

Books and Covers: Reflections on Some Recent Australian Novels

ELIZABETH WEBBY

For the 2002 Miles Franklin Award, given to the best Australian novel of the year, my fellow judges and I ended up with a short list of five novels. Three happened to come from the same publishing house – Pan Macmillan Australia – and we could not help remarking that much more time and money had been spent on the production of two of the titles than on the third. These two, by leading writers Tim Winton and Richard Flanagan, were hardbacks with full colour dust jackets and superior paper stock. Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001) also featured colour illustrations of the fish painted by Tasmanian convict artist W. B. Gould, the initial inspiration for the novel, at the beginning of each chapter, as well as changes in type colour to reflect the notion that Gould was writing his manuscript in whatever he could find to use as ink. The third book, Joan London's *Gilgamesh* (2001), was a first novel, though by an author who had already published two prize-winning collections of short stories. It, however, was published in paperback, with a monochrome and far from eye-catching photographic cover that revealed little about the work's content.

One of the other judges – the former leading Australian publisher Hilary McPhee – was later quoted in a newspaper article on the Award, reflecting on what she described as the “under publishing” of many recent Australian novels. This in turn drew a response from the publisher of another of the short-listed novels, horrified that our reading of the novels submitted for the Miles Franklin Award might have been influenced in any way by a book's production values. To those who work in book history rather than publishing this reaction will seem naïve to say the least. Yet many successful novels now appear in quite different formats as they are sold into different markets and different countries. How does this influence readers' interpretations of them?

This paper will look in particular at Peter Carey's multi-award-winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), which has appeared in five formats in Australia alone.¹ Like Flanagan, Carey bases his novel on an Australian historical figure, the bushranger Ned Kelly, who is supposedly writing his life story. And like Flanagan he has some fun with the materiality of the text, in this case via detailed bibliographical descriptions of the supposed Kelly manuscript. In addition I will be considering a more recent novel, Chloe Hooper's *A Child's Book of True Crime* (2002), which as its title indicates also draws on the trend in recent Australian fiction for mixing history and fiction, with an added spice of sex and violence. Like Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, Hooper's novel is set in Tasmania, allowing for some additional frisson thanks to that island's Gothic associations, though also attracting the wrath of those like Flanagan who actually live in Tasmania rather than just exploiting it in their novels. Like Flanagan's novel, too, *A Child's Book* includes illustrations, in this case mock-child-like drawings of iconic Australian birds and animals, which are an essential part of the text. And, at least in some editions, it featured a cover, also using Australian fauna, which made parodic reference to the covers of some early twentieth-century English children's adventure stories set in distant parts of the Empire, such as Australia. This cover seemed such an essential part of the work's meaning that I was very surprised when I discovered that the United States editions of Hooper's novel had very different jackets.

My initial interest in the disparity between the amount of money being put into the design and production of covers and dustjackets for novels by name authors as opposed to new or unknown ones was as part of an investigation of what we know to be happening with book promotion and marketing generally—the name authors now get such big advances that publishers have to keep throwing money at their books to ensure that they don't end up with even bigger losses. It then becomes even harder for a new author, or a not so new one who has not yet managed to become a name, to attract the attention of buyers, readers, and perhaps even judges. As I have delved further into the differences between these jackets/covers, however, a

number of intriguing issues have opened up with respect to the ways in which these differences must affect the readings of texts. This seems to be especially crucial in the case of texts which deliberately play with notions of history and fiction, truth and lies, and where one or more paratextual elements are used as part of this play. Even where this is not the case, as with Tim Winton's *Dirt Music* (2001), the differences among the Australian, British and American jackets/covers raise questions about the ways in which texts from elsewhere are presented to British and American readers. While one might have expected a playing up of the exotic element – as certainly happens with Australian film and television programs – usually the reverse seems to be the case. Indeed, it would seem that publishers have sometimes attempted to conceal the fact that Winton's and Carey's novels are set in Australia, perhaps because quality fiction is not usually associated with Australia in the way that crocodiles and the outback are. Interestingly, the material on the inside dustjacket flap for the British edition of *Dirt Music* is identical to that on the Australian hardcover except for the last sentence where Winton is referred to as "one of the finest novelists of his generation" instead of "the pre-eminent Australian novelist of his generation." The U. S. hardcover blurb reverts to the Australian version of this last sentence though in other respects it is very different, focussing on the novel's central male character, not the central female one.

