



Helen Garner

March 1995

AS HELEN GARNER WILL READILY admit—it was easier writing fiction. Easier than trying to grapple with the most celebrated sexual harassment case in Australia since the 1950s. Easier than finding out that your sympathies might not lie with the women but rather with the man whom you've come to see as a 'poor bastard'; easier than learning that the new breed of feminist on campus turns your blood cold; certainly less confronting than having to, in your early 50s, re-assess your ethical and political framework as a woman or discover that the battlelines are no longer between feminists and the rest, but now, perhaps most bitterly, between the so-called 'old-guard' feminists and the new. Or between you, the 'turncoat' Helen Garner, and them.

And if that were not enough, to regard yourself as being blackballed by the main women involved: to go through more than two years of high drama to distil and turn into a book what was an event of major political and cultural importance to Australia; to sink your teeth in further when the whiff of legal action is all about you; to go through three drafts and three sets of lawyers and then to wait six months to learn whether the manuscript is too litigious to be published, then to have a bitter falling-out with your publisher around the same time as the publisher herself has suffered a near-fatal heart attack. And that's before the storm has really broken over Helen Garner's head—which it surely will now that this book is finally entering the world. Yes, writing fiction is often easier. You can make things up, hide behind characters, take your leg rope off. With this story, you might get eaten by sharks.

The Whites of their Eyes

HELEN GARNER'S BOOK *THE FIRST STONE*, to be published on March 27, is based on a sexual harassment case that stirred passions and created headlines around the country in 1992 and 1993. It centres on Melbourne University's Ormond College where two female students accused the master of the college of indecent assault.

As is customary in such cases, the identities of the two complainants were suppressed, although the name of the master was broadcast around the country. In a fictional gesture Helen Garner has invented names for all the characters, including the master of the college, Alan Gregory, whom she refers to as Colin Shepherd.

On October 16, 1991, a valedictory dinner was held in the grounds of Ormond College, possibly the most prestigious residential academic college in Australia. At the end of the dinner about 250 people attended a party—known as the 'Smoko'—in the junior common room and the college quadrangle. Organised by the Student Club, the 'Smoko' was a black-tie affair, although never renowned for its sobriety.

'Nicole Stewart', a student in her early 20s, was to claim later that she danced that night with Gregory, the master of the college, and that in the middle of a slow tune the master placed his right hand on her left breast and squeezed it. Stewart alleged that she removed his hand but that Gregory repeated the action. She left the dance floor shortly afterwards, shaken, and told her friends what had happened.

At about 11 pm that same night a second student, 'Elizabeth Rosen', was returning from the women's toilet when she struck up a conversation with Gregory. Gregory invited Rosen into his nearby office where they continued to discuss, amongst other things, Rosen's sister's application to attend the college. Rosen was to later claim that, once inside, Gregory locked the door and turned off the overhead light, leaving only a desk lamp on. He then proceeded to make advances to her—variously cupping her breasts in his hand and squeezing them, asking for a kiss and declaring that he often harboured 'indecent thoughts' about her.

The first time Alan Gregory learnt that there were complaints against him was one month after this party. He was summoned to the office of the chair of the college council, himself a High Court judge, and warned: 'You should be very careful. You shouldn't go to student functions. You should watch what you drink. You should *never* talk to students on your own in your office.' Gregory was then advised by the judge that the allegations had been withdrawn.

Four months later the judge called Gregory again and informed him that this time the allegations had been formalised and that he had appointed a 'Group of Three' within the college to examine the complaints.

Helen Garner

Then, in March, thousands of anonymous leaflets were circulated throughout the college and university, under doorways and over noticeboards. The leaflets made inflammatory suggestions about Alan Gregory.

On March 10, nearly five months after the valedictory dinner, Gregory learnt who was making the formal allegations to the college and the precise nature of them. On April 9, he went to the Carlton police station to be interviewed. He completely and emphatically denied the allegations. The following month he was charged with four (later reduced to two) counts of indecent assault.

Four months later, Helen Garner picked up her copy of the *Melbourne Age* and read that a man she'd never heard of was up before a magistrate on the charge of having put his hand on Nicole Stewart's breast while they were dancing.

