



PETER CAREY ILLYWHACKER

Booker Prize-winning author of
Oscar and Lucinda



ff

PETER CAREY

Illywhacker



faber and faber

First published in 1985
by Faber and Faber Limited
3 Queen Square London WC1N 3AU
First published in this edition in 1986
Reset 1996

Photoset by Parker Typesetting Service, Leicester
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham PLC, Chatham, Kent

All rights reserved

© Peter Carey, 1985

Peter Carey is hereby identified as author of this work in accordance
with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade
or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without
the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other
than that in which it is published and without a similar condition
including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.*

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-571-13949-3

11752

Peter Carey was born in 1943 in Australia and lives in New York. He is the author of the highly acclaimed selection of short stories, *The Fat Man in History*, six novels, *Bliss*, *Illywhacker* (shortlisted for the 1985 Booker Prize), *Oscar and Lucinda* (winner of the 1988 Booker Prize), *The Tax Inspector*, *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and *Jack Maggs*, and a book for children, *The Big Bazoochley*. *Oscar and Lucinda* has been made into a film by Gillian Armstrong starring Ralph Fiennes.

For my mother and father,
with love and thanks

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 and so it pushes the other novelties into second and third place. It does not read like history, but like the most beautiful lies; and all of a fresh new sort, no mouldy old stale ones. It is full of surprises and adventures, the incongruities, and contradictions, and incredibilities; but they are all true, they all happened.

Mark Twain, *More Tramps Abroad*, London, 1897

illywhacker A professional trickster, esp. operating at country shows [derived by Baker (1945: 138) from *spieler*]

1941 Kylie Tennant *The Battlers* 183-4: An illywacker is someone who is putting a confidence trick over, selling imitation diamond tie-pins, new-style patent razors or infallible "tonics" . . . "living on the cockies" by such devices, and following the shows because money always flows freest at show time. A man who "wacks the illy" can be almost anything, but two of these particular illy-wackers were equipped with a dart game.

1943 Baker 40: *Illywhacker* A trickster or *spieler*.

1975 Hal Porter *The Extra* 15: Social climber, moron, peter-tickler, eeler-spee, illy-wacker.

G. A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary
of Australian Colloquialisms*,
Sydney, 1978

Book I

My name is Herbert Badgery. I am a hundred and thirty-nine years old and something of a celebrity. They come and look at me and wonder how I do it. There are weeks when I wonder the same, whole stretches of terrible time. It is hard to believe you can feel so bad and still not die.

I am a terrible liar and I have always been a liar. I say that early to set things straight. *Caveat emptor*. My age is the one fact you can rely on, and not because I say so, but because it has been publicly authenticated. Independent experts have poked me and prodded me and scraped around my foul-smelling mouth. They have measured my ankles and looked at my legs. It is a relief to not worry about my legs any more. When they photographed me I did not care that my dick looked as scabby and scaly as a horse's, even though there was a time when I was a vain man and would not have permitted the type of photographs they chose to take. Apart from this (and it is all there, neatly printed on a chart not three feet from where I lie) I have also been written up in the papers. Don't imagine this is any novelty to me – being written up has been one of my weaknesses and I don't mention it now so that I may impress you, but rather to make the point that I am not lying about my age.

But for the rest of it, you may as well know, lying is my main subject, my specialty, my skill. It is a great relief to find a new use for it. It's taken me long enough, God knows, and I have not always been proud of my activities. But now I feel no more ashamed of my lies than my farts (I rip forth a beauty to underline the point). There will be complaints, of course. (There are complaints now, about the fart – my apologies, my fellow sufferers.) But my advice is to not waste your time with your red pen, to try to pull apart the strands of lies and truth, but to relax and enjoy the show.

I think I'm growing tits. They stuck their callipers into me and measured them. That'd be one for the books if I turned into a woman at this stage of life. It's only the curiosity that keeps me alive: to see what my dirty old body will do next.

I'm like some old squid decaying on the beach. They flinch when they look at me and they could not guess that there is anything inside my head but gruel, brain soup sloshing around in a basin. My voice is gone, so they could not know what changes have taken place in me: I may even, at last, have become almost kind.

