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| **Ideas and Society Program:** **Helen Garner – Writing in Dark Territory** |
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| **Professor Robert Manne** |
| It's really lovely to see so many people here. Thank you all very much for coming. We acknowledge the traditional owners, but I'd like to say personally what I hope is not only for a formulaic acknowledgement but that the recognition which is presently on hold, is acceptable and goes deep. I'm really thrilled as the convenor of Ideas and Society Program at La Trobe to have three authors here, all of whom I admire, but who also I think admire each other's work and who know each other's work really well. I think we're really privileged to have this group tonight. If I can just say, in order of chronology, one of the speakers or one of the participants I taught at Jewish Sunday School, the other I married [laughter], and the third I have been reading with interest and pleasure for almost as long as I can remember. So without further ado I'd like to ask Ramona and Helen and Anne to come up. Welcome.  |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I was the one he taught at Sunday School. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| You're just showing off because you're the youngest. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I'm afraid to say what sort of student I was at Sunday School. Writing in Dark Territory - what is dark territory? For me it encompasses the cruelties of life, how terrible things can happen to innocents, how people can be vicious to each other. How the givens - that we protect children, that we care for mothers and babies and old people and sick people and that we don't torture each other, how these givens are traduced. That, for me seems to encompass what I think of as dark territory. What do we do with events that seem inexplicable? We turn to writers like these two remarkable writers who sit with me on the stage this evening, that's who we turn to when we can't wrestle with the ideas ourselves.Helen Garner is one of Australia's most beloved and respected writers. The author of *The Last Stone, Joe Cinque's Consolation, The Spare Room, This House of Grief.*  More recently her latest book is *Everywhere I Look*.And Anne Manne, whose works include *Motherhood, Love and Money, The Life of I* and her memoirs, *So This is Life.* And two of her essays, *Ebony - The Girl in the Room,* and *Catholic Clergy and Child Sex Abuse* will be particularly relevant, I think this evening.As a reader I remember thinking, that both of your work, all of our works, both of…. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| The works of both of you. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| … the works of both of you. [laughter], That's who she's so good, she was an English teacher once, remember. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| I was. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| How can she do that? How can she go so deeply into this horrible thing? In *This House of Grief* one imagines the children drowning, what happened afterwards, the mother hearing, the family completely devastated. In the essay on Ebony and one imagines the terrible state and the neglected child and the autopsy report and then the terrible state of her life as she died a long, slow horrible death. But I suppose I'm just trying to ask you, "How do you go there?" because it is a special gift both of you have for boring down into the story. Helen, "How do you go there?" |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Well I've found that in just about all the court cases I've ever been to, I would open *The Age* in the morning and read a report of perhaps a trial that had already happened, or a charge that somebody was up on and I often would think, 'I wonder what that person looks like?' I'd be curious to see, to look at them and I wonder about this. Doing this kind of work, I bet this is true about you too, you have a lot of wakeful 2 am horror nights and that's the kind of question I've asked myself, "What the hell am I doing in this story, how did I get in and how can I get out?" And usually it's already too late to get out, I have made some… undertakings of certain kinds and I don't mean contractual ones, I mean human trust relationships that I might have set up with some of the people in the story.  |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Like you've spoken about Joe Cinque's mother who you approached in the ladies? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Well we were both in the toilets at the court, just both of us putting on our lipstick and we looked at each other in the mirror and she just spoke to me in a friendly way. She was a rather awesome person, a person obviously in great anguish but holding herself together with dignity and she was the sort of person I normally wouldn't dare to speak to because I was a bit awestruck by her and she said, "Oh I see you in there with your notebook, what are you doing? Are you a journalist?" And I had to say, 'Not exactly, I'm just really interested in watching" and then I thought, well I'll take my chance and then I said, "I hope to write a book about this, would you talk to me?"And she looked me up and down with a measuring look and just for those few seconds I thought, this is a rather important moment in my life and she said, "Yes I will" and from then on I didn't look back or couldn't look back although I tried to. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| But there were times when you thought, "No I can't do this"? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yeah, just because it was so awful and so kind of grief striking, really. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| And you tried to get out of it with her? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yeah I tried to wimp out and she wouldn't let me. She just said, I made this nauseating…, wrote her this terrible letter, which I now think of only with shame saying, 'I'm afraid I just can't write this book' and given several really pathetic reasons for not doing it. This is after I'd interviewed her and her husband, you know, sat at their kitchen table for nine hours. And I was too stupid and inexperienced at that point to know that I was already in up to me neck or more, and I couldn't get out without betraying their trust. And she basically said, "What do you mean you're not going to write the book?" This was on the phone and she said, "You say you're going to write the book, we tell you our story and you said you would write the book" and then she started to cry and I felt 'that big' and pure yellow - pure gutless yellow. So she just put it to me. That's how she put it to me, she didn't use any high flown rhetorical language, she just said, "You said you would write the book and now you're telling me you can't write the book?" |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Well we have given you something? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yes, we've given you our story and you asked us for our story and we gave it to you and so I had to put my nose to the grindstone pretty much. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| What about you Anne? How do you go there, the different 'theres' that you have gone? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well, I think I'm often in a state of incredible anger, so it doesn't, the writing doesn't end up like that but my reaction is one of, there's a state of 'just' anger and it's about the injustice of what's happened and that consumes me but it's also a haunting, just as Helen was saying. I first came across, some of you might know the story, but this was a little girl who had hit the papers in 2007, she was starved to death by her parents. And they found this tiny, almost mummified child who had the body weight of a three year old when she was six, and she had no sign of having been in the open air for many, many, months. She had so little muscle tone she was not capable even of rigor mortis, the forensic team said they had never seen a corpse like this. So then this story unravelled over time, as to what actually happened to this child and how the parents had got into this state where they'd slowly starved her to death. How she lived in a room by herself and how the room was boarded up and initially she was able to be a part of the family but then she was, in successive moves, cordoned off and excluded from the family and the room had a rope tying it shut and then they boarded up the window and the last time she was ever seen alive was the neighbour who saw her little form against the window, looking out and calling mummy, daddy.So as soon as I read about this case I couldn't stop thinking about it, it becomes like an obsession really and I was haunted by it and there was just this question which always comes over me and it's a question that Helen actually asked in a wonderful piece of writing on Daniel Valerio, child abuse and his mum. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| For which you got… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| I got a Walkley for that, I am so proud of that Walkley. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| It is truly wonderful. And in it she says, 'What's the deal the parents are making with themselves? What's the deal the mother's making with herself?' Because it was a step-partner who was doing the abuse. And that for me is a question that just comes back all the time. What are they telling themselves when this is going on over… in this case a really protracted starvation to death, what are they thinking, what's in their minds? So it's a kind of compulsion really, I can't stop thinking about it until I've really wrestled it to the ground and written it.The other strange thing is, although I begin in anger, this 'just' fury the writing ends up in a very different space and it becomes very, there's a kind of sobriety that comes over you when you write about such a happening. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| What are the elements of this sobriety? You're nodding Helen, do you approve. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| No, I'm fascinated by what you're saying, keep going. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| So tell us about the sobriety where does it come from? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well when I was about to write it, I knew all kinds of things that I would do with it. That it would be in the present tense so that…. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Why? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| So that the reader was looking over the policeman's shoulder when he found her, so that we're looking over the forensic team's shoulder at this little body on the table, so there's kind of immediacy – it's not distant. I was very interested in talking about Joe Cinque's mother because there is something she's asking for there, which is to do with bearing witness. This is a primal thing I think in people, when something is unbearable to want to record it in the form of a story. I think Isak Dinesen has that wonderful quote where she said, "Every sorrow can be borne if it's put in a story" so, I don't think that's quite true but I think it's close to being true. There is a desire to make sure this terrible thing that has happened, not slip into the ether and be forgotten. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Well I think, we once had a conversation about the Farquharson trials that you wrote in *This House of Grief* and we talked about, most other people want there to be a simple explanation for things. They want, oh 'men kill their children' and you want it to be simple and you said "So we can all get out of there" because we've got the explanation, we don't have to think about, who did what to whom and how could they do it and what made them do it and what led up to this. But you don't want to do that, you just want to go on slow-mo, you want to be forensic – you both do – about what led up to this. And that's something that is very special about both of you. I'm wanting to know what is it in your outlook, the way you think, in your DNA that makes it possible for you? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| You have to sort of teach yourself to do it don't you? The sort of most bearable thing about it to me is actually being in the courtroom at a trial. I find that some of the most deeply gratifying hours of my life have been spent in courts and I think it's partly because of the formality of the process and the oldness of the process and the fact that people are wearing wigs and gowns. When I was a sort-of fire-eating hippy, I used to think, 'oh why do they wear those stupid wigs, they just look ridiculous?' But now I think, If I was up on a serious charge I would like the person hearing my case to be wearing a wig. Just to wear some kind of regalia that would show that this wasn't just some guy, but that it was somebody who was representing and knew himself or herself, to be representing the spirit of the law. So I think that when you're sitting in a court, it's very different from reading a transcript of a trial. I used to think if I'd read a transcript of a trial I'd 'get it', I'd think, before I'd even seen a transcript I thought it would be like this really reasonable document and I'd read it and I'd go 'Oh is that what happened, Oh right now I get it, and he did this and she did that, now I get it' close it and walk away. But in actual fact a transcript is often quite incomprehensible and there's a lot of boring bits in it. But when you're in the court watching what you think would be a boring bit, the boring bits are not boring because the whole process is so incredibly – I was going to say ornate, but I don't mean ornate - I mean just complex and ruled by strange…, things like the Rules of Evidence which the ordinary person in the street including me, does not understand and finds counter-intuitive. But somehow in court it can be very distressing to see witnesses, especially people who aren't used to talking formally and who don't express themselves very well, uneducated people, to watch such a person being cross-examined can be a very shocking experience. But somehow the awfulness of what they're telling the court is made bearable, and perhaps this is what you're talking about, the idea that something is being turned into a story, makes it possible to sit there and listen to it. I don't know if this makes any sense, I haven’t actually thought about this before. But when it gets really scary is when you go to someone's house to interview them and there's nothing like trying to interview someone about children or a child who has been murdered to make you feel, what a twerp you are, how little you know about the depths of human suffering and how people who are in that kind of suffering and state of loss are, they are awesome people. They've gone through things the rest of us don't know about, and they don't respect the niceties of things, they're quite capable of shouting at you if you ask a stupid question or if you, in your ridiculous naivety, you might try to say something to calm their distress and they say, "How dare you!" They're like this huge striding animal and you're like a little pea or little tiny insect on their back saying "Beep beep - why don't you calm down". Not that I would ever say that to anyone, even think it, because you're sitting there in front of this raging beast of madness, of pain and you think 'what do I say now, what do I do?' And you don't do or say anything just sit there - that's what I've learnt. You sit there and you just be with the person and it's taken me a long time to figure that out. I used think that I should be, I mean for example, if I go to see the Cinque family now, which I do a couple of times a year, still when they speak of what happened, Mrs Cinque in particular, can become highly distressed and enraged but I've learnt over the years that she doesn't expect anything of me except my company. She likes me and I like her and we have a warm relationship and I know everything about the story so she doesn't have to explain anything to me and neither of us has to play any fake role. She's there, I mean most of the time I might go to her house and as with many Italians, there's no such thing as a short visit, you go there and you're there all day and it's fabulous I love it. Most of the time we're laughing and talking but then sometimes she becomes overwhelmed with a memory or something will trigger a memory and for a moment, maybe ten minutes, she'll weep and rage and I just don't even say anything and I don't even find it, I don't feel inadequate anymore, I think what she needs from me is to just sit quietly at her kitchen table and be with her and let her go through this spasm of what will never leave her and then after a while she pulls out a hanky or she wipes her eyes on her apron and says, "We'll have a coffee now" and then we just returns to ordinary life. But I've had to earn that trust and it's taken me, it took me years to do it. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Anne what about you, are you a fan of the courts, are they places that you feel happy in? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| I think if you watch things live, if you watch you can see qualities of human beings that you might not see from a transcript. I understand that. I think that for example in the Royal Commission, there was a particularly obnoxious little priest who was kind of weaselly and pious and he was, his name's now escaped me but he was defending George Pell and he was elaborating on his the expression around his mouth that he remembered from thirty years ago or whatever. There was something so phoney about it all, had you just read that, yes you might have missed this rather delicious moment really in seeing the phoniness of some of the defences which have been mounted. But I would just devour everything, there's nothing that, there's a sense when you're trying to piece that story together that, well I always feel, there could be just something somewhere, where there's a little sign or a signal about someone, a gesture and suddenly you understand - you get it. So yeah I would read everything, talk to as well as observe I think. You're earlier question was, why you have this desire to…, because it's a highly unpleasant experience, you have to get a kind of psychological poise over it, which is very hard won or for me it is. It doesn't come easily and so you may be just at first, consumed by the horror of what happened, but somehow you have to get control of that material and there's a kind of, I think a psychologist might call it an effect storm, storm of emotion, you have to calm that and get a kind of stillness that is able to navigate your way over that to really try and understand or for me anyway, the why of it, why this happened, to get to a position where you can form an analysis of what happened. Not just, so the story for me is the beginning and it's the middle but it's not quite the end. That is there's some point where I like to go out into a more general case, into trying to understand what forms of denial for example, have gone on. One of the really interesting things I've found in both child sexual abuse and in the child abuse case is that the deal that people do with themselves when they're not facing it, it's startlingly similar to forms of political denial when something really horrifying happens and also the stages of integration into a position where something quite unthinkable can happen because, actually there's been this little slip and that little slide and this little move and this change of language. So that for example; Catholic Priests. There's one really brilliant bit of work by an Irish scholar who was investigating child sexual abuse and she actually went to prisons which is something that I'd actually like to do for this forthcoming book and she interviewed paedophile priests. And it's fascinating to see the beginnings of their language and they explained how they would go to confession, and when they were in confession they were then absolved of what was seen as a moral crime and a sin but it was never seen except once for one particular priest as an actual crime. But they also used euphemistic language, so the language of denial, so it was, 'I did something inappropriate with a minor', as opposed to 'I raped a little boy'. They had all kinds of ways of distancing themselves, 'When the abuse happened' as opposed to 'When I abused the child', so language was used all the time to enable things which are unthinkable, unbearable, to happen and this kind of self-allowing - not-facing what is going on, I find so fascinating that it gets me past what has actually happened. One of the quotes which stays with me from Saul Bellow is the doctor who is dying but he doesn't face it and its knowing and not-knowing, one of those very common human arrangements. Knowing and not-knowing how someone can know what they're actually doing, but also be in a state of denial about it, I think actually because my very early childhood which is another story but is so absorbing, so fascinating I can't not try and get to the end of it as to why people can just see themselves in that way as to what has actually just happened. But I have to say that I think many people find the pursuit of those topics subversive and you and I have discussed this, and people will think of something slightly wrong with you because you're able to do it. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| What sort of responses have you had, I'll ask you too. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well peoples, "Why would you want to that? Why would you want to write about that?" Because I'm on that book on child sexual abuse people have said; "Oh don't do that" they're just kind, I mean, and I get it, it's an emotionally aversive experience. But it also seems to me one of the most important stories of our time and whatever the writer goes through is nothing like the victims of child sexual abuse go through and so on. I think there's something where, I'll tell a story against myself. When I was really young I tried to work for Amnesty for a while, I was a young woman and I couldn't do it, I just couldn't do it and I didn't have enough of the empathetic wall to push it away and get on with what you needed to do to help the people who were being tortured somewhere. I couldn't stop thinking of the exact details of the torture, it really took me over. But there were other people there who were able to quite calmly, there was one really bubbly director of the organisation at that time, just one of the most happy, kind of delightful people, I've ever come across, but she was able to clearly compartmentalise. So I couldn't do it and in the end I slunk off, recognising in myself a weakness, an incapacity to cope with this. But then as I've got older I have developed enough of a skin, enough of an empathetic wall I suppose you call it, there has to be a membrane between you and the events, or you can't control the material in a way that you have to. Some way you are a conduit for what's happened, to come through you and onto the page and there's a discipline that has to go with it. I loved on the back of your, *Everywhere I Look,* this a wonderful book Helen's done, there's a quote, a lift out from one of your figures which is, where you're moving text like boulders and you're trying to get up to put your little flag on the top to finish. But I thought that was exactly right, that sense of the incredible struggle that goes on. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Well in a sense that struggle, the sort of technical struggle in writing is one of the things that can save you. If you haven't developed some sort of boundaries, you couldn't do that, you couldn't heave those boulders into a usable structure to run. The thing is you've got to make it stable enough so you can run up to the top and plant your little flag, which is to say what you wanted to say.  |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| What about the response of people to *This House of Grief* for example to why you are interested in this? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yes. Well, the response that most perturbed me in a way was that quite a few people said, "I'm not going to read that book because, I know that nowhere in that book does she say that Robert Farquharson is a monster" and I heard that nearly half a dozen times from different directions and it really threw me, and I thought 'what does it mean that people need to say this person is a monster?' And that goes back to what you were saying in the beginning, that to call someone a monster is basically saying that he or she, they're not human. You're saying they're not human therefore, they're not like me. There's no way that the awful violence and horror that broke out of that person could ever be in me, absolutely not because, that person's a monster and there's a brick wall between us and I'm not like that person in any way. But I think one of the ghastly things about, I remember when I was at the Farquharson trials and the whole thing went on for about seven years so it was kind of endless, I thought it would never come to an end. Some days I'd come home just so filled with deep disquiet and horror about the charges that this person was up on and the idea that someone would kill his own children and one of my grandchildren would come up to me and sit on my knee and I'd hold him and I'd think, 'How could anyone hurt this little lovely being, this chubby little creature who wants to sit and let me love him?' I started to get those sentimental feelings about children and then an hour later the same kid would be rampaging up and down the hall and throwing things and pushing my bike over and I'd be this red screaming rage, which all parents and grandparents are familiar with, would come down before my eyes and I'd grab him by the arm and I don't hit kids, but my arm would swing back and I'd think, 'God'. And that's the scary part when you allow yourself to see that there is in you the same seed to violent response that there is in every person. It's in all of us and you think you just have to look at how children behave and how we have to socialise them, how children just when they're really little, little babies are just all ego (or id or whatever it's called) rolling around the world and they just want things and if they suddenly get a little sibling, the want to kill that little sibling they don't want it to be there. And we have to teach them to know that they're not the main thing in the world and that other people can live and have being and consciousness and subjectivity and all those useful things. But I've got off the track here. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| No, but you're right on where I want to go to. It was perfect, not off the track at all because they're not the main thing in the world, we have to teach people that they're not the main thing in the world. But in your book about narcissism you're dealing with people who don't understand that they're not the main thing in the world, and people like Breivik who killed 67 no, 77 people and you describe observing that report and noticing that when people came to arrest him, he held up his finger. He had a cut on his finger, he'd just killed 77 people, but his only sense was for himself, that it was really hard to kill all those people, look at my cut. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| He wanted a band aid. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| He wanted a band aid? Was that what you think, this is my story? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| I did, I did actually think that. I was researching the book for a long time and reading lots of academic work and that's all fascinating, really interesting debates about what causes it and whether it's really the person's quite fragile underneath or whether they're just narcissistic through and through. But as soon as I read that story, it's a very extreme form of narcissism but I knew I wanted to begin the book like that, because often extremity of a situation or a person really reveals the underlying structure and I thought that that did. Especially his behaviour towards the end.One of the things about him is this question of monster. And there's a really fantastic long treatment of his life leading up to the crime by the Norwegian writer, Asne Seierstad and it's called *One of Us*. It's interesting that title *One of Us* is what you're really saying that there's a connection, there. There's no help talking about a person as a monster, you don't get anywhere, you don't get to the question of why they've behaved like that. Sometimes I think people maybe the people reacting as they did to your book think, that if you explain something, you're exonerating. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| That's right |