Garner was appalled. She regarded, as did many of her feminist friends born in the 1940s, uninvited sexual advances (presuming he was guilty) as simply part of the landscape. They were coded into human nature. Why go to the police—because as a friend of hers commented at the time: 'If every bastard who's ever laid a hand on us was dragged into court, the judicial system of the State would be clogged for months.'

In her disenchantment Garner wrote Alan Gregory a letter: 'I read in today's paper about your troubles and I'm writing to say how upset I am and how terribly sorry about what has happened to you. I don't know you, or the young women; I've heard no rumours and I have no line to run. What I want to say is that it's heartbreaking, for a feminist of nearly 50 like me, to see our ideals of so many years distorted into this ghastly punitiveness.'

'I expect I will never know what "really happened", but I certainly know that if there was an incident, as alleged, this has been the most appallingly destructive, priggish and pitiless way of dealing with it. I want you to know there are plenty of women out here who step back in dismay from the kind of treatment you have received, and who still hope that men and women, for all our foolishness and mistakes, can behave towards each other with kindness rather than being engaged in this kind of warfare.'

The letter, as Garner was to later discover, embroiled her in more trouble than she'd foreseen. She'd been cast as traitor to the cause.

THE CHARGE THAT GREGORY HAD indecently assaulted Nicole Stewart while dancing with her was found proven in August 1992 by the magistrate, though no conviction was recorded. Gregory appealed and

The Whites of their Eyes

on September 21, 1992 the appeal was heard in the County Court. Helen Garner was there to cast a rapt eye on the cross-examination of one of the women:

Now the QC really got to work on her. Into his tone, neutral so far, he introduced the acid that chills a listener's blood, casting doubt, as it is meant to do, upon the whole moral fabric of the witness. He pestered and nitpicked . . . He addressed Nicole as 'Madam' with the sarcasm that can lie behind what men have traditionally called chivalry. And when he got to the nub of her allegations, he squarely challenged her.

'The first time,' he said, 'you didn't move away from him.'

'I didn't want to believe,' said Nicole, 'that someone in that position would have done that.'

The QC leaned forward and turned up his chin. 'Why,' he said, 'didn't you slap 'im?'

The word rang in the air, sharp as a palm against a cheek. My skin prickled: a ripple ran round the court. You bastard, I thought—every woman in the room could answer that question.

The following day the judgment was handed down. The judge reminded the court that nobody saw the act in question. Nicole Stewart was an 'excellent witness' who had an impeccable record for honesty. He did not disbelieve her. However, he could not find Gregory guilty because the allegations had not been proven beyond reasonable doubt. It came down to oath against oath. The judge, therefore, set aside the magistrate's decision and found Gregory not guilty.

Garner writes:

As the Gregory family rose to leave, the son, a plump, pale boy of 19 or so, having controlled himself as long as he could, suddenly burst into loud, racking sobs. The sound of his weeping echoed off the bare walls and the ceiling of the courtroom. His mother cried too, in the arms of one of the two grey-suited men. 'I can't believe she did it to him,' she kept saying over his shoulder through her tears; 'I can't believe she did it to him.'

The appeal, in effect, cleared Gregory because earlier that month, on September 2, the Magistrates Court had handed down its judgment on the second set of allegations—that Gregory indecently assaulted Elizabeth Rosen in his office. Again, it came down to one oath versus another. Elizabeth Rosen was a spirited, forthright person with many friends who cared about her, the magistrate said, while Gregory was highly regarded

Helen Garner

and had led an unblemished life, both privately and professionally. He received the benefit of the doubt and the charge was dismissed.

For Alan Gregory, though, the ordeal was far from over.

Soon, he learnt that a motion by the Ormond College Council expressing its confidence in him had been defeated. He was also informed in October 1992 that the two women were now taking the case to the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission. (In March the following year a settlement was reached between Ormond College and the two students. The college issued a public apology acknowledging that the women's complaints 'could have been handled differently . . . with more sensitivity and with a greater degree of apparent impartiality'. The college accepted that the students 'acted honourably'. Gregory declined to approve the statement.) In May 1993, Gregory announced his resignation from the college.

