Mythology, History, and Truth: Teaching Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang

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Why Teach True History of the Kelly Gang?

There are many valid reasons why one might assign True History of the Kelly Gang. The novel lends itself to a variety of pedagogical purposes and approaches, and its combination of accessibility and complexity allows it to be read successfully in courses from first-year introductory classes to graduate seminars. The content of the novel provides students with insight into the colonial period in Australia, including the formation of dominant Australian cultural ideals, such as the importance of anti-authoritarianism and egalitarianism, and the championing of the underdog (these cultural ideals are certainly not limited to the colonial period, and the novel revises the colonial period from a contemporary perspective).

The fact that True History of the Kelly Gang has been a popular as well as critically acclaimed contemporary historical novel enables valuable examinations of the role of historical novels and the reasons why contemporary Australian novelists choose to examine and rewrite historical narratives. In my extensive experience teaching Carey’s novel at four universities in the United States over the past decade, at both the undergraduate and graduate level, most students find the novel engaging, challenging, and entertaining; read Carey’s Kelly as a sympathetic character; and enjoy the adventure, romance, and conflicts within the text. Carey’s use of an historical figure as a narrator and protagonist and, moreover, one who was a bushranger, folk hero, and subsequently a national hero to many Australians, tends to capture the students’ attention. From a pedagogical perspective, it is certainly not necessary for students to enjoy assigned texts, but enthusiastic engagement with a novel certainly makes students more willing to accept intellectual challenges.

The undeniable importance of True History of the Kelly Gang within Australian culture reflects the novel’s canonical and representative status as a work of Australian literature. The novel was awarded the Booker Prize in 2001, position-
ing it as one of the preeminent English-language novels at the beginning of the twenty-first century. That this was Carey’s second Booker Prize, moreover, elevated him to an elite position among contemporary Anglophone writers, with an international reputation matched only by a few other authors, such as J.M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Atwood, and Ian McEwan. In 2003, the Australian Society of Authors polled their three thousand members in order to ascertain the “Top Forty Australian Books.” True History of the Kelly Gang was voted number sixteen on the list, despite having been published just three years earlier, appearing higher in the poll than such classics as Patrick White’s Riders in the Chariot, Joseph Furphy’s Such is Life, and Marcus Clarke’s For the Term of His Natural Life.

True History of the Kelly Gang has been both a commercial and critical success, and its impact on Australian culture has been far greater than most literary novels, even those that have also been awarded prestigious prizes within Australia, such as the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award, the Queensland Premier’s Literary Award, and The Age Book of the Year Award, all of which Carey won for True History of the Kelly Gang. In my 2007 article on the novel, I argued that the extraordinary success of Carey’s novel returned the Kelly narrative to the center of Australian popular culture and created a commercial and cultural environment that enabled the production of further revisions of the Kelly narrative.

The immense popularity of Carey’s novel is evidenced by the fact that it was an Australian and international bestseller even before it won the Booker Prize in 2001. By August 2002, True History of the Kelly Gang had sold 250,000 copies in Australia alone, a remarkable figure in a nation where the average print run for a novel is between three and five thousand copies (Nile 90, 107). Thus, not only was the novel enormously successful as a literary work, its impact was so powerful that it had a significant effect upon Australian culture, which is certainly a rare feat for a novel; a text with such an impact demands critical engagement by both scholars and students.

The impact of True History of the Kelly Gang has certainly not been limited to Australia. In addition to English-language editions published in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, it has been translated into twenty-four languages to date, including Chinese, Japanese, German, Russian, and French. The novel is also featured in courses at numerous universities around the world, including King’s College London, the University of New South Wales, the University of Adelaide, the University of Queensland, the Australian National University, Buffalo State College, the University of Baltimore, Boston University, and Uppsala University. Unlike many works of Australian literature, True History of the Kelly Gang is readily available outside Australia, and thus university bookstores and students can easily acquire copies of the text.
In my experience, *True History of the Kelly Gang* works most effectively as a required text when assigned in courses on Australian literature. I usually schedule it for the mid-point of the semester, after students have read a significant amount of colonial Australian literature and gained a knowledge base regarding the establishment of the Australian colonies, the convict system, the place of the Irish within the colonies, the importance of masculinity and the “bushman” in Australian culture, and the influence within Australian culture of values such as anti-authoritarianism, egalitarianism, and justice. Of course, notions such as masculinity, egalitarianism, and justice are complicated and contested, so we discuss many of the various possible meanings, contexts, and uses of these terms. When I taught *True History of the Kelly Gang* in a contemporary world literature class, alongside texts from Africa, South Asia, Canada, the Caribbean, and South America, the work of contextualization regarding Australian history, culture, and geography had to be done before and during the teaching of the novel.

