

Car-Talk: Interview with Peter Carey

LAURA MOSS

"What is it about we Australians, eh? he demanded. What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might not we find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer? Must we always make such an embarrassing spectacle of ourselves?"

PETER CAREY *True History of the Kelly Gang*¹

ON A BOOK tour promoting his new novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*, Peter Carey recently visited Winnipeg, Manitoba. He arrived on a cold (-15 celsius, -25 windchill), but not blizzardy, Wednesday — March 21, 2001. Carey's reading at the University of Winnipeg was sponsored by the Winnipeg International Writers' Festival. During his 16 hours in the city, Carey read from *Kelly Gang* and was interviewed by 3 television stations, 1 radio station, 2 local newspapers, and me — an academic at the University of Manitoba. When I found out that Carey was coming to Winnipeg, I e-mailed him to request an interview. He was open to the idea and we settled on 8:30 Thursday morning. However, when I met him at the reading on Wednesday night, he apologized for having forgotten that he had another interview at 8:30 and wondered if I would mind meeting him "down" in the restaurant at his hotel for breakfast at 7:00 a.m.

After calling at 6:45 to make sure he was up, (Carey's idea, not mine), I arrived at the Radisson Hotel at five to seven and made my way to the only restaurant in the hotel, "up" on the 12th floor. I sat waiting in the restaurant wondering how literally an author would consider the semantics of "down" and "up." At 7:20 he had not yet arrived, and I had decided that he was probably waiting "down" somewhere, when a man who looked decidedly unlike Peter Carey (and I later found out was his publicist) came to my table saying, "oh, plans have changed and Peter had another TV interview this morning at 7:15 so he was unable to meet you. If you'd like to come with me while I drive him to the CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation], you can ask him your questions in the car and

between interviews there.” Feeling somewhat crestfallen, I agreed to do the interview in the car. However, a bit grumpily, I will admit, I wondered if all I might really have time to ask him about was his favorite colour. We got to the A Channel parking lot, and Carey came running out of the building apologizing to me profusely. He climbed into the car ready to begin the interview immediately. The publicist was kind enough to take the least direct route to the CBC. We arrived there and continued the interview in the foyer, in the hall walking, and finally, sitting down waiting for the television interview to begin. I watched his television and radio interviews and then we returned to the hotel where the adventure had begun 2 hours before. Accompanied by his fourteen-year old son (who was on March Break and had celebrated the pleasures of a visit to Winnipeg in mid-winter by watching four movies at the hotel), Carey set off to drive to North Dakota to see the badlands and visit a friend’s farm. Before he left for North Dakota, Carey signed my copy of *True History of the Kelly Gang*: “For Laura, I enjoyed all the car-talk. Thanks for your patience. Peter Carey.”

[In the car] The reason I wanted to talk to you is because I teach your work on my World Literature Written in English course and I wanted to know what you think about that.

That’s where I belong.

I teach novels by [Chinua] Achebe and [J. M.] Coetzee and people from all over the world, and I put them all together in a course on the literatures of Nigeria, South Africa, South Asia, Australia, Canada, and the West Indies. What do you think about this kind of grouping?

I think it’s a fantastic grouping, and I really do think it is a grouping. I suppose in the real truth you’re just happy if someone’s teaching you and reading you, and so on. But, we have so much in common. What we basically have in common is colonialism and the British Empire in most of those cases — all of those cases, I guess. And for me, I think people tend not to think of Australia. Commonly, when they put those writers together they tend to leave Australia out of it. And they don’t even think about it. Basically they tend to think of Australia as sort of a white settler

culture, which of course it is, in a sense, but the dynamic is much more complicated.

Do you mean in terms of multiculturalism? Or, because of the history? "Settler" doesn't mean the same thing everywhere.

Part of that often seems to be that "postcolonial literature" thinks of itself as having to do with "black" and "white," — "whites" oppressing "blacks" for the most part; maybe I'm wrong. I am looking at it from the outside. And when you think of that, there's obviously a lot that's attractive to people in postcolonialism because of that thing and the notion of oppressors and victims and so on, and the dynamic in Australian history is, in terms of those factors, very interestingly complicated. And then it begins — stop me if I'm rambling . . .

