

The Spare Room

Helen Garner

Author Background

- Birth—7 November 1942
- Where—Geelong, Australia
- Awards—National Book Council, South Australian Premier's Award, New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, Walkley Award for Best Feature Writing, Nita Kibble Literary Award, Ned Kelly Awards, Melbourne Prize for Literature, Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction, Queensland Premier's Literary Award, Barbara Jefferis Award

Garner was born in Geelong, Victoria, 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, residing at Janet Clarke Hall, and 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.

In 2003 a portrait of Garner, titled *True Stories*, painted by Jenny Sages, was a finalist in the Archibald Prize.

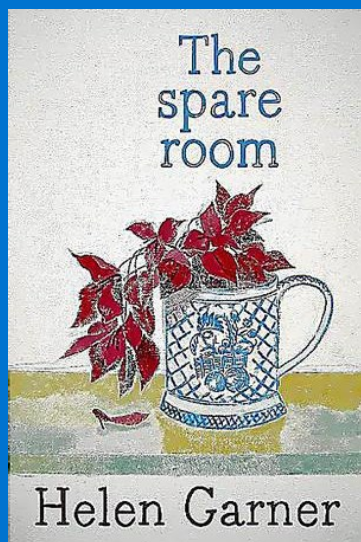
Garner came to prominence at a time when Australian writers were relatively few in number, and Australian women writers were, by some, considered a novelty. Australian academic and writer, Kerryn Goldsworthy, writes that "From the beginning of her writing career Garner was regarded as, and frequently called, a stylist, a realist, and a feminist".

Her first novel, *Monkey Grip* (1977), relates the lives of a group of welfare recipients living in student-style accommodation in Melbourne. Years later she stated that she had adapted it directly from her personal diaries. The book was very successful: it won the National Book Council Award in 1978 and was turned into a film in 1982. Critics have retrospectively applied the term Grunge Lit to describe *Monkey Grip*, citing its depiction of urban life and social realism as being key aspects of later works in the sub-genre.

In subsequent books, she has continued to adapt her personal experiences. Her later novels are: *The Children's Bach* (1984) and *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992). In 2008 she returned to fiction writing with the publication of *The Spare Room*, a fictional treatment of caring for a dying cancer patient, based on the illness and death of Garner's friend Jenya Osborne. She has also published several short story collections: *Honour & Other People's Children: two stories* (1980), *Postcards from Surfers* (1985) and *My Hard Heart: Selected Fictions* (1998).

Garner said, in 1985, that writing novels was like "trying to make a patchwork quilt look seamless. A novel is made up of scraps of our own lives and bits of other people's, and things we think of in the middle of the night and whole notebooks full of randomly collected details". In an interview in 1999, she said that "My initial reason for writing is that I need to shape things so I can make them bearable or comprehensible to myself. It's my way of making sense of things that I've lived and seen other people live, things that I'm afraid of, or that I long for".

(adapted from Wikipedia)



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Book Summary

The Spare Room

Helen Garner, 2010

Picador

175 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780312428174

A powerful, witty, and taut novel about a complex friendship between two women—one dying, the other called to care for her—from an internationally acclaimed and award-winning author.

How much of ourselves must we give up to help a friend in need? Helen has little idea what lies ahead—and what strength she must muster—when she offers her spare room to an old friend, Nicola, who has arrived in the city for cancer treatment. Skeptical of the medical establishment, and placing all her faith in an alternative health center, Nicola is determined to find her own way to deal with her illness, regardless of the advice Helen offers.

In the weeks that follow, Nicola's battle for survival will turn not only her own life upside down but also those of everyone around her. *The Spare Room* is a magical gem of a book—gripping, moving, and unexpectedly funny—that packs a huge punch, charting a friendship as it is tested by the threat of death.

