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Literary Criticism

CLC

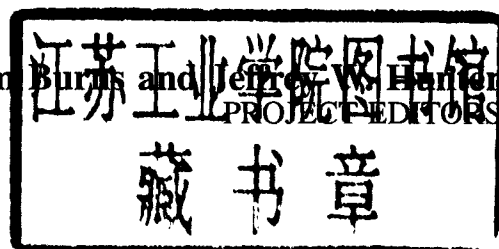
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Volume 183

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Tom Burns and Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITORS



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

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A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

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Peter Carey

1943-

Australian novelist, short story writer, children's writer, screenwriter, and travel writer.

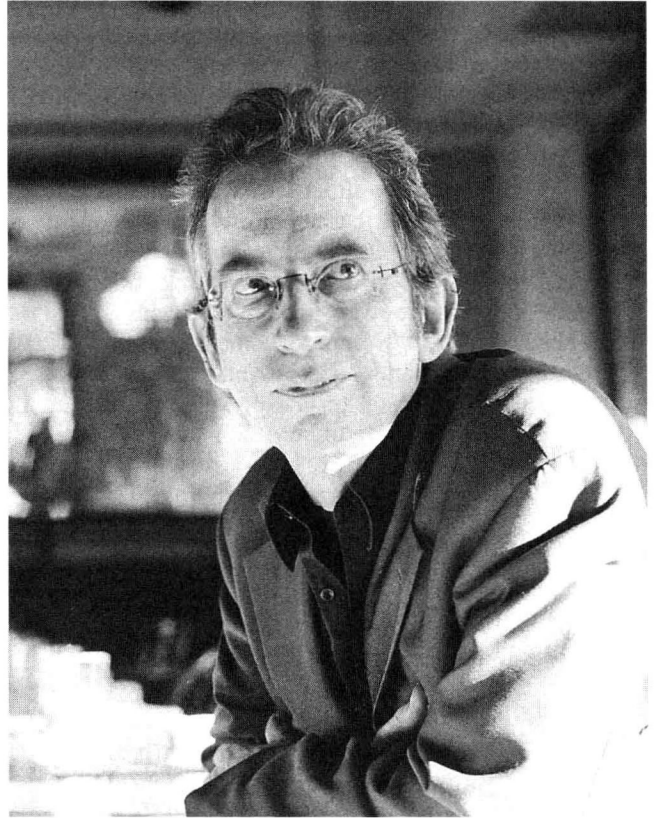
The following entry presents an overview of Carey's career through 2003. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 40, 55, and 96.

INTRODUCTION

Carey is widely acknowledged as one of the most accomplished and successful Australian novelists of recent decades and is one of a handful—along with Thomas Keneally, David Malouf, and Tim Winton—who command an international reputation. Carey's novels and short-story collections have won virtually every major literary award in Australia, and his international reputation was confirmed when he won a second Booker Prize in 2001, a feat equaled only by the South African author J. M. Coetzee. Praised for his inventive mixture of the fantastic, the comedic, and the ordinary, Carey often creates detailed, realistic settings into which he introduces surreal and fabulous events. Usually set in Australia, Carey's works address themes of postcolonial nationhood and history as he satirizes contemporary social values, explores the illusory nature of reality, and self-consciously examines the art of fiction.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Carey was born in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, Australia, on May 7, 1943. His parents, Percival Stanley and Helen Jean, owned a local automobile dealership. He attended Geelong Grammar School, an exclusive private school, and later enrolled in the science program at Monash University. After receiving failing grades his first year, Carey dropped out of Monash in 1962 and began working as an advertising copywriter in Melbourne. In 1964 he married Leigh Weetman, though the couple later separated. From 1967 to 1970, Carey lived in London and traveled extensively in Europe. During this period, he wrote three novels that were not published and had his first short stories published. Carey's first major work, *The Fat Man in History*, a short story collection, was published by the University of Queensland Press in 1974. Eventually returning to Australia, Carey moved into an alternative community near Yandina in southern Queensland in 1977. While living in Yandina,