No, ramble, please.

. . . in that you have these two really powerful forces at the beginning. You have this penal colony and you have the dispossession of the indigenous people and a war that's fought that is never admitted as a war, or used not to be. So the whole notion of who's the victim in this struggle is complicated because you have the convicts in one sense — cruelly ripped from their own country and cast onto the moon — and yet, when you look at the early cases of the violence between the races, the most likely perpetrators of the violence would be the convicts, the ex-convicts. And from those first convicts contemporary Australians inherit an underdog culture which makes them really passionately identify with the underdog, and what's curious about that is that that particular passion in contemporary Australia gets applied to racial issues. So I think there's a huge, not uncontested, but a huge degree of sympathy for the plight of the Aboriginal people in the population, and I think where that's coming from, historically, is convict culture. Paradoxically, those were the very people who were the most [at fault]. If Aboriginals were raped and murdered, then more likely than not it was the convicts and convicts' ancestors who did those things. Yet the convict values are producing sort of a more liberal racial consciousness in this situation. I personally I think we all don't really know very much about the history of Australia, and

how that might apply, or have any idea of those complications in that situation. Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, was remarkable I thought in that he was one of the first people whom I read from outside the Empire, at least, who had any notion of the complexities of it.

So is that why you rewrite history so often?

Well, I think we rewrite history because one has the sense of being raised on lies and silences, you know —

Beautiful lies, even.

Beautiful lies, yes. And there's this notion of having to go back and get it right. And, also, because I think one of the great privileges of being an Australian writer is there is so much of that, so much uninvestigated that you're like somebody, you're like Sir Joseph Banks essentially, sort of running in and all these plants are not named and we don't know who we are and even, like this book of mine about Ned Kelly, we have this power of a great story and in a sense, it's still not told. One can have the ambition to tell one's country's great story, and I think there are not many places where that sort of work is left to be done. I mean, I'm sure there are. Canada is probably also a place where all of that work has been done. Going back because, you know, I haven't got a particular passion for going back. Among people, my friends, they're quite likely, like Caryl Phillips, for instance, whose work I'm sure you're aware of, Caryl is one of my closest friends and I think it's not accidental. When I first met Salman Rushdie, who's another friend, and the amazing thing was that here is this guy from Australia and this Indian man and we're just talking about our lives and we had so much in common right from the very beginning, so, we feel very Commonwealth; the Empire connects us, in a weird way.

It's very interesting because Rushdie himself has said that Commonwealth literature does not exist.

Yes, but Salman's capable of saying all sorts of things.

He has said that postcolonialism doesn't exist but postcolonial literature does exist, so it is hard to read him. Anyway, I organized a conference last

year called “*Is Canada Postcolonial?*” trying to figure out where Canada lies in discussions of postcolonialism. Some people talk about Canada and say, “No, it can’t be considered postcolonial” because they look at it in terms of race [as a rich white country], which I think actually negates how multi-racial and multicultural Canada is. Other people say “Yes, it can be, if you think of the commonalities of colonial histories or the position of certain groups [the First Nations, for example] within the country now.” It is complex.

Postcolonial is such a weird label because it doesn’t really mean what it says it means.

No. It depends on if you use a hyphen or not in academic terms. If you put a hyphen in it is a chronological marker. If you don’t use the hyphen it means a set of ideas about resistance and reconstruction, or rewriting history, or marginalization, or finding voices. The two spellings are obviously linked but are not interchangeable. Let’s go back to the idea of history. Last night you were talking about “truth” and the “true” in *True History of the Kelly Gang*. You said “Ned’s determined to tell the truth and he’s aware that he’s telling his daughter.” When I read the novel, I just assumed that “true” would be ironic right from the start.

Well it’s more complicated than that.

Of course, but I’m just thinking of what you do in *Oscar and Lucinda*, *Jack Maggs*, and *Illywhacker*. It seems that in those novels you mix in tall tales, myths, and historical facts as you weave the stories together. Those novels are about storytelling. How does such self-conscious storytelling fit beside the idea of “true”?