Although my experience teaching *True History of the Kelly Gang* has been in courses that did not have a specific postcolonial focus, I have taught several courses on postcolonial literature and am convinced that the novel could be taught effectively in a postcolonial context. Having taught other Australian novels in postcolonial literature courses, including David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and Peter Carey’s *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), as well as short fiction by Elizabeth Jolley, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Henry Lawson, Murray Bail, and others, I know that Carey’s novel addresses key issues in postcolonial studies, including colonization, resistance, subjugation, cultural identity, immigration, and the uses and abuses of narrative, and would serve as an effective text for the exploration of Australia’s postcoloniality.

**Approaches to Teaching the Novel**

Before students begin reading Carey’s novel, I explain Ned Kelly’s importance within Australian culture and the relationship between Kelly’s “Jerilderie Letter” and Carey’s novel. It is important to manage students’ first encounter with Carey’s prose style, to help in what can be a struggle to read his distinctive imitation of Kelly’s prose, which contains many grammatical errors and frequently employs abbreviations, nineteenth-century Irish-Australian vernacular, and archaic diction. In order to help students understand why Carey has developed such a unique voice and prose style for Kelly, I require them to read the “Jerilderie Letter” (available online via the State Library of Victoria) before completing their first reading assignment from the novel.

The eight-thousand-word letter was composed in February 1879 by Ned Kelly and dictated to Joe Byrne, Kelly’s mate and fellow member of the Kelly Gang (al-
though scholars agree that the letter is written in Byrne’s hand, the issue of whether or not Byrne also played a role in the letter’s composition is open to debate. Kelly hoped to have the letter printed and disseminated, and attempted to do so in Jerilderie, New South Wales, after robbing the Bank of New South Wales branch in the town. However, rather than passing the letter on to the local newspaper’s printer, the bank’s accountant gave the letter to his superiors in Melbourne, and it was not printed or widely disseminated during Kelly’s lifetime. The original is now housed in the State Library of Victoria. The “Jerilderie Letter” can be read as Kelly’s manifesto; it is a remarkable, impassioned, poetic document expressing his justifications for his actions and his desire for justice. Peter Carey based the voice of his version of Ned Kelly on Kelly’s voice in the “Jerilderie Letter” and incorporates much of the content of Kelly’s letter into his novel. Students note that Kelly’s letter is more difficult for them to read than Carey’s novel and are able to identify ways in which Carey has mimicked Kelly’s style while simultaneously making it more comprehensible for contemporary readers. Nevertheless, students struggle at first with Kelly’s voice in the novel, but usually adapt by the time they finish reading the first chapter.

For courses that meet twice or three times per week, I usually devote two-and-a-half weeks of the semester to the novel. Thus, I divide the novel into multiple reading assignments, rather than having students read the entire novel before our first meeting—with a novel like Carey’s, that approach is only practical for graduate courses that meet once per week. During each class period devoted to True History of the Kelly Gang, we focus on an approximately sixty-page section of the novel. Class time is devoted to a variety of activities, including brief lectures, discussion, group work, engagement with multimedia materials (maps, photographs, primary documents, videos, songs), examination of secondary sources, and student writing. Topics for student writing include the similarities and differences between Kelly’s “Jerilderie Letter” and Carey’s novel, conceptions of justice, sources of conflict between the English and Irish in the colony of Victoria, conceptions of “the hero” and “the outlaw,” the development of the Kelly mythology, and Ned’s relationships with his mother, father, and lover.

As we work our way through the novel, in-class activities vary from an initial focus on the background of the novel, including Kelly’s personal history and the “Jerilderie Letter,” move through a close reading of the novel, and conclude with a focus on the reception and impact of the novel and contemporary developments in Ned Kelly mythology, such as new publications and the recent discovery of Kelly’s bones, which were verified by scientists as Kelly’s after DNA testing (Kenneally). The novel’s structure, which consists of thirteen letters (“parcels”) written by Ned Kelly to his daughter, bookended by accounts composed by other “authors,” readily facilitates the study of the novel in discrete portions.
Suggested Discussion Topics

Since I engage in a close reading of the novel with my students and devote a large portion of class time to discussion, I have devised numerous discussion questions regarding many aspects of the novel. The questions I ask my students range from the specific to the theoretical, seeking to help them engage with the novel through close reading and develop a thorough knowledge of the work, while simultaneously aiming to provide an understanding of the novel’s relationship to Australian culture, contemporary world literature, the novel as a form, postcolonial literature, popular culture, tourism, and the publishing industry. In the paragraphs that follow, I provide suggestions for discussion questions for each section of the novel. Instructors may wish to devise more theoretical questions, depending on the preparation and ability of their students.