A beautiful photograph of a large boab tree standing amidst an ocean of red grass is featured on the front of both the Australian hardback and paperback editions of *Dirt Music*; a small black and white line drawing of the same tree is used as a section breaker throughout the text. This is not only a most attractive image, but one resonant for any Australian reader of the northern Australian country where the novel is set, as well as seeming attuned to the novel's title. And, as one reads the novel, one finds that at a certain stage, when the hero is alone in a very isolated part of Western Australia, boab trees become surrogate humans for him – more particularly, surrogate women. So I was very surprised to see that the English edition of *Dirt Music* instead had a blue cover featuring a large rowing boat. Although quite pleasant this seemed far less striking that

the Australian cover as well as having nothing whatever to do with dirt, music or, it would seem, Australia. Granted, the sea does figure in the novel too, as in most of Winton's fiction, but this still seems to me a very strange choice for the cover of a novel which has nothing whatever to do with jolly boating weather or a quiet Sunday row. The U. S. editions feature aerial shots of what could be the Australian coast and, in being mainly in brownish tones, are at least more appropriate with respect to their colour. Even though the focus is still more on water than on dirt, one does get a sense of the immensity of the country, another theme in the novel.

With Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, there is much less difference between the images used on the covers, probably because the paintings of Australian sea creatures actually made by the Tasmanian convict artist William Buelow Gould in the 1820s are so intrinsic to the novel: its subtitle is "A Novel in Twelve Fish". The question of different reading experiences here relates more to the differences between the hardcover and paperback editions. As mentioned earlier, in the original hardback each of the twelve chapters was not only prefaced with the image of the particular fish it related to, but was printed in a different coloured ink, supposedly reflecting the fact that as a convict Gould had to write his journal using whatever was to hand. Some reviewers questioned the value of this conceit, and in fact in reading the novel the differences in type colour between the chapters might easily be overlooked if the narrator did not draw attention to them in passages recounting how he gets his different inks. The argument that using the different colours was just the author being rather precious seems to be supported by the fact that the cheaper paperback editions of *Gould's Book of Fish* are not printed in different coloured inks. Readers of this version have to imagine, if they wish, the different colours – arguably more in keeping with the novel's status as a magic realist text – and, after all, all versions present us with print instead of manuscript. Rather more of a loss to the reading experience, however, is the fact that in the paperback the coloured plates of the twelve fish, because of the need to use better paper stock, are all collected together at the back of the book rather than each appearing at

the beginning of the appropriate chapter. As Flanagan's novel demonstrates, there are considerable difficulties for any author who deliberately attempts to use the materiality of the book as part of its textual meaning, especially when going beyond the manipulations of layout or typeface found at least as far back as Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. All sorts of things can be done in artist's books for a select group of readers but going into the mass market is another matter.

Since Chloe Hooper stuck to black and white illustrations for *A Child's Book of True Crime* there are no such major differences between the internal texts of the hardcover and paperback editions. Here the big difference is between the jackets/covers for the American editions as against the Australian and British ones. As already noted, the covers for these featured a clever parody of typical covers for English children's books from the early decades of the twentieth century, books that were widely circulated in Australia as well. The American hardback, in contrast, has a stylish and attractive cover, which still uses an Australian faunal motif of the black swan, similar to the image that appears on the back cover of the Australian edition, but without any visual references to earlier children's literature. The American paperback, however, features a side view of a naked woman, which positions it as very much a book for adults, plus a very small picture of a kangaroo. Does the fact that the U.S. covers are so different from the Australian and British ones indicate that American readers were assumed not to be familiar with the sort of children's book covers being parodied? Or perhaps a worry that a book with such a garish cover and the word "child" in the title would be perceived as indeed just a book for children?

Peter Carey is now, of those catering to the more literary end of the fiction market, probably the Australian novelist with the most significant international reputation and sales. He has twice won Britain's Booker Prize, the second time for *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Like much of Carey's fiction, including his most popular works, this is set in the nineteenth century and is purportedly Ned Kelly's own first person account of his life, written for a daughter he will never see. The daughter is an invention of Carey's, however, as is Kelly's

distinctive narrative voice. Though the so-called Jerilderie Letter presents Kelly's own justification of his life and crimes, its highly idiosyncratic syntax and punctuation would have proved too taxing for readers of a long novel, so Carey provides his own version of Kelly's voice, as of his life.

While he has lived in New York since 1989, Carey has until recently remained faithful to his original publisher, the University of Queensland Press, which brought out his first collection of short stories, *The Fat Man in History*, back in 1974. Given that he has been the author mainly responsible for helping to keep them in the black, U. Q. P. naturally has made every effort to market and promote Carey's works. *True History* was initially issued by them in a limited edition hardcover which, with its plain cream covers and mock leather back, imitated an actual nineteenth-century publication or perhaps the type of folder used by libraries to store rare manuscripts. This resemblance was reinforced by the stiff, semi-translucent paper dust-jacket. A large format paperback was issued at much the same time. This is an interesting cover in being based on an 1880 engraving of the Victorian country town of Benalla, near where the Kellys lived, rather than depicting the type of bush landscape more usually associated with nineteenth-century Australia, and especially, for obvious reasons, with bushrangers. The engraving has, however, been coloured up in a deliberately stylised way, especially the sky, so that the cover presents itself as a combination of aesthetic object and historical artefact, in much the same way as the novel does.

