

Creative Work 3/

Chapter Three

‘... “Snails build a little house which they carry about with them,” so “they are always at home in whatever country they travel.”’

—*The Poetics of Space* (Bachelard 1958, 121)

Moving House

There are two things that have followed Mum and me on all of our moves: a small beaten up collection of books and the knowledge that there will always be somewhere else. Other items—furniture, clothes, a handful of goldfish, they've all come and gone. Have been left behind or replaced.

'Muscles, Pos,' Mum strained to order the last time we dragged our second-hand vinyl seats to the curb for the council collection. 'Only so many years you can sit in other people's lounge chair grooves. At the next place we'll buy a new one. One of our own.'

I told her she'd said that last time and she just smiled. The chipboard base crumbled as we struggled on; it tracked our progression through the grass.

As we've crossed state lines, traced and retraced long stretches of flat, simmering highway, we've never been alone. Never felt like something was missing, not with that box of books and our unspoken pact. Even when we've had enough stuff to need a removalist van, the box has stayed with us. Wedged in tight on the back seat, pride of place between the dog and cat in the back—maintaining the peace.

Until recently, that's all I thought it was for—a buffer to make our journey a bit easier. But on our last move I noticed something. The split spines of the books; their dog-eared creases and almost concertinaed pages; these were signs that the objects had been loved by my mother, that she'd read and re-read them as if they contained some mysterious truth. As I unpacked that box, I traced the spines with my finger. I committed their titles to my memory, along with the words that leapt out as I quickly flicked through—the voice that resonated, as if it told my own story; as if I was standing in the same hallway, sitting at the same kitchen table, climbing the same stairs.

'You should read them properly Pos,' my mother said, a smile creasing her eyes as she watched me from the doorway. 'All the answers you need are in them.'

Monkey Grip and *The Spare Room* sit as bookends to Helen Garner's works of fiction to date. The novels in between these two texts, with the exception of *Cosmo Cosmolino* (1992), present similar linguistic sensibilities—they conform 'to the spare style of [Garner's] first novel...' (Koval 2012, 39) and reflect similar motifs of 'insular [yet] seemingly close-knit [social groupings and of] ...the physical boundaries within the city' (Bastin 2009, 116). While I could have selected a number of Garner's texts to analyse, I selected the first and (hopefully temporary) last, to highlight her thematic continuity. By consistently featuring and repurposing the domestic space throughout the entire body of her work, Garner confirms the power and potential that the space has. She provides the material needed to complete this thesis.

Garner's fiction traces the movements of women within and through the domestic space in a way that places the reader directly into similar environments. The house and the home manifest as a by-product of her contemporary realist style. By reflecting elements of her own experience in such a sparse but vivid way, readers are immediately transported to the images she creates—to the table where Nora sits in '...the old brown house on the corner, a mile from the middle of the city' (Garner 1977, 1); to 'the immediate view from [*The Spare Room*]...of the old grey paling fence that [separates Helen's] place from [her] daughter Eva's' (Garner 2008, 2). The domestic space is not always the main focus of Garner's narratives—rather, she states her writing usually focuses on people and characters that have emerged '...from things [she's] witnessed, experiences [she's] had [her]self, or that people around [her] have had' (Grenville and Woolfe 1993, 61). I argue that the setting adds to and acts as a key exemplar of her realist style. Through Garner's descriptions of domestic life, readers bear witness to displays of unimaginable elasticity bound only by her own perspective of the human condition.

Every house, and general 'home' situation, in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* is unique to the characters within each novel, yet, as I've mentioned, they also all share elements of Garner's personal life. By allowing the domestic space to act as an avenue for her own memories and experiences, Garner repurposes the role of the space, making the settings, in my opinion, one of the main and most memorable features of her work. This emphasis on the domestic space is not a new concept. In Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* the house is described as 'one of the greatest powers of integration for thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind...' (Rutherford 2010, 113). Discussing this further however, Jennifer Rutherford

suggests that the house in Australian literature cannot, and should not, be separated from its colonial origins¹.

Although, for the most part, I agree with Rutherford, I argue that Bachelard's slightly romantic view of the house—of it being 'a site of felicitous memory' (Rutherford 2010, 115), is still equally valid in relation to this thesis, my selected texts, and my own work. Rutherford and Bachelard's views should not be read in isolation—in the case of Garner's work, and my own, the house and the home can be both a physical and a symbolic space; a setting which represents true, historic experience, as well as emotional and metaphorical meaning. Bachelard states that 'life begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house...' (Rutherford 2010, 113), but it is necessary to acknowledge that it also extends out from there. By allowing life and experience to influence how the house manifests in writing, authors can repurpose the space and allow it to stand alone—almost as a secondary character.

