

# HELEN GARNER

## JOE CINQUE'S CONSOLATION

A TRUE STORY OF DEATH, GRIEF AND THE LAW



# JOE CINQUE'S CONSOLATION

## by Helen Garner

By Geoff Coates

**W**hat's a review of a bestselling book of 'true crime' doing in *Precedent*? It could be argued that it is relevant because it has a cast of lawyers and judges and some analysis of the law and evidence, but I think its true value to the readers of *Precedent* might be its distinctly non-lawyerly view of events. Novelist, Helen Garner is a great storyteller with a clear and questioning gaze.

Joe Cinque was killed by his girlfriend in 1997 through the administration of a massive dose of rohypnol and heroin. Garner teases out the complex moral threads of this tragic

tale and casts an outsider's critical eye over the legal system's attempt to deal with it.

The book explores the evidence led at the aborted joint trial of Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao and then follows the unfolding of the individual trials. Along the way, Garner endeavours to gain an idea of what happened and why. She also asks how, as a society, we deal with the consequences of a senseless act.

Garner also reflects on why the killer maintains a vibrant centre to the story while the victim fades away from memory (except for those few who bear the full weight of the loss). >>

When Australian Lawyers Alliance chief executive officer, Eva Scheerlinck, asked me to review this book, she said that she hadn't read Helen Garner since her university days. I also first encountered Garner at University. With me it was *Monkey Grip* (1977). Given her age, I suspect Eva is thinking of the much more recent *The First Stone* (1995).

This latter book bares much similarity to *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. Both are works of non-fiction looking closely at the moral dimension of an incident which was played out in the legal system. *The First Stone* was an attempt to understand the motivations of the key players in a case involving an allegation of sexual harassment by two young women against a respected Master of Ormond College. In attempting to understand the motivations of those involved, Garner unleashed a hurricane of controversy concerning feminism and sexual politics.

In *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Garner tries to gain an understanding of why this terrible event took place from all the participants in this drama. She wanted to speak to everyone concerned, in order to avoid the criticisms levelled against her following the publication of *The First Stone* – that she took the side of the Master of Ormond College. Her desire for an even-handed treatment of Joe Cinque's death was thwarted when, as she says 'The women won't talk to me. Suddenly I felt very tired. Here I was back at the same old roadblock. My fantasy of journalistic even-handedness, long buckling under strain, gave way completely.' This

comment is a reflection back to the difficulties she had getting any comment from the women involved in making the allegation of sexual harassment, which was at the centre of *The First Stone*.

Instead of 'journalistic even-handedness' what we get is a compassionate account of the grief of Joe's parents and of their desire for retribution, a meditation on the difference between evil and insanity and a clear-sighted look at our legal system and its limitations.

Garner is known mostly for her award-winning fiction, including *A Children's Bach* (surely a candidate for best Australian novel), *Monkey Grip*, *Cosmo Cosmalino* and *Postcards from Surfer's* and she brings a writer's gifts to this account of a chilling act. She evokes a real sense of both Newcastle, where the main characters come from, and Canberra, where Joe died and where the trials of Joe's girlfriend, Anu Singh, and her friend, Madhavi Rao, took place.

In a passage early in the book Garner records: 'Next morning in the courtroom, just before the judge made his entrance between the grey-green velvet curtains, I heard someone at the bar table humming. It was only a worker absentmindedly settling down to a long day's slog, but how awful it seemed, this light, tuneful sound.' In simple portraits like this she creates the atmosphere in which the proceedings took place. There is a blood-chilling account of the solitary Anu Singh sitting arranging her long black hair in preparation for the start of the proceedings. I also found the account of Garner's meeting with Justice Ken Crispin moving in its portrayal of the difficult job our all-too-human judges have.

The book's cover features a photograph of a green apple sitting on a table. There is one small bite from it. It is reminiscent of the bright red apple lying by Snow White in one of my daughter Isla's videos – that too, you may recall, is a story of poison, jealousy and insanity. We find in the book a description of the scene of crime photos showing a bowl full of brilliant green apples. We learn later in evidence that Singh and Rao bought them for Joe shortly before his death. And later still, Joe's mother says, 'He really believed that if you ate an apple a day you'd always be healthy.' These small details give resonance to the story and tug your emotions one way and then another.

Garner poses a lot of questions with this story. Do we still believe in evil? Must you always say when someone commits a terrible act, that they must have been insane? Can the courts ever satisfy the families of the victims? Should they try? Where does all the woundedness go? What is Joe Cinque's consolation?

They are all good questions for lawyers to consider. Not everyone is going to agree with Garner's views on some of these issues, but thank goodness we have writers of Garner's ability to raise them. Highly recommended. ■

## PHIL STOTT CONSULTING

### PTY LTD

## ACTUARIAL CALCULATIONS

- Calculation of financial loss (medical negligence etc)
- Business modelling (loss of business income)
- Specialist life insurance / superannuation advice
- Competitive rates / flexible terms
- Melbourne, Sydney and beyond
- IMMEDIATE TURNAROUND ASSURED!

**Low deposit + contingency fee available  
to approved clients**

*Call now for an obligation-free discussion of  
your needs:*

**PHIL STOTT** B.Ec. F.I.A.A.

Phone / Fax: 03 9879 0765

Mobile 0412 186 804

Email: ps\_consult@bigpond.com

**Geoff Coates** is a senior legal adviser with the Medical Panels (Victoria) and a former editor of *Plaintiff*. **PHONE** (03) 9940 1167  
**EMAIL** [Geoffrey\\_coates@workcover.vic.gov.au](mailto:Geoffrey_coates@workcover.vic.gov.au)