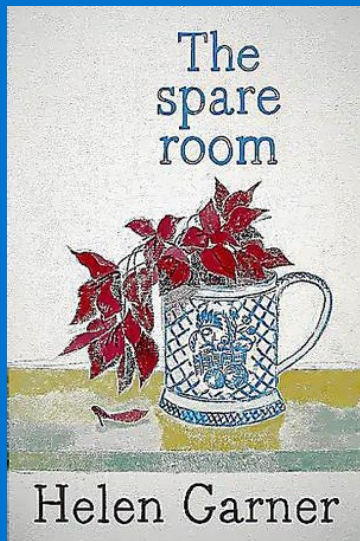
(from Barnes & Noble)

In her first novel in fifteen years, Helen Garner writes about the joys and limits of female friendship under the transforming pressure of illness. "The clear-eyed grace of her prose" in this darkly funny and unsparing novel has been hailed by Peter Carey as "the work of a great writer." Garlanded with awards, dazzling reviewers around the globe, *The Spare Room* is destined to be a modern literary classic.

(from the publisher)

The Spare Room

Helen Garner



Reviews

Helen Garner's new novel starts with a woman called 'Helen' putting out fresh sheets for a friend who's coming to stay, and thinking: what colour should they be? Helen's friend, Nicola – lovely, playful, careless, aristocratic Nicola – needs all the help she can get. She has cancer in her liver and her bones.

Over the next three weeks, Helen will change Nicola's sweated-through sheets again and again, bring her food and drink, and drive her to the shabby little Theodore Institute to get the strange treatments that Nicola believes will make her cancer 'disappear.'

Much of the special charge of *The Spare Room* is that of a fiction that seems to have been made very close to the writers' life. 'Helen' in this book is a writer, who lives in Melbourne, next door to her daughter, and as 'Helen' does this or that you want to point at the page and say: It's *you!* There's no *fiction*. I see you, Helen Garner! That's a special kind of pleasure, but there's also the harder pleasure of working to stop doing this. You can't just see a fiction author, easy as that. We too often think that writing is – is all of – the person who made it, but so much here has been carefully chosen, and so much carefully left out. Part of the fascination of fiction, especially a fiction like this, is that it can say both *here I am*, and *no I'm not*.

If you've read *Monkey Grip* or *The First Stone*, or *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, you'll know some of the Helen in *The Spare Room*. She's good company, good in a book. She's clever and fierce and she laughs; she's anxious and busy; she does her jobs; she rides her bike, she cooks and cleans and writes; she *slogs on*. Her feelings push up very fast and strong, and she's often shocked to find that what she wants is violence: to hit and smash to pieces. She makes lots of mistakes; that keeps her in pain; but it also keeps her where she can see – where she's painfully interested in – the mistakes of others. She'll tell you things more cautious, nicer writers wouldn't say. She'll tell you her dear dying friend isn't doing such a good job of dying. She'll tell you that, a lot of the time, she's thinks her dear dying friend is an idiot.

Nicola comes from Old Money, but she's always tried 'alternatives' – seeds and beads and vipassana. Now this is leading her into the world of small rooms where terminally ill people sit for a PowerPoint presentation on 'High Dosage' Vitamin C cures and the benefits of an Ozone Sauna. *The Spare Room* is not just an attack on this kind of belief: one of the kindest people in the book is a boy who gives Nicola some electro-magnetic 'healing' patches. This novel helps you imagine how much you could want a dying person to believe they're not dying – and hate how stupid they have to be to keep believing. Nicola thinks Professor Theodore can 'scoop' or 'sweat' cancer out of her body. Her bright smiling lies make Helen very angry and sad and tired, but Helen also knows – she does remember – that Nicola is the only one this cancer is going to kill. The dying should *face the truth*. Shouldn't they? Should they?

The Spare Room does what the best fiction does: it makes you stop arguing, in that flat easy way, about what people *should* do. It reminds us we might not know what anyone should do, until we have to watch them doing it.

Readings.com.au

No one likes to think about dying, but novelists seem scared to well, death--to write about it

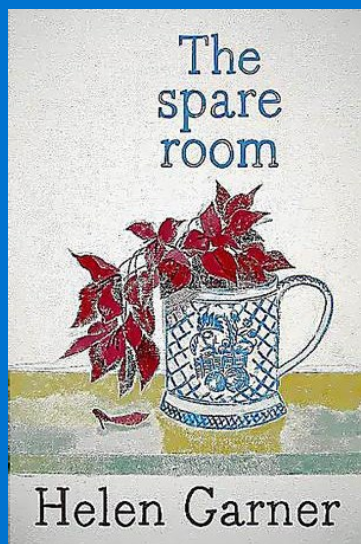
Characters in fiction don't spend much time dying anymore. Of course they die--if you were to remove from the shelves all the novels in which a life is lost, the stacks would be bare--and sometimes, as in "The Lovely Bones," they speak to us from beyond the grave. But the characters of today don't spend much time on the brutal labor of dying.

