

Habe Dank! A writer's release

Habe Dank! (Give thanks!) is a song by Richard Strauss, and I want to refer to it at the end of this essay because Helen Garner's use of it concludes the first stage of her writing career, but let us begin with *Monkey Grip*, her earliest published book. This book was discussed in 'Unfortunate affairs', earlier in this series, so what else is there to say?

I think my first words must be fuck, fucking and fucked, because *Monkey Grip*, if it is anything, is a celebration of sexual freedom. An outsider might say that its characters are promiscuous, but the word has censorious overtones which Garner's generation of admirers, and the people she portrayed, would dismiss. *Sexually active?* No, the words are too heavy because in trying to avoid being judgemental they retain some of the weight the old culture applies to bare bodies in bed.

It's hard to find new words for what we're talking about; a few years later the word 'bonk' filled some of the gap, but it's lighter, less serious, than 'fuck'. It's a word, perhaps, which takes for granted one of the changes in outlook celebrated in *Monkey Grip*. Garner's book goes to bed with her characters and their experiences of each other are detailed with acute perception. The people of the book are a new generation, and aware of it. They form households, and they drop in on each other all the time. The men, who are less central to these households than the women, are invited to stay the night; sometimes they ask if they can stay, sometimes they barge in. But there are children to be

cared for, so the women are more important. This means that the young women – often *very* young women – are sometimes quite matriarchal, and sometimes as busy with 'finding themselves' as any teenager. It's all, as they say, very fluid and if there are casualties – as there are – then the first of them is the conventional idea of plot.

Monkey Grip has no plot, unless you think they're on, they're off, they're on again, they're finally off, is a plot. I don't. A plot is a form of social understanding. Even the most conventional of plots, the old Mills & Boon sort, are social, because when such books raise the question of will she/won't she, they are raising the question of marriage, that socialisation of relations between the sexes. 'Will she go to bed with him?' is almost the same question as 'Will she marry him?' or it was in the world being pushed into the past by *Monkey Grip*.

The other major difference between the old world and the new is the presence of that monkey on the back, a heroin habit. There's smack everywhere, and coke, and marijuana, and everybody's into them. For some of the characters, drugs are marginal; for others, addiction has taken hold, and the only way out is via the individual's will power. The generational change is in its early days, and treatment programs – a reaction by society to the fact that some of its members are losing themselves – are nowhere mentioned in the book. They're not part of the scene. Everyone's destiny is in his or her own hands, and they're all young enough to

ignore, or simply be unaware of, what their drugs will do to them if taken for very long.

Monkey Grip is an optimistic book, because the years of reckoning haven't arrived. People think that if they've got a problem they can go to Hobart, or Sydney, or camping, and all will be well. A new scene, a new mood. A different locale, a different view of life. Starting again doesn't look hard.

Let us spend a moment trying to put a frame around the generation Garner is portraying. They are, I think, the first generation to say that the personal is the political. They don't form organizations, though one can sense between the book's lines that there's a new theatre movement just out of sight. They inherit social security payments for which not too many questions are asked. They're surrounded by advertising, trying to control their lives, but their own consciousness of bullshit is their protection. Anyone taken in by crap deserves what they get. They're smart, or they think they are. They're well aware that there are wealthier people getting things more easily, but they use the communal life style to counter this. They manage. If they haven't got a car, they ride a bike, or walk; the people who count are all within distance. They've settled, or squatted, in the old working class suburbs now caught up in the process of gentrification, but they don't give a shit about that: they live there too. They're rid of all the shames of the body, or they think so, and they're young enough not to bother too much. They're both tribal and acutely individual. They believe in their own states of mind. You wouldn't catch them adhering to any canon of great art, but they're not ignorant, either, and

Nora, Garner's central figure, makes regular references to singers, songs, and things she's read. Nora is guided from within herself, and that, I think, is a feature of the book that made it popular with early readers: that and the fact that they, the new generation, had made their mark – or had it made for them by Garner's book. They didn't object to being a talking point in the society around them. Garner herself had been much discussed a little earlier when she was dismissed from a teaching job over sex education classes she'd given in the spirit of the book, where people, as stated before, don't hesitate to express their sexual natures.

So Nora and the people she mixes with are a new generation, the like of which hasn't been seen before. Or so they believe. They haven't set out to change the world with a political program; they *live* differently. With pleasure, no longer forbidden, and integrity. Or so they believe.

How far would this movement go? Not very far. The consumer society surrounded it, pumping messages into homes via television, and into brains via signage. No commercial indices lapsed because of happenings in Carlton, Collingwood and Fitzroy. The media continued to manage the minds of the populace. But, and perhaps more importantly, the counter-culturists themselves began to encounter problems they hadn't noticed earlier on. Developments of this sort are the subject matter of Garner's second book, which offers us two stories, *Honour & Other People's Children*.

