

THE NEWSPAPER OF CLAREMONT

by

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The 1995 Elizabeth Jolley Lecture

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Elizabeth Jolley
Professor Reid
Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me begin by thanking those responsible at Curtin University for inviting me to deliver this year's Elizabeth Jolley Lecture. I am very pleased to have been afforded this opportunity to come to Perth to pay my personal tribute to a woman - and a writer - whom I greatly admire.

I am also honoured to be following in the footsteps of the Hon. Carmen Lawrence who delivered this lecture last year, and to whom I will refer again later in my remarks this evening.

Let me begin by addressing - immediately - the title I nominated for tonight's talk.

I suspect that many of you - perhaps including Elizabeth Jolley herself - were perplexed by my title. You no doubt thought either that I was misquoting or plagiarising - or possibly both - the title of one of Elizabeth Jolley's first published novels.

But, as I assured Professor Don Grant when I sent over the title for tonight's lecture, I was doing neither. I chose this title with care - and with reason. In fact I had more than one reason. I had three.

Let me elaborate.

It was through *The Newspaper of Claremont Street* that I first became acquainted with Elizabeth Jolley's work and I wanted my address tonight to acknowledge that.

I was introduced to Elizabeth and to her wonderful character Weekly via a serialised broadcast of the book which I caught merely by chance one day as I twiddled the dial on my radio. It was a wonderful way to meet Weekly and I have never forgotten her.

So my title tonight in part pays homage to the book which opened up to me the extraordinarily evocative universe of Elizabeth Jolley's fiction.

My second reason is similarly straightforward: I wanted to acknowledge Elizabeth herself and, using her own reference, have taken the liberty of calling her a newspaper who, (and I hope my information is current) lives in Claremont).

Elizabeth may be surprised by this characterization since she is a writer mostly of fiction - although in the course of preparing this lecture I was delighted to come across *Central Mischief* (Penguin Books, 1993), her collection of essays and other non-fiction writings. I would argue however for a broad interpretation of the concept of a newspaper.

Rather than the standard definition, such as that provided by the Macquarie Dictionary, which has a newspaper to be "a printed publication issued at regular intervals, usu. daily or weekly, and commonly containing news, comments, features and advertisements" I prefer a simpler one: a teller of stories.

And, if I may digress for a moment, I recall being slightly shocked when I first became a newspaper journalist, back in 1975, when the editor and my colleagues used to talk about the paper's contents in terms of "stories".

"That's a good story," someone would say. My untutored ears equated stories with fictions; surely what we newspaper reporters traded in were facts.

These days I recognise that facts have little meaning outside their essential contexts and that the art of reporting requires similar narrative skills to those possessed by the writer of fiction so I am now more comfortable with talking about newspaper "stories". I do it myself all the time!

And I'm doing it again with this lecture.

I feel entitled to call Elizabeth Jolley a newspaper because she is a teller of stories, not the kind you might read daily in *The West Australian* but those that possess universal truths and insights about we the people who inhabit this portion of the planet at this late stage of the 20th century.

My third reason for choosing this title is that I want to use tonight's lecture to explore some issues surrounding the stories women tell about themselves, and the stories that are told about them in Australia today.

The stories I refer to are not fictions, or at least are not presented as such.

I am referring particularly to the stories which currently constitute "news" - published or not - about women, and especially about prominent women.

The women I will be talking about this evening are not the kind of women who mostly inhabit Elizabeth Jolley's books, women disappointed or frustrated at their inability to have achieved more with their lives, women who often inhabit the margins of our society, women even, like those in her latest work *The Orchard Thieves*, who have no names but who are identified solely by their familial relationships to each other: grandmother, daughter, middle sister and so on.

The women I want to talk about are successful in the sense that they have achieved prominence, they are accomplished in their fields and whatever private disappointments they might harbour, they are seen by the world as having "made it".

