

## A Mythical Study of Peter Carey's Novels

Anshu Rani

*A Ph. D. scholar of MMH Degree College, Ghaziabad, CCS University,  
Meerut, India.*

---

### Abstract

Mythology allows taking a journey into an exciting and mysterious world. In every culture and every country during every period of time, people have told stories that explain and define the great acts of nations and peoples. Some of these stories educates, some mystify the culture. The human society is marked by the interpenetration of man with surrounding world and these results in the birth of magic, myth and religion, with their peculiar rituals and ceremonies. The images of myth have to be unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles. Peter Carey has made a case for myth and myth making is found in his writerly career. It occurs in various semantic manifestations in his novels. This paper provides an overview of the use of myth in his novels. It examines *True History of Kelly Gang* (2000), and *My Life as a Fake* (2003) to

illustrate how mythmaking operates in the fictional reality of his novels.

**Keywords:** Mythology, Culture, Religion, Rituals, Ceremonies, Semantic

Although postmodernity is, on the one hand, characterized by the dismissal of grand narratives and a retreat from certain myths, it paradoxically witnesses, on the other, a renaissance of myth. The tradition of mythmaking today is carried on in fields as diverse as political propaganda, advertising, and historiography.

It is crucial to our understanding of myth that, whatever the circumstances of its employment, it is vital to human beings. Historians, scholars of myth and, more broadly, philosophers of culture have made it clear that myth has accompanied man throughout the history of civilization. The need for mythmaking and storytelling even appears as one of the differentia specific of the human race. Graham Swift, in a much-quoted passage from his novel *Waterland*, puts it in a nutshell: "*But man [ . . . ] is the story telling animal.*"<sup>1</sup> He goes on :

*Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories. He has to go on telling stories. He has to keep on making them up. As long as there's a story, it's all right.*<sup>2</sup>

In his use of myth, Carey (like other postmodern storytellers and mythmakers) owes some of his premises-

wittingly or not-to this important late-nineteenth-century defence of myth. To some of Carey's culturally dissatisfied characters myth, as will be seen, serves as wholesome metaphysical nourishment: the mythic pretexts in which the stories of their lives are anchored have the potential to quench the consuming desire of these uprooted and transplanted characters to orient themselves.

In the present context of myth and myth-making in Carey's novels, myth is most relevant in the sense underlying many of Northrop Frye's writings on the topic: "*to me myth always means, first and primarily, mythos, story, plot, narrative.*"<sup>3</sup>

But myth is also pertinent to a discussion of Carey's writings because of its intricate relationship with history. History, the positivist discourse, gets melted down into myth through a number of narratorial manoeuvres. Sometimes Carey has his narrators rewrite history, sometimes they dissect its falsehoods; sometimes they delicense history by turning it into an explicit fiction, and sometimes they transport it to the realm of fantasy. In effect, history is refashioned into myth, a narrative without any epistemological privileges, one whose veracity can never be ascertained. Vice versa, myth is also turned into history. Sometimes Carey's stories are decked out with all the trappings of a traditional history, such as a critical instrumentarium with footnotes and a glossary (*The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*), editorial comments on the quality of the manuscripts which the account is based on (*True History*), or real historical persons and events that are

inextricably woven into the texture of his fictions so that one wonders where the storytelling starts and where the ex-periential past begins (eg, in *Oscar and Lucinda*).

Myth is all-pervasive in Peter Carey's novels. In its conventional meaning of something that is not quite true' it relates to Carey's fictions with their often revisionist agendas as a term denoting a 'lie', a 'legend', a 'misconception', which - once it has been identified-calls for a rewriting and conceptual rethinking. Given the political moorings of Carey, the leftist Republican, the avowed reconciliationist, the postcolonial novelist, it is hardly surprising that there are many myths of the Australian past and present that have engaged his writerly attention. To investigate myth, widely held misapprehensions (which at best are merely quaint and at worst highly dangerous) about the country's culture or history can even be called one of Carey's specialties; it is, after all, Herbert Badgery's "speciality" to enlarge upon "*The role of lies in popular perceptions of the Australian political fabric.*"<sup>4</sup> It is in this vein that in a novel like *Oscar and Lucinda* the history of inland exploration is rewritten. Carey here corrects the myth of exploration as a heroic tale of bravery and recasts it as a woeful tragedy that does not fail to mention the systematic destruction of an ancient culture incompatible with the civilizing programme of the white intruders.