| **Anne Manne** |
| But you're not, you're just trying to understand something. So his life was, first of all he had an incredible strange relationship with his mother, quite sexualised. The father abandoned the family, he was really quite a frozen, rigid child even by four and we know that because, he was almost taken away from his mother because of the severity of the neglect and also because it was suspected that he had been sexually abused. So we had this report from the Norwegian psychiatric team, so you can actually see right back then, and there's this extraordinary sense that maybe things could have been otherwise. I think that's a very strong imperative in writing is to be able to see whether or not something could have been otherwise and to show that to the reader and after this disastrous beginning, he goes on and he never finds a place in the world. He's constantly moving from one humiliating failure to another, he enters this extremely defensive, grandiose world of superiority and a lot of his ideas about migrants and racial superiority. All of that you can see this little boy who was treated as nothing, who was treated with such indifference or hatred. So he actually is someone whose biography you can follow right to the crime and understand his state of mind which doesn't in any way excuse him, or exonerate him, but you can see how he got there – that final fateful day where he picked up this machinegun and he released the bomb in Oslo which killed eight people and then he went to this island and he mowed down 69 young people who were attending a Norwegian Labour Party Youth Movement.  |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| But it wasn't out of anger, fury because he planted a bomb, got on the ferry, it was all very well organised? Very well organised? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, that raises a very interesting point I think because Helen's talking about I think, that recognising in ourselves moments of rage, that we are capable of something you know planting an axe in someone's back, that we're capable of more than we think. And actually we know that because say someone who has a certain sort of tumour on the brain will end up behaving completely disinhibited ways, they're some gentle person you suddenly realise that once the frontal lobes are damaged they forget to behave in certain ways that are really horrifying. So all of us will have some capacity for it.But at the same time as not calling someone like Breivik a monster, I think there are some categories where the person is in a category difference from just saying, 'well that was a moment of rage'. So Farquharson, people could understand the blind, even not condoning it, but understand the blind rage and humiliation of being left. I mean, this is an interesting question. Who was he thinking of when he was driving into the dam? Was he thinking of the little children he was about to kill or was he really thinking of his wife and in that rage thinking of her so angrily, knowing it would harm her and ruin her forever? At least, even if not acting like that, we could identify it seems to me, just saying about your grandchildren with moments of rage. But here's something that I don't think you necessarily would identify with, and that's the case where a psychiatric social worker told me this, there were parents she had coming into a unit, they were filming in a hospital, and they would see them actually trying to actively smother a child. So the cameras are capturing all this and they're looking around to see if anyone's coming in and they're actually holding a pillow over the child. So I suggest that most of us can identify with the moments where someone snaps, because we just, unless we're full of hubris. But there's another whole dark territory beyond that where there's malice and Breivik was like that. As you say, everything was planned, everything was organised, he planned it over months and here's another extraordinary thing; you suddenly realise what an incredibly clever person, with enormous capability he is because of the astonishing organisation it took just even to make his own bomb. But it's all gone on destruction of other human beings. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Anne can I just make a point here, while you were talking I suddenly had an insight and that is you talked about the plan that he'd made, and you talked about him coldly going about carrying out this plan and that suddenly reminded me of something. Firstly about Anu Singh who was the women who was accused of murdering Joe Cinque. She said at one point when she was asked how come this happened she said; "Well I've been thinking about doing it and about committing suicide myself and it was like a university assignment" she said, "I'd made the plan and I just had to keep on carrying it out". That's one thing and the second thing is: the strangest thing about the Farquharson case, is how no-one could understand why when he swung the wheel, the car went into the dam, he got out of the car and the kids went to the bottom in the car. He swims to the bank, hitches a ride back to Winchelsea to tell his wife that he's killed the kids and so what happened was, there he's standing dripping and covered in slime and mud on the side of the road and he thumbs a ride. And these two you guys say "What happened?" And he goes, "Oh my kids are in the dam, I've got to tell my wife that I've killed the kids" and they say, "We'll get in the dam, we'll get them out" and he goes "It's too late now, it's too late, just take me to my wife I've got to tell her". And these two poor kids they thought he was crazy, they thought that maybe he'd even been trying to kill himself and changed his mind, so they fell for his stick and drove him home and so he wants to say, 'Cindy I've killed the kids'. And that's a great puzzlement to everyone but I thought, when you were talking, it's another example of that, you make a plan and even though you start to carry it out and then you think 'Shit I'm in it now, the kids are… now what's the next step, the next step is, go to Cindy and tell her I've killed the kids', so I think fantasy becomes a plan and then I think people…. I remember the judge in one of the Farquharson trials just talking with the lawyers about how it could have happened and he said, well did he just say "Fuck it, and plant his foot?" And that's one attempt to understand. Was he just driving along suddenly a cataract of despair fell on him and he just thought, 'Oh well, I'm just going to wipe out the whole lot of us', of course nobody will know now. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| When you heard that, 'Oh now I have to go and tell Cindy that I've killed the kids', did you think then that this is the big clang – I get now what's happened? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| No it kind of crept up on me because it's such an awful thing. You know there's a lot of things in these stories, you come across so much that's so dreadful that you just don't want to believe it. You think, 'If only…' and you weigh all these mental manoeuvers that come spontaneously and some of them are like the thing you said when you read about Breivik's trials. I read that book too and just this awful, just a textbook case of how to create a psychopath, just the pain of his childhood and you think, 'If only that stepfather had of stuck around, he seemed like nice guy and if something could have happened then, none of the rest of it would have happened'. And I used to go through all of this stuff, I'd think, 'If only Cindy can be, instead of marrying Robbie Farquharson, if only she'd gone to Queensland' and there's that fantasy that everybody has in Victoria that if only we could go to Queensland. A better person will emerge from all of us if we go to Queensland. [Laughter} Those sort of little manoeuvers that you do that are so ridiculous but just to try and spare yourself from endless despair. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| You wrote Anne about Ariel Castro, another horrible story and his abduction and imprisonment and torture and rape of those three girls for eleven years. He was called an extreme narcissist and sexual predator and again you say, "He sees himself as a victim somehow". |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, that was a big surprise. These are some of the more extreme cases in the book. Something I have to say, a lot of narcissistic behaviour is actually very funny and quite enjoyable because it is about… |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| That would be 'Writing in Amusing Territory', that would be for another evening. [laughter} |
