

A love-hate story

By Susan Wyndham

April 1, 2006

Butcher Bones, the angry artist in Peter Carey's new novel, has a lot in common with his creator. Both were born in 1943 in small-town Bacchus Marsh outside Melbourne, one the son of a butcher, one of a car dealer. Both have lived in Sydney and Bellingen in northern NSW, travelled to Tokyo and taken their considerable talents to New York, where they've had to prove themselves all over again. Both have recently crawled through a bitter divorce from women they once adored and both have glamorous new lovers. So the story must be partly autobiographical.

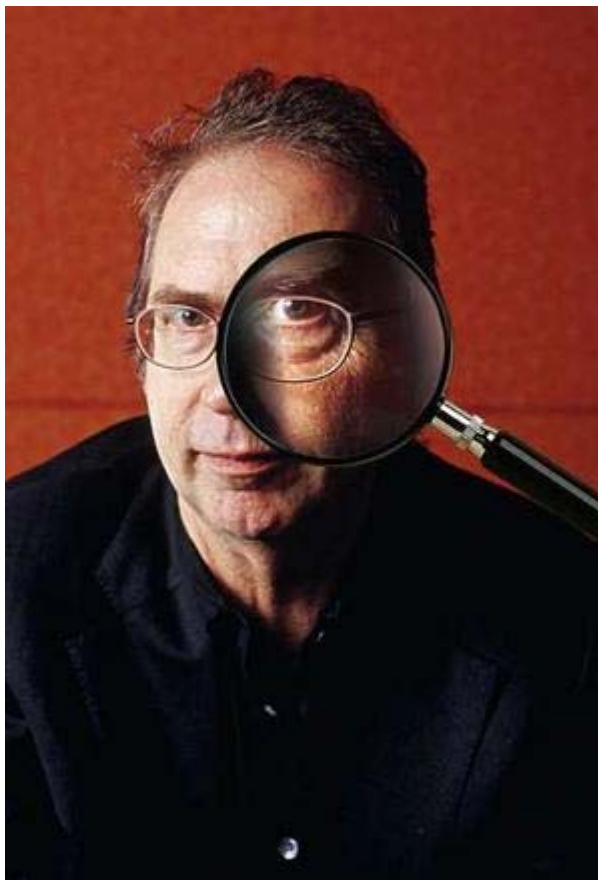
"NO. NO. NO. NO." The voice comes down the phone from Tribeca, emphatic, stern, followed by a puff of laughter. "I mean it's *really, really* not. If one wants to write memoir, I can do that." We will spend much of our two-hour conversation on this subject: Life v. Fiction. Plodding Realism v. Soaring Imagination. Journalist v. Novelist.

"There's an unholy alliance," Carey says. "I need you to write about me and you're going to do it in your way and then I'm going to complain about how you do it. The core of it for me is that the business of inventing worlds really, really is that. You get into things where you do not know where they came from and they might not have come from something that can be explained by Psych 1. And the better you do it the less people are inclined to believe you. I think the world's got more and more like that, by the way, and if you're a journalist you're looking for the real story."

He's a prickly bugger, Carey - teasing and argumentative. If I could see his eyes they'd be narrowed behind their glasses. We circle, politely challenge and disbelieve each other. He tries comparing his work with a Jackson Pollock painting that has matches, cigarettes and paint tube screwtops embedded in its surface. "I'm not trying to express my life. I'm trying to make a work of art with what's available to me," he says. For a while we reach a kind of agreement.

But later I suggest his new book, *Theft: A Love Story*, reads partly as a "divorce novel". In the first paragraph, Butcher describes the collapse of his life: he has lost his eight-year-old son, house, studio and reputation, been "eviscerated" by divorce lawyers and jailed for trying to "retrieve" his paintings from the home of his ex-wife - or "the Plaintiff" as he calls her.

"It's all sorts of novels," Carey says grimly. "Where did we start this interview? Is it about me? No."



Peter Carey: 'Journalism is so beyond me, but to make things up is wonderful.'

Photo: Steve Baccon

His irritation is felt a hemisphere away. Over the next few days executives from Random House, Carey's publisher, will make urgent warning calls to me and my editor against exposing his personal life. But how can we ignore it?

Viewed another way, Carey's ninth novel is an exposé of the international art world with Australian attitude. There's a thriller element to its fast-paced, bad-tempered, raucously funny race around the world. The once-famous artist Michael Boone, aka Butcher Bones, is lured into a clever fraud by the seductive Marlene, an art authenticator and Aussie-made-good who teeters into the mud of Bellingen in Manolo Blahnik heels.