I begin my discussion of True History of the Kelly Gang by focusing on the introductory material that appears before Parcel One. My students and I discuss the reasons why Carey might have included the epigraph from William Faulkner (“The past is not dead. It is not even past.”), debate the purpose of the “Undated, unsigned, handwritten account” of Ned Kelly’s last stand that precedes Parcel One, and examine the characterization of Kelly by the “anonymous author.” We discuss Carey’s possible reasons for framing Kelly’s letters to his daughter with reports written by “anonymous” authors, the potential purposes of the descriptions of the physical state and contents of each parcel, and the issues raised by the title of the novel, including the different meanings that would have been signified if the novel had been entitled The True History of the Kelly Gang or A True History of the Kelly Gang. Finally, before focusing on Parcel One, we examine the question of why Carey might have constructed the novel as a series of thirteen letters written by Kelly to a fictional daughter, including how the novel would be different if the letters were addressed to a son, a spouse, the government, the general public, or the police.

Discussions of “Parcel One: His Life until the Age of 12” might address the fictional Kelly’s reasons for writing his history, the importance of Kelly’s parents’ personal histories, the significance of Kelly’s first memory, Kelly’s attitude toward the English and the police, the importance of land ownership, the significance of the stories about the young Ned Kelly helping his mother deliver a baby and saving a local boy from drowning, and the circumstances surrounding the death of Ned’s father, Red Kelly. “Parcel Two: His Life Ages 12–15” contains rich material for discussions of Ned’s conceptions of law, justice, and corruption, especially the ways in which his conceptions are shaped by his interactions with the police. The content of the second parcel also facilitates discussions regarding Ellen Kelly’s relationships with other men after Red Kelly’s death, the effect of those relationships on Ned, the
position of women in colonial society, the Kelly family’s attitudes toward acquiring their own land, and Ned Kelly’s feelings about his mother’s relationship with the bushranger Harry Power.

During class discussions of “Parcel Three: His Life at 15 Years of Age,” I ask students to consider what Ned learns through his apprenticeship to Harry Power, the warnings Harry gives Ned regarding the life of a bushranger, the purpose of Harry’s story regarding James Whitty and the devil, and the significance of the stories regarding the Banshee and St. Brigit. Dialogue regarding the third parcel also usually addresses the epiphany Kelly experiences regarding his position in colonial society and his future prospects upon being imprisoned for the first time, as well as Kelly’s conception of justice and his moral code. We also discuss the effect upon Ned of his encounter with the “fairy boy” Shan and his sister Caitlin, and what the episode reveals to Kelly about the possibilities for happiness within the colony of Victoria.

“Parcel Four: His Life at 16 Years of Age” prompts discussion of the reasons why Harry Power pressures Ned to confront and kill his mother’s lover, Bill Frost, inspires debate regarding Harry’s reasons for lying to Ned about Bill’s “death,” as well as discussion of Ned’s intense guilt over the “murder” and Carey’s characterization of Kelly through the episode. The fifth parcel, “His Early Contact with Senior Policemen,” triggers discussion of Kelly’s motivations for allowing the police to arrest him, the importance of Ned’s interactions with John Fitzpatrick, Kelly’s portrayal of the treatment he receives from his relatives for his supposed betrayal of Harry Power, and the ways in which his life is changed as a result of his new reputation.

Discussions of “Parcel Six: Events Precipitated by the Arrest of Harry Power” tend to focus on Ned’s refusal to testify against his uncles and the significance of the Kellys’ encounter with the McCormicks.

After students read the seventh parcel, “His Life Following His Later Release from Pentridge Gaol,” we discuss the effects upon the Kellys after their encounter with Kevin the Rat Charmer, the reasons why Carey does not have Ned provide a detailed description of his three years in prison, Ned’s relationship with George King, and Ned’s plans for life as a free man. We also debate the significance of Ned’s fight with Wild Wright, Ned’s reasons for inserting Joe Byrne’s narrative into his text, the ways in which Ned is shaped by his relationship with Joe Byrne, and the significance of Kelly’s reading material, which includes R.D. Blackmore’s Lorna Doone, Shakespeare, and the Bible. Carey’s subtextual commentary on storytelling and literary influences is also discussed.