I read too. I didn't read a book until an age when most men are going blind or dying in their beds. Leah Goldstein, who has a brain as big as a football, deserves the credit. She was the one who got me going and once I was started they couldn't stop me. By the time I was in Rankin Downs gaol I was known as 'The Professor' and I was permitted to take my Bachelor of Arts by correspondence.

Back in 1919 the books on Annette Davidson's bookshelves meant nothing to me. But now, if I wanted to, I could invent a library for her. I could fill up her bookcases carelessly, elegantly, easily, stack volumes end to end, fill the deep shelves with two rows of books, leave them with their covers showing on the dining-room table, hurl them out the window and leave them broken-spined and crippled, flapping on the uncut grass.

Books! Books are no problem to me any more, but until I was in my late fifties I could only recognize ten words in print and two of those made up my name. I was ashamed of it. The ingenuity and effort, the deception, the stories, the bullshit, the lies I used, just to persuade people to read me the paper aloud, all this was far harder work than learning to read.

It's a blessing my eyes are as good as they are and with all my other vanity gone this one remains: my eyes. I speak not of their efficiency, but of their colour, which is the same colour, that clear sapphire blue, which illuminated my father's pale-skinned face. These eyes – which I so much admire in myself – I detest in him. I will tell you about him later, perhaps, I make no promises.

My father will wait. I'd rather start with a love story. It's not the only real love story I've got to tell – there'll be plenty of hanky-panky by and by relating to love of one sort or another – but there is little that I look forward to like this one, this flash of lightning, which occurred in November 1919 when I was thirty-three years old and already dragging out too many hairs with my comb each morning.

I wished to discuss Phoebe, but there is Annette Davidson to explain first. As usual, she is in the way.

They are, the pair of them, in that little rickety weatherboard house in Villamente Street in Geelong. It is a dull overcast day and there are, below the blanket of gloomy grey, lower clouds, small white ones scudding along from the coast at Barwon Heads. A red-nosed boy is driving a herd of pigs past the house towards Latrobe Terrace and the windy railway station. The pigs sum up everything Phoebe hates about Geelong. She would drive them over a cliff if she could, just to have done with it, just as now, as she sits down, she does not do it like a normal person, happy for life to take its easiest course, but impatiently. She drops into the chair. The windows rattle in their frames and Annette Davidson, in the process of fitting a de Reske to her cigarette holder, looks up and frowns. There will be no ignoring her. She insists on an explanation.

In November 1919, Annette Davidson was twenty-one years old. It was three years since she had left teachers' college in Reading, one year since she had fled Paris, and fourteen months since her affair with Jacques Dussoir had ended. Dussoir is meant to be a French impressionist of some note, a friend of Monet's, etc. However the only book in which you will find his name mentioned is the one Annette Davidson wrote when she lived in Sydney: *Paris Soir, Paris Noir* (Angus & Robertson, 1946). Dussoir apart, it is typical that she chose to write about eight months in Paris in 1916 and ignore twenty-eight years in Australia, but we will not go into that now.

She found a job teaching history at the Hermitage Church of England Girls' Grammar School in Geelong and it was there that she met Phoebe who was seventeen.

Annette Davidson was a striking woman. Norman Lindsay used her as a model in *Perseus & the Beauties* which is now in the Art Gallery of Victoria. Lindsay got her to a T, not an easy thing, because although she had a proud, strong face and quite remarkable Amazonian breasts, she also had a masochistic cast to her mouth and her shoulders looked as if they were ready to mould themselves around the trunk of a man (deceptively, as it turned out).

I cannot blame her for disliking Geelong – in the end, I didn't care for it myself. Teaching at the Hermitage she got the worst of it: all those stout-legged daughters of squatters who displayed the dull certainties of their type. But it was in that mullock heap she found a

muddied stone more valuable than any of the fool's gold the staff so proudly presented her with.

Phoebe was an awkward misfit. Her fingers were smudged with ink. Her knees were ingrained with dirt, her toes raw with tinea, her fingernails black and broken. She was the daughter of a bullock driver who had made his pile, and a dizzy overly-talkative ex-barmaid who did not know her place, although – Christ knows – she tried hard enough to find it.