They have other things in common: they are not afraid of confrontations, of publicly taking on their critics (and they have plenty!), and they have all recently been subjected to extraordinary barrages of vilification. The stories are unconnected and the women concerned, despite similarities in age and background barely know each other.

The three women to whom I refer are: Carmen Lawrence, Helen Garner and -- somewhat regretfully -- myself.

I want to explore, through the recent stories of these three women, what the vilification of women in high or public positions means for the continued advancement of women.

Is it having an effect on the progress of women into all areas and levels of our society? If so, is this effect entirely negative or can we discern any benefits at all? Is there a silver lining somewhere in this large black cloud?

Yesterday, at a YWCA Breakfast in Sydney, Carmen Lawrence spoke movingly to a mostly female audience of 500 of the difficulties of being the lone woman in Federal Cabinet, and of the "two-edged sword" presented by her high visibility.

She said: "...the down side of this visibility is... that I have become a clearly identifiable target for the Opposition - they have set their aims on getting my political scalp".

She recalled that when she first went to Canberra she was warned that, as the only woman in Cabinet, she was likely to be both "over-valued and over-

criticised", but, she said, "Little did I realise then how rigidly the events of the last year would follow the scenario of extravagant praise and excessive criticism".

Her words drew an empathetic response from the female high-flyers in the room because most of them could draw from their own recent histories comparable - if mostly less public - experiences.

Women today who are enjoying - though that is not really the word as I shall demonstrate - high-profile positions in companies, in politics, in the union movement, or elsewhere in our society are usually thunderstruck to discover that one of the "perks" of their positions these days is to have to endure resentment and hostility of unanticipated dimensions.

This hostility is frequently expressed in terms of personal vilification, more often than not expressed in sexual terms.

In my experience, women who occupy such positions as a result of having been recruited for affirmative action reasons - who are in their jobs because they are women - are particularly singled out for such vilification.

I believe this is what has happened to Carmen Lawrence who, long before the Liberal Party in this state and in Canberra decided to go after her, had already been subjected to the crushing-rather-than-welcoming bear-hug embrace of her Cabinet and Caucus colleagues.

It is particularly unfair when these women have been recruited to significant and high-profile positions by enlightened men who head these organisations and who want to do the right thing.

It is especially unjust when these women are the objects of vicious and hate-filled campaigns to try to cut them down to size.

I am sure this is the last thing Paul Keating intended when he pleaded with Carmen Lawrence to abandon her safe-haven in state politics and move to the federal sphere so he could point to an improved representation of women.

I am sure he is horrified by what has happened, just as I know many other senior men are who have brought women on to important jobs or positions, only to find themselves seemingly powerless to stop the attempted slaughter, by slander, of their protégé.

It is very difficult to get the women affected to talk about such things.

After all, who wants to admit to having a hard time?

Who wants to surrender to the suggestion that, perhaps, you "can't take it". So Carmen speaking out yesterday was a courageous thing to do - and although she won over totally the 500 or so people in the room - she has paid a price with today's headlines.

It is rare to hear a politician speak from the heart, especially a politician who is in political strife and whose every word is picked over by the press.

In describing the welcome she was given when she arrived in Canberra, Carmen said: "The fanfare... was enough to make anyone think that I was some moral crusader who'd ridden into town on a white steed. I was 'hot political property' who, with an 'almost saintly aura', was 'poised to shine on the federal stage'.

"I was going to save an ailing Federal Government by 'adding lustre to Labor's standing among women voters' and being 'hot favourite for the job of Deputy Prime Minister'. All of that would have been enough to challenge a saint, let alone one female politician from the west".

She continued, with a revealing insight: "I personally resisted the attempts to put me on such an unrealistic pedestal. But it was tempting to occasionally bask in the praise when in effect all it seemed I had to do was get on with the job".

Carmen's critics are unmoved by such honesty. They are baying for her blood and will not be content till they drag her down from the pedestal that Carmen herself agrees was "unrealistic". And if they succeed we will have lost a clever and competent person from the federal cabinet.

