other side". Much of the book describes Garner's unsuccessful attempts to interview the complainants, and being repeatedly being given the cold shoulder by "angry feminists" who had read the letter and viewed her as a traitor to the cause.

Undaunted, Garner struggled on, interviewing Shepherd, staff at the university, fellow students of Ormond and anyone else who would talk to her. *The First Stone* partially succeeds where it ought to fail, due to the intelligence and insight of Garner's analysis, and the rigour with which she hones in on the difficult issues that the case raises. Her narrative, a mixture of journalistic reportage, anecdote and memoir, widens its scope from the case to become a commentary on the confused state of contemporary sexual mores.

Throughout the book, she struggles and largely fails to understand the point of view of the complainants, who retreat into silence and refuse to be interviewed. "What sort of feminists are these, what sort of intellectuals, who expected automatic allegiance from women to a cause they were not prepared even to argue?" she writes.

I found Garner's rage towards these young feminists puzzling at first – if only because the world of Osmond College seemed so familiar to me. I was at university in the early 1990s, where sexual harassment was a hot topic in university culture. As a student representative, I fielded complaints from undergraduates about the unwanted attention of male lecturers. Rumours spread about Professor A- who now wasn't allowed to close his office door if he was alone with a female student. Across campus, counsellors and women's reps chanted the mantra that sexual harassment was an abuse of power, which seemed right and proper. Old white heterosexual men had ruled the world for too long, we agreed - it was time for the patriarchy to be toppled.

Garner's initial take on this culture was one of disbelief and contempt – a response that she freely admits is coloured by her strongly held beliefs about feminism that hail from an earlier and more idealistic time. Like Germaine Greer before her, Garner exemplifies the 1970s feminist: articulate, argumentative, unconcerned with causing a ruckus and able to defend herself in the face of stiff criticism. She seems constitutionally unable to understand younger generations of feminists, who she criticises for thinking of themselves as passive victims, “dragging themselves on bleeding stumps to the high moral ground of survival”, and wielding the law and other blunt instruments in their defence. “Why didn't you slap 'im?” Shepherd's barrister asks one of the complainants in the indecent assault hearing. It's a line Garner repeats several times, and appears to agree with, maintaining that both incidents could and should have been dealt with by the women themselves with a quiet word in Shepherd's ear.

Fearing that she might be too out of touch with the younger generation, Garner tries a different tack, and attempts to reconstruct the case from the complainants' point of view. Using interviews from fellow students, she draws a precise, pitiless picture of the boorish and chauvinist culture of Ormond College: a place of petty hierarchies and kowtowing to authority, in which the casual sexualisation of women is normalised and excused. Her insights prompt "sharp flashes of empathy" with the complainants, but it's never enough: "something in me, every time, slams on the breaks to prevent the final, unbearable smash" of identification with their cause. *The First Stone* stands as a striking and rather sad account of the failure of different generations of feminists to understand each other's politics.

There's a lot of anger in *The First Stone*: mostly Garner's, but from others too. Garner is fantastic at writing about anger. Like Greer and Susan Faludi, she has an uncanny ability to keep jabbing away persistently at white-hot sore spots until she reveals the discomfort and rage churning around inside. That's not to say she's always accurate: some of her contempt gets flung about rather unfairly at first in the direction of “radical feminists”, who she blames for imposing a punitive and anti-sex world order. As she digs deeper, though, she makes a more nuanced case. One of her most compelling propositions is that Shepherd's hounding was a misguided form of retribution caused by women's “referred anger” and guilt about their own “passivity under pressure” in old cases of sexist abuse. She describes with horror the modern conflation of sexual harassment with violence, and argues persuasively for distinguishing between levels of severity of sexist behaviours. Shepherd was, she concludes, at worse a “helpless blunderer”, whose punishment was disproportionately severe given the nature of his reputed offences.

Garner's conclusion is to plead for mercy and understanding, in recognition of the fact that no one is exempt from questions of sex, power and abuse. Tellingly, her title is drawn from Jesus' words in the Gospel of St John: “Let the one among you who has done no wrong cast the first stone.” As an unabashed libertarian she argues strongly for women taking responsibility for their own sexuality, and cautions against the stifling of the erotic in academic life, which “will always dance between people who teach and learn”. (In an eleventh-hour curve ball, she drops a casual reference to her affair with a university tutor when she was a student, an encounter she describes as painful but never harassment or an abuse of power).

The First Stone is both a brave and a foolhardy enterprise. Garner is never less than intelligent and inquisitive, and her prose is lucid and emotionally taut. The honesty with which she identifies her own opinions makes it an engrossing read, even while the exposure of her prejudices threaten to compromise the authority of her argument.

Yet this perhaps is no bad thing. In Garner's view, there are no absolutes about sex and power - only shades of grey and an appreciation of context. Eros is “for good or ill”, she says, “always two steps ahead of us, exploding the constraints of dogma, turning back on us our carefully worked out positions and lines”. With that in mind, it seems appropriate that she declares her beliefs and prejudices, and encourages others to do

the same. In an afterword, Garner writes that the book "declines - or is unable - to present itself as one big clonking armour-clad monolithic certainty". We're left with an intelligent middle-aged woman's perceptive account of a very sad and difficult case, which is perhaps as much as any of us can hope for. The greatest achievement of this sad, funny and compelling book is to reiterate Wilde's maxim: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."