Phoebe had a beautiful voice. She sang deliberately off-key. She had a gift for painting but 'dashed off' something at the end of a lesson when everyone else was washing their brushes. It was known that she smoked cigarettes. She was one of the group known as the 'Dorm 5 Co' who were suspected of active homosexual relations which, if the stories were true, left the school's more normal Sapphic romances looking almost Christian. She was known in the common room as 'the little horror'.

God knows what the common room said about Annette. She wore black or grey with flashes of brilliant colour: a shoulder panel of red, a pleat that opened obscenely to reveal a heart like a plum. She had a way of walking, a sort of slouch, with long strides, which may have been all very well on the boulevard St Michel but was not the thing at the Hermitage. Miss Kane, the headmistress, had reason to talk to her about this walk. She had noticed several of the older girls were imitating it.

Amongst the imitators of the Davidson walk, Phoebe was by far the most accomplished. She was in love with the new history mistress, even before her ears had been caressed by that round, soft north country accent. Within a month they had formed an alliance. Soon Phoebe (said to be 'thick as a brick') was writing poetry, keeping a diary, passing examinations in French and history. She knew the names of the streets of Paris and many of the people who had walked on them. She knew what a bidet was. She read Ruskin and learned to scorn Henry Lawson (whom her father loved with a passion) and learned to mock his bush poetry with her mentor's one-sided smile. With Annette's help and petroleum jelly she removed the ingrained dirt from her knees.

She began to imagine a place in the world where she might not only belong but also be admired, a place where there were other problems than the price of wheat or wool, or whether the waterside workers would be engaged in Yarra Street or Corio Quay.

Annette had been the subject of schoolgirls' crushes before, but she had never thought of herself as homosexual until Phoebe, who

boarded during the week and went home at weekends, came creamily into her history mistress's bed on the second night of the final term.

No matter what the pleats of her dresses suggested, no matter how recklessly she walked, Annette was both cautious and sensible. She hated her enemies silently and smiled at them politely. She tried to please her employers. She attended chapel and sang the hymns out loud. She argued with Phoebe, reasoned with her sensibly and listened for footsteps in the corridor outside: but none of this was any defence against Phoebe. There was no denying the force not of her arguments which danced from peak to peak as unpredictably and carelessly as lightning but of her almost unbelievably soft lips, her smooth skin, her tender strokes, her shocking tongue and Annette Davidson (not without a tiny Protestant tremble) gave herself to her student's embraces which compared most favourably with those of the impressionist Dussoir.

I like to think it was on this night, with her ugly brown uniform and heavy brogues shucked off on to the floor, that Phoebe revealed herself as a beauty. It had occurred to no one that she might be. And when it happened it caused a terrible confusion. The boys from College and Grammar not only seemed to overcome their distaste for her vulgar background, but gave her presents of school scarves. And when the anxiously awaited invitations to the prestigious end-of-year dances began, at last, to arrive, slipped into the green-felt letter rack, to be collected and displayed like trophies on study walls, the 'little horror' had more than her share. But by then Annette (cautious, careful Annette) had taken the house in Villamente Street, West Geelong, and Phoebe gave not a fig for the Manisides or Chirnfolds or the Osters or any of the other social luminaries of the Western District. She attended no dances and created a perfect scandal by tearing up an invitation to the Geelong Grammar School dance, before witnesses. She might as well have spat in the altar wine.

There were elm trees and peppercorn trees in Villamente Street and the people next door kept a cow. It was a quiet, almost rural, lower middle-class street. Phoebe (who had left the school at the end of 1918) had persuaded her parents to pay 'Miss Davidson' to give her history lessons there.

Some history.

There they are now. Their conversation is as clear as crystal. I simply have to reach out and take it.

'It cannot be immoral,' Phoebe says, 'to have a clear idea of how one looks.'

'Not as long as it doesn't become a preoccupation.'

A match is struck, slicing through the squeal of pigs. Cigarette smoke streams urgently towards the ceiling.

'Oh Dicksy,' Phoebe sighs, 'if only there was something to make me forget it.'