We will also have raised a few notches higher the bar women have to jump if they want to go into politics.

If you look at the track record of the past decade you would have to conclude that politics is a very unattractive option for women.

Susan Ryan and Ros Kelly, the two previous female members of the Hawke then Keating Labor Cabinets, were both driven from the Ministry and ultimately from Parliament under an onslaught of personal criticism and abuse which I believe far outweighed anything that was said about departing male Cabinet members, Graham Richardson or Alan Griffiths for example.

I hope very much that the same thing does not happen to Carmen Lawrence; I think it is hideous that so many people are so openly speculating, and even anticipating, that it will.

Carmen has determined to fight to save her political career, showing courage and fortitude which earned her admiration and support from yesterday's breakfast audience, and kudos this morning from an influential newspaper columnist.

Writing in today's *Australian Financial Review*, Christine Wallace argued that Carmen's decision "to stand and fight, rather than faint or flee the fierce

political attack on her in Perth is likely to have a political impact long after the substance of the Easton affair is forgotten". Wallace predicted that Carmen's stance "will do much to undermine the cliches surrounding women in public life. No tears, no tearing at hankies: just hanging tough".

Let me say that I sincerely hope that Carmen succeeds on both counts: that she survives politically (and does not pay too high a personal price in the process), and that her example helps erode the debilitating stereotypes that still determine how women in Australia today are perceived.

Helen Garner, the acclaimed novelist, is another prominent Australian woman who has been under constant fire--little of it friendly--since she published her book *The First Stone* almost six months ago. The book has been widely read and discussed, so it is probably superfluous to remind you that it visits events at Ormond College at the University of Melbourne some four years ago when two female students claimed sexual harassment at the hands of the master of the college.

Helen's book was instantly controversial because she questioned the appropriateness of the remedies sought by the young women who, having been treated dismissively by the college authorities complained to the police who obtained a criminal conviction against the master, a conviction which was later overturned on appeal. The master lost his job and has not worked since.

Helen's essential premise was: why could these young women not have handled the matter differently, not involve the police, not cost a man his career. In the course of her compelling narrative, Helen speculates on the recent evolution of feminism and mourns the demise of libertarian feminism in favour of a "grimmer", more authoritarian and punitive view of women, their rights and their responsibilities.

The response to Helen from some sections of the women's movement, especially academic based feminists, and from many young women was dismissive, hostile and vituperative. Many, many women refused to buy the book on the argument that they did not want to line the pockets of someone so treacherous.

Helen has faced an extraordinary degree of outright hatred and loathing, most of it emanating not from men who might applaud what could be detected as anti-feminist tinges in the work, nor from conservatives who believe sexual harassment is a trumped up device to deprive men of institutional and other forms of power. Instead, the guns that have been levelled at Helen and unloaded of their injurious ammunition have been aimed and fired mostly by other feminists.

This week in Sydney, Helen went public, in delivering the annual Larry Adler lecture at the Sydney Institute, and took on her critics in language that was blunt, direct and extraordinarily provocative. She named names and lashed out at people whose ideas she described as "poisonous" and "sick and mad". Talk about fighting fire with fire.

What has surprised and saddened me most about the fury over Helen's book has been the unwillingness of so many women, so many feminists--so many of them friends of mine--to either read the book, or to concede that it might contain so much as a paragraph of prose that might be worthy of discussion or debate.

In other words, there has been a retreat from the intellectual process which, especially where academic feminists are concerned, I find alarming and retrograde. While I'd concede it is a waste of time to debate *Mein Kampf* and I would not bother to read or debate some of the printed rantings of that emanate from the lunar right, especially from the US, I do not believe Helen's book can be placed in that

category.

I found *The First Stone* to be brave and honest and quite confronting--the hallmarks of a very good book.

(It is also a well paced and compelling read.) I did not agree with everything Helen said, but I admired her clearly genuine efforts to grapple with the proposition that if the Ormond College case is a benchmark, feminism today has weakened women instead of empowering them. I hope it is not.