Carey wrote the majority of the stories in his second collection *War Crimes* (1979). The publication of his first novel, *Bliss*, in 1981 built on Carey's burgeoning literary celebrity and established him as a major contributor to Australian letters. In 1985 Carey collaborated with Ray Lawrence to compose the screenplay adaptation of *Bliss*. Carey married theater director Alison Margaret Summers in 1984, with whom he has two sons. Carey moved his family to the United States in 1989, teaching creative writing at New York University and Princeton University. His works have received numerous awards both in Australia and abroad. *War Crimes* was awarded the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award in 1980, and *Bliss* received the Miles Franklin Award, the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award, and the National Book Council Award. *Illywhacker* (1985) won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award and the National Book Council Award as well as being nominated for the Booker Prize in 1985. Carey eventually won the Booker Prize twice for *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988) and *True History of the Kelly Gang*

(2000). *Illywhacker*, *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994), and *Jack Maggs* (1997) were all recipients of *The Age* Book of the Year Award, while *Jack Maggs* and *True History of the Kelly Gang* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1998 and 2001, respectively.

MAJOR WORKS

Most of Carey's short stories—collected in *The Fat Man in History*, *War Crimes*, *The Fat Man in History and Other Stories* (1980), and *Collected Stories* (1994)—center around individuals who experience sudden anxieties when they encounter surreal and absurd events in commonplace situations. Additionally, Carey's short fiction offers satirical perspective on the effects of technology and foreign influences on Australian culture and the postcolonial burden of owing one's ancestry to a former colonizing power. In such stories as "The Puzzling Nature of Blue," "Report on the Shadow Industry," and "American Dreams," Carey analyzes the pervasive influence of the political on the personal as well as the illusory appeals of artistic creation. *Bliss* continues Carey's penchant for satire in a novel that examines different kinds of stories and storytelling. The novel's protagonist is Harry Joy, an overworked advertising executive who suffers a near-fatal heart attack. Upon recovering from life-threatening open-heart surgery, Joy believes that he died during the operation and is now living in hell. He discovers that his wife is cheating on him with a close friend, and his seemingly lethargic son is actually a drug dealer who forces his sister—Joy's daughter—to commit incest in return for drugs. Joy also discovers that his advertising company maintains a map indicating cancer density for the area, with accountability traced to the company's clients. Joy eventually renounces his work, causing his wife to commit him to a mental institution, where he ironically finds happiness and fulfillment. Carey's tone becomes less satiric and more overtly comedic in his next novel *Illywhacker*. The term "illywhacker" is Australian slang for a liar or trickster, which accurately describes the novel's central character, the 139-year-old Herbert Badgery. Badgery lies constantly in order to survive and improve his life, and Carey draws parallels between Badgery's picturesque adventures and Australia's development as a nation following its independence from England. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey again endeavors to re-imagine and re-evaluate Australian history. Set in the Victorian era, the title characters are drawn together by their passion for gambling. Oscar takes a "gamble" as a young man by following what he believes is a sign from God and joins the Anglican Church, using his winnings from horse races to pay for his living expenses as a clergyman. Lucinda is an heiress who "gambles" her family inheritance on buying a glass factory and relocating to Sydney. The two characters meet on an ocean voyage and become involved in a tragicomic

love affair. *Oscar and Lucinda's* expansive narrative is composed of numerous short chapters, gradually unfolding plot details, vivid imagery, and symbolic references to water and glass.