Honour – I don't know why it has this name – is a story of fifty pages. What is it about? That only becomes clear at the very end,

with an image that haunts the mind long after the book is back on the shelf. Let us find our way to this moment. Kathleen has a daughter, Flo. Flo's father is Frank, and Frank has taken up with a new woman, Jenny. Jenny has no children but she wants to have a child with Frank. Quite early in the book it is decided – in an unsatisfactory passage, to my mind – that Flo will live with Frank and Jenny. Kathleen consents to this, but quickly has regrets. Flo, the little girl, likes living with Frank and Jenny, partly because they don't manage her as closely as Kathleen did, but she is aware that her mother is suffering. She tells Kathleen that she wishes that the four of them could live together. The wisdom of the child!

Frank and Kathleen, though separated for some time, still have affection for each other. More importantly, they are bonded by their years together, and by the needs of their daughter. And by Frank's family; his parents are ageing, his mother is unwell, and he takes Kathleen on a visit to see them, because they don't yet know that there is a new woman, Jenny, in his life. So Frank makes no effort to deny the things he shares with Kathleen, and there are times in the story when the reader feels a little sorry for Jenny, who is loved, it's true, but simply isn't as bonded to Frank as Kathleen is. I think it is clear from what I have been saying that *Honour* turns a searching gaze onto things which in *Monkey Grip* were taken for granted. When people change partners there are effects which ripple in many directions.

Flo, the child, is the central character of *Honour*. Whether or not Helen Garner knew this would be so when she began the story, I am not sure. I have already referred to the way in which

the observations and new understandings of Nora, the central figure in *Monkey Grip*, are the thread which holds the book together. *Honour*, I think, is shaped by the ways in which the needs and wishes of Flo are sometimes in accord, and sometimes out of accord, with the doings of the adults. She knows her father loves her, and her father is connected to the two women responsible for her. She knows, too, that there are difficulties for each of the two mother/wives, and these difficulties are beyond her understanding. At the end of the story, with Flo, Kathleen and Jenny going for a walk one evening, the two women are persuaded – by Flo – to get on a see-saw:

They separated and walked away from each other, one to each end. They swung their legs over and placed themselves gingerly, easing their weight this way and that on the meandering board.

'Let go, Floss.'

The child stepped back. Jenny, who was nearer the ground, gave a firm shove with one foot to send the plank into motion. It responded. It rose without haste, sweetly, to the level, steadied, and stopped.

They hung in the dark, airily balancing, motionless.

It's a lovely ending. The story has been searching for this moment. Notice that the understanding in the reader which allows the story to end is not provided by one of those inner, whispered insights which hold *Monkey Grip* together, but is given to the reader by the narrative itself. The narrator is yielding power

to the medium, the artist to the art. This, as writers learn, is what we have to do, and if we are wise we withdraw gracefully when required. I think we can see Helen Garner learning this lesson in *Honour*; let us now move on to *Other People's Children*, for we still have some way to travel before we can take flight with her in that song by Strauss: *Habe Dank!*

Other People's Children is not, in my opinion, the right name for this story, though I must admit that I've tried to think of a better one, and I can't. Why is this? Answer, it's not clear what the story is about. Nor is it clear that 'story' is the right classification. Still searching, I try the word 'novella', but it doesn't fit. A novella is smaller than a novel, and in being so it gains in organization. Tightness in organization is not present in *Other People's Children*, though the writing is very tight indeed, one of Helen Garner's greatest strengths. If we look to the ending for a revelatory insight, such as *Honour* gave us, we find Scotty and Ruth quarrelling, and this reminds us that they have been at odds throughout. Why? There was a time, the story tells us, when they were close, and that, paradoxically, was when they were members of a larger household. So they were closer when they were not pressed so tightly against each other. This is an important clue. The big household was when things had a good feeling, for Ruth.

'... for Ruth it was special, you know. She dragged herself out of that mess with Jim, and he took off with Wally. She fixed up her room, and planted her vegetables, and started up a new women's group. It was a big household. Rosters. Telling life stories. Signs! *When was the last time you saw a man around here with a broom in his hand? Revolution begins*

in the kitchen. The kids were everybody's kids – Laurel and Sarah's daughter used to call each other "my sister". We thought everything we'd theorised about was coming true. Breaking down old structures, as we used to go around saying in those days.'

Scotty, unlike Ruth, has no yearning to go back:

For Scotty, this was over. They had been through it once, once was enough; the sound of her own voice droning the ossified facts disgusted her. But Ruth wanted it again ...