What has perhaps been most significant about the debate--if we can call it that--is that it is mostly a discussion amongst women. Men certainly have bought into it, but the really heated and hostile conversations have all been among women.

We'd always hoped that one thing feminism would achieve would be to make women more accepting of themselves--and more accepting of other women.

In her soon to be published new novel, *The Orchard Thieves*, Elizabeth describes the physical ways women have traditionally looked at themselves:

The grandmother in her story wonders "why women never saw themselves as a complete whole. They never saw the whole person, the general effect of the complete person. The overall appearance, the grandmother wanted to say, was what mattered; the blending of the colours and the suitability of the cloth of the occasion and, above all, it was the expression of composure, serenity was perhaps a better word, in the eyes which made all the difference between being well or badly dressed.

Women... only saw themselves in bits and, as well, saw only the faults in themselves. They were always conscious of the physical fault, the extra chin, the wry mouth, eyes too small or too close together, a flat nose, an ugly nose, fat legs or legs which were too thin and had no

shape, lifeless drab hair, the list could go on, and they never, these women, they never saw serenity in their own expressions because of the anxiety reflected in the last-minute glancings in mirrors. The eyes they saw were forever worried and accompanied by small but deep frowns. (p. 54-5)

Unfortunately, women were also all too ready to only see each other "in bits" and as well, see only the faults in each other. This is something feminism hoped to change. The reaction to Helen's book suggests we have so far failed to achieve this.

I expect that in the coming months, the reaction to Helen's response to her critics will be even fiercer than the response to her book. This debate has now become very personal and that is a pity because it ensures it will become even more bitter and destructive. It is no longer about issues, it is about personalities. I can not see how we benefit from this vituperation, although I can certainly see how we would all be enriched by a fair-minded and even-handed debate on the issues of sexual conduct and sexual power raised by Helen's book.

In *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*, Elizabeth describes how no one in the street wanted to incur Weekly's indignation by refusing to pay her bus fares even though everyone knew she did not take the bus. They were afraid of the consequences:

Indignation can spread and grow and include grievances, true or false, of a most personal kind, with the memories of the last fifteen years coming to life keenly and vividly with endless embellishments. (p 37)

I can attest to the process by which such stories are spread and embellished and will do so by referring to an article I recently published in the major daily newspaper in each of the eastern states, but which

has not been published in Western Australia. Entitled "Execution by Innuendo", it sets out the stories about me that have swirled around the country in recent weeks and which comprise my third example of a woman feeling compelled to speak out in her own defence after being subjected to relentless vilification both public and private.

About fifteen years ago in Canberra, where I was a political journalist, I received an unexpected visit at home one Saturday afternoon from a Press Gallery colleague from another publication. While her husband sat grim-faced by her side, she tearfully told me how every time she went to head office interstate her editor hassled her in what she felt was an unambiguously sexual manner.

I was sympathetic, but somewhat perplexed. What on earth could I do to discourage him. She didn't really know either. The point was she hated what he was doing but she felt powerless to stop him. She'd come to me because I was a well-known feminist and advocate of women's right to live their lives unencumbered by obstacles such as these; maybe I'd be able to suggest something.

Regrettably I could not. The federal Sex Discrimination Act with its provisions for complaints against sexual harassment was still four or five years away - although at the time it was hard to envisage *journalists*, hard-bitten creatures we imagined ourselves to be, resorting to such laws - especially against *editors*! There was nothing I could do to help her. She left the job soon afterwards.

These days, sad to say, complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace are almost commonplace. Even in the media - although they seldom become public. Like many large corporations, media organisations tend to have procedures for handling employee complaints, resolving them without involving State or Federal law.

I've almost always been on the victim's side of such behaviour. I've seen sexual harassment as yet one more barrier, albeit a pernicious and sometimes violent one, in the way of women's efforts to secure genuine equality in the workplace. While I was head of the Office of the Status of Women, the Sex Discrimination Act became law and I was involved in efforts to publicize its provisions to women.