Discussions of “Parcel Eight: 24 Years” may begin by focusing on Kelly’s attitude toward Steve Hart, his younger brother Dan’s constant companion. Carey introduces Mary Hearn, Ned Kelly’s love interest, during the eighth parcel, so discussions often focus on Ned’s first impressions of Mary, the reasons why he falls in love with
her, the consequences of Ned learning the identity of the father of Mary’s baby, and Carey’s purpose in creating a love interest for Kelly. The shooting of Constable Fitzpatrick in the wrist is one of the major turning points in the narrative, and thus the causes and consequences of the shooting are inevitably debated at length.

I always begin class discussions of “Parcel Nine: The Murders at Stringybark Creek” by asking why the parcel might have been given such a title and how the title affects the way readers approach the content of the chapter. We focus especially on the word “murders” and the possible effect upon readers if the chapter title had used a different word, such as “shootings” or “deaths.” Discussions of the ninth parcel also address Kelly’s motivations for ambushing the police at Stringybark Creek, Kelly’s presentation of the events that transpire at Stringybark Creek, whether the deaths of the police officers in Kelly’s version of the narrative could be considered murder, the Kelly Gang’s reactions to their new situation, and the options now open to the gang. We discuss Carey’s characterization of Kelly and his depiction of the controversial historical event through his fictional narrator.

Discussions of “Parcel Ten: The History Is Commenced” begin by addressing the ways in which Kelly is depicted by the newspapers and his reaction to the media’s manipulations of his persona before moving on to the reasons why Kelly begins writing his “true history” and Kelly’s obsession with writing to Mr. Cameron, the Member of Parliament. Class discussions also cover the reasons why Mary is so upset about Steve and Dan wearing dresses, the point of the narrative Mary relates to the gang about a horse being tortured by rebels in Ireland, Kelly’s motivations for robbing the bank at Euroa, the purpose of Mary’s annotations of the newspaper accounts of the robbery, and what Kelly learns when he is tried by a jury of his peers at Faithfull’s Creek. Since Carey begins using the proper noun “Australian” in this section to describe citizens of Victoria, we engage in discussions of nationalism, imagined communities, and historical revisionism.

The eleventh parcel, “His Life at 25 Years of Age,” inspires discussion of the reasons why the colonial newspapers refuse to print Kelly’s letter to Cameron, Kelly’s anger at being denied a role in the public discourse, the causes for the showdown between Ned and Mary, Kelly’s motivations for robbing the bank at Jerilderie, and Kelly’s evolving self-perception. Discussions of “Parcel Twelve: Conception and Construction of Armour” may focus on Kelly’s reasons for continuing to write his history despite extraordinarily difficult circumstances, Kelly’s conception and construction of the suits of armor, the composition of the “coffin letter,” possible changes in Kelly’s moral character, and the connections between Kelly’s (Carey’s) coffin letter and Ned Kelly’s “Jerilderie Letter.”

The thirteenth and final parcel, “His Life at 26 Years of Age,” prompts discussions regarding the significance of the dream Kelly has about his mother, the inter-
actions during the siege at Glenrowan between Kelly and Curnow (the schoolmaster), and the significance of the passage from Shakespeare’s *Henry V* that Curnow reads and Ned attaches to his history. Discussions of the novel’s concluding materials focus on the way the siege at Glenrowan is portrayed by the author, S.C., and Curnow’s feelings about Ned Kelly in the years after Kelly’s capture and execution, especially his stature as a folk hero.

**Suggested Written Assignments**

I often give my students in-class writing assignments, which allow them twenty minutes to write an impromptu response to a question about their most recent reading assignment. The writing prompts enable me to assess whether or not students are keeping up with reading assignments and understanding the text, and they also provide students an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and think through issues raised by the novel before participating in oral discussion. Many of the suggested discussion topics provided above will also work well as writing prompts. I have used writing prompts addressing issues such as the similarities and differences between Carey’s *True History of the Kelly Gang* and Kelly’s “Jerilderie Letter”; Kelly’s depiction of himself in “The Jerilderie Letter”; Kelly’s attitude toward the English; the qualities of Carey’s Ned Kelly that make him a sympathetic character; the role Kelly’s Irish ancestry and cultural heritage play in his conflict with the British colonial authorities; and the ways in which Delia Falconer’s version of Ned Kelly in her short story “The Republic of Love” differs from Carey’s Kelly.

