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The Spare Room. Helen Garner. Text, 2008.

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 5 April 2008.

Helen Garner, that astonishing woman, has published another novel, the first since *Cosmo Cosmolino* in 1993. In a way that only the greatest writers can manage – Naipaul and Coetzee come to mind – she dispenses with fanciful disguises and uses herself as a first-person narrator – a fictional version of herself of course, but one we can easily recognise as the narrator of *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque's Consolation*: that woman who sees her own rages and vulnerabilities as clearly as she does her subject matter.

So. Helen is living in Melbourne, a comfortable, busy existence, alone but with her daughter's family in the house next door, enjoying her grand-daughter's casual visits through the gap in the fence. A friend from Sydney, Nicola, arrives to stay for three weeks so she can attend a Melbourne clinic for alternative treatment of her cancer. Helen is plunged into a nightmarish scenario of twenty-four hour nursing, dealing with the effects of a radical and unproved course of therapies into which Nicola, despite her agony, has placed a huge financial and emotional investment. The novel charts the three weeks of their impossible cohabitation, Nicola cheerily announcing, between bouts of indescribable pain, that in three days she'll be as fit as a Mallee bull, while Helen's angry frustration with her refusal to face her impending death seethes and crackles.

Grim material, but Garner's prose, simple and uncluttered as it is, is a constant source of delight. Trying to explain the situation to an interstate friend on the phone, Helen senses 'a light stream of silent incomprehension, even disapproval, flow[ing]

down the line.’ She meets an oncologist who is blessed with ‘the springy body language one sees in modern medicos whose wives make them jog, swim, and eat low-fat cereals.’ And how powerful is this passage, when she has just listened to Nicola making light of ‘poor old Hel’s’ difficulties looking after her to a mutual friend:

Peggy glanced at me. Horrified sympathy passed along her eye-beams. It weakened me. A huge wave of fatigue rinsed me from head to foot. I was afraid I would slide off the bench and measure my length among the cut roses. At the same time a chain of metallic thoughts went clanking through my mind, like the first dropping of an anchor. Death will not be denied. To try is grandiose. It drives madness into the soul. It leaches out virtue. It injects poison into friendship, and makes a mockery of love.

Notice the preciseness of the images – the fatigue ‘rinsing’ her, the chain of metallic thoughts. This is a magnificent book, absorbing despite its unpalatable and uncomfortable themes. It looks into the dark corners of friendship, the monstrously selfish self-deception of a dying woman, the banal incompetence of those who prey on the terminally ill, with fearless clarity and intense intelligence, but also with warmth and empathy.