A decade later, as a political consultant on women's issues in Paul

Keating's office, I helped steer through the strengthening of the sexual harassment provisions of the Act.. In between, I'd spent time in New York as Editor-in-chief of *Ms.*, America's foremost feminist magazine.

Through these three jobs I learned the often horrendous facts of what some women endured in the workplace at to dreadful, often horrendous, stories of what some women continued to endure in the workplace at the hands of unwelcoming, resentful and hostile male colleagues. Many women working in previously all-male workplaces or occupations found themselves the victims of relentless intimidation.

Sexual harassment is sometimes laughed off as being just a matter of off-colour jokes or sexually provocative pin-up posters. The reality for many women - and, yes, some men - is far more down and dirty: explicitly threatening notes on desks or lockers, grubby groping in lifts or corridors when no one else is around, up-front demands for sexual favours as the price for promotion. In extreme cases, employees have had their genitals grabbed, have been stalked when they left work and - even - raped. I have always felt that employees who have endured such behaviour should almost be seen as martyrs to the gender revolution.

So it was with disbelief, and then horror, that I learned a few weeks ago of a rumour being widely propagated within media circles that I was to be the subject of a sexual harassment complaint by a male staff-member of *Good Weekend*.

The rumour arose following a *Good Weekend* personnel problem, which was in the process of being resolved and the details of which have no bearing on subsequent events.

There are many things about the story which have been frightening - and which have left me feeling sickened and disgusted - but one of the worst of them was that the story was in widespread circulation for at least five days before anybody told me.

During those five days, and before I had a chance to intervene in my own defence, the story was spread around Sydney and Melbourne and beyond.

Friends who'd heard it and rang me assumed I knew and that, when I did not raise it with them, I did not want to discuss it. The story thus assumed the force of fact before I was in a position to fight it.

The people who were putting the rumour around saw the story fall on fertile ground and sprout rapidly like desert flowers after a shower of rain. After all, what a good story! One of Australia's leading feminists hoist on the petard of the very laws she'd helped implement. A former Keating adviser to boot. And she'd recently defended Helen Garner's book which was sympathetic to a man charged with sexual harassment at a university college in Melbourne.

No-one who knows me seriously believed that I would engage in any such behaviour; nevertheless many could not resist repeating it. Have you heard the rumour about Anne Summers? one colleague asked. It's not a rumour, she was informed by another Fairfax journalist; it's fact.

So that by the time I finally heard about it - from a friend who works for a rival news organisation - it had acquired a life of its own. I am still suffering from this.

What made the story especially insidious was the veneer of apparent verisimilitude applied by those who spread it.

The so-called harassment took place at a "Christmas party", a key word, I've learned since, in the lexicon of sexual harassment complaints--so much so that a barrister of my acquaintance who handles a number of harassment complaints is of the view that Christmas parties should go the way of Guy Fawkes Night.

People who would not give credence to my harassing an employee at work might concede that anything's possible at a Christmas party. Worse, there were supposed to be "photographs". Proof, in other words! No one could tell me what the photographs showed. Or even if they existed. But the mere word gave a scintilla of credibility to a rumour that should otherwise have been dismissed by decent people for the disgusting defamation that it is.

For a couple of days after I first heard the rumour I was in a state of total shock and an agony of anguish about whether a complaint was actually going to be laid against me.

I began to notice people looking sideways at me as I travelled in the Fairfax lifts; people who'd normally greet me were avoiding my gaze. I tried desperately to find people who were willing to tell me the

substance of the rumour so I knew what it was I had to fight.

But like many rumours this was one was elusive, never stopping still for long enough to be pinned down.

Those few days were a nightmare for me as I saw my reputation held hostage to rumours that ran too fast for me retrieve - and repudiate.

Even today, three weeks after I was able to secure written confirmation from the person whom the rumours concerned that he had no complaint to and that there was no behaviour on my part that warranted a complaint, the rumours have not been laid to rest.