I do not require my students to write formal essays on *True History of the Kelly Gang*, but the novel is one of several that students may choose to focus on. Typically, a third of my students write a formal novel analysis essay about *True History of the Kelly Gang*. I require students to use secondary sources and engage with critics who have written about the novel, but I do not require students to write about a specific topic. Students choose to write about many aspects of the novel, including conceptions of justice, rebellion, family relationships, Irish mythology, morality, truth, discrimination, police corruption, nationalism, heroism, the suppression of anti-authoritarian narratives, and the role of the media.

**Common Student Problems**

As I alluded to earlier in this essay, instructors assigning *True History of the Kelly Gang* at universities outside Australia need to be aware that the majority of students will know very little about Australian literature, history, culture, politics, and geography. If the novel is not assigned as part of an Australian literature course, the instructor will need to perform a significant amount of work in order to contextualize...
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The novel and Kelly’s place within Australian history and culture. It is important to emphasize that the events in the novel take place during the colonial period in the colony of Victoria, and that during Ned Kelly’s lifetime the Australian nation did not exist. Over time, Kelly’s story has been subsumed into Australian history and he has become an Australian hero, rather than being a hero solely within Victoria. The reasons for the ascendency of Kelly’s narrative to the national level will need to be explained, and doing so will create interesting and productive discussions regarding nationalism and what Benedict Anderson termed “imagined communities,” especially Anderson’s notion of the nation being projected backward in time. Carey’s novel works as an effective starting point for discussions regarding the role novels can play in the formation of national identities, the notion of a novel as a “national narrative,” and the ways that nationalism can lead to the privileging of certain narratives over others. Students who are not Australian will often initially have trouble comprehending Ned Kelly’s significance within Australian culture and the reasons why a criminal can be considered a national hero, but exposing students to secondary sources and other versions of the Ned Kelly narrative will quickly demonstrate Kelly’s significance.

SUGGESTED SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

I have found the use of supplementary materials to be extremely effective in my teaching of True History of the Kelly Gang. I show my students numerous photographs of “Kelly Country,” including images of Glenrowan, Benalla, Wangaratta, and Stringybark Creek. I use photographs I took while visiting the locations, but many suitable images are available online. Google Maps is useful for showing the locations used as settings in Carey’s novel. I use the State Library of Victoria’s website to show images of the “Jerilderie Letter,” Ned Kelly’s armor, and Ned Kelly himself. I bring in brochures from Glenrowan and the Old Melbourne Gaol that contain reproductions of wanted posters and contemporary newspaper articles about the Kelly gang, as well as a bottle of “Kelly Country” wine that uses excerpts from the “Jerilderie Letter” and an image of Ned Kelly on the label. I even pass around Australian children’s alphabet books in which “N is for Ned Kelly” and a Ned Kelly doll. The latter items are useful illustrations of the commercialization and reach of the Kelly mythology. When time permits, I play songs about Ned Kelly, such as Paul Kelly’s “Our Sunshine,” and clips from film versions of the Kelly narrative, such as Gregor Jordan’s Ned Kelly, using them as examples of alternative manifestations of the Kelly narrative.

When my students are researching essays about True History of the Kelly Gang, I share numerous primary and secondary sources with them (see this article’s works...
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cited for details regarding sources referenced in this paragraph). More than a dozen academic journal articles and book chapters regarding Carey’s novel have been published to date; the most important and useful of these include those written by Carolyn Bliss, Heather Smyth, Penelope Ingram, Paul Eggert, Graham Huggan, and Deborah Bird Rose. Useful newspaper articles regarding Carey’s novel and Ned Kelly include those by Patrick Barkham, Robert McCrum, and Christine Kenneally. For a brilliant alternative Ned Kelly narrative, see Delia Falconer’s short story “The Republic of Love.” Useful booklength studies of Ned Kelly include Francis McQuilton’s The Kelly Outbreak, Ian Jones’s Ned Kelly: A Short Life, and Peter Fitzsimmon’s Ned Kelly: The Story of Australia’s Most Notorious Legend. The sources referred to in this paragraph will prove extremely useful for students but are also invaluable for anyone planning to teach Carey’s novel.

Notes

1. This essay draws upon two of my previously published articles: “Teaching ‘English with a Twist’: Australian Literature in the United States” and “The Influence of Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang: Repositioning the Ned Kelly Narrative in Australian Popular Culture.”

2. The information in this paragraph draws from the State Library of Victoria’s website description of the “Jerilderie Letter.”

3. For more details regarding this issue, see my articles “Teaching ‘English with a Twist’: Australian Literature in the United States” and “Waves of Fosters, Crocodiles and Ockers: Representations of Australia and Australians in American Popular Culture.”

Works Cited


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