*Illywhacker*, is devoted to sabotaging stereotypical images Australianness as male, proud and freedom-loving. In this novel, the Australian types of 'the myth' are exposed not

only as unrepresentative but also as being, more often than not, commercialized fictions of a pretentious and self-righteous nation at a loss for postcolonial orientation. At the very end of the novel, Australians of the legend are climactically displayed as oddities in the showcases of the "Best Pet Shop in the World": the "shearers [with their] dry, laconic anti-authoritarian wit" as well as the "life-savers, inventors, manufacturers, bushmen, aboriginals" (599)

In the assessment of mythmaking in *True History*, it is important to notice that it works within and beyond the novel. In extra textual reality, Carey's novel offers a new and potent version of the Kelly myth, which has already monopolized popular perceptions of Kelly to a considerable degree. After all, the novel was an international bestseller and Booker winner, and was chosen for the "One Book, One Brisbane" campaign in 2002. Within the confines of the book, the mythmaking results in the fictional re-creation of Kelly's life. It not only reflects on the Kelly myth and its social function for Australians,

*"What is it about we Australians [...]. What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might we not find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer? Must we always make such an embarrassing spectacle of ourselves?" (350)*

But it also offers an inquiry into the potency of myths which are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Anglo-Saxon world and which serve Kelly as narrative patterns to accommodate the story of his own life. Kelly

scavenges about for English and Irish folk narratives - for example, Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Richard Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* - and with their help creates for himself the context of heroism. His engagement with King Henry's "Crispin's Day Speech" from Shakespeare's history play demonstrates this. With the hubris of a megalomaniac, Kelly translates the epic-heroism of the soldiers preparing to fight at Agincourt to his own situation.

In *My Life as a Fake*, a fictional rendering of the Ern Malley affair, Carey, the "master of storytelling", again indulges in the re-creation of what Peter Porter calls an "archetypal Australian legend"; but this time, says Porter in his review of the novel, it "is fresher than Ned Kelly". This may be because the "mythical" figure of Ern Malley has attracted not nearly as much attention as that of Kelly.<sup>5</sup>

Carey's version of the Malley affair is revealingly mythologized. He suspends *My Life as a Fake* between the Prometheus myth, one of the most frequently consulted in Western literature, and that of Isis and Osiris. Both of these myths are transported into the book through literary texts-not surprising, in a novel set in a high-brow literary milieu and, moreover, saturated with allusions to classic from the literary canon. Prometheus penetrates *My Life as a Fake* via Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which serves as a direct intertext (the motto of the former being a quotation from the latter). And the myth of Isis and Osiris comes into the novel through Milton's pamphlet "Areopagitica" (1644). Troubled by the Ordinance of Printing passed in the previous year, Milton here takes up the motif of

*sparagmos* related to the myth and uses it to illustrate the manner in which the "sad friends of Truth" imitate the search Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris.

Peter Carey's mythistory of Australia is a forceful illustration of the power of I storytelling. In *Bliss*, as Pordzik observes in the above-quoted passage, the commune "gradually grows into existence with each story told"; in *My Life as a Fake*, Bob McCorkle creates a whole country in his eponymously entitled testament (247); in *True History*, Ned Kelly writes in order to get his daughter born. Because of their power, stories also need to be handled carefully; if told in the wrong place or at the wrong time, they quickly lose their splendour, or even turn against their tellers. Transplanting myths from the Old World to the New, for example, deprives them of their intrinsic value. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, for instance, the stories Oscar carries in Ms "sweat-slippery leather Bible" (492) simply fail to prevail against the resident mythology of the Aborigines. Likewise, in *True History*, the Kelly family's imported Irish mythology and its accompanying rituals quickly lose their mythic power and appeal, which subsequently leads to their dismissal:

*In the colony of Victoria my parents witnessed the slow wasting of St. Brigit though my mother made the straw crosses for the lambing and followed all Grandma Quinn's instructions it were clear St. Brigit had lost her power to bring the milk down from the cow's horn. The beloved saint withered in Victoria she could no longer help the calving and thus slowly passed from our reckoning. (88)*

Peter Carey's novels, I would argue, constitute a mythistory of Australia. The author seeks to analyse in his fictions the power of such "ultimate narratives" over his characters, but he also takes up myths that intrigue his real-life compatriots. His engagement with myth, though, appears highly ambivalent: Carey demythologizes as keenly as he remythologizes. Thus, paradoxically, he is mythopoeist and mythoclast at the same time.

## Works Cited

1. Swift, Graham, *Waterland* (1983, London, Picador, 1984).
2. Ibid.
3. Frye, Northrop, *Anatomy of Criticism : Four Essays* (Princeton N.J. Princeton U.P., 1957)
4. Carey, Peter *Illywhacker* (London & Boston M.A.: Faber & Faber, 1985) : 488
5. Porter, Peter, "*Spooked by a Spoof*", *Spectator*
6. Carrey, Peter, *My Life as a Fake* (London & Boston M.A.: Faber & Faber, 1985)
7. \_\_\_\_\_. *True History of Kelly Gang* (2000, London & Boston M.A.: Faber & Faber 2001); 321.

## *About the Author*

---



**Anshu Rani** is a Ph. D scholar of MMH Degree College, Ghaziabad, CCS University, Meerut, India. Earned her academic degrees Master of Philosophy in English and Master of Arts in English from CCS University, Meerut, India.

## Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here.](#)

## Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://authornbook.com>.