In *Sexual Textual Politics* (2002), Toril Moi states that '...it is only through an examination of the detailed strategies of the text on all its levels that we will be able to uncover some of the conflicting, contradictory elements that contribute to make it precisely *this* text, with precisely these words and this configuration' (2002, 2). By analysing the domestic space in this way—with authorial intention, reader reception, feminist literary criticism, and the theories of de Certeau and Bourdeau in mind—the works of Garner present as complex layered narratives that extend beyond personal experience. For example, in *Monkey Grip*, Garner records the lives of women living in 1970s Melbourne in the midst of the second-wave feminist movement. By mapping the 'ethos of communal households' (Bastin 2009, 116) in the seventies, her work not only raises questions of 'women's relationship to power' (Bastin 2009, 116) and indicates de Certeauric tactics at play, but it also reflects on her own experiences of the political and social upheaval of the time. Here I will return to the concerns of the critics mentioned in Chapter One—specifically the implication that either 'women have not reached the standard of men because they have not been allowed to, or, alternatively, that they have reached the standard of male writers but their work has not been valued' (Eagleton 1986, 4).

Toward the end of Chapter One, I concluded that, although theorists such as Gilbert and Gubar, Armstrong and Olsen attempted to introduce alternate ways of thinking about the work of female writers, they did so almost at the expense of what made women's work stand

¹ She argues that writers should embrace the images 'of porous walls, of an unbound enormity of space, of unhoused characters and their desolate unhoused authors' (Rutherford 2010, 114).

alone. Garner's work does not succumb to this and, subsequently, instead of shying away from the social and political upheaval that she writes from, an analysis of her work needs to recognise the importance of embracing these issues. By focusing on Garner's use of the domestic space—the variation and structural flexibility with which she treats it, her influences become obvious. Through her use of the domestic space, Garner draws on her experiences of the second-wave feminist movement.

Extending beyond the realist style which I share with her, there is a message behind Garner's use of the domestic space that speaks to my own approach as well: home should not be fixed to a physical structure. Displayed in the patterns in which we both make our characters trace, Garner and I present the house and the home as a more fluid, transient space—a concept based more on relationships and interaction, than structure. Bastin states that 'the integration of [realism] into [Garner's] prose—[often] involving itself with the private [and] the personal' (2009, 115) opens up questions into the legitimacy of her work. Although, given our thematic and genre-based similarities, I was initially concerned about the reception of my own writing however, throughout this project, I have developed the argument that, by repurposing the domestic space and layering narratives with notions of the house and the home being two separate concepts, like Garner, I can create powerful stories—ones which reflect my own authorial concerns, regardless of how they may be judged by exterior sources.

The houses I've lived in and, subsequently, the ones I have written about always tend to be small, dark and deteriorating. Whether because of foreign atmospheres that seep out of rooms filled with repressed memories, or just because the buildings themselves are old and haven't had anyone to take care of them, there is always a sense of gloom; a foreboding mystery that affects the way each space is experienced. This is not dissimilar to Garner's work—while her houses act as the site for a lot of character interaction and meditation, the structure itself seems restrictive.

In *The Spare Room*, Garner opens by immediately orientating readers with the room in which her protagonist, Helen, develops.

'First, in my spare room, I swivelled the bed on to a north-south axis. Isn't that supposed to align the sleeper with the planet's positive energy flow, or something?' (Garner 2008, 1)

As the narrative continues, Helen's spare room becomes the birthplace of tension—locked behind, and extending out of it is her close friend Nicola's cancer. Instead of focusing primarily on the illness though, Garner uses the domestic space to emphasise the emotional upheaval taking place. Reducing the walls of the room, enclosing them with 'stripping and bundling, breaking out new linen, refreshing [the] bed and refreshing it again' (Garner 2008,

57), there is little room for the two characters to exist unless they spill out to the rest of the house away from the ‘twisted mess of wet sheets’ (Garner 2008, 66). It is when this occurs that the tension between Helen and Nicola reaches a climax and the restrictive powers of the house become audibly apparent. By using dialogue that seems alien, even to the characters themselves, Garner emphasises the transformation of the space—now much more than a domestic site, it is one of discomfort and torment:

