



A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work

Bernadette Brennan

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Helen Garner is one of Australia's most important and most admired writers. She is revered for her fearless honesty in the pursuit of her craft.

But Garner also courts controversy, not least because she refuses to be constrained by the rules of literary form. She has never been afraid to write herself into her nonfiction, and many of her own experiences help to shape her fiction. But who is the 'I' in Helen Garner's work?

Bernadette Brennan's *A Writing Life* is the first full-length study of Garner's forty years of work, a literary portrait that maps all of her books against the different stages of her life.

Brennan has had access to previously unavailable papers in Garner's archive, and she provides a lively and rigorous reading of the books, journals and correspondence of one of Australia's most beloved women of letters.

A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work Details

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Alison says

Such a beautifully written and exemplary approach to Garner's life/work. Every chapter is immersive, engaging, and tackles its texts with an attention to genre that is riveting. I just loved it.

Philippa says

A compelling book that is both a study of Helen Garner's full works and a literary portrait of Garner herself (not a biography, Brennan is careful to point out). I really enjoyed how this book explores Garner's literary output - everything from Monkey Grip to her screenplays and latter day works - within the context of what was going on in her life at the time, and maps her development as a writer. If you've ever wondered why Garner writes the way she does, or picks the subjects she does, this book goes some way to answering that. Fascinating and insightful, it's a must for Garner fans and anyone curious about the life, influences and creative process of one of Australia's most interesting writers. I loved it!

Anne Fenn says

If I could, I'd give this book six stars. I'm a longtime fan of Helen Garner's work, and this is a very rewarding read. Bernadette Brennan develops two really interesting strands, Helen's life, alongside a record of her writing. Brennan has finally clarified for me why some readers criticise Helen for making herself part of her books. I find this aspect of her work so valuable, it brings her together with us to try to understand things we totally reject. It's in her personal reactions to the troubling events of her nonfiction where we most benefit from this sharing. I don't give a toss about who the characters in her novels may be based on. The novels are just such compelling reading about modern life and its more commonly experienced ups and downs. While Brennan is very perceptive and informative about Helen's way of writing, I got even more pleasure from learning about her as a person. It left me wishing she was my friend.

Tracey says

As a Helen Garner fangirl, have to own up and say that it's impossible for me to be objective about this book - I love it!. Structured around the writing and release of each of Garner's books, Bernadette Brennan had access to HG's archive, as well it seems, her massive circle of friends and family. By accounts, Garner's not always an easy woman, a seeker, an observer with an enormous need to sort out her thoughts and feelings in writing. An understated intellectual, who is fully immersed in many communities. The book is full of wonderful stories, some jar ... but the ending, in particular, is magnificent. I am so happy that I've read this book.

Nancy says

#AWW2018

Review

Sherry Mackay says

I am a huge Helen Garner fan so this study of her works was a joy to me. It was very readable (not too literary) and I sped thru it in a couple of days. Yes it does give an insight into her actual life events but is largely a study of her work and how those events affected her work. This is a very accessible and interesting study of a woman and her body of work.

Veronica says

This is an excellent literary biography of Helen Garner, told chronologically through her books. In each chapter, Bernadette Brennan interrogates the conditions and concerns that produced one of her books, along with the receptions and responses that followed publication.

I found this book enormously useful, in a practical sense, in that it helped me gain a sense of the contexts – social, cultural, literary – that have deeply informed Garner's work. Particularly fascinating were the sections about the critical and popular responses to *Monkey Grip* and *The First Stone: Some Questions of Sex and Power*, both of which I first read many years after their initial publications.

One can revere and admire an author like Garner regardless of whether one shares her experiences in the eras that produced her, but Brennan's book fills in some of the crucial gaps around her books. It is also beautifully written, clear-eyed and restrained.

Rosemary Atwell says

A beautifully realised analytical exploration of Garner's life and work to date (although, as I write, two new collections have just been published to mark her 75th birthday). Part biography, part critical analysis, 'A Writing Life' sensitively and evocatively draws the reader into Garner's mind and world, resulting in a longing to return and revisit each work afresh, with newfound relish and vigour. Luminous.

Joanne says

This fascinating and well written book gave me fresh insight into one of my favourite Australian authors. Highly recommended

Janine says

This book is exactly what the title promises: a study of Helen Garner and her work. It's not, and nor does it purport to be, a full biography but is instead a 'literary portrait', firmly based on and in Garner's own writings and writing practices.

...It is not necessary to have read Garner's books to enjoy this literary portrait, but it certainly helps to have done so. Critiques of short story and essay collections are always difficult to write and read because the act of describing them often eviscerates them, and several of Garner's publications fall into this genre. Nonetheless, Brennan gives enough of the flavour of Garner's works to jog the memory or provide sufficient background for her analysis to make sense.