Well, the idea of “true” in the Ned Kelly thing is even more complicated because one of the things that I did within this, which is like a four-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, is really take these moments in the story, which are really many of them quite well documented, and which are part of “the story,” and if you’re going to tell the story like this, then you can’t have. . . . the way I’ve gotten used to talking about it, I say — you might have read the stuff, it doesn’t matter, it’s a useful sort of image — that you have this notion of the life or the story as a dark plain with these narrow spotlights, and then within the narrow spotlights are the things that are thought

to have happened. And I've got to acknowledge those because that's the story, and I can't have three people in the gang, and Mrs. Kelly can't have fewer children. I really want those things to be as the most responsible people think they happened. But then the great huge pleasure is to invent everything else, but still have my characters walk through the right door at the right time. So, in the sense of "true," I really do want all that stuff to be right [like] where they lived. But then I want to really just invent all the things that no one could possibly invent because their history's like a wooden shack, in a sense of all that, the emotional life "rots," in a way, and then it's gone.

So, in that sense, then, I guess you're doing the same thing as in Oscar and Lucinda and Jack Maggs because you have historical veracity, the truth of historical detail, and the story woven through?

I think that that sort of "truth of detail" is another issue, but yes, important. I think that the actual non-events in the story — and having characters motivated for previously unthought of reasons arrive at the right historically recorded moment — is really fascinating for me. And I love it. And I feel sort of mischievous doing it. The thing about the detail, I think, is more when I'm writing I always just want to ask myself, "How would it really be?" and this would apply if you were writing about the future, too, in other words, really thinking through the sort of forces that would affect people. And I would think about the shape of the room in the same sort of way. You want to imagine their lives and you want to know about, well, something like the Land Act or you want to know about [other details]. . . . So, [you need] to think about the business of earning a living and the size of a room, the size of a hut. What does the size of a hut, a real hut, mean in terms of their life? And how does it — if you're going through the bush shooting at somebody and they've got a modern revolver and you've got a Carbine that you have to ram and you think, "I have to keep the balls in my pocket" — affect the action. A character is made by those things and action is made by those things and we're made by those particular forces in a way, not just the genetic or social. The little things affect [us].

Let's move on to the question of national art.

That's a big one with me.

Would you say there's a national literature of Australia or national literatures? In Canada, we're in the process of deconstructing the whole idea of one national literature. There are many voices that come together in contemporary Canadian literature. Would you say the same thing?

Well, that's very Canadian [laughs].

It is very Canadian. But that's what we are, so . . .

Yes, there you are, that is what you are.

Part of our identity surrounds the whole ideal or myth of the cultural mosaic. It makes sense that that fits in discussions of Canadian literature. But what do you think about Australia?

Well, I guess, first, I don't know, because when you're in the middle of something it's very hard to know what's going on. You really need somebody from outside coming in and saying, "Australians do this" or "they do that." So, I really don't know. I certainly am sort of obsessed with the notion of national identity and the notion which goes perhaps against the whole idea of the cultural mosaic which is [that] the traumas of our birth continue to persist and persist through all of these continuing waves or layers of immigration. Somebody who's born in Kenya or Malta or somewhere, who you would expect to have no interest in Ned Kelly, for instance, will either have that interest and reflect in many ways those founding values, or if they don't, their children will. One of the things that for me was a really interesting demonstration of the persistence of the "underdog" culture, was seeing at the Olympic Games in Sydney — the crowds at the Olympic Games, that's not pre-1960 Australia with its Anglo, basically Anglo-Celtic, mix of people, but people from everywhere — and what happens? You know, there's this guy from I don't know where in Africa who decided to represent his country as a swimmer and he'd never swam, taught himself a little, goes and jumps into the pool, and goddamn nearly drowning to reach the other end. And this guy, who was nicknamed "Eric the Eel," became a celebrity in Sydney and the crowd loved that

guy. And I don't know where else in the world really, you would have this. They *loved* him and he became famous. So you have modern Australians still celebrating an "underdog" culture. It certainly wouldn't have happened in the United States. We'd like to think it would have happened in Canada [laughs].

