



Thematic Concerns in Peter Carey's Fiction

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Abstract:

In his fiction, Carey explores the nature of modern Australian identity, partly by creating origin myths for white Australia drawing on the nation's history, immigration, and land settlement, but also by experimenting with the nature of storytelling itself, showing how people constantly reinvent themselves through the stories they tell about themselves.

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Introduction: -

Peter Philip Carey was born on May 7, 1943, in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia, where his parents ran a General Motors dealership. He studied at the prestigious Geelong Grammar School between 1954 and 1960 before moving to Monash University in Melbourne to enroll in a science degree program, intending to major in chemistry and zoology. Boredom and a car accident cut short his studies, and he left the university to work for what he later described as an "eccentric" advertising agency. Two of his colleagues, the writers Barry Oakley and Morris Lurie, introduced him to a broad range of European and American literature. He read widely, particularly the work of James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Franz Kafka, and William Faulkner, and by 1964 he had begun to write fiction himself. In the next four years, he wrote several novels and a number of short stories. Although some of his early work was initially accepted for publication, it was later rejected and he remained unpublished as a novelist until 1981.

Carey has won numerous awards for his work. He received the Man Booker Prize twice, for *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) in 1988 and *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) in 2001, and he has been shortlisted twice. He has won the Miles Franklin Award, given in Australia, on three occasions, for *Bliss*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, and *Jack Maggs* (1997), and was short-listed on two other occasions.

Peter Carey once said, "my fictional project has always been the invention or discovery of my own country." His writing is shaped by an acute awareness that Australia's earliest white settlers were criminals cast out by their own country, cut adrift from their own history. Their dilemma is



exemplified by Jack Maggs, who regards himself as an Englishman, but who can only remain English as long as he doesn't return to his home country. Carey's novels attempt to provide the voiceless former convicts with a new set of origin myths, to reflect their new circumstances, thus initiating a new cycle of history. This is important to Carey because Australians, as he has noted, really believe in failure and seek to deny the fact that their country's origins lie in the formation of penal colonies.

In the same way, there are no losers in Australia, only "battlers" who continue to struggle with seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Carey claims that Australians admire "battlers" more than those who actually succeed, and his fiction is populated with characters who have to deal with one setback after another. They are constantly on the brink of achieving success, only to lose everything at the last moment, often through their own incompetence. His careful portrayals of these people suggest a certain sympathy; however, he never shrinks from exploring the immensity of their self-deception. Ironically, the confidence-trickster in *Illywhacker* (1985) is the one character who fully understands his own capacity to deceive others, and even then he occasionally manages to deceive himself.

Carey is extremely skilled at providing a voice for those unable to speak for or to defend themselves. This is best illustrated in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, where Carey's close study of the language of Ned Kelly's Jerilderie letter allows him to tell Kelly's full story more vividly. Likewise, with *Jack Maggs*, Carey gives a convincing voice to an Englishman

who has been away for a long time. However, Carey's skills extend beyond historical reconstruction, as shown in *Bliss* and *The Tax Inspector* (1991), where he reveals a flair for handling a complex ensemble of voices, while in *Theft* the narrative is shared between the Boone brothers, one of whom has learning problems. Only in the first-person framing narrative of *My Life as a Fake* (2003) does this skill seem to temporarily desert him, when he seems unable to create a convincing voice for Micks, the English poetry editor.

Carey employs a wide range of narrative techniques throughout his novels and constantly interrogates the nature of storytelling itself, as befits a man who is interested in providing his country with a set of histories. At times, Carey's narrators are aware of themselves as characters in novels and equally aware of their audiences, whom they directly address. In other instances, his characters are themselves storytellers, using their skills to come to terms with their lives, or else aware of the power of the printed word as a vehicle of expression.

Carey's great influences are Beckett, Faulkner, and Joyce; his narratives frequently appear to be chaotic or fragmentary, his characters acting at random rather than according to the dictates of a



previously chosen plot. Carey notes the influence of postmodernism on his work, while *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) is clearly intended as homage to *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.* (1759-1767) by Laurence Sterne. Nonetheless, Carey's novels retain an overall narrative coherence; they often end abruptly, not always as the reader anticipates, but always in a way that, in retrospect, does provide closure and satisfaction.

Oscar and Lucinda was the first of Peter Carey's novels to win the Man Booker Prize. The present-day first-person narrator tells the story of Oscar Hopkins and Lucinda Leplastrier, two young people who meet on board a ship sailing to Australia. The implication, from references made, is that the couple are the narrator's great-grandparents and that he or she is telling a love story. However, the truth is more complicated.