‘Listen,’ I said, in a voice I hardly recognised. ‘You’ve come to my house. You’ve asked me to look after you for three weeks, and I will, because you’re my friend and I love you—but I can’t do it on my own.’ (Garner 2008, 69)

Expressing a need to move beyond the house, to get outside help, Helen mimics the sentiments of Nora, the protagonist in *Monkey Grip*. Although the concept of restriction—of the four walls of domesticity holding Nora back, manifests in a less confronting and more indirect way, it still presents as a common theme. In *Monkey Grip*, Nora executes power over how she acts within the walls of the houses she lives in by showing no tolerance for the confines of structure. Her coming and going between rooms and different share houses suggest a likeness to the author herself—to Garner’s dealings with style and content in her career; how she slips from fiction, to non-fiction, and even dabbles in elements of the supernatural in *Cosmo Cosmolino*. This reflection and foreshadowing of the author is particularly evident in Nora’s dreams and daydreams—

I fantasised again and again of our street with its centre parking metres, the green carpet in the hall, the flattened square of sunlight that hit the wall of the first landing of the stairs, and my room with its blue floor and thin red curtain, oh the joy of going home, it choked me in the throat. (Garner 1977, 165).

As is evident in this excerpt, the images of home that Garner creates through Nora’s eyes are often bright and idealised—home is a place she longs for; one of security and joy. Throughout the novel however, actual instances of houses reflect the notion of isolation and restriction, suggesting the distinguishing features between house and home. Garner allows Nora’s pleasant images of home to “choke” her, an image which works to impart the author’s own experiences and opinions regarding the social expectations on gender roles in the domestic space. Nora’s descriptive and actioned discrepancies toward being bound by a home-like structure suggest deeper underlying issues—ones arising directly from Garner’s experience as a child in the midst of Australia’s second-wave feminist movement. Toward the end of the novel, the domestic space becomes so undesirable to Nora, and so reminiscent of times in which she mothered and loved as per the social expectations of the time, that she becomes an almost ghost-like presence within it.

The others were out in the kitchen. Once I woke up to an extra loud burst of laughter. I lay in my blanket half-stunned, wondering how it was that I'd lost my customary social urges. (Garner 1977, 372)

Throughout this section, Nora longs for the outside; for the life that lies in the distance with 'the absent-minded carolling of magpies' (Garner 1977, 373). It is this freedom to move beyond structure that, Nora concludes, is her home—a concept broader than the house and the ideals contained within the domestic space. I am aware that, at this point, it seems as though my discussions have slipped from author to character however, in this instance, I argue that author and character are inseparable. Garner's fiction, as she admits herself, is largely semi-autobiographical—'...it is her practice to take stories from life' (Koval 2012, 39). Therefore, although I'm not suggesting that all female contemporary realist writers produce works that are closer in form to memoir, in the case of this thesis, given my selected texts, I feel that the characters deserve at least a small mention.

In my own work, I present a similar view of impermanent home-like structures. Although there are four walls which work to contain my characters, they always have the opportunity to leave and they often do. As my narrative continues, from the conclusion of *Closed Doors and Sour Soap* to *Along the Bruce*, it is evident that the car is in fact 'home'. This is the site where Pos and her mother store their most treasured possessions; it is how they escape the threat of unstable family dynamics and separation; and it's where Pos reflects on their 'history together'. Just as Nora knows when it's 'time to go home' (Garner 1977, 374) in *Monkey Grip*, Pos knows when it's time for them to reclaim their 'black stretch of road', safe in the confines of their car—together.

In my mother's box of books I read of travel. Of memories and pain; of houses in which women 'couldn't sleep for the tremendous snoring that sawed through the closed doors'², and others in which they 'dreamed again and again of houses, always big and airy open houses, always beside the sea, wind flowing freely through the rooms, people pleasantly disposed or working quietly, and miles and miles of ocean out every window'³.

I revisited the words, over and over, and realised what my mother had always seen. That these women, these characters—with their bikes that carried them from house to house, the planes and trains that flew them across states lines, and their memories which transported

² *The Spare Room* – Garner 2008, 194

³ *Monkey Grip* – Garner 1977, 210

them to times when they felt they were truly alive—these people were like us. They reacted against the traditional idea of the domestic space and flourished in their own, unique versions of home.

‘We’re okay,’ I said to Mum when I found her—back to me in the kitchen, eyes focused on the park beyond the window. Her ears twitched the way they did when her face shifted into a smile and, even though I couldn’t see the glint in her eyes, I knew it was there.