In fact, they have been more widely broadcast. The *Courier-Mail* in Brisbane two weeks ago felt free to publish a prominently positioned article, with a photograph of me, under the headline "Anne Summers caught up in sex harassment claims" - despite having been told there was no foundation to the story, and that I had a letter proving this.

A week ago, *The Australian* newspaper reported "a rumour of sexual harassment in high places [which] has spread like wildfire through media circles", a rumour which the paper described as being "particularly engrossing" because it involved a male staffer "alleging harassment at the hands of his well-known female editor". Just in case the reader still hadn't got it, the article was accompanied by a still photograph from the movie *Disclosure* showing Demi Moore with Michael Douglas up against a wall while she has her way with him. The caption for the picture read: "Unhand that man". The paper felt under no obligation apparently to mention that it had a copy of the letter exonerating me.

Every day a radio station somewhere around Australia weighs into the story and earlier this week the tabloid television shows started to show interest. It seems to be too good a story to let the facts get in the way.

I have not been accused of anything. I have not been charged with anything. No complaint has been made. I have not done anything that could possibly support a complaint. I have a letter signed by both the person named and an official from the journalists' union stating there is no complaint against me. That should be the end of it. I sincerely hope that it is.

What distresses me most about this episode is the comfort it could give to those who'd like to water down the sexual harassment laws. It is being claimed that false complaints are the latest weapon against bosses by disgruntled staff. It would be a terrible shame if a few instances of falsehood were to trivialise the crime and cast doubt on the stories of its victims. We need workplaces where women and men can operate side by side without sexual innuendo or intimidation. Just because the rumours about me were without foundation does not mean all such stories are false. The story of what happened to me is a shabby and sordid one. But it is not about sexual harassment. It is about defamation.

Going public like this has had two effects. First, it has given the rest of the media--and especially the non-Fairfax media--carte blanche to climb into the story and embellish it in ways which would make Weekly blush.

It has been a strange and unnerving experience for me to pick up the papers day after day and read articles about me which have so little accuracy that they might as well be fiction. Often because the writers of these stories have not bothered to contact me to try to check their facts, I have had no warning that the story was about to appear.

One such example occurred on July 29, just two weeks ago, in the West Australian in an article entitled "A Bad Winter for Summers", which sought to develop a local angle to the story, positioning it thus: "A prominent Australian feminist central to the drafting of our sexual harassment laws says she is now accused by rumour mongers of breaking those same rules, with the alleged victim being a former WA photographer."

I have been amazed at the terms that have been used to describe me and the attention that has been paid to my legs, my age and the age and nationality of my partner of six and a half years, mischievously referred to as my "boyfriend".

What has been most illuminating about his episode has

been the realisation that sex is still a potent weapon to use against women regardless of their age or marital status. I have been reminded recently of the number of prominent women who have been the subject of scarcely believable sexual rumours which I now speculate were nothing more than slander and an attempt to discredit and disempower them. The shocking thing is that it still works. People are alarmingly willing to hear these stories and pass them on.

Equally alarming has been the reemergence of motherhood as a weapon against women. Only this week, I was attacked in *The Bulletin* for not being a mother. In an article that pitted sisterhood versus motherhood, I was criticised for discussing with a former staff member the fact that I had given her time off to look after her kids. The caption under my photograph said "Anne Summers: Children are OK, but is none better?" implying this was my view.

One of the things we feminists fought hardest for was to have women treated as individuals whose marital or maternal status was simply beside the point. Are we now seeing a reemergence of the view that mothers are somehow superior to women who don't have children? I sincerely hope not.

The second consequence of going public, of taking the risk of the mud sticking, has been the extraordinary response I have had from friends, acquaintances and total strangers who have rung, faxed, or sent moving and humbling letters of encouragement and support.

Helen said in her speech the other night that she too had been inundated with letters--in her case "hundreds and hundreds"--which had alleviated the pain of the attacks she suffered.