Two smaller format paperback versions of *True History* followed. One, in contrast to the seemingly deliberate ahistorical stylisation and rejection of conventional associations seen in the cover for the large paperback, included a small photograph of Kelly combined with a reproduction of part of a letter in his actual handwriting, so providing a reading frame which stresses the historic figure rather than the fictionality of the text. The other, with a much more stylised cover featuring a large letter K, and so this time stressing textuality rather than history, was issued after the novel had won the Booker Prize, and has been by far the biggest seller in Australia – over 100,000 copies. Another hardback edition was also issued to

celebrate Carey's second Booker Prize. All in all, the University of Queensland Press has sold more than a quarter of a million copies of their various Australian editions of *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Sales of the big K cover paperback were considerably helped by its being chosen for a special promotion by the city council of Brisbane to encourage reading, called One Book, One Brisbane.

In Britain, where Carey is published by Faber, the decision was obviously made to emphasise the historical aspect of the text, with a cover using a documentary photograph of Kelly's mother outside her hut with her family. Readers of this edition of the novel would therefore be less likely to question the truth claims made in the title, one assumes, and more inclined to believe that this actually is the true history of the Kelly gang. Indeed, for many readers both inside and outside Australia, Carey's Ned Kelly will now be *the* Ned Kelly.

The American publishers of *True History of the Kelly Gang* seem to have been mainly concerned to sell it as a novel, choosing covers which stress neither the historical aspects of the text nor its connections with Australia. The jacket of the hardcover edition features an attractive illustration of a homestead set among trees that could perhaps be taken as making some iconic reference to Australia though, as the photograph on the British edition demonstrates, is nothing like the huts in which Kelly and his family actually lived. The real surprise was the cover of the U. S. paperback edition, with its two rearing white horses. While the Kelly Gang did include horse-stealing among its nefarious activities, it would be hard to think of a less appropriate cover than this one. What readers, one wonders, did the publishers have in mind here?

Peter Carey has recently announced that he is leaving University of Queensland Press for Random House, in part perhaps because Carol Davidson, who has looked after the marketing of his novels in Australia for many years, is now working for the Australian branch of his U. S. publishers. In a final attempt to wring the last possible sales out of *True History of the Kelly Gang*, U. Q. P. is now marketing the big K cover paperback edition along with a similarly styled edition of *Oscar*

and *Lucinda*, Carey's other Booker Prize winner, offering them packaged together in a little black paper bag with red ties. U. Q. P. rightly prides itself on being one of the few independent publishers of Australian fiction but it is noticeable that this nationalism does not extend to promoting an Australian literary prize rather than an English one. Carey has actually won Australia's own Miles Franklin Award three times, for his first novel *Bliss*, and then for *Oscar and Lucinda* and for *Jack Maggs*, but did not win it for *True History of the Kelly Gang*. For some readers all this ferreting around in the past had become a little wearying, even when the setting was not Tasmania. At a time of increasing globalisation, there have been questions as to why so many Australian novelists have turned to the colonial period for their stories. Are they, and their readers, retreating to the greater certainties of the past where it is easier to portray the white Australian male hero as victim of malign forces outside his own control? Is the supposedly postcolonial present too full of stories which challenge this comforting image?

Ironically, as this paper has demonstrated, Australian authors are still very much the colonial Other when it comes to the ways in which their novels are packaged for overseas audiences. They may not be subject to quite as many editorial changes to the actual words on the page as in the days when nearly all Australian novels were published in Britain without authors being able to correct proofs. In 1901, for example, Miles Franklin herself was horrified to find the title of *My Brilliant Career* lacking the intended question mark after Brilliant, not to mention numerous other changes to her text.² Today, Australian authors do have a local publishing industry, even if one dominated by multinational companies, which gives at least some of them some say in how their works are presented to the public. So the Australian Society of Authors is presently gearing up for a fight to exclude cultural products from any future free trade agreement with the U. S. A. If this is lost, Australian novelists and readers may have once again to put up with covers that not only contain inaccuracies but diminish rather than enhance their reading experiences. For me, the Australian editions discussed here had not only better

designed but more appropriate and meaningful covers than their American or British counterparts. While there can be arguments about the respective merits and reading effects of each of the five Australian covers for *True History of the Kelly Gang*, surely any one of them must be preferred to rearing white horses!

1 The following editions are cited in this paper:

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Flanagan, Richard, *Gould's Book of Fish*

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2. See Elizabeth Webby, Introduction, Miles Franklin, *My Brilliant Career* (Sydney: A & R Classics, 2001), pp. vi-ix.

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ELIZABETH WEBBY is Professor of Australian Literature at the University of Sydney.