Lucinda, a wealthy heiress, is returning to Australia after carrying out research on the manufacture of glass in London. On a whim, once she had come into her fortune she bought a glasswork, which she is now attempting to run. Her efforts are confounded in part by the fact that her male employees, although they are willing to work for her, will not allow her in the factory and prefer to deal with her friend, the Reverend Hassett. Accustomed to living on a farm in the bush with her father and mother, and latterly alone, Lucinda has found it hard to make friends in Sydney. Having bought the glassworks, she finds her way to the Reverend Hassett, an expert in the properties of glass though not its manufacture, and to the household of Mr. d'Abbs, her financial adviser, where she plays cards with him and his friends. Lucinda's unconventionality is not intentional, but all her life she has been used to taking care of herself, and she finds she does not fit comfortably into the role that society assigns wealthy young women. As a result, her visit to London, where she has called on her mother's old friends and correspondents, has been an unmitigated disaster. Oscar Hopkins's father was a nonconformist preacher and naturalist who had brought up his son alone, according to his own unorthodox beliefs. Queerly dressed, physically and emotionally stunted, Oscar finally rebels by rejecting his father's religious beliefs and attaching himself to the local Church of England vicar. The church sponsors Oscar's degree at Oxford, where Oscar discovers his latent skill as a gambler. After he takes holy orders, the church determines to send him to Australia.

Oscar and Lucinda bond over their shared love of gambling. When Oscar arrives in Sydney, it is assumed by many that he is to be her husband. The men at the glassworks gladly accept him in a way that they have never accepted Lucinda. However, unable to articulate their feelings for one another, the two become confused about their desire for



one another. Oscar is convinced that Lucinda loves the Reverend Hassett, who has been sent away to Boat Harbour because his bishop does not approve of his religious views, whereas Lucinda's determination to build the priest a church made out of glass is an attempt to encourage people to buy the buildings she wants to develop. Their work on the building brings Oscar and Lucinda together and they enjoy a period of happiness, although their relationship causes a scandal.

Their brief happiness is destroyed when Lucinda foolishly wagers her fortune on whether or not Oscar will be able to successfully deliver the building to the Reverend Hassett, convinced that he will succeed. However, Oscar's journey descends into farce as the expedition's leader determines to use the voyage to establish himself as a famous explorer. Pursuing his own agenda, he leads the expedition away from its intended route. On his arrival at Boat Harbour, Oscar, ill from the journey and emotionally naïve, is enticed into marriage by a local woman. After he dies by drowning, his wife claims Lucinda's fortune, and the reader finally understands that the narrator's great-grandmother is not the person they initially supposed. Lucinda has disappeared from the historical record without a trace.

True History of the Kelly Gang gives the bushranger Ned Kelly a chance to tell his own story in the form of a long letter to his daughter in San Francisco. Kelly's father was a former convict, transported to Tasmania; Kelly has no idea what his father's crime might have been. He met Kelly's mother, Ellen, in a town called Donnybrook, and they determined to marry. Her family, the Quinns, were habitual criminals who constantly drew the attention of the police. Ellen Quinn was unaware that her husband was a former criminal, but the police knew, subjected his family to much attention, and attempted to blackmail Ellen for sexual favours. Kelly's father is finally imprisoned when he takes the blame for young Kelly's theft and butchering of a cow, although he is in fact prosecuted for removing a brand from the hide. He is released as a favour after Kelly saves a local man's son from drowning, but he is a broken man and dies shortly after.

A first-person account of the life of Ned Kelly, the Australian bushranger, in which he attempts to explain to his daughter how he was driven to break the law by the authorities. At twelve, Kelly finds himself the man of the family and struggles to lead a law-abiding life through farming and breaking horses. His mother, meanwhile, opens a drinking den and, it is suggested, also works as a prostitute. The family moves around, supported by the extended Quinn family, finally settling in the Glenrowan area, where they have bought some land and become "selectors," or settlers. However, they live in great poverty and remain targets for the local police. Young Ned is temporarily apprenticed to the bushranger Harry Power and is present



when a number of crimes are committed. He serves several terms in prison for alleged cattle-rustling and other crimes.

The final period of his short but tumultuous life begins with an incident on the family property, when a policeman, Fitzpatrick, claims he was injured in a gunfight with members of the Kelly family. The Kelly family claim Fitzpatrick was knocked to the ground when he attempted to proposition Ned's sister Kate. Ned's mother is imprisoned, but Ned and his brother Dan go into hiding, where they are joined by two friends.