Carey returns to the modern era with *The Tax Inspector* (1991), creating a postmodern tale with plot twists, bizarre characters, and gruesome yet compelling situations. Maria—an unmarried, pregnant tax inspector—comes to investigate the Catchprice family business, a crumbling auto dealership in a suburb of Sydney. Offended by such an intrusion into their affairs, the Catchprices entrap Maria in a spiraling series of lies and insanities. *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*, Carey's first novel written entirely in the United States, comments on Australian national identity and the assimilation of American culture. The novel's protagonist, Tristan, is a citizen of Efica, an imaginary island nation that closely resembles Australia. Efica has been colonized and exploited by Voorstand, a colossal world power that is reminiscent of the United States. At the center of the story is the Eficans's struggle to retain their cultural identity, which the Voorstanders attack through an entertainment spectacle known as the Sirkus. The primary characters of the Sirkus are Bruder Mouse, Uncle Duck, and Hairy Man who closely resemble the popular Walt Disney characters Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Goofy. Horribly deformed since birth, Tristan finally finds love and acceptance by donning a Bruder Mouse costume, which hides his physical disfigurements, and becoming part of the Voorstand culture. Carey continues his analysis of postcolonial Australian identity in *Jack Maggs*, a novel based on Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. In Carey's interpretation, he tells the story from the perspective of the Magwitch character, named Jack Maggs in Carey's text. Maggs is an English ex-convict who, after paying for his crimes, escapes to Australia and becomes a wealthy landowner. He repays an earlier kindness by sending money to a young boy, Henry Phipps, who helped him when he was a convict. Maggs looks upon Phipps as a son and wishes to be reunited with the boy. Risking the punishment of death upon return to England, Maggs finds that Phipps has grown into a self-centered, boring, and lazy man. In the process of his journey, Maggs also becomes involved with a young writer and mesmerist, Tobias Oates, who is a representation of Dickens himself. In reworking *Great Expectations*, Carey attempts to put forward an uniquely Australian perspective on a classical English text, showing Australia as a land of freedom and fairness, unlike its typical depiction in nineteenth-century literature, which portrayed the country as a rugged wasteland populated entirely by low-class citizens, cattle thieves, and hardened criminals.

One of the most popular figures in Australian history, Ned Kelly, is at the center of Carey's novel *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Born in 1855 to Irish immigrant

parents, Kelly was a notorious gentleman bandit who became a prominent figure in Australian legend and folklore. Although Kelly and his gang murdered three policemen, they have since been immortalized as men who would not bow down to the British imperialistic government that controlled Australia in the nineteenth century. Using both conjecture and legitimate facts, Carey depicts Kelly as a poor and illiterate man who commits crimes only to settle injustices for the downtrodden—a mythical Robin Hood figure for Australia. Carey published his first work of travel writing, *30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account*, in 2001, focusing on Australia's capital city. The text recounts Carey's return visit to Sydney during the 2000 Summer Olympic games, giving his personal reflections on the city and its inhabitants. In 2003 Carey released *My Life as a Fake*, a work of historical fiction regarding an Australian literary hoax, based on a real incident in 1943. The novel follows Sarah Wode-Douglass, a struggling literary editor, as she attempts to discover the truth behind a series of poems written by an author named Bob McCorkle, who may or may not exist.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Commentators have often described Carey's works as postmodern, noting that his prose and dominant thematic material clearly identifies him as a postcolonial author. Critics have lauded how Carey uses nonlinear techniques to attack his reader's sense of narrative coherence, order, time, and sequence. Carey's talent for placing extraordinary events within mundane contexts and use of allegory and symbolism have also drawn extensive praise from scholars, earning him comparisons with such writers as Franz Kafka and Gabriel García Márquez. Reviewers have complimented Carey's interest in themes of nationhood, cultural identity, and colonialism as well, most notably in the novels *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* and *Jack Maggs*. However, some have criticized Carey's continuing emphasis on examining Australian themes and issues, particularly because Carey has lived in the United States since 1989. Such critics have faulted Carey for failing to identify himself as an expatriate author and argued that his later works display a flawed and detached understanding of modern Australian culture.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Fat Man in History: Short Stories (short stories) 1974
War Crimes (short stories) 1979
The Fat Man in History and Other Stories (short stories) 1980; also published as *Exotic Pleasures*, 1981

