



THE FOG GARDEN
by Marion Halligan

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About Marion Halligan

Marion Halligan is an award-winning novelist, essayist and short story writer. Her novel *The Golden Dress* was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and the Nita B. Kibble Award and was nominated for the Dublin IMPAC Prize. She has also received *The Age* Book of the Year, the ACT Book of the Year, the Nita B. Kibble Award, the Steele Rudd Award, the Braille Book of the Year, the 3M Talking Book of the Year, and the Geraldine Pascall prize for critical writing. Her novels are *Self Possession*, *Spider Cup*, *Lovers' Knots* and *Wisbbone*; her books of essays, non-fiction and short stories include *Collected Stories*, *Eat My Words*, *Out of the Picture*, *Cockles of the Heart*; she has written a children's book, *The Midwife's Daughters*, and with Lucy Frost co-wrote *Those Women who Go to Hotels*.

On writing *The Fog Garden*—Marion Halligan

Writing this book was different from any other that I have done. If you read it attentively, I do in fact tell you how it came about, what its origins were, how I put it together. But here is a brief account.

I was in the middle of another novel called *The Point* which I am at this moment finishing. My husband was ill, I wasn't getting much done. When he died I quite soon after went to Tasmania for a stay. I was full of grief and did not know what to do with myself so I sat down and wrote, not in any organised form, just wrote; writing was my profession and there did not seem anything else to do. I put this first piece away, but discovered that life around me kept offering interesting narratives, which I thought about and shaped into what I considered unpublishable stories, unpublishable because I would not want to publish them. I was still in quite a strange state and not expecting much of myself. Then I realised that these stories were turning into a novel. Not an uncommon thing for me, a number of my novels have begun as short stories. They are a form I love, but also one which seems to sprout in my hands.

The first chapter, the Tasmanian piece, is written by me about me, but the rest of the book is a third person narrative. It is a novel about a woman called Clare who is like me in a lot of ways but isn't actually me. I wanted to write the book as a novel because I wanted the freedom this form offers, to follow my imagination, to order and reorder events, so that what is important is their truth rather than their factual nature. And anyway I couldn't stand the thought of all those 'I's. Clare was great fun to write because I could give her my voice, she could know the things I know,

have my vocabulary, read the same books and see the same films. Quite often my characters are simple working class women who are intelligent but not educated, or artists without much book learning, and I have had to get inside their heads and write from their viewpoints, which is also fun, but not so easy.

The title *The Fog Garden* comes from a sculpture at the National Gallery in Canberra, a mist sculpture that eddies through casuarinas and across a pond with reeds, always changing, absolutely ephemeral yet always available. I find it immensely beautiful, and I liked the name as a title, for Clare is in a fog of grief but it keeps changing and has its own beauty. The fog swirls, the story swirls, sometimes things can be seen clearly, sometimes not.

The book is about grief, about the power and significance of it, about its erotic nature, its energising qualities; Clare discovers that grief is a marvellous emotion, not one that anyone would choose, but being given it she realises how meaningful it is, how she desires it. The book is about death and all the wonderful elements of life that go with it: death and sex, death and gardens, death and food. It's a love story: the loss of her husband sends her back into their life together, to be remembered and dwelt in. The book is Clare writing love letters to him.

I wrote *The Fog Garden* more quickly than any other book I've done; novels usually take me years. Somehow it seemed to be there, to be offering itself, everything I did, thought, talked about, saw, visited, seemed to feed into it. The space of the novel is the magic space of a year and a day, and that's how long it took me to write.

Influences

I find this difficult. Whatever I am reading and loving is an influence because it opens me to the possibilities of language. I love reading Iris Murdoch and Margaret Drabble and John Banville, people who write about living in the world now. I like novels like Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* which insist on their artificiality but make characters so real they become part of our acquaintance—the little Becky puppet folded up in her box, the man at the window who, says Kundera, wasn't born like you and me, I made him up. I read masses of fairy stories when I was young and their narratives and imperatives are still important to me. And there is the Bible, its rhythms, its cadences, its stories, its language. In the beginning was the Word.

Reviews

***The Age*—Jane Sullivan**

Grief, Marion Halligan says, is a passionate emotion. Not like depression at all. The adrenalin flows, you are in a state of excitement, you have erotic experiences. And your body doesn't say, 'This is good or bad'. And so she has written about taking a lover, and tongues and breasts, and backs arched and flights of orgasms, as a way of feeding and nourishing a widow's grief ...

The Fog Garden is a novel about Clare, 'a young woman in her fifties', a writer very like Halligan, whose husband Geoffrey dies after a long and happy marriage, and about how she discovers and travels through her grief. It is, Halligan says, the best book out of the 13 she has written. She's never been game to say this about any of her previous novels, short story collections and non-fiction books, though she's picked up many accolades along the way ... And now what she claims is her best book is also possibly her riskiest.

Some of the people at her publishers told her it was a very brave book. 'I thought, "ooh ..." but then I thought, "what's the point of a book if there's not some bravery involved?"'