Dying, it seems, has become the province of nonfiction. Memoirs charting the final illnesses of parents, relatives, mentors and, indeed, the authors themselves are too numerous to cite. A number, including Mitch Albom's "Tuesdays With Morrie" and Randy Pausch's "The Last Lecture," have become bestsellers. We have time for death as a learning experience, at once real (it is more moving to us to know that the personage under discussion once lived and breathed) and morally instructive (perhaps, from their wisdom, we will learn how to live and how to die). Jade Goody, a reality-TV star from the British "Big Brother" who was once reviled for her racism and bad behavior, has of late been lionized as she faces death from cervical cancer: she married in front of the cameras this past month, providing us an image of courage in adversity, of fairy-tale romance to the end. This vision of dying as noble, even beautiful, consoles us, assures us that somehow we can remove its sting.

The prolonged messiness of dying, however, is not the focus of our accounts, in prose or in pictures. Like the unseemly actuality of childbirth, it is publicly elided: Goody racked in pain, confined to her hospital bed, is

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Reviews (continued)

not on offer for the cameras. Nor are depictions of terminal suffering often found in contemporary fiction. Publishers are wary of a subject so bleak. It may be that writers, too, shy away from the topic: in a culture preoccupied with youth, beauty and success, death seems peripheral, a necessary but ignorable ill. Unless we can imbue it with meaning--the transcendence that we all so guiltily seek--we do not want to talk about it.

It was not ever thus. In 19th-century life, death could not be so easily avoided; and so, in 19th-century fiction, dying--the actual, hideous effort of dying--played a significant role. Think how long it takes Emma Bovary to succumb to her arsenic, and the scrupulous detail with which

Flaubert records her agonies. Remember, too, that his unflinching eye alights upon the indifference of the living before the dead, as the pharmacist and the priest debate faith over Emma's corpse while snacking upon the cold supper laid on the dresser. Similarly, in Tolstoy's masterpiece of dying, "The Death of Ivan Ilych," we learn at the outset that "the very fact of the death of someone close to them aroused in all who heard about it, as always, a feeling of delight that he had died and they hadn't." Only then does Tolstoy cast his narrative back to Ivan Ilych's brief life and seemingly endless dying: "How it came about in the third month of Ivan Ilych's illness ... Another two weeks went by ... Two weeks went by like this ..." Who knew that death could take so long? His family can't stand it; only Gerasim, his rudely vital peasant servant, holds his legs and uncomplainingly gives him comfort--"Gerasim did all of this easily, willingly and with a kindness that Ivan Ilych found moving"--in the knowledge that death will come someday, too, for him. Gerasim's is an awareness which most of us would willingly ignore.

The Australian writer Helen Garner's new novel, "The Spare Room," is a bracing reminder that we cannot. Barely a novel (the first-person protagonist is named Helen; the outlines of her life resemble her creator's), it is nevertheless significantly not a memoir. It does not seek to instruct or to uplift: it seeks, rigorously and unflinchingly, to tell the truth. It is Helen's story of the three-week visit by her dying friend, Nicola, a visit in which Helen is called upon to be Gerasim and cannot, for that time at least, fully embrace the challenge; in which she yearns, like Ivan Ilych's family and colleagues, to turn her back on mortality: "Death was in my house. Its rules pushed new life away with terrible force. I longed for the children next door, their small, determined bodies through which vitality surged ..."

Nicola ventures from her hometown of Sydney to Melbourne for alternative cancer treatment--chiefly, intensive doses of vitamin C--that make her frighteningly ill. For a long time, she refuses any palliative care. Unprepared, Helen finds herself called upon to nurse her old friend in the most intimate ways, and all the while Nicola refuses to admit that she is dying, to Helen's fury: "Death will not be denied," Helen observes. "To try it is grandiose. It drives madness into the soul. It leaches out virtue. It injects poison into friendship, and makes a mockery of love." Eventually, Helen can bear it no longer: "I wanted to say this: you're using that bloody clinic to distract yourself ... from what you have to do ... You've got to get ready." Yet it is still a long road--a long dying road--before Nicola can finally, tearfully, concede that "death's at the end of this, isn't it."