No, in Canada we would have found his other strengths, and said, he didn't need to be the best swimmer around, he's still a very nice man [laughs]. . . . Who would you say are the writers to look out for in Australia today? What other authors are of interest to you?

Well, the people you would know about, David Malouf, for instance, you would know about, Tim Winton, you would know about, Murray Bail, probably. Helen Garner, do you know her?

Yes, Monkey Grip *and* True Stories.

I think she's just one of our really finest, finest writers and she doesn't normally travel fantastically well, for some reason, but I think she's great. And *The First Stone* [*Some Questions About Sex and Power*]. Have you read *The First Stone*?

No.

It's a really wonderful book. It's another non-fiction book about a sexual harassment case where she took it up. She's paid her feminist dues *forever*, but she took what younger feminists thought was a sort of a cop-out sort of position where a master of a college had sexually harassed somebody and he basically had his career destroyed. Well, he actually hadn't sexually harassed her; well, he had sexually harassed her, he was famous for sort of dancing, a bit of groping, in a sort of pathetic elderly sort of way with younger students — no one who rejected him was ever [harmed], nothing more ever happened, and their careers were not hurt, but his life was totally destroyed. And so she went into investigate this case and what had happened and the younger women wouldn't even talk to her and she was just talking about the criminalization of that sort of behaviour, and so she really took a lot of heat for it. It's an amazing book. It's typical of her, because it's just very courageous and all she's interested in is reflecting on this. So I think she's great. There's some younger writers coming along basically whose work

I'm not really aware of, so I only know the "noise" about them — Richard Flanagan's one, whose work *Death of a River Guide* is one of his books and *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* — so you hear "noises" and that seems to indicate that maybe there's a "radar," that maybe there's somebody there.

I guess that leads into a question about being an Australian writer who lives in New York. Salman Rushdie says to see things clearly you have to move away, have distance. In The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith you have Tristan Smith going to Voorstand partly so he can speak critically about Efica. I am not trying to throw you into Tristan Smith in a strange autobiographical way, but what do you think about Rushdie's comment and about being a "migrant" writer?

Well, we're very self-serving, all of us, in a sense, and that's Salman's situation and being away from one place, particularly in Salman's case, a place that he can't go back to at the moment, fills one with anxiety. If one's literature grows out of one's soil, to be separated from it, for whatever reason, is disturbing, and so one better make a virtue out of it. [On one hand,] I feel anxious all the time about being separated from Australia. On the other hand, I am pleased not to be there. These are all sorts of complicated things. I think there are obviously great benefits to distance and also huge benefits to [proximity]. In my sort of idealized, romanticized world, the writer would[n't] live like the Australian writer Gerald Murnane who lived all his life and never left Melbourne. In a way it's like fishing the same stretch of river, you only get to know that bit of river very well. So for those of us who haven't done that, we'd better look for the benefits of it. It's commonly suggested to me that it must be an advantage. And finally with the Ned Kelly thing I can actually see it was an advantage to be away in that way because I filtered out a lot of the crap around the story in my head and was able to see its true wonder more clearly than I might otherwise have done.

Well, this is a very roundabout segue, along the idea of "wonder." What about the "wonder" that you have in your books? At one point you said magic realism, for example, is a "cheap cliché," or at least is in danger of becoming a "cheap cliché." What do you think about magic realism now?

“Magic realism” was an exciting thing to say about something awhile ago. Now it sounds like last year’s fashion. And the label in a funny way is not the point.

It still does such exciting things. If it’s a “representation of what the real might be,” as Franz Roh defined it, then to me that’s what fiction is.

Yes. That’s what I think the whole notion of fiction is. Now, people say, because I’ve got a couple of books in a row that are set in the past, I’m a historical novelist. The sound of historical novelist sounds like someone I really don’t want to read. It sounds boring. And everything does feel made-up to me, whether it’s in the present or the past, or wherever it is. It’s just *made-up*. And writing about the past becomes exciting at that point where you know enough to know you can just make it up. And the blending of all sorts of stories within a work is an exciting thing for me. So the women in the Ned Kelly story, I’m really happy to have the banshee and the deal with the Devil and the child who’s the magic child. They are all of the sort of stories we tell ourselves.

