

## **Major Issues of Society in Illywhacker By Peter Carey**

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### **Abstract**

*In Peter Carey's world, we are all creatures of the shadow lands. His fictions explore the experiences lurking in the cracks of normality, and are inhabited by hybrid characters living in inbetween spaces or on the margins. In this paper I have discussed how he examines twentieth century Australian history with the savage humour and fantasy of the earlier fiction now placed within an epic framework with Illywhacker. Carey's success achieved international dimensions. It acquired the Australian rights and implemented a wide advertising campaign using international responses as promotion. Thus the paper analyses the role of literature in society. It is the literature which reflects the correct issues of political, cultural values, self conscious national, identity and self constructions of Australian literature.*

**Keywords :-** *Cultural Value, Self-Conscious, humour and fantasy, national identity.*

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## Introduction

Peter Carey was born in 1943 in the small town of Bacchus Marsh in Victoria. He has described it as the town of Frank Hardy and Captain Mooligh. *Illywhacker* a mixture of politics, history and legend suitably prefiguring the hybrid nature of his own work.

With *Illywhacker*, Carey's success achieved international dimensions. It was published first in the UK and USA, something of an irony for a novel exposing cultural imperialism. The University of Queensland Press acquired the Australian rights and implemented a wide advertising campaign using inter-national responses as promotion. The effect was to increase Carey's profile and sales dramatically in Australia and abroad. The novel won three of the major Australian literary prizes and was shortlisted for the British Booker Prize.

*Illywhacker* examines twentieth-century Australian history with the savage humour and fantasy of the earlier fiction now placed within an epic framework. The result is a novel with energy, panache and sardonic vision, which mixes family history with satirical fable and fantasy in an abundance of play and arraignment. Like *Bliss*, *Illywhacker* transgresses and under-mines presumptions of formal continuity and genre coherence: it both entertains and indicts as it investigates the construction of fundamental Australian mythologies, the visions, dreams and lies of the national psyche. In the process, it deconstructs the contemporary state of the nation. Through this picaresque treatment of the Badgeries' family history Carey felt as if he were 'at last trying to come to grips, with what it means to be an Australian and what Australia is.

The novel opens with an epigram from Mark Twain: '*Australian history is almost always picturesque; indeed, it is so curious and strange, that it is itself the chiefest novelty the country has to offer... It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies*'. The epigram also formed the basis for the title of Brian Kiernan's anthology of contemporary Australian fiction, *The Most Beautiful Lies* (1977), a title Carey suggested to Kiernan after discovering the Twain quote at 'the end of the late 703', having 'kept it for years' and feeling he was never going to be able to use it himself; and it became the title for the 1986-7 film on Carey by Joanne Penglase and Don Featherstone.

Lies and lying are significant in *Illywhacker* in two related ways- as characteristic of the narrator, Herbert Badgery, and as part of the analysis of Australia's self-construction. While in gaol, Herbert studies history and comes across the fictional M.V. Anderson's history of Australia with its biting expose of national

origins. The invented extract (456) acts as a programme for the lying theme, achieving increased significance in the more recent context of the Mabo land rights decision with its challenge to the notion of *terra nullius*. By linking its central narrator's fibulatory capacities with white Australia's misrepresentation to itself of its past and present, Carey's novel creates an expose of the colonial process through a post-modern extravagance and the way various narrative elements adopt emblematic qualities.

This novelist-as-liar device has analogies with the 'jumble of incident, dialogue, reflection, etc.' which forms Joseph Furphy's anarchically experimental Australian anti-novel *Such is Life* (1903), but Carey's immediate context is the post-modern unreliability of the storyteller. Herbert's unreliability is comparable with that of Rushdie's narrator in *Midnight's Children* (1981). There, Saleem reveals his own mistakes, getting the date of Gandhi's assassination wrong, for example, and then telling us so later in the novel. This reinforces a sense that history is a construction from particular subjective points of view: like the perforated sheet through which Saleem's grandfather viewed his future wife, there is no whole picture available to anyone. Instead, individuals construct history from whatever materials are their disposal and the reader is made aware of that partiality.

*Illywhacker* depicts a particular phase of Australian culture and nationalism, a search for identity which went wrong. Carey conceived the novel as a survey through three generations, from the confidence man, through 'a kind of degeneration from entrepreneurial capitalism', to 'the pet shop people'. Herbert's 'salesman's sense of history' (343), which gives such priority to salesmanship and putting on a show, reveals Australia itself as a 'show', a product constructed from illusion and deception; and his life parodies his country's. Rejecting the colonial dependency which led him to sell American-made Ford motor cars, his early vision is of an independent Australian aeroplane business making an autonomous product, yet by the end of the book the Badgery entourage has become a 'menagerie' (594), exhibits trapped in the American-funded Best Pet Shop in the World.