Bliss (novel) 1981
Bliss [with Ray Lawrence] (screenplay) 1985
Illywhacker (novel) 1985
Oscar and Lucinda (novel) 1988
The Tax Inspector (novel) 1991
Collected Stories (short stories) 1994
A Letter to Our Son (letters) 1994
The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (novel) 1994
The Big Bazooohley [illustrations by Abira Ali] (juvenilia) 1995
Jack Maggs (novel) 1997
True History of the Kelly Gang (novel) 2000
30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account (travel writing) 2001
My Life as a Fake (novel) 2003

CRITICISM

Norma Jean Richey (review date summer 1989)

SOURCE: Richey, Norma Jean. Review of *Oscar and Lucinda*, by Peter Carey. *World Literature Today* 63, no. 3 (summer 1989): 534-35.

[In the following review, Richey examines the symbolic elements in *Oscar and Lucinda*, praising Carey's characterizations of the dual protagonists.]

Peter Carey has established himself as one of the best contemporary writers of fiction. His last two novels, *Bliss* and *Illywhacker*, were finalists for the Booker Prize, and *Oscar & Lucinda* was an early contender. Carey has both imagination and intelligence, and his writing gets better with every venture, though I am not sure anyone can write a better picaresque novel than *Illywhacker*.

Oscar & Lucinda tells the story of two misfits, unsuited both by nature and by parents who raised them according to personal rather than traditional communal values. Oscar's father is a religious fanatic and an erudite collector of strange sea life whose son is indeed an odd fish; Oscar is totally ill suited for being anything but an oddity in his combined ignorance and innocence, using gambling skills to support a theological vocation. Lucinda is an Australian heiress who meets Oscar between two worlds—on a boat en route from England to Australia. Their entire relationship continues as a metaphorical journey between two worlds: between England (past) and Australia (present), between religion and reality, between moral order (as in Kant's categorical imperative of "ought") and the exigencies of poverty and greed.

These two mismatched individuals find each other in an odyssey that mocks English rigidity and Australian mores. The strong-willed couple are outcasts and gamblers who find themselves like each other. They bind their destinies in a glass church that they construct for transport to a near-wilderness settlement in Australia. The church, a fragile symbol of beauty and meaning, is a measure of their own values in a mediocre world in which they find themselves so strangely adrift.

Carey used the device of a figure seen passing in a boat in *Bliss*, when a glimpsed female was viewed as a romantic object, echoing Byron's words, "I did but see her passing by / Yet I shall love her 'til I die." Oscar is far too weak and human to be seen as a Byronic figure as he passes in a boat (sitting inside the glass church thus transported). Oscar's destination is toward his own heart of darkness, and the savagery Conrad showed in Kurtz envelops Oscar as he sees the mindless and ambitious head of his caravan victimize both whites and Aborigines. Carey has a knack for making vignettes tell a historical chapter, as he does here in showing the mistreatment of Aborigines in a morality-play-like sketch, or as he did in showing the communist movement in one section of *Illywhacker*. For Carey, the small boat in which Oscar rides is a ship of the state of Oscar's sensibility, carrying Oscar's vision and his reality, his aspiration and his destruction.

Oscar dies in the church in the boat, drowned hours after having been seduced by this strange woman. He then consummates a will, leaving everything he owns to this strange woman—within hours after his first and only sexual experience. The will results in the loss of Lucinda's fortune, gambled by Lucinda to Oscar as a gesture of faith in his journey and his love for her. Lucinda is left poverty-stricken and eventually becomes a laborer and a labor activist. This does not mean, however, that all's well that ends well, but rather that the world is such a chaos that everything is a gamble, however matters turn out.

Carey's writing often balances elements which create a wonder of words that somehow keep emotions at a distance. Carey is not distant on the subject of death, and his account of Oscar's dying is a powerful example of his greatness as a writer.