There is a scene in the middle of the story where Ruth, Scotty and another woman go out in a car, with cans of spray paint, to write on advertising signs. The reader isn't told what their messages say, because the focus is on their happiness:

They sped away from each finished sign in a euphoria of silent laughter. It was like falling in love again in the dark. All their antagonisms dissolved, their eyes shone.

This happiness doesn't last, because they are caught, and told to follow a police car to Glenhuntly station. Scotty manages to laugh about this the next day, but Ruth isn't so accepting.

'To put it bluntly,' said Ruth from the doorway, 'we made fuckin' idiots of ourselves. In the copshop we were pathetic.'

A moment later Ruth's kids – they're always referred to as kids, not children – are called inside to eat toast, their lack of table manners disgusts Scotty, and her quarrel with Ruth resumes.

'Why don't you two shut your mouths when you chew?' said

Scotty in a surly tone. 'It nearly makes me sick to listen to you.'

They glanced up at her, puzzled, and went on gulping and gnawing.

'Lay off'em, Scotty,' said Ruth. 'Just lay off'em.'

'I live here,' said Scotty. 'It's awful, the way they eat. Why don't we teach'em?'

'Don't be so fuckin' bourgeois! You never used to think table manners were important!'

'Things change,' said Scotty. 'They're not babies any more.'

'You've changed!' said Ruth. Out came the Drum, the tense rolling. 'You know what's happened to you? You've turned into a boss. You're an individualist.'

This is a revealing moment in the life of the household, perhaps the whole movement of which it's a part. Scotty and Ruth are going in different directions, Ruth clinging to what she thinks the movement was, Scotty sensing that she has to go somewhere new ... or is it back to the *modus vivendi* of an earlier time? I think *Other People's Children* is a long preparation for a change of heart, a restless examination of the way of life we saw in *Monkey Grip*, and *Honour*, before a move is made, finally, perhaps.

Such a move is made in *The Children's Bach*, and convincingly because this time there is a plot. It's very simple, and every move is telling. The opening, too, is more certain than the earlier openings: there is a photo on the wall of Dexter and Athena's kitchen of a famous poet (Alfred Lord Tennyson) and his family. Garner describes it in some detail and one feels that she is

enunciating a certainty which is about to be tested, but which will survive, as the photo survives:

Dexter stuck this picture up on the kitchen wall, between the stove and the bathroom door. It is torn and stained, and coated with a sheen of splattered cooking grease. It has been there a long time. It is always peeling off, swinging sideways, dangling by one corner. But always, before it quite falls off the wall, someone saves it, someone sticks it back.

The way this clinging on prefigures the sustaining power of the marriage of Dexter and Athena in the trial it is about to undergo is an indication of the control Garner has found in *The Children's Bach*. The title, an appropriate one this time, reminds us of Athena's piano, also in the kitchen, and her attempts to play the composer's pieces, or the *Mikrokosmos* of Bartok: not very well, in her own opinion, and in Dexter's too. Dexter loves attention, loves to whistle, loves to put his ideas on show but he is a humble man and he doesn't think inflated thoughts about himself or his family. Athena's music, to him, is a harmless hobby, and she too is unpretentious, hardly able to understand why anyone would be interested enough to push into her life. Yet two people do. There is Vicky, who comes out from England at seventeen to join her sister Elizabeth, twenty years older; their mother is dead. Elizabeth's work is never stated and she lives in a warehouse which is both hollow and empty. Vicki quickly leaves it for a little room at the back of Athena and Dexter's house. Elizabeth has a boyfriend – boys at thirty-seven? – called Philip, a musician with, says Elizabeth, 'the attention span of a stick insect'. Elizabeth is sharp, and Garner makes a convincing figure of her, living in that

thin band of life known as 'style', unable to keep Philip faithful to her, yet belonging to him because he too lives in that thin band which is no longer, in this book, as all-encompassing as it was in the earlier works, when it was the world of almost all the characters. Thus the life of the earlier books is now an alternative to what goes on in the home of Dexter and Athena's marriage, a single-fronted Victorian villa close to one of the creeks leading into Melbourne's unimposing Yarra. The couple, one feels, get by but have nothing to spare, and their view of themselves is modest.

Yet Athena, a grand name, is curious to know what life could offer if she stepped outside her closely-drawn boundaries. She takes the step. She responds to Philip's interest, his talk, his visits. She goes to Sydney when he's playing in that city. Dexter finds out where she's gone, and he goes to Sydney too.

'Come home.'

'No. I haven't finished yet.'

'Come home.'

'I can't.'

'Let's go home.'

'I'll never forgive you if you make me.'

'Make you? How could I? I love you.'

She shrugged. 'At home I was half dead.'