And, the Rat guy.

Yes, and the Rat guy. All of these things. Actually, those stories all have their foundation in Irish folklore. So, I’m really happy to incorporate all of that sort of thing in the warp and weft of the story. For me, it really enriches it. It makes it more made up. Makes it more rooted at the same time. But, magic realism, is probably a useful way to talk about it. But it just makes me uncomfortable because it has to do with literary fashion. And I suppose, when it is a literary fashion, you’re happy to write it. The minute you suspect it’s not, well, you know, you want to call it something else.

*I was teaching *Midnight’s Children* last week. I’m sorry to bring Rushdie up again, but I’ve been teaching Haroun and the Sea of Stories and *Midnight’s Children* in the last couple of weeks. Anyway, I was explaining that magic realism is the accepted juxtaposition of the ordinary and the extraordinary to a class, and one of my students put up her hand and said: “Well, this makes so much more sense, because it didn’t have to have happened.” I said: “No, you just accept that it can happen and you move on.” And she said, “well, hey, now I like the book.”*

Wow. Good for you.

It just opened it up for her. It's fine . . . it happens. So I think, yes it's a label, but it's a useful label.

Yes, that's right. The thing that makes me uneasy about it is, to a degree, my own misunderstanding. When I read [Gabriel Garcia] Marquez, a long, long time ago. . . . One of the few books in my life I actually stole — someone's given to me and I haven't given back on purpose.

One Hundred Years of Solitude?

Yes. Some friends came back from Colombia. They had met him and it was very early for the piece. It was one of those things, I thought, I didn't want anyone else in the world to read it. And secondly, I just couldn't believe that book. I misunderstood it. I didn't recognize the degree to which those stories really were rooted in the culture. And so therefore it felt more *made-up*. In a sense.

So that's what you're saying about the Irish stories in Ned Kelly, too.

Yes, that they're rooted in the culture. I think that I misread — like one does misread across cultures — I misread fruitfully, I guess. It gave me permission to make things up, and do things in a certain way. But perhaps sometimes [things are] not as deeply rooted in the place as they might have been. I can't think of examples.

Well, because of magic realism's Latin American roots, some people have seen magic realism as a form for the "third world," or a form of writing from the margins, or of form of postcolonial discourse.

So, that would have to be the totally academic interpretation.

That would be the very academic interpretation. But those same people say: "other writers are seen as writing postmodernism." So, what do you see as the difference between them? I guess from what you were saying before, you don't think that postcolonial literature particularly has a form.

Well, I mean you have postcolonial situations.

What about postmodernism? How do you address ideas of postmodernism?

Well, I don't even know what that means exactly, but in the sense that if part of postmodernism is acknowledging and incorporating, you know, the sort-of *past*, to that degree it's an interesting exercise for me. If it also has to do with a plain sort-of metafictional [element], then it's also interesting.

To me, postmodernism centres on the idea that it's a "questioning." It's a questioning of accepted truths or norms.

Well, by that definition I'm hugely postmodern [laughs].

I guess by that definition I have to wonder if anybody isn't.

Yes. How could you not be. But, I mean you'd say that for instance *Jack Maggs*, which deals with [Charles Dickens's] *Great Expectations* in a sense, and the questioning of Magwitch's whole role in the story, is postmodernist. It's referring to a lot of *literature*, and so on.

It seems to be the most metafictional of your novels. The biographic novel that Tobias Oates is writing about Jack Maggs within the novel, stolen from Jack while he is under hypnosis, is fittingly called Jack Maggs. In its use of postmodern hyperbole and untruths, this version of Jack Maggs contradicts the version that we are reading. As we see the unreliability of Oates' narrative, the unreliability of all narratives, is, implicitly, called into question. I love the novel.

Thank you.

