Carey Peter

Peter Carey was born in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia. He studied chemistry at Monash University but failed his first-year examinations and dropped out of college. Carey then found work as an apprentice writer in an advertising agency in Melbourne, and this became the turning point in his life. At the agency, Carey met writers and playwrights, especially Barry Oakley, who would forever influence him. Oakley introduced Carey to the works of writers such as James Joyce, William Faulkner, and Samuel Beckett, which had a powerful influence on Carey's writings. Carey next worked in advertising agencies in London and Sydney before settling down in New York in the late 1980s.

Carey's novels are often described as a mix of seriousness and surrealism. His preference for the macabre and the unusual is exemplified by the assortment of strange and tormented characters in his stories, such as the minister in the grip of a gambling compulsion in Oscar and Lucinda (1988). The absurdity of the characters' internal world is complicated by their actual situations in the external world in which they live. Through the clever twisting of his tales, Carey is able to communicate the phantasmagoric but realistic situations of ordinary human experiences. His stories are sardonic commentaries on the bittersweet and inextricably welded relationship between the individual and the society. The often seedy and shadowy nature of Carey's actors makes it hard for some readers to empathize with their tragic and unfortunate experiences. This controversial nature of Carey's novels makes them compelling and thought-provoking to read.

Carey sees himself as an Australian writer, and his works are predominantly set in Australia, either in the countryside or on the streets of big cities. His characters, however, have a variety of backgrounds and origins. They range from the average man on the street to infamous outlaws. Though most of Carey's characters are fictional figures, he has also used historical materials to reconstruct the life and exploits of certain historical figures, such as Ned Kelly in The True History of the Kelly Gang (2000). Ned Kelly was a celebrated outlaw who eluded the police for many years before he was captured and hanged in 1880. An unlikely hero, Kelly is a powerful legendary figure who is admired and respected for his filial piety and loyalty. Many of Carey's protagonists share a similar characteristic—they are social failures and misfits. By narrating their stories, Carey attempts to show that these characters, through their unconventional behavior and personality, challenge a society that does not endorse difference; it is society's inflexible institutions that make the characters victims within their own societies.

In recent years, Carey has continued to write provocative novels. My Life as a Fake (2003) is based on a historical event, an Australian literary hoax of the 1940s. Theft: A Love Story (2006) has a great deal in common with Joyce Cary's The Horse's Mouth. The protagonist and principal narrator, a painter named Michael Boone, is a self-described "hateful loathsome beast" driven by his desire to restore his sagging reputation. Most recently, Parrot and Olivier in America (2010) focuses on the relationship of a French aristocrat and the poor son of an English printer as they come together in the raucoius democracy of the New World.

Critical Analysis

Carey is an accessible writer whose works appeal to a mass audience. Carey wrote several short stories before the publication of his first novel (Bliss, 1981). These stories won Carey a large following of fans in Australia, especially among the younger generation. One of these stories is "Crabs," a powerful depiction of the sense of alienation. "Crabs" tells the tale of a young man who transforms himself into a tow truck after he realizes that he and his girlfriend are marooned at the drive-in theater. The young man finally realizes in the end that although he has successfully escaped, he is all alone in the world as is everyone else who is still at the drive-in theater.

Carey's later short stories also examine the theme of estrangement. In "The Fat Man in History," for instance, a fat man finds himself caught in a world that favors slim and muscular bodies. In a postrevolutionary era, where humanity is reduced to forms and shapes of its bodies, the protagonist declares obesity to be subversive and challenges the status quo. Through his misfit central characters, Carey is able to poke fun at the mindless fashion trends of contemporary society where men and women are reduced to mere objects. "The Fat Man in History" was published in a collection of short stories of the same title in 1980.
Bliss, which won the Miles Franklin Award in 1982, is a nightmarish and surrealistic tale of a man who dies three times but is resurrected each time to face new challenges. This novel combines light comedy with cynical jabs at the contemporary situation. The story has a political message, as it laments the role of American companies and popular culture in influencing and changing Australia.

Carey's second novel, Illywhacker (1985), which is set in Australia's bushwhacking country, conveys a bleak view of Australian society. The narrator, the 139-year-old Herbert Badgery, represents the first generation of Australia's inhabitants whose desire to make good and succeed in society is not fulfilled. Badgery's failure to market the plow he has invented is an allegory of Australia's own failure to extract itself from its economic crisis. The poignancy of Badgery's experiences is worsened by his observation that, two generations later, his descendants, now pet-shop owners, find themselves imprisoned within metaphorical cage similar to those in which the pets are kept constrained.

The most influential of all Carey's books are those that examine the history of Australia's social outcasts, such as the convicts, the poor, and the gang members. Jack Maggs (1997), which won the 1998 Commonwealth Writers Prize, is the tale of a young man who inherits money from a convict. It critiques the oppressive influence of English literary writing on Australian literature and represents an attempt to break free of the English conventions of writing.

Carey gains more recognition with every publication. The True History of the Kelly Gang won the 2001 Commonwealth Writers' Prize and 2001 Booker Prize and was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. Anthony J. Hassall, after describing a harrowing death by drowning in the final scene of Oscar and Lucinda, remarks, "All of Carey's stories offer such fierce and dangerous pleasures, and despite the terrors they also enact and arouse, they create a wild, apocalyptic beauty." He sums up Carey as "a tribal teller of tales, whose stories strive to articulate an indigenous Australian mythology needed to replace the cultural narratives of successive colonial masters."

Further Information

Other Works by Peter Carey


Works about Peter Carey


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