A day or so later, she returns. The stick insect's attention has turned elsewhere. But I am doing Philip an injustice, because he has a daughter, Poppy, aged twelve, and she is his responsibility which, after a fashion, he accepts. There is a marvellous passage

where he tells Poppy a story to get her to sleep, then, as she lies, no longer hearing, he turns the tale into a warning to her, an expression of the ruthlessness of the world he inhabits, where music and sexuality swirl around each other. There had always been this moral compass to Garner's writing but it is stronger and surer in *The Children's Bach* than it has been before, and this time it is the family that wins. Athena gives up her attempt to enter, and learn to live in, Philip's world.

Are there longer nights than those spent sitting up in a second-class seat between Sydney and Melbourne?

At dawn her own reflection receded from the glass, the train groaned and halted, and she looked out at the basalt plain, the striding power lines, the nodding thistles. The landscape was sheep-coloured. Sheep thronged by dams and under trees. The sky was clear. Someone at the front of the carriage turned on a radio, and in the stillness of the sleeping train, before hoarse voices could cry to it to shut up, she heard the music begin again, the whine, the false drama, the seductive little whispering of despair.

When Athena gets home, she cleans the house. It's a mess and it needs her. In the longest paragraph in the book Athena cleans everything. Then Helen Garner gives us a couple of last lines in the past tense ...

She ironed a cloth and spread it on the kitchen table.

And then she sat down and waited for them to come home.

... before the book makes a triumphant leap into the future ...

And they will come!

And Vicki will say, as they drive in through the gateway,

'Hey! The bins are out! Athena must be back.'

... and a whole host of things will happen: Garner tidies her story, her lovely, carefully balanced plot, with every character and every happening necessary, with a string of predictions that are really certainties ...

and someone will put the kettle on.

and Dexter will sit on the edge of the bed to do up his sandals, and Athena will creep over to him and put her head on his knee, and he will take her head in his hands and stroke it with a firm touch

and the tea will go purling into the cup,

... and the last of the wonders of a household reassuming its proper character, that is, the home of an unpretentious family, will be that Athena will play Bach ...

and Athena will play Bach on the piano, in the empty house, and her left hand will keep up the steady rocking beat, and her right hand will run the arpeggios, will send them flying, will toss handfuls of notes high into the sparkling air!

When we come to stitch together, to assess, all that has happened in the book's less than a hundred pages, we cannot fail to notice that the book stretches from Tennyson to Bach. Philip and his music, well played no doubt, drop out of reckoning. High culture had another moment, while Athena was still in Sydney.

Vicki was trying to find music on the radio. 'I'll turn it off,

Dex, if you don't feel up to it.'

'No, leave it,' he said. He held out the boxes to Elizabeth and sat down. 'That's Berlioz. Leave that on.'

'Opera,' said Elizabeth under her breath. She opened the cutlery drawer and scrabbled among the metal.

The announcer, a young and bashful man whose tentative voice could have reached the airwaves only on an amateur station, began to read out a synopsis.

'In the next act,' he murmured, 'Margaret waits for Faust. She waits and waits, but in vain: he does not come. He is in the depths of the forest, invoking Nature.'

Contested though the world of music may be in the late twentieth century, the classical now mixed with a thousand other noises, Garner is reasserting the quality, the veracity, if not the altitude, of what used to be called 'high' culture. Athena is home, she's going to play Bach, and life will resume in the humble home of the Fox family – that's their name – a little more richly, with a little more understanding, now that Athena's explored the hard, the selfish world outside her home and its ways. The world of Monkey Grip and its sequels got inside the home of Athena and Dexter, but it's outside again now, and Garner's exuberance is spectacular.

We are ready at last for 'A Happy Story'.

It's a simple piece, a mere two pages long. The narrator is called Helen, and she has bought two tickets to a concert – a rock concert – for her daughter and ...

Will Helen go with her daughter? No, she's forty one, it's not right for her any more, so she sells her ticket to her sister, who is a musician, and she drives daughter and sister to the Entertainment Centre. There is a crowd, happy and excited. 'They are going to shout, to push past the bouncers and run down the front to dance. They are dressed up wonderfully, they almost skip as they walk.' Helen lets daughter and sister out of the car, then she does a U turn to go home.

I shove in the first cassette my hand falls on. It is Elizabeth Schwarzkopf: she is singing a joyful song by Strauss. I do not understand the words but the chorus goes 'Habe Dank!' The light is weird, there is a storminess, it is not yet dark enough for headlights. I try to sing like a soprano. My voice cracks, she sings too high for me, but as I fly up the little rise beside the Richmond football ground I say out loud, 'This is it. I am finally on the far side of the line.' *Habe Dank!*