What other contemporary movements in genre or form are you interested in?

Nothing and *everything*. I do ask myself: how am I going to deal with what I've got to do. At the moment I'm trying to do this book which is about this poetry hoax in Australia. Do you know about Ern Malley [a pseudonym for Max Harris]? There was an anti-modernist hoax in Australia in the forties, in 1946, which had huge and devastating effects in all sorts of different ways. My conceit is that the poet, or the *imagined* poet, who did the hoax, is a motor mechanic who had written these amazing modernist poems — and they are amazing — and he did it to make a fool of the editor of an avant-garde magazine called *Angry Penguins*. And he succeeded in doing it, but the interesting thing is that these poems continue to exist and actually they're pretty good. And the

character of Ern Malley sort-of lives in our imagination. So, my book is called *My Life is a Fake*. And it begins with him being born at the age of 24, to be a fake, to be known as a fraud. And within this book — I'm just talking about genres and things — I'm going to have a character, not him, whose totally into alien abductions and UFOs. So, you started talking about genre. . . . I don't know where this fits.

It fits. I think your stuff has been taught on Science Fiction courses.

Yes. That pleases me. Although, you know, I don't know a lot about science fiction.

This is when your own words come back to haunt you. Because I know you said this about 18 years ago. But you said that the trouble with academics was that they try too hard to understand these stories [War Crimes and Fat Man In History]. They should relax. The stories are only about what they seem to be about. So what do you think? Do you think we should still relax?

No. I was young and silly and threatened.

What do you think about academic readings? Do you enjoy them or do you just distance yourself from them?

Well, I would say now that it's a form of reading. When people read, they bring their own lives to bear. This sort of amazing connection takes place. I'm always staggered that there's any degree of commonality in the response at all given how different our lives are and how the work is totally illuminated. The 'text,' to use that word, is totally illuminated or shaped by the life that connects with it. And so obviously academics are gonna . . . I mean it's a foolish young person's thing to say . . .

That's why I said it may come back to haunt you.

Yes. No. Well, it was actually nice of you to put it that way, because it is true, I mean, what the hell, I've said worse things. But I wouldn't say that now. I suppose at first I was thrilled to find that somebody was writing academic stuff about my work, but I couldn't admit that to myself. So I had to say, "that's wrong, how foolish can you be." But of course, now, I wouldn't think that at all.

That brings me to my last question. How much authority do you think an author has? Do you accept the idea that once the book is done, then you step back from it and the reader takes over.

Well, of course. You can't be sitting there beside every reader, whispering in their ear, saying you mean this, or you mean that. That isn't how it works anyway. The satisfying thing about literature when you read it is that you do *make it*. And it's why it's more nourishing, why it seems to me more fundamentally nourishing than the great percentage of movies anyway. It's because you do that, you work to make something. The miracle, I think the miracle is that if a work's *made well*, and if it has any *integrity*, then it'll sustain a whole lot of, not contradictory meanings, but overlapping readings. Which are all, which all fit — with luck, if you've done your work properly — with, generally within the lines that you've drawn for yourself. People will read things that will make a certain sense that never occurred to you. And, I think it's great. Frankly.

Alice Munro, the Canadian short story writer, says that she read a review of one of her books that went on and on and on about her using the word "brown" — about having 'earthly' connotations and mother earth and all that kind of stuff. And she said: "I just thought brown was a nice colour, I was wearing brown the day I wrote it." But I read that and say, "you may have been wearing brown, but it still has the connotations . . . they're both there."

Yes. Absolutely. Once it's there, it's going to work, it's going to do something. And what are we doing? We're busily making sense out of things. So, of course, particularly in the movies, I can think of numbers of moviemakers who are actually really remarkably stupid who then get the benefit when people attribute great intelligence to them.

NOTES

¹ Peter Carey began reading from *True History of the Kelly Gang* with this passage. It serves as an epigraph for both his reading and my interview. Thank you to The Winnipeg Writers Festival, Amy Kroeker, Fred Cutler, Debra Dudek, and Adam Shoemaker for helping me decipher Carey's words.