Carey says: "I had always sworn I would never write about painters or painting. Writers tend to misunderstand the nature of painting and think it's the equivalent of writing a novel in some way, and it's such a physical, difficult business."

Art has, in fact, featured in previous books, including his first, unpublished, novel written in 1964. He lived with a painter, Margot Hutcheson, in the '70s and '80s. He came back to the subject after giving a reading at the Australian consulate in New York, where he met Stewart Waltzer, a "very amusing little fellow" who is an art dealer and former studio assistant to the American abstract painter Kenneth Noland. "I'm a writer, and you either go to the gym or you go to lunch," Carey says. "So we'd have lunch a lot of days at Eno's on Bedford Street, the first of those cool little panini places in New York. And as we talked I suddenly thought, 'F--- it, I can do this.'"

His story draws on amazing truths, such as the legal power - known as *droit moral* - held by artists' heirs to authenticate their work. In the case of the cubist Fernand Léger, for example, his studio assistant divorced her husband to marry the ageing Léger, inherited the *droit moral* after his death and remarried her ex-husband, giving the couple control of his work.

"Whatever you want to invent in the world of art has been done," Carey says. "It's not meant to say the art world's worse than anywhere else, but because we invest so much religious faith in art and literature we're disappointed that it should be so."

Carey has noted in the past that each of his books is a reaction to the one before it. Indeed, *Theft* is an obvious companion to his 2003 novel, *My Life as a Fake*, which was a riff on Australia's Ern Malley poetry hoax of the 1940s. Narrated alternately by Butcher and his hulking, brain-damaged brother - a source of love and frustration - *Theft*'s lineage also goes back to the liars, crooks and gamblers, the strivers and chip-shouldered rebels who have always peopled his books.

"The moment I have been dreading has arrived," Carey cackles at this notion. "When I suddenly realised what this book was about, I went: oh shit, everyone's going to go, 'Oh Peter, you seem to have a really great interest in fakes and frauds and hoaxes'. And I'm going, 'I don't, I don't!'"

He has formulated a part-explanation. "One thing about the Australian condition historically is we've continually set ourselves up, and been set up, to be judged by outside experts: What do they think in London? What do they think in New York? How do you like it here? All that stuff we crave and resent. One of the pleasures of Ern Malley is to show the great metropolitan centres are fools and that modernism was crap. I felt this was the periphery giving the metropolitan centres a bit of a belt around to show that 'We're tired of you bastards telling us what's good and what's not good'.

"In *Theft: A Love Story*, Butcher's from the periphery and he can't bear to be judged by the centre but reputations are made in the great metropolitan centres. This is a similar but different revenge on the centre by the periphery. I think we like those tricks."

It's baffling to hear Carey still speaking from the periphery. He is the author of 16 books, winner of two Booker Prizes and two Commonwealth Writers' Prizes. He has lived in Manhattan - the centre of the centre - since 1990. Since 2002 he has had dual Australian-US citizenship. He's rich and well-connected, ambitious and proud. Yet he carries a whiff of the Aussie underdog who got away with it - so far.

When Carey won one of his three Miles Franklin Awards, an ABC interviewer asked him, "So Peter, how did you swing it?" Not so different from Butcher Bones's question, "... why is it when an Australian does well outside the country, everyone thinks it's a scam?" In Butcher's case, throbbing talent aside, his success in the centre is the result of a scam.

Over the years, Carey has given a variety of reasons for his move to New York. At first it was to take up a short-term job as a writing teacher vacated by Tom Keneally. It was for fun, a "moral holiday" from the responsibility of being a writer in his native country. Sometimes he has said it was to allow his wife, Alison Summers, to pursue her theatre directing ambition. He told a journalist last year it was because Summers "hated" Australia, an accusation she hotly denies. At their farewell party he told friends Australian intellectual life was like a "flea circus". Maybe the lure of cracking New York, where he had been well reviewed but not embraced, was stronger than Carey has admitted. And why not?

Whatever the reasons, he acted as if he meant to stay. A year after winning the 1988 Booker Prize for *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey bought a townhouse in Greenwich Village. He sold his Balmain waterfront house and cut ties with the advertising partnership that had made him Sydney's wealthiest novelist. When Australians took offence at their ugly portrayal in *The Tax Inspector*, it must have become easier to stay away. His sons Sam and Charley, now 19 and 15, grew up as Americans. Summers was writing and directing Off Broadway plays. Carey kept teaching and in 2003 became director of the creative writing program at New York's Hunter College.