| **Anne Manne** |
| But I have a sense of humour that cops and people who work in the morgue have, sort of dark. But no say, Kanye West, partner of the narcissistic power couple, you know Kim Kardashian. He said; "I'm a genius you know, and if he could possibly fill out the form at customs when he arrives at the airport and put the occupation 'genius' he would, but he couldn't spell it." [Laughter]So I mean, there's a lot of fun that actually gets said. And at the lighter end of narcissism where people are essentially simply too full of self, in love with themselves as he clearly is and full of a kind of hubris, then it is actually quite amusing or parts of it are amusing, annoying – but amusing. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Like Donald Trump? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well, yes I mean he has immensely narcissistic qualities, but I'm just saying, it's not a continuum and I'm not saying they're all as extreme as these cases, but one of the interesting things about sexual aggressors on a continuum from some situation of a highly charged sexual nature, when there's alcohol and there's some sexual activity but then there's a question of whether you back off when the woman says 'No'. Or whether you then use real sexual aggression. What was interesting is that people who are high on narcissism were much less likely to back off, people who are high on narcissism were also much more likely to support rape myths and then when you move to those people who are actually incarcerated rapists, again this actually baffling thing which is, not only they often see themselves as victims, but even when they are arrested and tried and convicted and incarcerated for a crime which involved say, tying up their victim, incapacitating her, raping her and so on, they would maintain that she had absolutely wanted it. And so they could not suspend their narcissism in the sense they had a grandiose vision of themselves. They would even brag about what wonderful lovers they were and so on. This extraordinary disjuncture between what had actually happened and their rendition of it, their way of telling themselves a story, telling themselves lies about what had really happened and self-deception seems to be a central part – not only of these kind of crimes, but also of narcissism, which is often involved in crimes. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Well that's their version of the bearable making story isn't it? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yeah. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| That's what we're doing in our work, they have a slightly more self-interested one….. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well, that's a really interesting point. Yeah. They're making reality bearable too. They're making it more palatable.  |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Just so they can walk down the street. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| One of the things I found quite destabilising about doing that book was, you realise the distortions and even contortions of people's reality that are so problematic and so everywhere, and that it is so important that people are able to keep what is called, the psychoanalysts would call 'The Reality Principle', to keep a sense of what's real and not get blown up into such a grandiose state that you lose touch with what is really happening. And I think the first thing you opened with Ramona was a sense of in narcissism where there's a kind of switch jammed on 'for self', whereas most of will move in and out – we will have narcissistic moments, but just not jammed on in a way that it is with Breivik or Castro. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Can I just go back to the Ebony story and monsters and these parents who are kind of just hopeless, dumb, involved in just a terrible macabre dance between them, while they do terrible things. But in that essay, am I making this up or I think you started to feel angry, but it was towards the people from DOCS that you were directing the anger to? It didn't seem to be, angry at these people you were trying to understand how they got to this, but you were angry with the people who should have rescued the child? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well, no I was angry with the couple, but by the time of the writing, it just seemed to me really clear that I had to not be exuberantly rage-filled about it. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| No I was just talking about the writing. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| I know, but's that's the quality that we're talking about that's in your work that I think is terrifically impressive. You used the word sobriety before and we were trying to find a word for this quality you've got where you can write the most abominable things on the page but somehow you take a tone which is completely; not exactly neutral but it's a very calm tone, that makes it possible… |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Yeah, it's a pure… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yeah, it's a pure tone and I'm terribly impressed by that because you don't put yourself into the story as much as I do, I'm always rushing in there and saying what I think. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Which has its own… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yes, it's just a different way of doing it and it's really the only way I can figure out to do it. But I think it's really a wonderful tone that you manage to strike and I know just from experience, how much hard work you've had to do on yourself to get that tone. It's not a tone you just say 'which tone till I use, I'll use that one?' You have to, as it says it in the prayer book, - read, mark learn and inwardly digest the material - before you can hit a tone like that. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| But isn't it sometimes the testimony of the forensic people or the police or what they found when they walked in, or in a court case too that the horror of what you are reading, the testimony doesn't really need anything fancy? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| It doesn't need any embellishment? Saying its objective is not the right word, but it is…, there's some restraint which is needed, I think, in writing about such cases. I actually liken it a little bit, to some experiences I had as a very small child of disassociation, that's what psychologists call it. Where something unbearable was happening and I was floating above it and I was very calmly seeing everything that was happening, why it was happening, it was a very analytic – some kind of quite pure space where I was looking down on everything and it's quite a common thing to happen and it happens whenever people are confronted, adults as well, with certain things that are unbearable. So I actually think I do channel that in some way. But I know that there are numbers of decisions you have to make and say in another piece I might decide to have myself present, but in that piece I knew instantly I wanted to absent myself so that I was just the vessel and people weren't aware of me at all. So that was really necessary to achieve that tone, not for me to impinge at all, on what had happened, and it was just there before people.  |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| But back to just the anger about the DOCS people, the people? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well that was astonishing because the parents were really messed up, they were Valium addicts, he was a gambling addict; both of them had incredibly troubled backgrounds. But it was a really interesting thing, the man when he gave interviews, the father, this is a very narcissistic thing; he didn't look at people, it was like he was looking inwards, something really self-involved. He would give these speeches to the press saying, "I don't know, help me find out what happened to my little girl, she was eating last night, she was on the couch with the family eating bikkies and chippies". The media at this stage didn't know what had happened, but it was easy to find out when she went to forensics exactly what had happened. So he was on I think, a 25 a day Valium habit, which is staggering. She was on a huge number of Valium because she had a back injury or so on, but they also had clearly. This is the interesting thing about knowing and not-knowing. Farquharson, maybe he made a decision and then all the fif-faff later was about not admitting he was sort of knowing and not knowing. That father, when the mother discovered the girl dead, tried to revive her, then in this bizarre scene sang lullaby's to her for several hours. The father found the mother on the toilet weeping and he said "What's wrong, it's not Ebony is it? She's not dead is she?" Now he said that he didn't know what was happening, nothing to do with the child, he looked after the older girls, she looked after the little child, the autistic little child Ebony. If so, here's this knowing and not knowing – a little leakage of knowing. How many fathers go, find their wife crying in the toilet and say, "Is one of our children dead?" So he did know, he knew that she was gradually progressing towards her death and he was doing nothing about it, but he wasn't ever kind of acknowledging it to himself, not acknowledging, not being truthful, allowing himself as well as the Valium and the gambling on the horses every day and all the rest of it, meant he could buffer himself against the knowledge of what was happening.I think in a lot of politics, if we face what is happening to the people in Manus Island, if we face what was happening in so many instances, and it's about not facing which allows people to slide away and I find that unbearable. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I know I'm going to go on and on about these DOCS people, but I really need you to answer this question. [Laughter] |