The Fog Garden was also her fastest book—it took her a year to write—and the most inspired, 'because of the weird way it all turned up out of nowhere ... I was pretty hyped up, it came out of the mad energy I had at that time. There's never been a book that's so passionately about me.'

Not that she actually knew she had written a book. Like her character Clare, she thought she was just writing a collection of private stories or meditations that would never be published. She sent them to her agent, Margaret Connolly, wondering if she should just put them in a bottom drawer and forget about them. It was Connolly who told her she had a novel.

... Halligan wrote about her grief as a cathedral. Dwelling in it will make 'happiness and sorrow and pain, love and sex, music and words and pictures and all the terrifying world to be felt so intensely that I will ache with the desire of them. And ... the ache of that desire will be exquisite and addictive.'

... The liberating discovery was her character Clare, closer to herself than any of her previous characters. 'With Clare I could let it all go—not stop to think, "Would she think that?" She has the same thoughts as me, reads the same books, even writes the same books.' Does she know where Clare stops and Marion begins? 'Not really. But I'm quite aware she isn't me, just as Geoffrey

isn't my husband. The four of us—Marion and Clare, Graham and Geoffrey—have a lot of things in common . . . With Clare I'm untrammelled by fact, but I stick to the truth.'

With the current literary fashion for blending fact and fiction into hybrid 'fictional autobiographies', it's not surprising that Halligan has been asked why she didn't write something with the label of memoir. 'I was intrigued at how appalled I was at that notion,' she says. In the last few years, she finds, writers have tended to say: 'This narrative is important because it really happened.' What's more important to her is to say: 'I'm going to tell you a really good story, and I'm going to make you believe that it's true.'

. . . Halligan feels that some publishers might have been put off by explicit sex in a book by a middle-aged woman, aimed at least partly at middle-aged women readers. In recent years, sex in Australian novels has been largely the territory of the young, so-called 'grunge writers' and their young audiences. 'Some people might be shocked by the notion of grief as an erotic experience that can lead to other erotic experiences,' Halligan concedes. But not all her readers are middle-aged women—and in any case, she's never yet met one who wasn't interested in reading about sex.

The Fog Garden is also a book about making the private public. In the midst of her grief, Clare writes, because that is what she does, and she might as well get on with it

. . . *The Fog Garden* is full of reading and writing and meditation on why we read and write. So why does she write? 'Because I can't help it.' She laughs. 'Because whatever comes across my consciousness, I want to find words for it, write them down and make sense of them. I just never stop doing that.'

In her book, the wife finds out about the affair and confronts Clare (or perhaps Clare just imagines it). She accuses Clare of writing stories that are love letters to her husband. Clare replies: 'I think if you look carefully you will see that they are love letters to my husband.' Is that what Marion Halligan has written? 'The more I think about it, if I want a sentence to sum it up, that's it. Love letters to my husband.'

The Australian's Review of Books—Helen Elliott

Marion Halligan's new book *The Fog Garden* declares itself to be a novel although it reads more like a Pillowbook, one of those haphazard anthologies collated by a woman vigilantly attentive to life. In fact, in tone, Halligan sometimes echoes the writer of the most famous Pillowbook of all, the 10th-century Japanese Sei Shonagon. Both are a certain type of woman; clever, erudite, observant, subtle but also rather conceited and assiduously self-regarding.

. . . At the centre of this is the question she (Clare) is resentful of having to ask: how does a woman who has for so long enjoyed a relationship where each partner has been the most significant person to another begin to make a life again alone? There are many ways to be alone but being a widow, or a weirdo, as one nice joke in this book puts it, is so much more complicated. And, for Clare, one of the major complications is her sexuality. Clare is sensual and sexy. She loves food and she loves sex and she pursues both in her writing and in her life . . . Unlovely middle-aged sex happens. She's writing about it. There must be an embarrassment barrier somewhere and Halligan has just broken it.

There is also some gleaming writing about gardens and gardening and some fine reflections about the satisfactions one might find in the fall of a particularly beautiful old curtain in the sunlight.

What Halligan doesn't seem to note—and it's a basic indelicacy central to the book—is that being able to appreciate the fall of this particular curtain is a highly rarefied pleasure. Unlike most books, the second half is more gripping than the opening chapters and stories which, in their cramped and superior self-consciousness, swerve towards preciousness. This later confident voice shimmers with a sense of self-knowledge of having emerged into a more elevated space where the air is crisp and the view limitless. These last chapters, relieved of that genteel slyness, are some of the best writing Halligan has ever done. Perhaps because she has taken such a risk.

Australian Book Review—Brenda Niall

The Fog Garden takes risks. It has a single consciousness, very little external event, and a group of friends and lovers seen rather mistily by the central character. The novel begins with the husband's death and circles back to revisit scenes from the marriage. Although it moves forward in time and place, as when Clare travels alone to Paris, death and desolation are always present, to be explored, sometimes transcended, but never out of mind. Such close concentration could be stifling, but there's enough emotional energy to carry it through.