He also continued with his disciplined output of a novel every three years. His characters and concerns remained doggedly Australian, culminating in *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the reworked story of our national antihero Ned Kelly. That novel, brilliantly narrated in Kelly's voice, lifted him to a new level of esteem. It won the 2001 Booker Prize and has sold 2 million copies worldwide.

He moved from the small University of Queensland Press to Random House Australia in a deal that has been reported at \$2 million for three books. In New York his new profile attracted an advance of \$US350,000 for *My Life as a Fake*.

But at the height of his success, like Butcher Bones, he was watching his domestic life crash like the World Trade Centre towers. In September 2001, he and Summers separated, though Carey stayed in his home office. Summers had felt for some years that Carey's ambition had overtaken his care for his family. Even he has talked about his "monstrous will".

Anyone who had known them early in their marriage - the second for both - was surprised. Since they'd met at a National Playwrights' Conference in Canberra in 1984, Carey had glowed with adoration for Summers, a fresh-faced, gamine blonde. As Butcher says, "Who could not see the hairline crack in the

pedestal? Me, your honour, not to save my bloody life."

All Carey's books from *The Tax Inspector* to *True History of the Kelly Gang* were dedicated to his wife. In the acknowledgements for the latter, he said his "greatest debt" was to Summers, "whose clear literary intelligence and flawless dramatic instinct illuminated and clarified a work that at times threatened to swamp and drown me".

While his American publisher, Gary Fisketjon, is his official editor, Summers made notes on his manuscripts, urging him to develop characters compassionately and sometimes naming them (Lucinda was her great-aunt's name). Her suggestions included the removal of punctuation from Kelly's narration, inspired by a play she was directing, *Kid's Stuff* by Raymond Cousse. Carey loved the idea, which gave his prose an uneducated yet poetic rhythm.

But she felt crushed by working as his unpaid assistant, caring for their sons while he travelled, building her career and scrimping on expenses. Carey dismissed the idea of moving to Brisbane when she had a hope of becoming artistic director of the Queensland Theatre Company in 1999. Eventually, under his pressure, she gave up theatre work.

During their divorce over the past two years, Carey referred icily to Summers as "the Plaintiff", a term taken up by Butcher Bones. "I don't think anybody involved had a good time," is all Carey would say to me about their break-up, so it's hard to represent his case.

Summers spoke to me because she believes he has unfairly smeared her - as a career-obsessed spendthrift who claimed credit for his success - to lawyers, journalists and old friends such as Salman Rushdie, Paul Auster and David Williamson. *Theft* is another indirect but public blow.

"I finally saw that the man I thought I had married didn't exist," says Summers, now 52. With a modest financial settlement, she lives with her sons not far from where she escaped from the basement of the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. She has begun work on her own novel, *Mrs Jekyll*.

Carey sold their townhouse for \$US2.45 million last year. Since 2003, he has lived in a rented Tribeca loft with his new love. Frances Coady, the English-born publisher at Picador US, is a charming, workaholic, dark-haired beauty in her late 40s with an ex-smoker's voice. A "sexy marmoset" in the words of an English journalist. In London, she published Rushdie, Edward Said and Jeanette Winterson for Granta Books and lived for a time with Carey's former publisher at Faber & Faber, Robert McCrum.

Carey is happy again but has other worries. After September 11, he says, "People weirdly stopped reading fiction. There was a lot of terrific non-fiction written and then there's this huge, naive appetite for crudely written memoirs." He blames that effect for the expensive US flop of *My Life as a Fake*, which sold no more than 7500 hardcovers in its first year. Perhaps the book's complicated plot had its own problems. In Australia, sales are higher than 76,000 according to Random House publicity, but 35,000 according to Bookscan.

Although Carey can be a fine essayist, his forays into non-fiction have strangely blurred fact and fiction in another way. *Wrong About Japan*, his 2004 memoir about a trip to Tokyo with his son Charley, was commissioned by National Geographic. The company rejected it and Random House picked it up, after Carey admitted inventing a central character, a Japanese teenager, to create conflict in the story.

"Journalism is so beyond me, but to make things up is wonderful," he says. He is working on the next novel, partly set around Coolumb and Yandina in Queensland, where he lived in a hippie colony in the 1970s. He is pleased with its title, *His Illegal Life*. It will, of course, be entirely fictional.

***Theft: A Love Story* is published by Knopf (Random House) on Monday, \$45.**

[Did you know you could pay less than \\$1 a day for a subscription to the Herald? Subscribe today.](#)

More Entertainment

Copyright © 2006. The Sydney Morning Herald.