For my complete review see:
<https://residentjudge.wordpress.com/2...>

Meg says

Before I begin, I declare I am a great admirer of Helen Garner and her writing. I think she is one of Australia's greatest writers. Bernadette Brennan's study of Garner's life and writing over the past 40 years is revealing and honest as Garner is in her own writings. 'A Writing Life', encompasses all Garner's books (fiction and non-fiction), with an in-depth study of each; plus her song writing and play writing. Brennan had access to Helen's archive material, diaries, letters, family and friends. Garner has faced a fair amount of criticism for her views and rightly so at times. She admits her faults but stands by what she believes. I, and many others will appreciate Bernadette Brennan's analysis of Helen Garner and her importance to Australia, and Australian literature.

Charlotte says

Fantastic biography encompassing the technical, masterly writing of Garner's work, but more importantly the psychological and emotional investment she gave to her writing. Brennan does a good job of staying neutral. As I'm so used to picking up anything by Garner and having her perspective right there, this muddled me a little and I kept expecting Brennan's voice to appear, and it did, carefully and with purpose in the final chapters.

Great book, would read again. A wealth of insight to any writer, or maker of any art form.

Michael Livingston says

What an achievement this is - a thoughtful and rich analysis of Garner's life and writing (as if the two could ever be separate). I still have some issues with Garner, but this is a triumph, that places her writing squarely in the social and personal contexts from which it emerged.

Zora says

Bernadette Brennan has done a marvellous job here of weaving together illuminating details from Helen Garner's life with her progress as a writer. There should be more literary biographies like it: perfectly balanced between biography, wider social / cultural context and the work itself, with the latter given the most attention. It helps that Brennan herself is a fine and elegant writer, the chapters focussed on particular works were so well-plotted and never became rote, despite the inevitable cycle of idea-gestation-execution-reception. As soon as I finished, I wanted to go back and start reading Helen Garner's work all over again.

Text Publishing says

'A book for those who want to understand Garner's work more. But, it is also a book which makes clear the significant contribution Garner has made to Australian literature. And, in doing that, it is itself a significant book.'

Whispering Gums

'Billed as "the first full-length study of Garner's 40 years of work, a literary portrait that maps all of her books against the different stages of her life". Well, who wouldn't want to read that?'

Australian

'Brennan's depiction of Garner's fearless approach to the very difficult subjects of The First Stone, Joe Cinque's Consolation and This House of Grief is beautifully modulated and a real triumph. She has captured and interpreted an important writer and her work beautifully.'

Books + Publishing

'The New York Times journalist Richard Eder once wrote that a skilled interviewer needs "alertness to the answer that hints at a life half-hidden and stimulates a question that gets it to emerge, shake itself and look around". Brennan possess this rare talent and she proves a canny interlocutor for Garner, their conversations forming an essential and fascinating part of the book...Brennan herself writes with an eloquence and perceptiveness equal to her subject. Her tone is never overly reverential or adulatory, the close analysis of the texts is lucid and intelligent and she is not afraid to prove difficult and controversial aspects of Garner's life and work.'

West Australian

'Brennan is an astute and sensitive reader of Garner's work.'

Big Issue

'This is literary critique and biography at its finest.'

Australian Financial Review

'The writing is clear, measured, and graceful throughout...The readings of the fiction are astute and straightforward, tracing Garner's development from the allegedly unstructured Monkey Grip, which in fact offers a formal equivalent to the push-me pull-you vagaries of love and junk, through the perfection of The Children's Bach and the experiments in voice and style in Postcards from Surfers, to the late-style bareness

and hardness of The Spare Room.'

Sydney Morning Herald

'This book offers an illuminating discussion of Garner's boundary crossing work. Its own magic lies in bringing elements of memoir and criticism into an absorbing conversation that begins with a rich contextualisation of Garner's work, and extends into the literary and ethical questions with which Brennan has long been concerned.'

Australian

'Absorbing, informative and engaging read.'

Conversation

'Brennan examines both assumptions by tracing Garner's steps to becoming a full-time writer in a style that is both thoughtful and readable.'

Australian Book Review

'Bernadette Brennan brings a calm eye and an easy grace to her descriptions of Garner's life, literature and impact on Australia's cultural and socio-political landscape...She draws a more complex picture of one of our best known and most skilled writers than we've enjoyed in a full-length volume before.'

A Bigger Brighter World

'Probably my favourite book so far [this year]. A marvellous tribute to one of Australia's great writers.'

Mark Rubbo, The Best Books We've Read This Year (So Far) 2017, Readings

'Bernadette Brennan's first full-length study of Helen Garner's work, A Writing Life, has inspired me to pile Garner's books on my bedside table, and to look at each of them again with fresh eyes.'

The Best Books We've Read This Year (So Far) 2017, Readings

'A remarkably shrewd study of Garner's work knitted with a tender representation of her personal life.'

Mascara Literary Review

'Brennan performs a kind of call for literature, its criticism as well as creation.'

Sydney Review of Books

'Bernadette Brennan's ingenious A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work, which gets around the subject's resistance to biography by viewing her life through her writing, as Garner herself does.'

Susan Wyndham, Best Books of 2017, Australian Book Review
