

Profile

Peter Carey

Within days of his triumphant return from London with the 1988 Booker Prize, Peter Carey disappeared into the bush with filmmaker Wim Wenders. Carey is working on the screenplay of Wender's next film *Till The End of the World*, much of which is set in Central Australia.

Work commitments aside, the desert is probably providing Carey with a welcome respite from the endless interviews, press appearances and public functions which followed the announcement that *Oscar and Lucinda* had been awarded the world's most prestigious literary prize.

In many ways, *Oscar and Lucinda* was an appropriate choice to win the Booker during the Bicentennial year (interestingly, it was overlooked for the major Australian literary awards). The novel is an unusual love story set in Australia in the 1860s. Oscar Hopkins, a young member of the Plymouth Brethren, turns against his father and becomes an Anglican minister. Oscar sends himself into exile to Australia on the fruits of his successful gambling exploits. In Sydney, he finds himself increasingly drawn to Lucinda Leplastrier, a strong-willed independent woman who has bought a glass factory at Darling Harbour, through their mutual obsession with gambling. And it is a bet which sets up the central incident of the novel — a glass church on a barge floating up the Bellinger River.

The glass church provides Carey with a number of opportunities to raise issues about colonisation of Australia. The church has to be carried in pieces overland from Sydney to the mouth of the river — passing beyond the limits of

European settlement through areas where the only religion is the spirituality of the Aboriginal people. The bringing of Christianity to the "heathens" or, indeed, Christianity passing through "heathen" lands has to be marked in some form, and the leader of the expedition organises a massacre of Aboriginal people. Christianity has well and truly arrived.

Carey readily acknowledged the difficulties he faced as a non-Aboriginal attempting to write about the effects of the European invasion upon Aboriginal society. "A number of years ago I was at a playwrights' conference in Canberra, and Gary Foley said, "Just stop fucking around, you whites, because Aboriginal people have enough misinformation to deal with about who we are and what we are. Let us deal with that and you stick to your own stories.

"I thought that this was both absolutely right and absolutely wrong. Right because I understood what he was saying and I recognised that he had every right to say that. But, at the same time, I felt that there might be writers who were capable, even though they were not Aboriginal, of transcending their race and class to a degree by the sheer power of their understanding and sympathy and the power of their writing."

Oscar and Lucinda, then, continues the political trend Carey established with his first collection of short stories. *The Fat Man in History*, published in 1974. *The Fat Man* was followed by another collection of short stories, *War Crimes* (1979), and the novels *Bliss* (1981) and *Illywhacker* (1985).

For Carey, all his work is political in one sense or another. But while he may be constantly criticising society and suggesting alternatives, he is also aware of the dangers of overtly political writing. "Talking about politics and writing can be dangerous because it can make you sound like an essayist. I'm not trying to write essays or propaganda. What I am trying to do is to create an imaginative work and it just happens that politics plays an important, but hopefully subtle, part in the creation of that work."

In the early days of Carey's career I felt a little uneasy about his



work. While admiring his skill and imagination, I found it difficult to reconcile Carey the author with Carey's other profession in advertising. For a long time, in fact, Carey combined the two, supplementing his income from writing with a steady income from the advertising agency. It took *Bliss* to finally expel doubts I had about Carey and advertising. In *Bliss*, the main character, Harry Bliss, too works in advertising. After a heart attack Joy looks around at his work, house and family and decides that he has died and is in hell. Nothing, however, has really changed except Joy's perception of his society.

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to question Carey about his background in advertising. Somewhat surprisingly, he referred to advertising as one of the important political influences on his work. "We live in a capitalist society and large corporations are the bodies which really rule our lives. I found it very useful and informative to be in a position where I could see the intimate workings of large corporations and I got to know a lot of people involved in the running of those corporations quite well. I'm sure that none of us would wish to have a literature totally produced by schoolteachers and I feel it has been a valuable experience to have had the nitty gritty political experience of working in advertising."

But whatever you think of Carey's political "education", it's probably vitally important to read *Oscar and Lucinda* before you accept your next dinner party invitation. It's the sort of book everybody will be discussing for a long time to come.

Mark Roberts.