

The Spare Room

Helen Garner

ISBN 978-1-921351-39-6
RRP AUS \$29.95 NZ \$35.00
Fiction Demy hardback



Praise for *The Spare Room*

'A perfect novel, imbued with Garner's usual clear-eyed grace but with some other magnificent dimension that hides between the lines of her simple conversational voice. How is it that she can enter this heart-breaking territory – the dying friend who comes to stay – and make it not only bearable, but glorious, and funny? There is no answer except: Helen Garner is a great writer; *The Spare Room* is a great book.' Peter Carey

About Helen Garner

Helen Garner was born in Geelong in 1942. Her award-winning books include novels, stories, screenplays and works of non-fiction, including *The First Stone* (1995) and *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004). *The Spare Room* is her first work of fiction in fifteen years.

A reader's introduction to *The Spare Room*

Helen's friend, Nicola, is coming to stay for three weeks. She is to receive an alternative treatment that she believes will cure her cancer. Helen prepares the spare room in her home, taking care with details. She offers Nicola a choice of pillows. She hangs a mirror. The glass falls in the night, hinting at future conflict: Nicola, unable to face her death, will force Helen to moments of brutal truth.

As the novel progresses, past considerations about sheet colour seem trivial. Helen is exhausted by the physical care she must give Nicola. More importantly, she is exhausted by her friend's denial of death. Her anger at the 'bullshit' treatment and at her friend's façade fills the house.

In Garner's world of domestic detail questions of life and death are beautifully and honestly explored. Is there a good way to die? What makes a worthwhile life? Do the rights of the dying override those of friends and family who must watch?

The novel draws the reader mercilessly into the spare room, where death is brutal and real to Helen: exhausting nights full of sheets soaked in sweat, exhausting days empty of honesty. At the same time, Garner gives relief and perspective through humour,

through her descriptions of nature, and through the youths that visit the house.

The conclusion to the novel contrasts sharply with the beginning. Helen and Nicola move forward on their intimate journey and the reader arrives with them as they travel towards the 'trackless forest'. It's a place where there are no answers. The novel questions what it is to be alive by exploring death in intimate detail.

Questions for discussion

1. There has been debate over whether *The Spare Room* is a work of fiction or non-fiction. A more interesting question is: what 'truths' are revealed about human nature through the exploration of the intimate and, at times, brutal relationship between Nicola and Helen? What 'truths' are revealed about human nature through the scenes at the Theodore Institute?
2. Death is childhood come again. How does Garner explore this idea in the novel?
3. Discuss how Garner uses humour, Bessie, and descriptions of nature to explore attitudes towards death. In what ways are these elements essential to making the sorrow in the novel bearable? Discuss why Garner describes, in such detail, small domestic details.
4. '...or is this the way the heart behaves when it grieves?' *The Spare Room* is as much about Helen's grieving heart as it is about Nicola's. Is Helen a tyrant? Is her confrontation of Nicola the greatest act of love in the novel?
5. 'Nicola was quietly equipping herself, as everyone must, with whatever it is one needs to die.' What does the novel suggest about what a person needs to die? What questions does the novel raise about what makes a life worthwhile? What different forms of love does the novel explore?
6. Are all our preparations for death as useless as Helen's preparation of the spare room? In the end, we're facing the '...plunge into the big dark gardens' for which we can never own a map. Discuss whether you agree with Helen's thought that 'Death will not be denied. To try is grandiose. It drives madness into the soul. It leeches out virtue. It injects poison into friendship, and makes a mockery of love.'