| **Anne Manne** |
| These questions. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| What's going on in their minds, is it clocking off at five? Or what's going on? I mean I believe that people want to do their jobs well and…. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Don't |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Alright. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Don't. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Tell me why not. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well to begin with they're overstretched and the child protection workers might be some quite frightened person. He was a bully, he was frightening when you went around there. But in essence these are large bureaucracies they say there's another priority, there isn't enough evidence: it was a series of botches. Even at one point a work experience, young student took the details of a call, a crucial call from a neighbour who said, "This child is going to die if you don't do something about it" because she'd seen the way the parents were living and she saw the little girl at the window and then after a while she saw it all boarded up and she could still hear. And then she didn't hear. But here's the thing. In such cases whether it's DOCS where nobody acted, not the child protection workers, not the supervisors, at one point they moved just two months before the little girl's death so the case was handed over to another office of course and they take a while to get up and running, and you're right I did allow my anger to leak through because this could have been otherwise. There's no reason for us not to pick up a case like that, except to say slackness, inattention, we don't resource child protection in the way we should, we don't do anything about… that's not quite true… we don't do it nearly enough, not even remotely enough for prevention. There were numerous moments in that child's life where you could see that she could have had intervention, including being taken away from the parents because another child had been and she had been diagnosed as autistic, but in fact it's not at all clear that it wasn't simply that she was very delayed developmentally because of failure to thrive. That is the most gross-neglect during the first year of her life. But something could have been done, something could have been done all the way along, and so the ball was dropped, just by almost everybody. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Well the same thing happened in that Daniel Valerio story, the little boy who was bashed to death by his mother's boyfriend back in the mid '90's and I went to that trial and I was flabbergasted by the people who, a GP who had seen this kid with bruises all around here… and he was being violently kicked by his… There were two guys who the stepfather actually worked with and the stepfather boasted to these two guys that he used to make this little boy; what he called 'do a star', he was two this kid and he used to make him… |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I can't even bear it… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| I won't tell this story. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I'm just saying this is the darkness. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| But these guys didn't do anything. They just said, oh one of them said, "Oh people like you should be put in jail" and that he said to the kicker, and there was a next door neighbour, she used to hear such screaming coming from their house, a child screaming, that she used to go for a drive and not come back for an hour or so, and when she got back the screaming had stopped and she could turn on her TV or go to bed or whatever it was. Again and again you find these stories of people who will do anything rather than know that these things are going on. A woman who, this is in *This House of Grief*, a woman who lived in a flat that overlooked some bushland and she was having a cup of tea on her veranda, one day and she say a woman, a young woman jogging past in jogging clothes and then she saw this guy come after the woman and attack her, rape her, strangle her and chuck her into the bushes and she didn't even call the police, she didn't want to 'get involved'. What does that mean? |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Just reminding me now that you've said when we have a talk before, that reading Hannah Arendt's, *Eichmann In Jerusalem*, you were very taken with the idea of what are these trials for? Of trying to repair the rent in the social fabric. Perhaps also with this kind of writing that we're talking about, is that a motivation? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yes I guess in the sense that all these terrible deeds, they do rend the social fabric but the social fabric is, what we hope, that's what we hope that the law will do when somebody's charged with a crime. And I'm sure this is why detective and true crime is so popular with people, I mean every show you see on TV is about murder, investigation, charging and the rest of it, but it's as if people have a very deep need for the shape of that story because you need to feel that the rend has been, firstly acknowledged, and then dealt with by the agents of our common decency. And I'm not sure if that's why for example, I find being in court so terrifically gripping but you can feel this huge machinery of the law working its way around and sometimes you can just feel it start to swing and you think, 'This is nearly over, they've nearly dealt with this' and an enormous relief comes over you. The moment of a verdict is very traumatic. People wail and scream and people faint, but it's almost an unbearable moment and yet without such a moment, we wouldn't be – what's the word for it – there'd be no resolution to the pain of the story and the pain of the rent in the social fabric. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I'm about to ask you for your questions so formulate them now, but I just want to ask Anne about this rent in the social fabric, is that what you hope will happen, will something move, shift, when these stores are told? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well I certainly think by trying to answer the question 'why' then that can contribute to some deeper understanding such that other cases might be prevented. I think, I really agree with Helen about the sense of, say with the Royal Commission, someone said "How can you spend so much time thinking about it, reading about it and looking at it?" But there's something really inspiring about a Royal Commission and about the processes of law, about really good legal minds, really trying to zero in on the question of knowledge or guilt or innocence and that you know that it is about some sort of restitution of the moral order by the fact that we have been, that this has been a kind of never listened to story for these people, who have had their lives destroyed and now there is suddenly, some major societal shift. The most acute listening going on, day after day after day. There's a swinging of attention – of full attention and people are treated with great respect. I mean sometimes the testimonies roar and agonise and they're crumpled and crumbling human beings who've been really, all but destroyed by what has happened to them. But there is also something so inspiring about the coming together of human beings to try and set something to rights and to enact justice and this is a commission that, it's an enquiry that would happen nowhere else in the world, we've had other enquiries in the world, this is the most seriously extensive, over the length of time, the brief they have and so on. It's a really remarkable process and it's about justice and so often I think people have to, so often the courts let them down, so often 'The laws an ass' and all of that. But at its best there is that knitting of the fabric of the moral order again. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| There's something that the Tipstaff says at the beginning of each weeks hearing. The Tipstaff stands up in the court and says in this very formal way, "All persons having business before this honourable court present yourselves and you shall be heard" and when you talked about listening, every time the Tipstaff would say that I felt like bursting into tears because in a way it's a statement of why we're all there, is we want to hear this story and see what we can make of it and what can be done about it and I find that really quite thrilling.One time I went there, when I was wanting to quote that sort of trumpet blast, that they say at the beginning of each week I went to see the Tippy and said, "would you just tell me the words that you say at the beginning and he said them to me", but he handed me, it was written on a typed sheet that he had - a little framed sheet - because he'd been in the job for so long that he knew it by heart. He said, "There's a bit at the end that you don't have to say but you can say it if you want to" and it's 'God Save the Queen'. But he didn't say it. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Well on that note, if you have a question, put your hand up and you're not allowed to say anything until you have a microphone under your nose. So please, our first question here… |