A great bubble of air broke the surface of the Bellinger and the flying foxes came down close upon the river. When they were close enough for his bad eye to see, he thought they were like angels with bat wings. He saw it as a sign from God. He shook his head, panicking in the face of eternity. He held the doorknob as it came to be the ceiling of his world. The water rose. Through the bursting gloom he saw a vision of his father's wise and smiling face, peering in at him. He could see, dimly, the outside world, the chair and benches of his father's study. Shining fragments of aquarium glass fell like snow around him. And when the long-awaited white fingers of water tapped and

lapped on Oscar's lips, he welcomed them in as he always had, with a scream, like a small boy caught in the sheet-folds of a nightmare.

Andro Linklater (review date 7 September 1991)

SOURCE: Linklater, Andro. "Landscape with Peasants." *Spectator* 267, no. 8513 (7 September 1991): 34.

[In the following review, Linklater applauds Carey's descriptive abilities in *The Tax Inspector*, though notes that the title character is the novel's weakest.]

In the old days, when kindly scientists were still trying to develop 'smart' weapons as the humane way to deal out death and destruction, television news once showed a subversive clip of a submarine missile being tested. It was crammed with about \$10 millions worth of computers and enough information to navigate itself from the ocean bed through the earth's atmosphere and down the throat of a passing cod in the South Atlantic, but through some flaw in its make-up, it chose instead to describe two and a half circles of fluffy smoke and explode in a shower of orange sparks just above the surface of the North Atlantic. If they ever recovered the tail-fin, it probably said 'Designed by Peter Carey'. This is the unmistakable behaviour of all his most notable creatures—to be bursting with possibilities, with a will-power aimed firmly at the stars, only to corkscrew hopelessly out of control due to some malfunction of nature or nurture.

Its most spectacular demonstration was in *Oscar and Lucinda*, the 1988 Booker Prize winner, in which God and gambling rocketed the protagonists across the firmament of the 19th century towards happiness until timidity and frigidity tilted them off-course and smashed their dreams to a million glassy fragments. It was such a dazzling display of fiction-making that one could forgive the relentlessly episodic structure, as though it were being serialised in 110 installments. Since the book following a success tends to be panned by reviewers regretting earlier enthusiasms, I should say at once that *The Tax Inspector* confirms Carey's status as a novelist of formidable power. The scale, however, is much smaller.

The action is confined to four days, in the course of which Catchprice Motors, a family-run car dealership on the outskirts of Sydney, is being investigated for tax evasion. Unlike both Oscar and Lucinda the nearest any of the Catchprices gets to considering the state of their souls is when the youngest, Benny, determines to become an angel of lust after taking a course in self-realisation, and his brother joins the Hare Krishna movement. Otherwise they are into country-and-western music, child abuse, station wagons and, in the case of Frieda, the family matriarch, gelignite. These are grotesques, but there is a normality about their gro-

tesqueness as there is, for example, about Brueghel's peasants: in place of the blains and bulbous noses bred by rural life in the 16th-century Netherlands, this 20th-century Australian peasantry suffers from neurosis, emotional disturbance and psychopathic urges, but given their environment these aberrations are natural.

What was once farming country watered by the Wool Wash river is now a dormitory town whose awfulness is epitomised by the state of the river it has polluted:

The banks of the Wool Wash were littered with beer cans and condoms and paper cups. Petrol-heads came here to do one dusty spin-turn before screaming up through the S's for the race back to the skid-pan at the Industrial Estate. Stolen cars were abandoned here, virginities were lost here . . . At weekends you could buy speed and crack by the gas barbecues. It was the sort of place you might find someone with their face shot away and bits of brain hanging on the bushes.

In proper Brueghelian fashion, Carey gives each character, however minor, in this bleak landscape a distinct character, and his economy in conveying a likeness is constantly satisfying. Here is the manager of the Hare Krishna restaurant who makes just three appearances and never as more than window-dressing: 'Govinda-dasa was not an easy man to work for. He was too often disappointed or irritated with the human material that was given him. He was kind and generous, but these qualities lay like milkskin on the surface of his impatience, wrinkling and shivering at the smallest disturbance'.