In an interview in November 1993, Gregory told Helen Garner that his professional life was in ruins:

'It's damaged my reputation forever. There's been a lot of talk about me being in situations of power over attractive female students. Look—I've been teaching in schools and universities for 27 years. I had pass or fail power over students—power over their future as teachers. There's never been a single item of untoward behaviour. My record was impeccable. What power did I really have over Elizabeth or Nicole? Elizabeth was an ex-student. This alleged power I was supposed to have over these people is an illusion.

'In terms of career, I'm finished. My concern now is just getting a job, enough to keep the family happy. My age is against me—I'm 54. Times are bad for jobs.'

'Do you really think your name is terminally smeared?' I asked. 'I mean—do you think people believe in their hearts . . . '

He cut across me. 'There's a senior post going in an education faculty. What they want is almost written for me. I've applied. But I can tell you they won't have me, because of this.

'People keep pointing me out, in the street. Other people make jokes. The worst are the really bad male chauvinists, who go "Ha ha ha—I do that all the time, but you got caught".'

IN 1977, WITH THE PUBLICATION of her first novel, *Monkey Grip*, Helen Garner established herself as possibly the strongest and clearest post-1960s feminist voice in Australian writing. *Monkey Grip* was a landmark

The Whites of their Eyes

account of communal living, drug use and single mothers caught in the chemical reactions of their own love affairs in inner urban Melbourne.

Her subsequent novels and short stories included *Honour and Other People's Children*; *The Children's Bach*; *Postcards from Surfers* and *Cosmo Cosmolino*, as well as the screenplay for the film *The Last Days of Chez Nous*. (*Chez Nous* was based on the unravelling of Garner's second marriage, to a Frenchman, after he fell in love with Garner's youngest sister.)

It is no secret that Garner has always been an autobiographical writer—she once said that fiction for her was changing the colour of the dress from red to blue—and that many of her friends were aghast at how they had been portrayed between the pages of her books. (A few have never quite forgiven her.)

Through all of her work the same contours were there to be seen: a celebration of the ordinary, the domestic (notwithstanding the presence of an angel in *Cosmo Cosmolino*), and a keen eye—as well as an exquisite ear—for the moral proprieties of an age in which the rules had ceased to be fixed.

'Some people mistake Helen for someone who writes on a very small canvas,' says Diana Gribble, Garner's friend and long-time publisher during the days of the publishing house McPhee Gribble. 'But that is not Helen at all—she is tackling very big issues by writing on a small canvas. She is constantly exploring concepts of honourable behaviour and how it is possible to live with honour. That's why I think she stands apart from the rank and file of Australian writing.'

Garner was also no puritan. 'She understands very well,' says Gribble, 'the kind of messy, neurotic, ungovernable nature of human beings. So she is never likely to fall for the politically correct, although she is adamantly feminist in her view.'

In 1961 Garner entered Melbourne University as a 19-year-old English student. 'I went through my whole university career without basically opening my mouth,' she told me.

'Girls didn't talk much and I didn't talk at all. I just sat there. I wasn't socially shy. I had a wonderful time socially. I was having a ball. It was the whole drinking and sex and parties—you know, all that side of my life was flourishing. But I felt intellectually very lacking in confidence and I just crawled out the other end of university with a third-class honours degree.'

By the age of 25 she had married Melbourne actor and writer Bill Garner and was soon pregnant with their daughter, Alice. The marriage began to collapse a few years later, about 1971, which is when feminism went off in her head like a bomb.

Helen Garner

Today, talking with her about feminism and the booby-trapped path her latest book has taken her down, there is little doubting that her views have been reached only after much soul-searching. The body language speaks volumes: one minute staring into oblivion and picking desultorily at the nail polish on her toes while she talks; then coiled tight in the couch, her green, feline eyes searching out the visitor for clues to his sympathy; then slumped forward, head buried in hands as if this were a divine service instead of an interview.

‘I wish the word feminism would just fall out the window,’ she says, a genuine look of pain flickering across her angular, watchful face. ‘I wish there was some other way to talk . . . when I say the word I feel a sort of sourness.’

Earlier in the interview, in a dark corner of the apartment which has been loaned to her as a writing space, she had been unequivocal about the importance of feminism in her life.