| **Audience** |
| Helen, you said that you tried to…. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Where are you? |
| **Audience** |
| That at one point you tried to weasel out of the Joe Cinque story with his mother. Has there ever been a story that you haven't continued with that has been too much? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| No. I haven't done all that many of these, but no I tried to wriggle out of the Farquharson one too. When I say wriggle, once again I know that because I hadn't interviewed anybody immediately involved in this story I hadn't set up that trust relationship that Maria Cinque taught me was so precious and so serious. But I just thought I just can't go on. I can't stand the pain. But at one point I thought, well I really just can't stand this I'm going to go home and lie on the bed and so I went home and lay on the bed and I stayed there for three days and then I realised that once you're that far in, the only way out is to write the book. You can't back out because you're all churned up and you've got to form the thing to make it bearable in the way that we've been saying all along. So I've never managed to wriggle out of it – no. |
| **Audience** |
| Today as I was driving here I heard, I don't know the exact quote, but Malcolm Turnbull said something like in the last few hours, 'let's not get misty eyed about Manus', that's what he said, something like that and then he went on to, you could see what he was doing, he was grabbing the chance, he was falling at the polls and then he said, 'we're preventing drownings at sea'. Now my reaction was one of utter rage, so I thought I'll write something it'll be something angry, this rich, pampered guy who is going to go to his $4million house, all of that stuff, so you don't do that. What do you do? And I think this is what you've been getting at in some ways, what you have to do is then go into the forensic detail of what Manus Island is all about. So immediately the writer in me starts to calm down and say, 'well ok, what are the things that can bring it home?' Things like this, the whirring, I've heard asylum seekers on Manus Islands talk about the whirring of the fans, because they're in the tropical heat and they live in these little cramped rooms for three years mind you and they say the whirring of the fans all night, it gets your ears, it gets into your brain and then you raise a Berati. What about him, a rock was thrown on him and crushed his skull? That's what I'm finding out here, is this what it's all about? Is this in a sense what you're talking about? There's the rage, there's the anger and then something else kicks in and says well, 'I've got to sober up here and do the work and the work is actually finding the detail, the specific detail that you hope against hope are going to get through and make someone begin to be in the shoes of that horror that those men are experiencing?' |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yes, because people who, many others who were listening to Malcolm Turnbull are not necessarily where you are emotionally, so you have to try and draw them into that space, you have to show them why and how they can empathise. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| That's the art of it, isn't it? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And the tiny detail is very important. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yes, detail, the whirring of the fan, that's fantastic. Yes, that's true. I mean you could sit down and write down a list of facts about Manus Island and everyone says, 'well I'm going to turn to the footy'. There's got to be some other…You've got to sink the knife so that people… |
| **Anne Manne** |
| The language has to be direct and not abstract as possible. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| And it shouldn't be filled with outrage, that sort of outrage where people are really saying, 'look how sensitive I am, I really know this is a bad thing and I'm going to blow my little trumpet about it and blow my tin whistle' but so what? We don't care if you've got a big heart, we want to know what's going on there and why it is and what can be done about it? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| And it's to help the person, the reader imagine what is happening and to have those details and to write in such a way as they are left in absolutely no doubt as to what is happening to those people. But I think when you say, writing something, sometimes outrage can work but it's more often the case I think people find anger aversive and so they turn off and they shut down. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Well the anger gets you started though doesn't it? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Anger gets me started. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| And it pushes you past your own shyness and you think, 'I'd be a wimp if I didn't follow this up'. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| As a person it's a motivator, but I'm just saying to land on the page, and particularly with an issue with refugees, so much is written about it that you can have to find new ways of recreating and making people 'get' what's happening. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Or making people human. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Of all the things I was talking about in the Catholic Church you can see with the example of refugees, you can see how language has very slowly and systematically changed such that the …. If you're using human language then human things can be done, so the language we use for everything is so important to be precise but also…. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Orwell said it a long time ago. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yeah, not an abstraction can be a problem, it's actually quite an interesting human rights journal called *Right Now* where that essay I wrote on the Catholic Church Clergy appeared and their idea which was a good one, was to write about human rights but not do it in, there's certain language that the NGO's which are really worthy and do fantastic work, or lawyers, will tend to use, but it is a distancing language so that you're not really feeling what's happening.  |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Why does that language exist, I mean why did it come to be used in those circumstances? What you said before, that's one thing I always notice, people slip into the passive voice, they say; 'when this happened' in other words 'when I killed her'. People in politics use it all the time. There's a little alarm bell that goes off when I see the passive voice and I hate it. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Obviously you can technically use it. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| But why do people use that language? Why do people slip into that polysyllabic, abstract talk? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| It's like putting on a suit of armour. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| What against, what do the NGO's? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Against being thought of as foolish or you gain a certain sense of grandeur or authority. Often it sounds authoritative. Politicians use it a lot, that's why someone like Jacqui Lambie comes along everyone is incredibly interested because she's being so freshly and worryingly….. Go Jackie! |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| I was just going to look for another hand. There's one here. |
| **Audience** |
| When you're writing about such dark places, how important is it to get a bit of light in? Or is the light just shining, putting a view over these awful things? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| You mean in the piece itself? Or in your life? |
| **Audience** |