Initially Herbert embodies what Carey has called 'a kind of entrepreneurial optimistic nationalism'. Herbert's combative nationalism displays itself in a number of ways, although not as parochial chauvinism.

As the title of the novel indicates, Australian language, too, deceives some attention. Carey recalls the relish with which he came across the word '*Illywhacker*': 'I used to sit at night and I'd flick through Geoff Wilkes's *Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, and other books - you know, all at random. You look through and

you think “isn’t that interesting”, “I’d forgotten we used to say that”. And I came across *Illywhacker*. And I thought, “Oh, fantastic exactly right”. But it took me three years of looking to find it.’ As a ‘yacker’, Herbert displays many of the distinctive characteristics of Australian English, and Carey has acknowledged his efforts to recapture accurately the language of his grandfather’s era, the 1930s and 1940s: Herbert introduces one of the O’Hagen boys as ‘Goog, which, until we started to forget our language, was the common name for a hen’s egg’ (63). The book is itself saturated with the flavour of Australian English and imagery: there are debates about Australian speech and language comparing it with English usage (54,126) or American (518); there are overtly signalled usages of Australian English as when Leah and Charles debate the term *Illywhacker* (245-6), listing its associated terms as *spieler*, *quandong*, *ripperty man*, and *con-man*; there is distinctively Australian imagery, as in the descriptions of gum trees (318), *goannas* (462), and the activities of *swaggies*, *bagmen*, *Johns* and *rattlers* (338); and, as Paul Sharrad has mentioned, there are many other ‘recondite Australianisms’, such as *snaffla every staver* (35), *cackleberry* (273), and *bullswack* (291) Adrian Mitchell for one has queried whether anyone actually used or had even heard the expression *Illywhacker* prior to Carey’s creative intervention, but the success of the novel and consequent renewal of currency for the word emphasises the potential for a subversive reshaping of, the, English language which post-colonial writing can achieve.

Along with the three-generational structure, the metaphor of the pet shop was the genesis of Carey’s conception of the novel: I began with the image of my country as a pet shop, people living in cages, being well-fed, thinking they are happy, but denying the nature of their prison’, culturally and economically a collection of pets who are going around thinking that they’re all really wonderful, not really feeling that they’re in cages or on leashes’, since ‘one of the great lies Australians tell themselves is how proud, free, independent and anti-authoritarian they are’. He instanced as an example the British government’s intervention through the Governor General of Australia to bring down the Whitlam Labour government in 1975, coincidentally the year Carey’s first book appeared: ‘We think of ourselves as a proud and free and anti-authoritarian people, and that’s ludicrous. Why did everyone do nothing when Whitlam was fired. The Headmaster said he’d been a naughty boy, so he must have done something wrong. It wasn’t the response of a freedom-loving, questioning people who hate authority. It seemed to me one of a people who really love authority.

Carey demythologises contemporary Australia in a manner analogous with John Pilger’s in *A Secret Country*. Both books reveal a hidden history beneath the

surface 'show'. Pilger argues that Australia's brief and tenuous moment as 'an independent country' has been undermined and compromised by the neo-colonial effects of multinational capital, the ambitions of the superpowers and the continuing legacies of colonial history such as the marginalised oppression of the Aborigines and the astounding *coup* in 1975. As a result, contemporary Australia suffers from a 'regression' which is masked by a veneer of pretence. Unmasking the 'beautiful lies' is the project of both writers.

Perhaps in doing so *Illywhacker* presents a somewhat hermetic image of Australian culture. The resistance to the international corporate domination of the pet shop by 'the enemies of the emporium' is located outside its jurisdiction and merely referred to on the penultimate page of the novel (599). All the groups represented *inside* are reduced to passive exhibits with no suggestions of possible points of resistance. Such a view is at odds with the actual heterogeneity of Australia's ethnic components whose positive contributions over the last two or more decades, contained as they may be, nevertheless suggest a challenging diversity which has more in common with Homi K. Bhabha's view of the post-colonial situation than Carey's symbolism perhaps allows. Nevertheless, with its hybrid mix of narrative forms, its post-modern playfulness and the savagery of its critique, *Illywhacker* is a remarkable and memorable work.

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