

***Fabulating Beauty: Perspectives on the Fiction of Peter Carey.* Ed. Andreas Gaile. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005, xxxv + 438pp.
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This is a most welcome and overdue volume, the first collection of essays on an author who has been in the literary limelight for at least two decades and who, as the editor stresses in his introduction, “has come to represent Australia as Salman Rushdie does India or Margaret Atwood Canada.” The contributors from Australia, Europe and America—including almost all the major Carey critics—deal with all of Carey’s published literary works, giving a valuable overview of critical responses to his fiction.

Their essays are grouped into three sections: “The Writer and his Work” has a biographical focus; “Aspects and Overviews” contains comprehensive analyses of his oeuvre; and “Perspectives on Individual Fictions” is devoted to individual works. This is a judicious ordering allowing for an immediate comparison of standpoints, though one might argue that Nicholas Birns’s article on the short story “Kristu Du” ought to have been put in the section on individual fictions, whereas Carolyn Bliss’s challenging exploration of cultural master-plots in *True History of the Kelly Gang* really provides a comprehensive survey of more than one novel, though it also makes sense to place her paper next to Susan K. Martin’s complementary analysis of the same book. Indeed, it is one of the great strengths of this collection that it manages to engender a dialogue between the various papers, juxtaposing divergent interpretations and pitting against each other different perspectives and standpoints, which enrich the reader’s appreciation of both the novels themselves and the various critical responses to them. Thus Carolyn Bliss explores the way in which most of Carey’s characters are held in the thrall of cultural master-plots, which prevent the achievement of authentic selfhood in the Sartrean sense. Ned Kelly constantly places himself within the meta-narratives of mateship, loyalty, social determinism and various European master-plots that lose their relevance in Australia, and, in the end, ironically he himself becomes a potent master-plot authorising “the simplistic nationalism that Kelly’s fight against the established order in Australia was meant to challenge.” Martin extends the focus to Carey’s own entanglement in Australian master-narratives of dispossessed white male heroes fighting against social injustice. Disregarding documents which seem to point at Ned Kelly’s relationship to the Aboriginals and to his possible homosexuality, Carey instead celebrates Ned’s masculinity and heterosexuality (to the point

of even providing him with a fictional daughter), and thereby appropriates the Catholic-Irish working class rebel as a stereotypical Australian hero.

Both critics thereby draw attention to Carey's paradoxical double perspective of both deconstructing and commodifying nationalist narratives—an aspect also addressed in Karen Lamb's critical assessment of the policies of the Booker Prize and Carey's possible accommodation to clichéd English notions of what constitutes Australian history and character. In contrast, Andreas Gaile more unproblematically sees Carey's fiction as mythogenetic in the sense of demythologising misconceptions about Australia and, instead, advancing forms of storytelling which help "Australians to claim their country through the imagination." Nicholas Jose, a writer himself, in turn admires Carey's dazzling storytelling, but is not entirely convinced by its content, and contrasts the older generation's more troubled relation to the "national" with his own generation's more comfortable acceptance of multiculturalism.

The question of a deconstruction or re-construction of master-narratives also surfaces in the three papers on *Jack Maggs*. Annegret Maak celebrates the novel as an "Aussie Story," since the eponymous hero returns to Australia and gives up his self-destructive nostalgia for England. A similarly positive view of Maggs's Australian career is held by Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp, who argues that the novel overcomes the postcolonial writing-back paradigm by posing as a pre-text to the genesis of *Great Expectations*, a book she accuses of dehumanising Magwitch (overlooking that the derogatory epithets are meant to characterise the narrator, Pip, and are hence obviously avoided in Carey's omniscient narration). In contrast, however, one might also argue that *Jack Maggs*—unlike Carey's earlier deconstructive fiction—in fact reiterates the white Australian myths of the sinned-against convict and of Australia as a workman's paradise. Much more controversial issues are raised in Bruce Woodcock's brilliant and challenging reading of *Jack Maggs* against the background of Karl Marx's *Capital*. The language of trickery and illusion Marx employs to unmask the bourgeois chimera of a fair economy is mirrored in the cut-throat capitalism portrayed in the novel and its "paradox of crime as labour and labour as crime." The central metaphor Carey uses to expose the deceptive rhetoric of capitalism is the fakery of fiction-making itself. Woodcock reminds us that in Australia the Maggses become capitalists themselves and preside over a violent neo-capitalist society.

Different problems are investigated in relation to *Oscar and Lucinda*. Lyn McCredden pursues the interesting question of how sacredness might be

imagined in a postcolonial novel. She believes that Oscar's hellish journey through the outback leads him towards "the savage nothingness which might be his God," and she links the glass Church in which he is entombed with Kristeva's chora, metaphorical birthplace and grave of the non-subject, "the place of terrible rebirth where the sacred might possibly be revealed." Ansgar Nünning, on the other hand, in his excellent article interprets the same novel against recent trends in historiography foregrounding the history of mentalities, of average people, especially women's history, and the history of everyday life. Carey indeed focuses on the living conditions, the characters' changing world views and their individual experience of social prejudice and cultural change. Like McCredden, though from a different perspective, Nünning stresses the redemptive potential of the novel which, by questioning categories of confession, class, race and gender, "restores us to the humanistic core of our humanity."