Her letters, she said, were often very long, thirty-five percent were from men, and they tended to be

very personal, telling "stories of the patient unravelling of interpersonal knots and of happy resolutions".

But, she continued, "the word that cropped up most frequently is relief."

Again and again, people speak of the relief they feel that it might be possible to acknowledge that the world of daily work and social life isn't as horrible and destructive and ghastly as punitive feminists insist. People are relieved that it might be possible to admit sympathy in human terms with people on the opposite side of a power divide. They're relieved that ambiguity might be readmitted to the analysis of thought and action. And specially, they're relieved that to admit gradations of offence is not to let the side down or to let chaos come flooding in.

Carmen Lawrence also said yesterday that she had drawn strength from the hundreds of messages of support that had flooded into her office.

These public responses are interesting because they show the extent to which people, especially so called ordinary people, want to engage in these issues or debates, how they want to take sides and back who they see as the good guy. It is easy to imagine that most people have no opportunity to air their views, to have their voices heard in the big debates of our day.

But that is not necessarily the case. I guess the popularity of talk back radio is a case in point. And I was constantly surprised when I worked in Paul Keating's office by the number of people who would ring up to express a view on something. It was especially surprising--and gratifying--when people rang up to thank the prime minister for something he'd done. A lot of women for example would ring up after a child care announcement.

Perhaps these communications with politicians and public figures are a substitute for the absence of adequate communications in many people's daily lives.

In her essay 'The Changing Family- Who Cares' published in *Central Mischief*, Elizabeth addresses the question of the essential loneliness of modern suburban life:

It is possible to go out shopping and to come home laden with groceries, dog food and cat food, and to have spent several hours among people without exchanging one word with one person, so that there has in fact been no meeting between human beings, only an immense gathering of food during which the heaviness of the heart has not been lifted at all (p.89)

How different from the world of *The Newspaper of Claremont Street*:

On her way home from work, she went in the shop at the end of Claremont Street and sat there, taking her time, seeing who was there and watching what they bought. No one needed to read anything, the Newspaper of Claremont Street told them all stories and kept them up to date with the news. No one needed to bring a shopping list because Weekly knew what they needed to buy (p.4)

The world that Weekly inhabited barely exists today.

It was dependent on women being at home and out in the neighbourhood and, as Elizabeth found when she worked as a door-to-door salesman, street after suburban street of houses are unoccupied during the day because all family members have business elsewhere.

Now so many women are in the workforce and increasingly in positions of power, new issues and

problems have arisen which Weekly could barely have dreamt of. The issues of power and sex and new codes of conduct between women and men at work and in the wider world generally have presented us with new ethical challenges and dilemmas.

Those people who are home during the day are often lonely and isolated but they can follow the events of the world from their homes via radio and television and they can interact to a degree if they get on the phone and talk to a radio show host.

I know Elizabeth does not approve of computers for writing and I don't know how she feels about using computers and modems to talk to other people, but the Internet has the capacity to break down loneliness and isolation by allowing people anywhere, anytime to talk to each other.

We are only beginning to grapple with the implications of this new form of storytelling. At present there is what I regard as an unhealthy emphasis on trying to prevent people from communicating. Politicians here and in the US are trying to place limitations on electronic communications that do not exist for printed communications. They seem to be reacting, motivated by ignorance and fear of the possibilities of a form of storytelling that knows no boundaries of time or nation, that permits instant real-time communication amongst like-minded people around the world.

Of course the possibility exists that the kind of vilification to which I have referred tonight could be broadcast even more widely causing even greater distress.

But I don't think so.

Gossip is only good--and satisfying--if it concerns people you know.

A really salacious story about someone you've never heard of is unsustaining fare. The stories I've addressed tonight exist within very specific contexts and really have little meaning beyond those political, literary and media contexts.

This does not mean there are not wider messages to be drawn from them. As I've attempted to show, they tell us stories about women in Australia today, stories which regrettably have not yet reached the realms of fiction. Elizabeth's realm.