‘It has made my life possible in certain ways—the fact that back in the early ’70s, which is when it first hit my life as a series of propositions and ways of thinking about things, it was almost as if I had been living a dream up until then.

‘Suddenly I had tools with which to examine my own experience . . . I realised there’d been a lot of obscure frustrations and dissatisfactions in my life that I didn’t think I could discuss with people. I am tempted to say I didn’t feel I was getting a fair deal.’

Garner’s feminism manifested itself as a kind of counter-cultural snub to the status quo, rather than as the sophisticated, intellectual paradigm of today which has found its way into the universities. It was more practical than theoretical; it had more to do with how to live with broken marriages than with a discourse of power.

She’d joined an organisation formed to help change abortion laws and arrange safe terminations for pregnant women; she got involved with women’s consciousness-raising groups, exploring friendships with other women and starting up communal households with other single mothers: she wrote for the Melbourne feminist newspaper *Vashti’s Voice* and then the alternative magazine *The Digger*, feminism being one of the banners it flew; and, of course, she’d long been taking the pill.

Because if you were 20 years old in 1972—or even 30 as Helen Garner was—and you thought of yourself as worldly-wise, you probably had a lot of sex with a lot of people. Rock festivals like Sunbury and Woodstock were about having a swim in the dam and then getting your rocks off! Not rebelling against your parents was like an act of capitulation, because in service to a higher truth, namely sexual liberation and personal freedom, you declared a kind of war on paternalistic authority.

The Whites of their Eyes

When Helen Garner was a university student, she defied the conventions and rules by sleeping with her tutor. She had a natural sympathy, therefore, for the erotic dance 'between people who teach and learn' and she regarded attempts to manage its 'shocking charge' as often destructive and dictatorial. The corollary of this argument, of course, is that Garner believes if Alan Gregory had not looked like every daughter's father; had been 20 years younger and a lot better-looking, the consequences for him might not have been so grave.

In 1972, Garner was also sacked from her teaching position at Fitzroy High School after she discussed sex in explicit details with her enthralled students. ('Before we can start, I want to make you understand that the words some people think of as dirty words are the best words, the right words to use when you are talking about sex. So I'm not going to say "sexual intercourse". I'm going to say "fuck", and I'm going to say "cock and cunt" too, so we'd better get that straight. Is that okay?') She could, therefore, identify with what it was like to be an academic booted onto the streets for his (alleged) sins.

Today, it is argued, there is a new sexual puritanism in the air—and not just because of the AIDS epidemic.

A new bedroom politics has entered campuses, particularly in the United States, and as Katie Roiphe pointed out in her controversial book, *The Morning After*, published in 1993, what is changing is not sexual behaviour, but sexual politics.

Sexual harassment and rape are now subject to entirely new interpretations and definitions because the definitions themselves have become entangled in a fierce ideological debate. Rape, for example, can constitute (a man's) verbal coercion or even (a woman's) regret at what took place the night before. Someone's sexual harassment can be someone else's bad night.

When you peel back the outer skin of the Ormond College story, what you are left with, Garner believes, is the furious heartbeat of generational conflict, or at least conflict between so-called 'liberation' feminists like herself and a new breed of politically sophisticated feminist whose primary concern is ostensibly about the discourse of power.

For Helen Garner, even if you assumed that Alan Gregory was guilty—and the courts finally found him not guilty—what happened to him and his family was completely disproportionate to the crime he was accused of.

'I am in favour of there being an apparatus to deal with these matters and I hope I make that clear in the book,' she says. 'But if the apparatus fails, what happens then? Do you let it pass until the next time, or do you go after that bloke with everything you can get? Do you get the big guns in there and blast him away?

Helen Garner

‘[Because] when I saw how deeply the feelings about this story went, I thought that he [Gregory] must be a [sexual] marauder . . . but I could not come up with any evidence that he was. Nothing like it.

‘I know there are lots of men who do think they’ve got the right to approach women sexually in any way they want and they’re the sort of men that I, like most other women, fantasise about machine-gunning when they go past you in the streets hanging their tongues out of the truck window. Don’t get me wrong. I would love to deal with men like that as viciously as I possibly could. But this is where you’ve got to talk about a graduation of offence.’