| Well probably both but more in the pieces itself. I'm just thinking from something Hannah Kent was saying a couple of, about two years ago when she was writing *Burial Rites*, her first draft was reviewed and they said, 'Get a bit of light in, just humanise things'. I'm just looking at the perspective on light and dark? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| For me it would depend on what it was I was writing, so that in the case of this little girl who was starved to death there wasn't any light and that was it. There was no light. And so to try and have any kind of sentimental ending, to try and manufacture that would have, I think, would have betrayed the integrity of the piece. But there are other times, say when I was reading *House of Grief*, there's many very funny moments, the observations about human beings. There's also another form of light I think that is in *House of Grief* which I'm really glad I now have the opportunity to mention which is, I think what you do is you pity the wrongdoer. You feel… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| That's why everyone gets mad at me see. [Laughter] |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Well it's a very fine thing to do because you think about it. Most people identify with the victim and they're angry and all of that's quite normal and human and reasonable, but it's a very hard thing to imagine the life and the interior world, the relationships. So there are many tender moments between his sisters and Robbie Farquharson. Now somehow nothing is taken away from the gravity of the crime, I'll never get over the scene which you did so sparely, where the children must have, when the father leaves the car and it takes some minutes for the water to fill the car and those children are strapped in they can't escape. So here you are, this seems to me an incredible act of, kind of love, for all people if you understand. So you're imagining the wrongdoer, here's this ordinary, I thought quite shitty little man really, not interesting, but here you are imagining how it was that he came to that point and I suspect, I'm not a Christian I was raised by a very devout atheist mother, but I can actually hear echoes of something actually which was good in a world much more, breathing in the concepts of Christianity and that is an understanding of how important it is not to cast-off the wrongdoer and to be able to pity the wrongdoer and to feel sorrow for what has happened, for what they have done. |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| About the sin and the sinner? |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Who said that? |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Hate the sin but not the sinner. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| That's pretty hard. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| It's very hard, very hard, but somehow imagining this dull little man's life, but this enormous crime, this terrible thing that has happened, there is a fidelity to the way of seeing human beings which does not cast one of our members, it's a sort of asunder, just not throw them out as a monster. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| The thing is, you go down to the court and you expect to see the person sitting in the dock, you think, there's going to be a monster in the dock, some brute of a guy. And then you go in there and you just see this pathetic… I went to a court case recently I just went to a sentencing and the fellow who, I went to see this, I did have a slightly personal reason for wanting to see this guy. I'm not sure if you remember it's a fellow in the Yarra Valley who bought a dune buggy who took it home and put his little girl on it and another little kid that was there and the thing rolled and the little girl died. He pleaded guilty to a charge of (I don't know) completely moronic behaviour or one of those charges and it was very crowded in there and I was thinking, 'who is this bloody idiot who would have done such a thing?' And I went along in a spirit of outraged grandmotherly hood and there was a lot more people in the room than I thought there would be and a lot of people who came in late were crammed up at the back standing up. And I was standing there and I didn't realise that this bit of wall that I was leaning on was actually the front wall of the dock. And there was a bit of a fluster and it was actually the accused person who was soon to be called the prisoner, came in with his security guards and he was right as close to me as that. I just looked around and saw him and I saw this man who – it just broke my heart to look at him. He was crying like a person whose heart was broken, his face was red and he was making that noise that children make he was going 'sob uhh uhh' crying like that and it just broke my heart to look at him and I thought 'you poor bastard, you've killed your child, and you did it out of sheer stupidity'. And then the judge did his beautiful, his remarks were so superb, he didn't take any trumpeting kind of righteousness: they always address the person when they're sentencing them they say: you did this and you did that in the second person. And he said 'You did this and you did that, you ignored the fact that all over this dune buggy there were notices saying Do not do this. Do not take a child younger than a certain age. Do not do U-turns. Do not speed.' And wherever he would have put his hand on the controls there was a notice, Do not do the stupid thing. But somehow the way he spoke to this guy seemed to me very highly evolved somehow. He wasn't saying 'you are a piece of shit and you are no longer a human, we're going to fling you into jail and we don't care what happens to you ever again'. He spoke to him like a human being. And in a sense that was sort of worse. I mean it was more painful to witness. But I noticed that the grandfather of the child, who was somebody I vaguely knew, and he was a policeman, I kept looking at him to see how he was responding to this sentencing and I couldn't tell. He sat quite still and his wife was in tears and he just sat quietly in his seat and I thought, 'That's the face of a very experienced cop, you do not cry in court, you just sit quietly in dignity and you listen to what's going on and then you do whatever else you need to do at home'. But I was struck by the fact that he was not cast into outer darkness and I was glad that he wasn't. I think because we don't have execution anymore, I think that putting someone in jail is really a symbolic execution it's saying; "Get out of my sight, we don't ever want to look at you again, get over there, we're putting you over there and then we'll all be clean again." And of course somebody's got to look after him in jail and he's not really dead and he hasn't been obliterated but we want to obliterate criminals because we can't bear what they've done. But to see a court handle a person like that, with extreme sophistication and firmness, but rightness of everything the judge said seemed to be right, he placed the fault where the fault lay and basically said to the guy, 'well that's what you did and you're going to have to wear it and you're going to go to jail for x amount of time'. And there was something about that, that was very resolving to me, and I think, to many other people in the room. When it's done well, you don't have to trumpet the evilness of the person and the goodness of everyone else. As we were saying before, you just have to say; 'These are the facts, these are the facts and there's the weeping person' and that's all you need to do and all those little tin whistles of outrage are really beside the point and they're really just vanity. I think they're people saying, 'I am better than that'. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| That's actually moral narcissism, where you feel superior to the person so you kind of… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| Yes, and you want everyone to know. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Yeah and so there's pleasure of a very dubious kind in condemning the person. In the cases that I was talking about, they are people without remorse which is why…. |
| **Helen Garner** |
| You mean in the problems Catholic? |
| **Anne Manne** |
| Not in every case, but often. Whereas what you're talking about in that man, is something that in any writing or any Justice System. Anyone who is thinking about anyone who has done something really heinous, has to remember which is that, of all emotions, remorse, real remorse and shame are exquisitely painful. So painful that, Rai Gaita the philosopher, has a really lovely way of putting it, he calls remorse of that really full kind, (like if Breivik really faced what he did, if those parents really woke up one day and realised what they'd done and Robbie Farquharson did that). That kind of remorse is a kind of he calls it a "Dying to the world" so there's some way of entering into a completely different space, of full recognition of what you've done and that is so agonisingly painful for someone. Then it seems to me of the case you're saying of that man, he didn't mean, want to kill his daughter… |
| **Helen Garner** |
| He loved his daughter. |
| **Anne Manne** |
| On that day, people are idiots, they're not perfect so sometimes they're idiots, but he must feel the most terrible remorse, so that’s again, in the same domain it seems to me as pity for the wrongdoer.  |
| **Ramona Koval** |
| Well, it's time for us to stop and there are books outside for you to buy and for you to enter the minds of the writers again, more fully than you could have just listening to people up here. Please thank Anne Manne and Helen Garner for a wonderful conversation.[Applause] |
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