The police determine to track down the Kelly gang. Ned and his friends come across a group of police officers at Stringybark Creek, whom they disarm, killing one policeman, and then wait for the others to return. When they do, although one policeman proposes that the police should surrender, the others refuse, and there is a shootout in which all of the policemen are killed.

The Kelly gang then carry out a series of audacious bank raids, taking hostages but killing no one. They are finally betrayed by one of their friends when they arrive in Glenrowan. Knowing that a trainload of policemen is on its way to the town, the gang take hostages and pull up rail tracks in order to cause a train crash. Ned Kelly's letter to his daughter ceases at this point, and his story is supplemented by a third-party account of the siege in which the Kelly Gang, all except Ned, are killed, and an account of Ned Kelly's hanging.

Throughout the narrative, Kelly is desperate to ensure that his daughter knows the truth about her father, and he attempts to justify his actions, as he did in the Jerilderie letter, by showing that the police and the authorities in Victoria treated the colonists unfairly and with great severity.

Theft opens with artist Michael Bones, newly released From prison, discovering that he is to be sent to northern New South Wales to take care of an isolated property belonging to his biggest collector, Jean-Paul Milan, and also to act as caretaker to his slow-witted brother, Hugh Bones. The hope is that Michael will cut down on his drinking, as well as

produce some new works. He has lost control of most of his work, as it was deemed to be marital assets during his divorce from his wife, and he was prosecuted for attempting to steal it back.

Michael is not particularly happy to be caring for his brother or to be exiled in Bellingen, let alone to be issued with a long list of maintenance tasks around the house. However, once Milan leaves, the brothers settle into a chaotic day-to-day routine, during which Michael more or less unintentionally vandalizes the house in the cause of his art, which is rather different in its production methods than his patron seems to suppose.



It is at this point that Marlene Leibovitz inadvertently enters the Bones brothers' lives, when, enroute to visit their neighbour, Dozy Boylan, to authenticate a painting by Jacques Leibovitz, she is caught in a flood. Hugh and Marlene immediately establish a rapport, much to Michael's surprise. He meanwhile is astonished to learn that Boylan owns

a painting by Leibovitz, as it was this artist who first inspired him to become an artist. When Marlene returns, she tells Michael the story of how Leibovitz's wife, Dominique, stole many of his half-finished works after his death and then altered and amended them, exercising *droit moral* (or moral rights) in order to control and authenticate them. Marlene, married to the artist's son, Olivier Leibovitz, now has the *droit moral* to control her father-in-law's work, and she is thus an immensely powerful woman in the art world.

Sometime after Marlene's departure, Michael is surprised to receive a visit from the Sydney police, who seem convinced that he is in some way involved in the theft of Boylan's Leibovitz and who impound his latest work. He is already having trouble reestablishing his career, as the galleries do not want to know him, so this incident is a disaster for him. Unexpectedly, the brothers encounter Marlene Leibovitz again, and she rescues them, revealing that her husband has run away and is suspected of having stolen Boylan's painting, although he is physically incapable of touching any of his father's paintings because he hates them so much.

Michael and Hugh finally leave Australia and follow Marlene to New York. For a period, Michael, Marlene, and Hugh lead a golden life. Michael's art is recognized once again and he feels successful. Hugh enjoys the bustle of New York and makes friends. Marlene reveals her life story to Michael: She has deceived him and is really an Australian woman who fled a life of poverty and transformed herself, through hard work and study, into an expert on art, in order to catch Olivier Leibovitz.

Blinded by his growing love for her, Michael does not understand that Marlene, although she has enabled him to restart his artistic career, is also using him to help her authenticate forged Leibovitz paintings. When Olivier dies and she finally inherits the *droit moral* to control the paintings, Michael strongly suspects that Marlene encouraged Hugh to murder Olivier, and the brothers flee New York for Australia. However, Michael's past continues to haunt him.

Conclusion: -

Peter Carey's novels address the issue of what it means to be Australian, particularly in regard to the paradox that the history of Australian settlement is so new, whereas the continent and its indigenous culture are so ancient. Likewise, he constantly seeks to give voice to the white



colonists who have been expelled from their home country or who have fled, hoping to find a better life, and whose histories have been lost as a result. However meaningless and petty their lives may seem to outsiders; Carey's constantly reiterated point is that these are the people whose work made Australia what it is. Their lives are as just as important as those of the people whom history does remember, and his writing gives them a voice.

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