And to Garner, assuming for the argument that the allegations were true, a nerdy pass by a slightly inebriated man at a party is a long way from an act of violence, or even sexual harassment. It might be clumsy, inappropriate, befuddled or even lecherous behaviour, but to call in the police, take the matter to court, ruin a man’s career and his family life, is nothing short of overkill. And where, in this seeming thirst for retribution, she argues, is a concession to the complex, often shilly-shallying nature of male-female relationships: to just plain old heterosexual miscommunication?

Katie Roiphe and Camille Paglia have condemned the so-called ‘rape crisis feminists’ for what they see as their closet Victorian puritanism and their desire to legislate the ambiguity out of sex.

Now, with *The First Stone*, Helen Garner has added her distinctly Australian voice to the chorus. Why this apparent clamour for vengeance, she asks? And why the trampling of open debate?

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 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.

HELEN GARNER WAS NEVER ABLE to interview Nicole Stewart and Elizabeth Rosen, nor a number of their key supporters. Not surprisingly, they viewed her letter to Alan Gregory—which he had photocopied and circulated widely—as support for his cause.

True, Garner has a history of dashing off letters and this one, she admits now, was an act of consummate naivety. ‘It was naïve of me to think

The Whites of their Eyes

that I could write a letter like that and it not be seen as a political act,' she says. 'But it was made into a [political] statement . . . and perhaps these [students] saw my appeal to them for information as some sort of sleazy play instead of what I thought was a genuine approach to them to say, "Listen, maybe I said the wrong thing, do you want to tell me your story?"'

They never did, and their absence from the book, Garner acknowledges, 'leaves a ragged hole which I am unable to fill'.

To some extent, Jenna Mead (real name), a former Ormond College councillor, teacher of feminist theory at Melbourne University and key supporter of the two students, has attempted to fill it. Mead declined to discuss the case with me but told writer Amanda Lohrey in an interview with *RePublica* magazine recently that it was vital to remember how the structures within the college and the university had failed the two women.

This in turn, Mead says, forced them, reluctantly, to take the matter to the police. They believed, therefore, that the case was not just about indecent assault but also about an academic college bunkering down inside its own masculine fortifications of tradition, privilege and seeming insensitivity to the female experience. And yet, to read Garner's letter to Alan Gregory, says Mead, you could easily form the view that the women were merely displaying a 'puritanical attitude towards gender relations'.

Mead continues: 'Further, [Garner implies] that these two hadn't learnt a very basic rule about being real women and that is, that it's the woman's job to be responsible for the effect her sexuality might have on a man . . . So in other words, real women, for all "our foolishness and mistakes", should behave toward men with "kindness". This is offered by libertarian feminists like Helen Garner as a feminist analysis.'

Assuming the allegations against Gregory were true, Mead says, the only conclusions you could reach, if you accepted Garner's analysis, were that it was unwomanly and unworldly not to handle having your breasts squeezed and that the women simply overreacted. They went to the police instead of shutting up. They are culpable, therefore, for all that followed, including the decision by police to lay charges, the court case and the media attention.

'Can I suggest that this is perhaps excessive and irrational,' Mead says. 'The accusation of puritanism has been levelled at these two young women, I think, as a kind of target practice for the backlash against contemporary feminism. The fact is that for a woman to make a complaint of sexual harassment is a courageous act, not a frivolous or vindictive prank. In pursuing a legal remedy, she often faces vicious attacks on her personal life.'

Helen Garner

THIS WAS NEVER GOING TO be an easy book to write and in the mood-and-moment reportage that has become a hallmark of Garner's style, you see pages bathed in anguish and self-doubt, but suffused also with a white-hot anger. The anguish lies in the torturous self-examination she subjects herself to as a feminist (causing her to nearly shred the manuscript amid bouts of insomnia); the rage springs from the blackballing of her by the students and their supporters, an act she decries as 'politically and intellectually despicable'.

Everybody associated with the Ormond case or its telling has been to some degree traumatised by it. The result is a legal trip-wire. *Vogue Australia* magazine, for instance, was sued in late 1993 after its former features editor Caroline Baum wrote what amounted to the first in-depth article on the subject, exploring the connections between the Ormond College case, the release of a new film, *Gross Misconduct*, and the celebrated sexual harassment episode of the 1950s in Tasmania involving the academic Sydney Sparkes Orr.