'That', says my *bête noire*, 'is exactly what I mean.'

Phoebe, gazing out the dusty window at the retreating pigs, knew exactly how beautiful she was. She had a creamy skin, brilliant waving red hair, long legs like a water bird's, a small waist and breasts which were just . . . so.

To look at a photograph you would not understand the extent of her beauty. There is no doubt that her face was not classic. The chin and lips were perfect, as if the imaginary almighty had lavished extravagant amounts of time on them and then, realizing it was getting late, had rushed on to the small nose and forehead, cramming them in where there was hardly room. In photographs the forehead looks a little low, the nose too high in the face, the magnificent chin and lips too dominant. Yet in life this was not the effect at all. Only the loveless camera shows these things in this way, blind to her strength, her spirit, the intensity of those small brown eyes, the porcelain complexion, the hypnotic way she spoke, hardly opening her mouth to allow the passage of words between her small, fine white teeth.

Annette Davidson did not doubt Phoebe's beauty. But she did not like the way Phoebe had begun to speak about it. She thought it was unhealthy, or unlucky. She brooded on the consequences but none of her insights, which were numerous, did anything to free her from her pupil.

'Your beauty', she said, 'will be your downfall. You'll end up like Susan Bussell.'

Phoebe groaned. 'How could I be like Susan Bussell?' She turned from the window. She wore a short black dress with a flash of chartreuse on the shoulder. The light was behind her and Annette could not see the hurt in her eyes. 'Susan Bussell is a cow,' she said, and turned back to the street.

'A dull, complacent cow,' said Annette, 'who doesn't bother to think or feel because she knows she will marry a rich farmer and knows exactly what schools she will send her children to.'

Phoebe pulled a face at the dusty window.

'She is waiting for life to come and court her, and it will, in exactly the way she thinks it will. She doesn't need to work, or think.'

Phoebe flattened her nose against the glass. 'A nose like a pig,' she thought, 'in a street full of pigs.'

'You have to *work*,' Annette said softly. 'And *think*. If you go on like this, you're going to be very unhappy.'

Phoebe felt it. She felt the unhappiness push into her, thread itself through her like piano wire, push out through her stomach and bind her wrists. 'You're horrid,' she said, betrayed. The face behind the rain-flecked dusty window crumpled and her shoulders collapsed.

Annette drew the curtain slowly, discreetly, so as to attract no attention from the curious Mr Wilson who was laying out tomato seedlings not twenty feet away, and then (only then) held the crying girl and buried her face in the blissful softness of her neck.

'Why are you so horrid, Dicksy?'

'Because', Annette hissed, surprised at her own passion, 'you are waiting for something to happen to you. You must *do* something.'

'I will do something,' Phoebe said quietly, running a finger thoughtfully across her lover's lips. 'It will just be something unusual. It will not be something I can plan for. It won't be what you expect or what I expect either.'

'What will it be?' Annette whispered, but by then she was no longer interested in the answer and she rubbed her nose into the softness of my darling's eye.

'It will be something,' Phoebe said. 'I guarantee you.'

Later, when she was in Sydney being notorious, Phoebe went around telling people that she had 'foreknowledge' of the event. She had known she would see my aeroplane suspended in the sky above Vogelnest's paddocks at Balliang East. She convinced many people, and I won't say it can't be true. In any case, it is a pretty story, so I will leave it hovering there, like an aeroplane, alone in the sky, gliding towards her with a dead engine.

3

Phoebe sat on the big kitchen table and kicked her legs and listened to the commotion, the little cries of pleasure, as her mother and Bridget set about packing the hamper. Phoebe frowned and bit her nails. She watched her mother like a parent who knows a child will shortly stumble. In that odd household it was the parents who were the children: Jack and Molly fussing over each other, touching each other, walking around the roses hand in hand, turtle-doving and cooing at fifty years of age while their only child watched them, nervous lest they hurt themselves.

They did not understand Geelong society. They were friendly and

neighbourly. They offered hatfuls of hens' eggs across the fence.