It may be consistent with Clare's self-enclosed world of grief that none of the other characters seems quite real. Her friends Polly, Miriam, Kate, Elvira and Helen, make their appearances, give comfort and advice, but it's hard to remember which is which. So too with Oliver and the other unnamed lovers: they get lost in the fog. Only Geoffrey, the husband, is as strongly present at the end of the novel as he was in the opening scenes in which his death is described in painful, loving exactness.

With plot and character minimal, much depends on the quality of mind expressed in Clare's reveries, and their range. The physical world, strongly evoked, sustains the novel, giving it solidity and variety of tone. It's unusual for a novelist to range so confidently through all five senses. For touch, there's remembered sexual delight; the streets of Paris for sight; possums on the roof for sound; the taste of salmon caviar on black bread; the smell of honeysuckle in a Canberra garden. This is a random list, easily extended.

***The Bulletin*—Sally Blakeney**

The Fog Garden is a deeply moving, highly original and beautifully written portrait of a writer as a young widow in her fifties. It is a love letter, full of the subtle joy, pain and poetry of enduring marriage. It is a self-conscious, at times painfully honest, exploration of how a woman deals with the erotic side of grief. And because Halligan is using all her skill to convey raw, deeply felt emotion, there are no jarring notes, no descents into facile trendiness.

... Halligan is not above teasing. For example, readers of 1999's 60th anniversary issue of *Southerly* magazine will recognise *Vermilion*, a Halligan short story, reproduced here as one of Clare's. She even cheekily footnotes references to her own novels, attributed to her fictional character, in the acknowledgments. Tantalising play with autobiography, the story's narrative thread, is not the only interest. Halligan shows us the workings of a writer's mind.

***The Weekend Australian*—Liam Davison**

... It would be easy to see Clare as an emotional safety mechanism for Halligan, providing the distance required to write of such intimate things after so recent a loss. And there may well be something of this, given that much of the writing is so patently about Halligan's experience. The device of splitting the self, though, also allows for what has become Halligan's hallmark reflexivity. It opens the way for a sophisticated dialogue about the shifting juncture between life and art. Halligan acknowledges 'that secret, terrifying cannibalism that all writers recognise in themselves sooner or later' and explores both how memory is transformed into fiction and who is betrayed along the way.

Halligan and her fictional Clare are building cathedrals of grief, imaginative constructs of the past within which they can find the comfort and solace not just to cope with their loss but to live contentedly. Halligan tells us hers is a truly Gothic one. It is built largely from the memories of a wonderfully rich and loving marriage of two minds—a marriage that saw the birth of children, the building of homes and gardens, a separation and reconciliation, a shared love of language, food and travel.

Halligan's Gothic cathedral comprises stories, confessions, speculations about what might have been, literary commentary, anecdotes—all manner of things that fuse with memory to create a rich, dynamic book that constantly delights and surprises.

When an archivist asks Clare to include a story she has written about a public figure in his files, Halligan has her reply 'It's not history. You can't let people think its history.' It's a claim she makes for her own work too. Like Clare, she has learned sophistication in her writing and how to play with narrative forms, and it's this sense of play that invests her accounts of loss and grief with such vitality and life affirming energy. The book is anything but maudlin and sentimental. Halligan moves easily between joy and sorrow, fear and wonder, and takes the reader on an untimely uplifting journey through her life as she has lived it and as it might have been lived.

It is about love and loss, but also about sex, desire and betrayal. Halligan recognises the physicality of memory and the body's remembered needs—to hold a man and to share one's bed. Her own story accommodates a remarkable array of other tales concerning sex and death: Tristan and Iseult, The Unquiet Grave, The Merry Widow. Stories of love and devotion are countered by stories of adultery and betrayal. All love stories, she says, are also stories of death since the lovers must eventually part. As with much of Halligan's earlier work, the literary commentary provides as much interest in the stories, especially in this case since we know that all are informed by the 'central, enormous fact' of her husband's death.

No matter how solidly Halligan builds her cathedral of grief, there is a feeling that it's true art is in its essential fragility.

Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ *Now here's this discovery of the merging of grief and sex, how the sex doesn't only comfort the grief, it intensifies it, so she can live in it and desire it. She has learned that grief is like desire, that she needs to feel it as she feels desire. Grief isn't sadness. Grief is a kind of passion. What does *The Fog Garden* tell you about the nature of grief? How does grief liberate Clare?*
- ◆ Describe the structure of the novel. How does the narrative work? What do you think about the use, for example, of other stories, poems, films, television?

- ◆ How might *The Fog Garden* have been different if Marion Halligan had chosen to write it as a memoir instead of a novel?
- ◆ This book is filled with sensual descriptions and concrete detail. Discuss the passages which you found particularly evocative.
- ◆ ‘Sex, death and gardening, and the stuff that novels are made of’, says one of the cover blurbs. Discuss what *The Fog Garden* suggests about the ‘stuff’ of novels and the nature of fiction.
- ◆ Various people have said it is a brave book. What do you think about this statement?

Further reading

The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon by Sei Shonagon

A Widow for One Year by John Irving

Rose Boys by Peter Rose

The Water Underneath by Kate Lyons

Conditions of Faith by Alex Miller

Night Letters by Robert Dessaix

Iris by John Bayley

The Peppered Moth by Margaret Drabble