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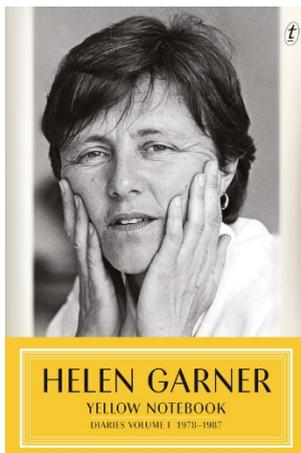
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TEXT review

Diaries: Empirical Evidence and Desire

review by Moya Costello



Helen Garner

Yellow Notebook: Diaries volume 1 1978-1987

Text Publishing, Melbourne 2019

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All of Helen Garner's work is intensely personal. But diaries and letters are genres particularly charged with intimacy. On reading the Garner diaries, what came to my mind yet again was a statement from Janet Malcolm: 'voyeurism' is one of the impulses behind reading life writing (Malcolm 1994: 9).

Previously my fandom for both Garner and her third, former husband, Murray Bail, has been benign. But I noticed a shift occur with my reading of Garner's diaries. I behaved more like

an overzealous, if not actually deranged, fan. I sought out references to Murray Bail in *Yellow Notebook*, Garner's first volume of her diaries. And when reading *Notebooks*, Bail's diaries, in 2005, I did the reverse, even returning to them on reading Garner's diaries, checking any references to Garner.

I decided that what the Garner diaries needed was an index, a chronology of her book publications and marriages, and a glossary: a key to the single-letter-named people in her diaries – I briefly imagined devising a one-off game with a few other Garner fans, where we match a letter to a person and prove our decision with evidence from the diaries and elsewhere.

Garner doesn't always name the books she is working on in this first volume of her diaries 1978-1987, so it's useful to have the following at hand: *Monkey Grip* 1977 (before the diaries), *Honour & Other People's Children* 1980, *The Children's Bach* 1984, *Postcards from Surfers* 1985, and *True Stories* 1998 and *Cosmo Cosmolino* 1992 (both after the diaries). A chronology of her marriages is Bill Garner 1968-1971, Jean-Jacques Portail 1980-1985, and Murray Bail 1992-1998, though Garner first met Bail in 1986.

My very limited but assured glossary would be this: M – Alice Garner, Helen Garner's daughter; and V – Murray Bail. Z is probably David Malouf, and F is possibly, probably Portail.

The real, genuine pleasure of diaries and letters by artists, for the artist, is reading about the processes and practice of the art.

Moments in the Garner diaries are later transformed into her fictional narratives. She has the writer's observing/recording eye/ear: 'meaning is in the smallest event. It doesn't have to be put there: only revealed' (22). One of Garner's visual artist friends, P,

...lay on her bed and wept. She was grieving over her isolation as an artist. "I'd like to talk about things with other painters, the men, but they know so much and I feel sure they'd realise how ignorant I am ... and they won't think I'm worth talking to." (112)

Surely this is a component of 'The Life of Art'. Then there is H who has "'jointed the born-again Christians'" / "'gone back to Jesus'" (17) and is surely the basis for Ray in *Cosmo Cosmolino*.

Garner demands of herself that she '[t]ake risks' (5). Or, '[s]ometimes', she notes 'ideas for stories surface as if from a muddy pond' (32). Or there is doubt: 'I'm scared to go to my office in case I can't make things up' (83). Or there is a breakthrough:

I can see "dimly-lit pathways" into the forest of a book. I've got Alexander, Athena, Philip. They are established and already their names belong to them. Now I must take

charge of them, lead them away from the literal past, start to snip and pin and stitch my SEAMLESS GARMENT. (56)

She records her reception of rejection. There is the setting up of a writing office, and establishing writing discipline: 'I hereby resolve to refuse all social engagements on weekdays' (61).

Further content of the diaries concerns personal and domestic life and the publishing industry.

Garner is self-judgemental – 'I can hardly stand myself' (196) – but also self-accepting as she grows more knowledgeable and stronger. She is grateful for her daughter, Alice. And the growth of her spiritual life is noted. She is in psychoanalysis. She is learning the piano. As with Jane Austen in her fiction, Garner repeats the trope of walking alone or with another in parks, streets, cemeteries, or has her Garner-esque take on bicycling. She records dreams, and attendance at criminal trials, concerts and opera. She's concerned with her appearance.

An example of the publishing industry is the infamous 1981 anthology *The First UQP Storybook* which she reviewed while trying 'to hold the bitterness' out of the review: 'the only woman in it is the naked one on the cover' (20). She meets other artists such as actor Noah Taylor and writers, among them Frank Moorhouse and Raymond Carver. She gives brief accounts of judging competitions and Australia Council grant submissions.

In 1986 and 1987, there is a significant amount about V (Murray Bail).

I wonder if I will become one of those women in their forties who have affairs with married men. No! I will not. Full of curiosity about this one though – V. (230)

She is curious but not unwarily, because of his views, his intellect, his nature and his long first marriage.

I read fiction, including Garner's fiction, for knowledge of how to live, for instantiating a moral compass in my life. Others read life writing, a form of creative nonfiction, for the very same purpose. While there are practical implications for me, as a writer, for reading letters and diaries of writers, I read them, too, as I mentioned above, as a fan, a topic I partially dealt with in a conference paper 'Fanning Hallucinations in Murray Bail's Hall of Mirrors' (Costello 2015).

Bail was a subject of my PhD, and in the National Library of Australia I've read letters to him and some he has sent to others. But what I assume are Garner's letters to him require 'permission for research until 20 years after Murray Bail's death'. I didn't attempt to read Garner's letters because of the permission required for all. Bernadette Brennan enviably gained access to Garner's correspondence for her book *A Writing Life: Helen Garner and Her Work* (Brennan 2017). That book is a tool for deciphering some of the diary entries.

In a review of Brennan's book, I wrote that 'there can be a slither of surprise, concern for the lack of caution, a sense of alarm, of aghast-ness at [Garner's] openness, her exposure of herself and others' in her work (Costello 2017). With the diaries, I am aghast at my own undisciplined, intemperate reading of them, behaving as if I was following a soap opera. If I offered an excuse, it would be that art produces what Elizabeth Grosz calls, via French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, 'sensations, affects, intensities as its mode of addressing problems' (Grosz 2012: 1), in other words high passion inflaming your imagination, fuelling flagrant desire. 'In fandom, you enter a Bureau de Change, lending your body to a text, the space of fandom being a crossing-over, a border space, for texts and selves' (Costello 2015).

The diaries are for Garner a source of more fiction ('Maybe it'd be a good idea to start another diary, just to cream it off' [1]), and working out personal issues ('I see what I am doing, in this diary, is conducting an argument with myself, about these two men, and myself, and men in general' [240]). A reader probably goes to the diary-as-archive for empirical data. But such archival material bleeds the borders of genre; it is alive with becoming fiction. It shimmers, driven by a reader's mounting affect and ballooning desire.

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