Unfortunately such deftness is less apparent in his treatment of Maria Takis, the tax inspector and the one person of integrity in this corrupted world. Although invested with the liberated woman's conventional attributes—tough but caring, pregnant but sexy—she remains a blurred figure. Since she merely serves as a *dea ex machina* to open up the can of worms, this is no great failing, but in what I can only presume is an attempt to make her human, she is given a love affair with a Catchprice who is smooth, successful and civilized. The device is not only unbelievable but such a bizarre stylistic flaw—as though a peasant by An-nigoni had been introduced—that it threatens one's enjoyment of what is otherwise a splendid Gothic satire. Fortunately it is irrelevant to the superb melodrama of the last pages, in which every pigeon not only comes home to roost, but blows up—and unlike submarine missiles, dead on target.

Victoria Radin (review date 13 September 1991)

SOURCE: Radin, Victoria. "Toxic Waste." *New Statesman and Society* 4, no. 168 (13 September 1991): 39.

[In the following review, Radin laments that Carey's dark tone in *The Tax Inspector* is overly gruesome, arguing that Carey is at his best in his lighter, earlier works.]

Peter Carey can normally be relied on for weather-resistant high spirits and brazen acts of generosity. *Il-lywacker* is narrated by a con man of 139 years who has grown a pair of magnificent breasts that suckle a babe. *Oscar and Lucinda* builds a glass cathedral in a river, in which the hero gratefully drowns. *Bliss*, being the tale of Harry Joy, triumphs over dark parable. Carey's novels are all fables or follies, but their design is so nicely demonstrated, so deeply embedded in unexpected largesse, that the reader feels stroked and loved.

By the end of *The Tax Inspector*, this reader felt abused. A Great Point is being made, and the finger is jabbing at us. Even the writing falters, loses Carey's typical relish and precision: there are slacknesses, surprises that slam doors rather than open them. It is an ugly story, and ugliness is not Carey's forte. We have other writers for that.

Abuse is the theme of *The Tax Inspector*. Ecological abuse has carved a hideous housing development and stinking motor business from fields where Frieda Catchprice, the octogenarian matriarch of the tale, had once dreamed of creating a flower farm. And now the local swimming hole is toxic, its shores littered with condoms left by old children with "lighter-fuel breath". We never quite learn why blonde, pretty Frieda gave up her dream, but we do eventually see her as the hag she has become. Carey's sympathy wavers near the end of the book, before she detonates Catchprice Motors in a cinema-melodramatic, rather than inevitable, gesture of spite.

He is equally wasteful of Maria Takis, open-hearted, raven-haired, eight months pregnant and single—and the tax inspector of the title. Only Peter Carey could envisage a taxation department staffed by latter-day Robin Hoods, creaming the owners of Rollers to fund child-care and hospitals. But the Department has reverted to type, Dial-a-Death threatens, and Maria's attempt to save Catchprice Motors by breaking into the taxation computer by night proves a meticulously observed red herring. Likewise her rose-coloured, though plausible, romance with Jack Catchprice, whom she drops with a display of sullen hopelessness similar to that with which the author ends his book.

Although Carey has always been unusually able to draw either sex as easily as the other, *The Tax Inspector* reeks of dislike for men. Running through the Catchprice males is a generational curse of child abuse that culminates in the derangement of Benny, a scary adolescent who cold-bloodedly transforms himself (transformation of a more haphazard sort being a more typical, and endearing, Carey motif) into a white-haired, depilated, silk-suited Lucifer, an Angel of Death—in fact, his own.

It is unclear if the ghastly ending, combining mass destruction and possibly one of the most horrible births in fiction, is meant to be redemptive, but it leaves an

awful lot of gore on the ground. Here in Franklin, Australia, are Sam Shepard's Badlands without his warmth, crossed, when the action goes urban and upwards, with a sort of Sydney *After Hours*. Carey used to write of freakishness and make it seem friendly and compelling. He is now writing, in unforgiving dissatisfaction with contemporary life, of freaks.