Phoebe understood Geelong all too well. She shuddered when she heard that her mother had invited the A. D. Collinses to a picnic at Balliang East. Molly and Mrs Collins were on the committee for the Wyuna Nursing Home, and although they were both on the committee because their husbands were rich, in Molly's case this was the only reason. Molly did not know the other reasons ever existed. She thought she could ask Mrs Collins to a picnic.

It was perfectly clear that the A. D. Collinses would not come and then there would be food not eaten and her mother would become brighter and brighter, chattier and chattier, and the moment would come when a particular laugh – Phoebe would recognize it instantly – would shudder and twitch and then fall apart in tears.

Phoebe jumped down off the table and embraced her mother. Molly was white-skinned and ginger-haired, sweet and soft as roly-poly pudding.

'Isn't it lovely?' Molly said. And Bridget stood back so that they might admire the hamper.

'Yes,' said Phoebe. 'It's lovely.'

It was probably just as well the Collinses would not come. The McGraths always picnicked at the most dreadful places. They picnicked without shame; they picnicked thick-skinned and jolly at places Phoebe would not have stopped to spit at.

Phoebe no longer pleaded and no longer sulked. She understood the parameters of the picnics all too well. E.g. they could not go to the beach because of the sand. They must keep away from areas frequented by mosquitoes, trees with limbs that might fall, forests through which bush fires might suddenly sweep, places known to be frequented by bull ants or similar in soil or vegetation to places where bull ants had been observed. Last, and most important of all, there must be plenty of running water, water of impeccable credentials (a river, with the constant risk of dead heifers just a mile upstream, was quite unacceptable).

A good brass tap was, to Molly McGrath, the thing around which a good picnic could confidently be built.

They all knew, or thought they knew, that there was something wrong with Molly's brain. Neither father nor daughter mentioned it, but why else did they pamper her so, bring her bowls of bread and warm milk, and fuss over her like an invalid when she was – anyone could see – strong as an ox. Molly worked at her picnics like she tended her roses or worked on her veggie garden, breathlessly. Phoebe could feel terrors in the air when the cries of delight were

loudest. Her mother was a creature building a fragile stick next on a beach that will shortly be deluged by tide. She made happy optimistic cries but a practised observer would see she did not quite believe them.

However, the first time I saw the ritual of picnic preparation, I saw no terrors. I saw Molly's fine green eyes alight with anticipation, heard her laugh, saw her throw her small plump hands into the air with girlish delight, watched the same ringed hands accompany the hamper, like an escort of anxious doves, to the trunk of the Hispano Suiza.

And what newcomer, seeing the hamper, the car, the excitement of the hostess's eyes, would understand why Phoebe's lips were so pale and eyes so dull?

Jack McGrath was a man who was happiest without a collar. He preferred his trousers a size too large and his boots loosely laced. You might confuse the roll of his walk with that of a sailor's, but you have not made the study of walks I have – this was not a sailor's walk, it was the walk of a man who has covered twenty thousand dusty miles beside his bullock teams. He had drunk champagne from metal pannikins and called it 'Gentleman's Grog'. He had slept beneath his wagon and on top of it. He had hidden his gold in a hollowed-out yoke and drunk from dams that held more mud than water. He had, before he became a rich man, eaten a picturesque array of animals, reptiles, and birds. But he was not, not in any way, upset by his wife's restrictions in regard to picnics. 'It was as if', Phoebe said later, 'he was *proud* of the whole nonsense mother went on with, as if it suggested some height of gentility and femininity few women might hope to attain. I don't think he ever saw how bleak the picnic spots were. All he could see was an advertisement for the sensitivity of his wife's beautiful skin. He was very proud of her.'

Good dear Jack would never understand why anyone would slight his wife. He could not see that there was any difference between a picnic and having a drink with old A.D. (which he did often enough) in Finch's Railway Hotel. He would never learn the difference between having a drink with a man and sharing a feed with his family. You never met a man who seemed to make so few social distinctions. He would have anyone to his house who would come – bishops and rabbit-ohs, limping ex-servicemen and flash characters from the racetrack. They brought him presents or took him down, told lies or their true life stories and he stamped his foot and filled their glasses and took them for joy-rides in the Hispano Suiza. He was one of the worst drivers I ever met. He had no feel for machinery.