Baum is the only journalist to date who has managed to secure an interview with one of the students. Her story was sympathetic. In the article, Baum wrote that the students 'had to endure six months of internal college inquiry and three court cases while pursuing their degrees, not to mention unacceptable levels of stress including being abused in public places'.

While the students were reportedly not unhappy with the article, Suzy Nixon, the university's sexual harassment consultant, was. She sued, and as part of the settlement *Vogue* was forced to publish a retraction and issue an apology.

The two female students remained unbudgeable in their refusal to speak to Garner and the father of one has let it be known through his lawyers that he is watching developments closely. For this reason, publishers Pan Macmillan have kept the manuscript under lock and key, without the normal advance copies going out to the media.

In the middle of last year Alan Gregory was shown a copy of the manuscript, and was reportedly shattered by what he read. Although many readers will probably find the book sympathetic to him, he clearly didn't. His lawyers have also contacted Pan Macmillan in what was considered another shot across the bows. Gregory also wrote Garner a 15-page letter of corrections and objections, some of which Garner incorporated. Gregory's wife has let Garner know that she was devastated by the existence of the manuscript and could not bring herself to read it.

Garner delivered what she hoped would be the finished manuscript around the middle of July last year, a few days before Hilary McPhee, her publisher of 17 years, suffered a massive heart attack.

The Whites of their Eyes

At this point the manuscript then went on a merry-go-round as the publishers sought legal advice as to whether or not it was too litigious. Ultimately, three law firms were consulted. The third found it eminently publishable, on the condition of certain changes. But it had taken six months to reach that decision and it had a harrowing effect on Garner.

‘It was the worst period of my professional life,’ she says.

Then, in the middle of all this, Garner and McPhee had a major falling-out. At the time of writing they had not spoken since last September and all contact had been through Garner’s agent.

‘I think there was enormous anger in each of us toward the other,’ Garner says now. ‘I think this had been building up for at least a year and has got everything to do with the sort of relationship that can develop between a writer and a publisher.

‘Our professional and personal relationships got hopelessly entangled, so that fears for one side of it would prevent us from being frank to each other about the other side of it. It just happened to be that the atmosphere surrounding the fate of the book exacerbated a much more personal falling-out. I think it probably would have happened anyway.’

McPhee declined to discuss her friendship with Garner but had this to say about the book: ‘*The First Stone* is a brave and remarkable book. Helen had a really horrible time writing it and I had a hard time publishing it. A lot of people badly wanted it dumped. But we got there in the end. Its publication in March will be a triumph.’

HELEN GARNER HAS ALREADY BEEN accused by women who have not read the manuscript of writing a book that peddles a grotesque fiction: that women who are raped are asking for it. Far from it, but Garner knows this is dangerous territory nonetheless, especially as she has never been raped.

‘In a sense, I don’t have the right to talk about that because it has just never happened to me. I’ve been attacked but I’ve never been raped. But I do know from the people I know who have been raped that not just the attacks themselves differ enormously in levels of violence but the way the women later incorporate or find a place for that experience in their lives is vastly different. And I know too that within a single life, the raped woman’s attitude to what happened to her can change over time in very striking and interesting ways.’

And yet, as American writer Mary Gaitskill observes, these ‘rape crisis’ feminists obviously strike a chord with many women and girls who have been raped or have *felt* raped in a wide variety of circumstances. Feminists

Helen Garner

like Katie Roiphe, Camille Paglia—and indeed, Helen Garner—doubt the veracity of some of these experiences on the basis that they don't necessarily square with their own. Yes, they might have had an experience which many would now call 'date rape', but no, they didn't feel violated. All the fuss, therefore, is either a political ploy or a retrograde impulse to return to paralysing notions of helpless femininity. In other words, if a man makes an unwanted sexual advance, you slap 'im on the face, knee him in the groin, or just deal with it, so goes this argument.

