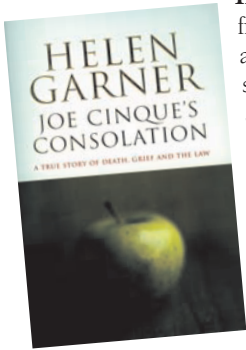


A legal outcome observed

Joe Cinque's consolation. A true story of death, grief and the law.
Helen Garner. Sydney: Picador, 2004 (\$30, 328 pp). ISBN 0 330 36497 9.



IN 1997 A YOUNG WOMAN gave her boyfriend a large dose of Rohypnol and heroin. As a result she is now a graduate in law with a special interest in criminology, and he is dead. She was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment. The usual complex arithmetic surrounding sentencing set her free less than three years after being sentenced.

The circumstances of the killing were complex and bizarre and the author has examined them carefully. It occurred in a maelstrom of late-adolescent turmoil, drug taking and disturbed group processes, filled with denial. If you wish to discover the details buy the book — it is very good value.

Garner questions the legal processes which can produce such a result, as well as such curiosities as preventing the two Crown psychiatrists from examining the defendant.

The law is imperfect but getting better. At the beginning of the 19th century there were more than 220 statutes carrying the death penalty, and judicial interpretation had expanded the list to more than 350 capital offences. Children were hanged with some frequency, on one occasion 10 in a row. Not until the Criminal Evidence Act of 1898 were accused persons permitted to give evidence in their own defence. Most improvements were made in the teeth of firm legal opposition. One must keep up the pressure and Helen Garner is doing this here.

Is such an outcome morally wrong? Morality is a system of approvals: there will be as many moralities as there are groupings in society. There is no empirical way of establishing which is to be preferred. Those who argue that morality must be founded on religious beliefs should remember that until relatively recently the Christian church thought it morally right to burn alive those who did not believe that the Earth was the centre of the universe and was orbited by the sun.

The best we can do is to examine every proposition put to us and this thoughtful book does just that.

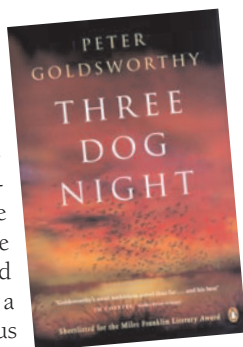
John H T Ellard

Psychiatrist, Balmoral Beach, NSW

Death and sex make a good read

Three dog night. Peter Goldsworthy. Melbourne: Penguin, 2003 (340 pp, \$22.95). ISBN 0 6708 9398 6.

I THINK THAT UNLESS a journey is bumpy and uncomfortable you haven't really travelled far from home. In his latest book, *Three dog night*, Goldsworthy sure does "good travel" according to my requirements. In this lyrical, and strangely suspenseful, novel we accompany three doctors who travel — literally into the desert, and figuratively into the untidy and impolite world of death and erotica — to a place that unnerves, but surely tantalises, us all. The title refers to the number of dogs you need to sleep with in the desert at night to keep warm.



Martin, the protagonist psychiatrist, has a head full of Latin names and is obsessively in love with his impenetrably beautiful but physically flawed wife, Lucy. She is also a psychiatrist and a specialist in pain management. Lucy is a "trophy wife" and Martin is bringing her home to Adelaide (think churches and zoo murders) to show her off. He is particularly keen to introduce her to his oldest friend Felix, a grumpy old surgeon, who years ago turned his back on the Establishment and went bush to work with the Aboriginals, being initiated into the Warlpiri people along the way. Felix is dying of hepatitis-related hepatoma that he contracted from a young boy who died as a result of his drunkenness. He is tormented by the boy's death and seeks penance (or is it pain relief) from Martin's subsequent agony. He also wants to travel into the desert to find a place to die, a sinkhole that is a special place for his Dreaming. In one last unbearable stretch of friendship he wants company. Martin and Lucy, armed with morphine, oxygen and a disappearing mask of propriety, accompany him on his journey, and nothing is the same again.

Goldsworthy, in a book where too much metaphor is barely enough, has written a worthy and enthralling travel manual, peering under masks into the murky realms of the "id" below. Fortunately, he has done so with forgiveness.

Christine Hampshire

General Practitioner, Balmain, NSW

Secrets and silences

The secret cure. Sue Woolfe. Melbourne: Picador, 2004 (444 pp, \$22). ISBN 0 3304 2124 7.

SUE WOOLFE, author of the widely enjoyed book *Leaning towards infinity*, dedicates this, her latest novel, "To a brother I never knew". The dedication sets the tone of the book.

In a fictitious Australian town, the central character, Owen, who has spent most of his life confined to his home and is completely mute, allows himself a month in the real world, posing as a hospital maintenance worker. From afar he falls in love with Eva, an exuberantly dressed but painfully shy laboratory assistant. Most of the book is a record of his outrageously voyeuristic attempts to spy on Eva and her scientist lover Gunther, whom he tries to discredit in order to replace him in Eva's affections. These "spying" passages could make some readers uncomfortable, as it is difficult to know how much Woolfe expects us to suspend our disbelief. However, it is worth pushing through this to enjoy the book's main themes.

Each character in the story, however peripheral, harbours a secret — and, in some way, everyone is mute. This obvious metaphor forms a good canvas for Woolfe's exploration of Asperger syndrome and, of course, that substance whose secrets have galvanised scientists since its discovery over 50 years ago — DNA.

Why do people do science? The characters in this book have compelling reasons for their obsessive (and, in Eva's case, illegal) pursuit of a cause and a cure for Asperger syndrome and, while you might have to suspend your disbelief a little more to swallow Woolfe's conclusion, it is wonderful to believe that secrets can be known and silences broken.

Ruth M Armstrong

Deputy Editor, *Medical Journal of Australia*, Pyrmont, NSW

