



Last word Kathleen Noonan

It's a killer read

Think you know the James Hardie story? Kathleen Noonan says a new book reveals the truth behind the silence

ONE sunny Sunday afternoon recently, I was sitting in the State Library of Queensland contemplating the dark and stormy chasm between what is legally right and what is morally right.

Corporate behaviour was under the spotlight in the State Library when ABC journalist Matt Peacock spoke at the Brisbane Writers Festival about *Killer Company*, his new book on building materials giant James Hardie and its "wonder product" asbestos.

I thought I knew the James Hardie story. I'd seen the news reports of asbestos workers dying as their lungs disintegrated and the corporate manoeuvrings to shift the headquarters to the Netherlands leaving behind a limited victim compensation fund. And I'd watched the *730 Report* when host Kerry O'Brien had on toast Hardie's then chairwoman Meredith Hellicar with her slippery weasel words.

But nothing quite prepares you for Peacock's forensic look at James Hardie's handling of its "miracle fibre of the 20th century", which was not banned in Australia until the end of 2003. Australia now has the highest rates of the fatal asbestos cancer mesothelioma in the world, plus

significant numbers of lung cancer and asbestosis. Medical researchers predict the total number of mesothelioma cases will reach 18,000 by 2020. By then, 50,000 Australians will have either died from or contracted asbestos-related diseases.

Hardie wants people to believe this is all ancient history. Take a look at the James Hardie website today. It is as if asbestos never existed, let alone made this modern company's predecessor its fortune. The general information does not even mention asbestos. Surely, in the James Hardie: A History section there will be some acknowledgment of the product that built the empire and its deadly impact on unwitting workers and customers. You can't just rewrite history, can you?

Apparently, yes. In Hardie's history section, covering the 1920s to the 1970s – as it pumped asbestos products out into the suburbs despite mounting health warnings – no mention can be found. Then, right down the end: "Fibre cement building materials were developed ... in the early 1980s, when we pioneered the use of alternative reinforcing materials to create asbestos-free cement-based building products."

You'd be forgiven for thinking Hardie has been an anti-asbestos

company. I don't know why I'm surprised. That's been the James Hardie modus operandi all along. Deny. Hide. Spin.

(Remember, the first workers' compensation case for asbestosis was brought against Hardie in 1939.)

Then take a quick look at the website of Queensland Asbestos Related Disease Support Society Inc, a self-funded organisation of sufferers of asbestos diseases, families, friends and carers. There's mention there of a raffle draw. That's right, they hold raffles to raise money.

Right about here is a perfect time to introduce multi-millionaire John Boyd Reid, AO.

Peacock writes that Reid, a much-honoured businessman, revered for his patronage and philanthropy today, was Hardie chairman from 1973 to 1996, a period in which the company pursued a strategy that allegedly ignored the dangers of asbestos and silenced critics.

Reid remains in his luxury penthouse overlooking Sydney Harbour. Peacock says he has never appeared in court or any other public forum to explain his actions to the estimated 20,000 Australian families affected.

There has been no one criminally



charged over Hardie's deadly legacy. In August, 10 former Hardie directors, including Hellicar, were fined a total of just \$750,000 by the corporate watchdog and banned an average of five years from directorships.

Today, James Hardie continues to try to unload blame. It is suing the Ipswich City Council to recoup nearly \$200,000 in compensation it paid to a former council worker suffering from asbestosis. This counter-claim technique is likely to be used more often as the number of claims lodged in Queensland by asbestos disease sufferers rises.

All over Australia, the asbestos diseases have spread beyond the factory gates. Peacock writes about the contaminated hessian bags Hardie sold for pest protection to north Queensland banana growers, who have since died.

And he warns of other unfinished business. Bags were mulched and turned into carpet underlay. So this weekend, if you are thinking of ripping up that ancient carpet in your mother's house to polish the floorboards, read this book first.

Back in the State Library in Queensland, Peacock explains that when asbestos-death stories surfaced, Hardie chose to boost its image by giving large donations to the arts, universities and charities. "In this very building there is the James Hardie Library of Australian Fine Arts."

Indeed, the SLQ website states: "In 1988, as a bicentennial gift to the nation, James Hardie Industries Limited donated their library of Australian fine arts to the State Library of Queensland.

"As a ... gift to the nation." Nice. James Hardie had already given this

country a much bigger gift - Australia's largest peacetime disaster.

Now, you'd think with the carpet underlay thing revealed, James Hardie, good corporate citizen, would rush to take out advertisements alerting Australians of the danger, offering to pay for expert asbestos-removal teams to do it. No.

James Hardie must be busy. So let's do it ourselves. I'm interested in anyone who believes they have a driveway made from asbestos waste, who remembers any dumping of asbestos in Queensland, or who has an old carpet in their house with asbestos-contaminated underlay. Email or send me a letter to *The Courier-Mail*, GPO Box 130, Brisbane, Qld, 4001. Let's see what else may have been swept under the carpet.

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BEWARE: James Hardie asbestos is being swept under the carpet.