But, as Gaitskill observes, many women, including herself, have allowed themselves to be drawn into sex because they couldn't face the idea that if they said no, the man might at best sulk interminably or at worst, turn ugly. For many women there is an incipient guilt about saying no.

Garner herself is by no means deaf to this argument:

I thought too that, at 50, I might have forgotten what it was like to be a young woman out in the world, constantly the focus of men's sexual attention. Or maybe I was cranky that my friends and sisters and I had got ourselves through decades of being wolf-whistled, propositioned, pestered, insulted, touched, attacked and worse, without the big guns of sexual harassment legislation to back us up. I thought that I might be mad at these girls for not having 'taken it like a woman', for being wimps who ran to the law to whinge about a minor unpleasantness, instead of standing up and fighting back with their own weapons of youth and quick wits. I tried to remember the mysterious passivity that can incapacitate a woman at a moment of unexpected, unwanted sexual pressure. Worst of all, I wondered whether I had become like one of those emotionally scarred men who boast to their sons, 'I got the strap at school, and it didn't do me any harm.'

In heeding this argument, Garner still emerges convinced that the women went too far and the failure to understand this exposes the yawning gulf that exists between middle-aged mothers and their daughters who want to demolish their elders for their 'wimpy scruples and desire for mercy'.

Yes, there could have been a way to avoid this ghastly mess, Garner believes. The students could have been 'cool' enough to repeat their statements to Alan Gregory's face and to ask for an acknowledgement and apology from him. Gregory then might have had the 'sangfroid' to have said something like: 'I certainly don't remember doing what you say I did, and I can't believe I ever would have done such a thing . . . but we'd

The Whites of their Eyes

all had a bit to drink . . . [and] if I seem to you to have behaved inappropriately, I'm terribly sorry.'

But this, Garner argues, would have been the pragmatist's fantasy of a way out. It would have rested on the presumption of worldliness in all the protagonists and would have assumed a 'fundamental generosity, flexibility, goodwill, absence of fear and willingness to go the extra mile'. And it would not have taken into account a certain kind of modern feminism Garner labels 'priggish' and 'unforgiving'.

At the age of 52 and in the midst of a third—but by far the most successful—marriage to author Murray Bail (who admits to finding feminist arguments rather tedious), there is an ease with the world and absence of anger in Helen Garner now that tempers whatever tendency there once was to see all men as brutish, predatory creatures.

'When you're young,' she says finally, 'you see blokes, especially ones who might be slightly older than you and in positions of authority, you see them as impervious in some way. You see them as kind of bearing down on the world with this terrific kind of seamless quality. But when you get to this age, you've been around the back of blokes and you see that they're just propped up with struts.'

That may be the view for Helen Garner and women like her—well-educated, experienced, assertive and possessed of a certain 'boys will be boys' power of forgiveness. For many others, however, it is not a case of struts holding up harmless, hollow men, but of buttresses reinforcing pillars of power. With the publication of *The First Stone*, the two camps are about to meet head-on.

Postscript

Those closing words turned out to be even more prophetic than first thought. No-one could have imagined the furore that would follow the publication of The First Stone. Helen Garner became a pariah to many feminists who considered the book an act of betrayal and a naïve interpretation of the Ormond College events. Some academics even took the extraordinary step of refusing to read the book.

In other quarters she was hailed, especially by men, as a champion of free speech and a rational voice against political correctness and the more extreme elements of feminism.

Despite the fact Garner had written a number of novels, short stories and film scripts prior to The First Stone, this was the book that made her a household name. Newspapers were filled with columns and letters to the editor wanting to either canonise her or tear her apart. Talk-back radio couldn't get enough on the

Helen Garner

subject; books and essays were published; full-page extracts of speeches run; arguments had over dinner, in reading groups, on buses.

Helen Garner found herself for the first time a public figure, and hated it. For the past four years she has felt incapable of writing fiction.

'It just paralysed me,' Garner admitted recently. 'It turned me into an automaton. I just went dead in the water.'

While Garner does not directly blame the book and its repercussions for the break-up of her marriage to Murray Bail, she admits to its corrosive effects.

At the time of writing, she had just returned from a writers' festival in Chile; embarked on a six-week Latin course and re-entered the world of fiction. 'I am fighting back on that score,' she said.