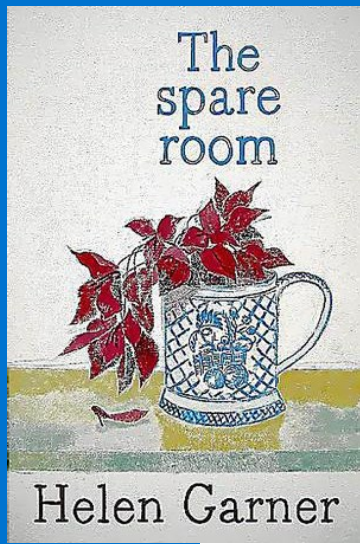
The beauty of this novel lies in its insistence on the frank and inescapable fight between life and death. Ivan Ilych's wife is not wrong, after all, to want to flee the room: the labor of dying is agonizing for all concerned. There are no clear lessons, no consoling homilies: there is a lot of sweat and piss, and a lot of suffering all around. Over time (who knew death could take so long?!) Nicola must learn how to die, and Helen must learn to help her die, must learn to be Gerasim ("I learned to wash her arse as gently as I had washed my sister's and my mother's, and as someday someone will have to wash mine.")

The fact that Garner has written this story as a novel rather than as a memoir grants her greater authorial freedom, but it also grants her creation a different status. We are not asked to believe that Nicola actually lived and breathed (although one suspects that she did), just as we are not asked to believe that Helen's rage and compassion belong to Garner alone; instead, we confront this situation--this universal situation--on its own terms, purely on the merits of Garner's luminous, adamant narrative. Just as Ivan Ilych both is and isn't you, or me, both Helen and Nicola are also raised above themselves. Fiction offers a genuine transformation, a truth greater than the sum of its parts. This short, passionate book explores all aspects of struggle in the tremendous, inevitable struggle. A triumph of art over artifice, Garner's novel does not spare us, nor itself. It reminds us that literature not only can, but must, address the most important subjects, because it does so in ways no other form can. As (fictional) Helen quotes (fictional) King Lear: "Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,/And thou no breath at all?" Made up words they may be, but no lament has rung more true.

Newsweek

The Spare Room

Helen Garner



Discussion Questions

1. Beyond the guest room in Helen's home, are there other images the title *The Spare Room* brings to mind? How much room, energy, and patience does the narrator, Helen, have to spare?
2. Discuss your own experiences with caregiving. What are its rewards, and its difficulties? Would you have allowed a friend like Nicola to stay with you until the very end?
3. What is universal about the way humans handle their own mortality? At what point is Nicola able to accept that her illness is terminal? Is it better to know the outcome of our lives, with an opportunity for a long goodbye?
4. How does Helen Garner balance humour with the raw reality faced by her characters?
5. How would you describe the friendship between Helen and Nicola? Are they compatible in very many ways? Are they honest with each other? Which friend would you turn to in a similar situation?
6. In chapter seven, Nicola fears that she has wasted her life, comparing herself to Helen, who is close to her family. Discuss the two kinds of lives illustrated by Nicola and Helen. What is the best measure of a life? What sorts of "families" do we create for ourselves through friendships?
7. Though *The Spare Room* is a novel, Helen Garner is often asked why she and the narrator have the same name. She has said that she used her own name because she wanted to acknowledge the reality of certain deeply troubling emotions, particularly anger, that she has experienced while caring for dying people whom she loved. How did it affect your reading to see that the author and main character are both called Helen and are both writers?
8. Discuss the notion of hospitality and culture. When is it acceptable to turn someone away? Which guests must be welcomed, no matter what?
9. Nicola bitterly resists hospice or any other signal that she has run out of options. What accounts for the different approaches people have to their final days: those who accept death versus those who fight it?
10. What will Bessie remember about this episode in her life? How does Nicola's illness unfold as seen through the eyes of a child?
11. Discuss the magician who performs beautiful feats in chapter ten. Why is it sometimes good to suspend rational thinking? Is it harmful to believe in magic?
(from the publisher)