Indeed, some of the best articles view Carey's works against the background of various theories of cultural philosophy. One of the high points of the volume is undoubtedly Bill Ashcroft's interpretation of *The Unusual Life of Tristran Smith* as an engagement with Jean Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum, which Carey, however, reinterprets to allow for the possibility of subversive political action. Since all cultural identity is performance, the subalterns may seize the signs of self-representation by mimicking the discursive apparatus of cultural authority, and by fighting out contesting versions of culture and history in the theatre, the book's appropriate central image.

The present volume also offers a wealth of other rewarding insights. In an interview Peter Carey reflects affably and with his typical satirical edge on the anxieties of academics and the vagaries of reviewers, on Australian history and culture, and on his own literary career. Christer Larsson traces "Allusions to Christian Tradition" in Carey's fiction, which figure often as formal rather than thematic elements, playing with reader expectations. Though not all of the examples he lists are equally compelling, he brings to mind an important perspective which is often disregarded in relation to Carey's supposedly "post-Christian" writing. Brian Edwards interprets *Illywhacker* as bricolage, in which the existence of various kinds of truths opens the opportunity for multiple interpretation and further constructions of personal and cultural identity. Pam Macintyre relates Carey's often neglected *The Big Bazooobley* to well-known children's literature and stresses the ambiguous and complex sides of the tale, in which the popular lost

child motif is linked to an attack on colonising adults and capitalist culture. Readers will agree that the hero takes on responsibility unusual for a nine-year-old, even though his wish to enjoy a “bombe Alaska” in the end seems amiably childlike and need perhaps not be interpreted as a capitulation to capitalist values. Anthony Hassall inquires into the generic ambiguities of *30 Days in Sydney*, which begins as travel writing and ends as a collection of fictions which search out the constituents in history, geography and human life which have shaped Sydney, fictions which “capture more searchingly than a merely factual travelogue the look, the feel, the history and the spirit” of the city. Robert McFarlane points out that, like many postmodern works, *My Life as a Fake* dissolves the borderline between making and faking; it exemplifies various positions in literary theory as regards originality and authorship—a theoretical concern which, he feels, occasionally overwhelms the narrative thrust of the novel.

It is only natural that in a collection containing 21 essays, not all papers will be equally convincing. Cornelia Schulze’s attempt to read Carey’s short stories as Brechtian *Lehrstücke* seems a doubtful approach, since it reduces these multi-faceted narratives to a simple didactic and often banal message. Thematically, she divides the stories into four categories—entrapment by the American dream, capitalism, power and authority, and gender—but she frequently selects only one story for exemplification, disregarding such relevant texts as “The Chance” (gender), “Report on the Shadow Industry” (capitalism), “The Puzzling Nature of Blue” (colonialism), “The Journey of a Lifetime” (authority), to name but a few, which would have yielded a more differentiated picture. In his article “‘Kristu Du’ and the Architecture of Tyranny” Nicholas Birns wisely reminds us to see the short story in its political context of the Vietnam War, Idi Amin, and Western support of totalitarian regimes, but belabours the similarity between the architect and the tyrant as being both unelected (if all architecture were put to the vote, we should be swamped by neo-Victorian monstrosities, at least in my part of the world); and the term “carceral confinement” in the dome built by the architect in the story is misleading, because the tribes are not literally imprisoned there, but are overawed by the supposed magic of rain-making which is its side-effect. Peter Price’s paper on captivity in Carey’s fiction stretches the metaphor too far, making it range from captivity by futile work and imperialism to “obsession and loneliness,” and devoting disproportionate attention to unlikely texts such as “A Letter to Our Son” while passing rather cursorily over *Jack Maggs* or *Kelly Gang*, which would seem relevant in this context. Theodore F. Sheckels, in his paper on film

versions of Carey's works, draws attention to such problems as the visual representation of surreal imagery and the constraints of genre. Although postmodern fiction may pose more formidable challenges than realist novels in their adaptation for the screen, Sheckels disregards such successful adaptations as that of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (adapted by Nobel prize winner Harold Pinter). The danger of losing "some significant dimension of the source" applies to any film adaptation, and viewers are, arguably, even more intolerant of such loss in classics. Sheckels' analysis of the film adaptation of "Crabs" unfortunately contains a number of factual mistakes. It is by no means clear that the tow-truck driver the protagonist borrows the car from is his brother, and after Crabs has metamorphosed into a car, he does not "hurdle" the fence (but finds an open door instead), and he certainly is not locked "within the fences" in the end, but locked out, wishing to get back into the compound.

There are a number of typographical errors and other mistakes in the volume (for instance, *Jack Maggs* is italicised even when the character is referred to) which a more thorough proof-reading might have eradicated. Some of them are positively confusing—such as the use of "Efica" when what is meant is obviously Tristran's experience in Voorstand.

Irrespective of such mistakes, however, this collection has great merits and is a must for all those interested in Peter Carey and Australian fiction in general. The book also comes with a helpful bibliography of Carey's works and all secondary sources. In this stimulating and diversified collection postmodern, postcolonial and nationalist perspectives predominate; in the preface, Paul Kane proposes shifting attention "more firmly on the *writer*" in the future. The present volume has done a great job; but Kane suggests that there is room for more work on Carey's rich oeuvre.

Margarete Rubik, University of Vienna