Peter Carey and John F. Baker (interview date 13 December 1991)

SOURCE: Carey, Peter, and John F. Baker. "PW Interviews: Peter Carey." *Publishers Weekly* 238, no. 54 (13 December 1991): 37-8.

[In the following interview, Carey discusses the difficulties he encountered in writing *The Tax Inspector*, the influences that shape the subject matter of the novel, and the different critical receptions of the novel in Australia and the United States.]

Most writers seem to have had a harder time than Peter Carey getting to the top. Perhaps it's partly due to the hunger in his native Australia for new literary voices, but from the time he began to publish in 1974 critical recognition was swift, and was soon followed by prestigious awards. *War Crimes*, his second book of short stories (the first was *The Fat Man in History*), won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award in 1980; his first novel *Bliss* the following year won three, including the National Book Council Award; *Illywhacker* in 1985 earned several more and a Booker nomination in London, and *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988 finally took the Booker.

Now Carey, who has been living in New York for the past couple of years, teaching a class in creative writing at New York University, has emerged with *The Tax Inspector*, a novel about a Grand Guignol family of car dealers that is at once tender and comic, realistic and savagely horrific. It has already garnered an ecstatic set of English reviews. (Edmund White in the *TLS* said that Carey's work was "destined to make him one of the most widely read and admired writers writing in English.")

Carey, tall, thin and bespectacled, with an unruly shock of hair and an enormous, goofily disarming grin, greets *PW* in the narrow Greenwich Village townhouse he shares with wife Alison Summers, a dramatist and theater director, and sons Sam, four, and Charlie, born last year. We move swiftly up through the clutter of playpens among bookcases, to Carey's workroom at the top of the house, where he flips off his word processor—almost, it seems, reluctant at the intrusion—and perches on his desk to talk, his back to the quiet, tree-lined Village street outside the window.

One of the first things to strike an interviewer is Carey's remarkable combination of sensitivity and self-deprecation. He is very much a public figure in Australia (on a previous encounter, at the Adelaide Writers Festival in 1988, we recall him trailed everywhere by a television crew) and is obviously resigned to the necessity of giving interviews. Yet the personality that emerges, far from being media-hardened, still seems almost as gawkily school-boyish as his appearance. He gropes for the right word, grins delightedly at finding it understood, and gives the impression that he is learning as much about himself from his own conversation as you are.

The Tax Inspector is a novel that marks all sort of changes for Carey. After the epic historic sweep of *Illywhacker* and *Oscar and Lucinda* it is much smaller, more concentrated and strongly—even bitterly—contemporary. For it he has moved to a new agent and publisher—and for the first time wrote much of a book away from his native land. Perhaps partly because of his current self-exile, and perhaps for reasons having to do with traditional rivalries between Sydney, where the new novel is set, and Melbourne, where Carey was born 48 years ago, there was some critical carping about *The Tax Inspector* in Australia. Carey describes it as "a weird reaction," probably related to the strange Aussie "tall poppy" syndrome, whereby success is denigrated. "One of the things I particularly like about America is that you celebrate success, you don't dump on it."

He went back to Australia last summer on a promotion tour for the book, but for the time being is very happy with life in New York. "In many ways my life here is as narrow as this room, but I find it very rich and rewarding. We go to a lot of theater because of Alison, and have a lot of good friendships. It's hard to believe it's been two years already since I left." And when he does return, says Carey, "I want to go back to somewhere extreme—like Townsville, say."

He found *The Tax Inspector* a particularly challenging book to complete, and one that took him 12 drafts to get right rather than his usual seven or so. It is set, ironically, in a milieu into which Carey was born—his mother and father were suburban auto dealers, and he says he began it thinking that he wouldn't have to do much research into the background. "I'd never drawn on life in my writing like that before. But although I knew what things looked like, I didn't know how they worked, especially now, and I had to go and research at an auto dealership anyway." He was also worried how his brother and sister might react, though the dreadful Catchprice clan of the book "is nothing like my family." His solution was to use a literary occasion to make a speech in which he stressed "how writers make everything up."