



# This house of grief:

## The story of a murder trial

By Helen Garner

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Genre & subject

Murder - Australia

True crime

### Synopsis

Anyone can see the place where the children died. You take the Princes Highway past Geelong, and keep going west in the direction of Colac. Late in August 2006, soon after I had watched a magistrate commit Robert Farquharson to stand trial before a jury on three charges of murder, I headed out that way on a Sunday morning, across the great volcanic plain. On the evening of 4 September 2005, Father's Day, Robert Farquharson, a separated husband, was driving his three sons home to their mother, Cindy, when his car left the road and plunged into a dam. The boys, aged ten, seven and two, drowned. Was this an act of revenge or a tragic accident? The court case became Helen Garner's obsession. She followed it on its protracted course until the final verdict. In this utterly compelling book, Helen Garner tells the story of a man and his broken life. She presents the theatre of the courtroom with its actors and audience, all gathered for the purpose of bearing witness to the truth, players in the extraordinary and unpredictable drama of the quest for justice.

### Author biography

Garner was born in Geelong, Victoria on 7 November 1942, the eldest of six children. She attended Manifold Heights State School, Ocean Grove State School and then The Hermitage in Geelong. She went on to study at the University of Melbourne, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts with majors in English and French.

Between 1966 and 1972 Garner worked as a high-school teacher at various Victorian high schools. During this time, in 1967, she also travelled overseas and met Bill Garner, whom she married in 1968 on their return to Australia. Her only child, the actor, musician and writer Alice Garner, was born in 1969, and her marriage ended in 1971.

In 1972, she was sacked by the Victorian Department of Education for "giving an unscheduled sex-education lesson to her 13-year-old students at Fitzroy High School". The case was widely publicised in Melbourne, bringing Garner a degree of notoriety.

Garner married two more times: Jean-Jacques Portail (1980–85) and Australian writer Murray Bail (born 1941). She is no longer married.

## Discussion starters

- The book begins with the line 'Once there was a...', with all its connotations of fairy tales and fables. Why has Garner chosen to begin her story this way?
- The first time Garner sees Farquharson in person she describes him as 'scared, and small, and terribly lonely'. Later she uses words like wretched and pitiful to describe him. She also describes his self-centredness and she is eventually convinced of his culpability. Discuss Garner's portrayal of Farquharson. Why has she chosen the words she has used?
- The grief counsellor's testimony fills Garner with scepticism, 'yet I longed to be persuaded by it—to be relieved of the sick horror that overcame me whenever I thought of Farquharson at the dam, the weirdness of his demeanour, the way it violated what I believed or hoped was the vital link of loving duty between men and their children'. Earlier she has felt something like shame when she becomes convinced of Farquharson's guilt. How have these feelings influenced the way Garner has told the story?
- Garner talks of a 'missing piece' and a possible 'nub of the matter' as she tries to understand Farquharson and the trial. Are there such things? When Garner imagines a divorced man who gets to know his children and their lives, who needs to put an end to his exile from them, and forms a 'dark contemplation', she sees the idea 'firm up, like a jelly setting'. Is this, ultimately, what Garner sees as the ultimate cause of Farquharson's actions?
- Did your opinion about Farquharson's guilt and culpability change as you followed the ebbs and flows of the trial?
- Garner contrasts Farquharson with his 'bossy big sister' and level-headed [ex]-wife', with him cast as a downtrodden husband, and a coddled son and brother. 'If he doesn't fight back, a treasured boy can wind up as a man with women in his face,' she writes. What is Garner saying about gender relationships and roles in this book?
- Garner notes that jury does not get all the information that may give it insight. How do you think Garner judges the justice system?

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