

Eclectic and lifeless—My Life as a Fake

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My Life as a Fake by Peter Carey, Random House, Australia 2003

The framework for *My Life as a Fake* is a literary hoax that occurred in Australia in 1944 which became known as the Ern Malley affair. The perpetrators of the hoax were two mediocre poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, members of a privileged officer caste who were enlisted in the intelligence unit in the army at the time. Using a manual on mosquito eradication, an Oxford book of quotations and some Shakespeare, they wrote a series of poems, supposedly in one afternoon. They created a fictional poet and named him Ern Malley, providing him also with a sister who discovers the poems after her brother's "death" at 24 of Graves' disease and who forwards them for assessment to the *Angry Penguins*, the journal of modernist art and literature.

The novel's narrator is Sarah Wode-Douglass, editor of a struggling London literary journal the *Modern Review*. It is 1985 and she recounts events of 13 years earlier, when a family friend and poet, John Slater, persuaded her to accompany him to Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia. Once there, she discovers a decrepit-looking bicycle repairman from Australia in his dingy, run-down shop reading Rilke. Slater recognises him as Christopher Chubb, a literary hoaxer, and warns Sarah to avoid him.

Sarah's interest though, is piqued and she returns to the shop where she discovers that Chubb is a disgruntled and disillusioned traditionalist poet whose only literary acclaim is for the poetry written by Bob McCorkle, the fictional writer he had created. Believing she has at last discovered something close to poetic genius in McCorkle's work, she agrees to transcribe Chubb's tale in return for access to more of the "fake" poetry.

Like his real life counterparts, McCauley and Stewart, Chubb abhorred the "pretension" of the modernist trend and aimed to humiliate its most fervent adherents. Chubb's target was David Weiss, the editor of a modernist magazine. Weiss is prosecuted for publishing the poems, which are considered indecent. The main evidence against him comes from the investigating detective, Voegesang, who considers some of the ambiguous sexual innuendo in the poems immoral. Weiss is found guilty and with his reputation and that of the magazine in tatters, he commits suicide.

During the obscenity trial, the fictional McCorkle, in an allusion to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, becomes incarnate and begins to follow Chubb, demanding that he provide him with a history. McCorkle kidnaps Chubb's daughter, the product of a brief liaison with another artist, and escapes into the wilds of Indonesia. From this point on, any allusions to the relationship between the creator and his creation are lost in a maze of detailed but chaotic adventurous capers and personal revelations.

Through Chubb's account of the history of the poetry, the action and plot are then transferred to Indonesia, replete with shady and bizarre characters, such as a Japanese decapitator, political subversives who concoct poisons and a collection of other incredible personalities.

The novel ends with Chubb, his daughter and McCorkle's wife nursing the dying McCorkle. The chase for the poetry has assumed a life and death importance with Sarah willing to risk almost anything to have the volume of McCorkle's poetry. McCorkle's wife and daughter guard the poetry after his death and end up murdering Chubb when he attempts to steal it for Sarah. Why the two women murder Chubb is unclear, but it is

not something that overly preoccupies Sarah, who is in a state of despair pondering the nature of truth and art and wondering whether everything told to her and what she has witnessed and experienced is just ...fiction.

The sections dealing with the court proceedings are probably the only convincing aspects of the novel. Carey has borrowed freely from the Malley case, including court transcripts, letters and the original poetry itself. Despite this interesting material, which underlines the well-known adage that the truth is often stranger than fiction, Carey nevertheless feels compelled to create a grandiose literary experiment of his own, which although premised on an actual event, has little of the drama or complexities of the processes that generated the genuine hoax and the possible implications for Australian art and literature.

The Malley hoax is a significant part of Australia's cultural history, but it was one of many instances during World War II in which artists came under attack. In 1943 the Archibald Portrait Prize won by William Dobell was contested in the Supreme Court on the grounds that the portrait was a "caricature" and contained "distortions". A year later Lawson Glassop's realistic novel *We Were the Rats*, about Australian soldiers in WWI was banned by state and federal governments as was Robert Close's *Love Me Sailor*, an innocuous story about a promiscuous young woman. Close was found guilty of obscene libel and jailed, but appealed the conviction and was freed with a fine of £150.

The *Angry Penguins* journal championed modernism and all forms of literary and artistic experimentation and innovation, which according to McAuley and Stewart, had rendered the editors of the journal Max Harris and John Reed "insensible of absurdity and incapable of ordinary discrimination". Harris and Reed were under constant attack from traditionalists and conservatives who not only disapproved of the modernist trend artistically, but also the association that modernism had with left-wing political groups and ideas in Europe. McAuley and Stewart stated as such in an open letter explaining their motivations for the hoax: "Such a literary movement as the one we aimed at debunking—it began with the Dadaist movement in France during the last war, which gave birth to the Surrealist movement, which was followed in England by the new Apocalypse school, whose Australian counterparts are the *Angry Penguins*—this cultism resembles, on a small scale, the progress of certain European parties."

Max Harris was targeted for his brash and outspoken manner in defence of modernism and after much media hype, was eventually prosecuted in a court of law for publishing the Malley poems, which according to Victorian era statutes of what was considered obscene, were deemed to be likely to "deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences and into whose hands a publications of this sort may fall." Harris was fined in lieu of a jail sentence and the *Angry Penguins* folded about two years later.

There were rather important figures that collaborated with McAuley and Stewart such as John Kerr—whose legal advice the poets sought—who rose to senior levels in the judiciary and was eventually appointed Governor-General by Labor leader Gough Whitlam whose government Kerr sacked in 1975. Kerr had been a member of the Trotskyist movement for a time, but deserted the socialist movement and became a notorious anti-

communist in the post-war period. He was also a member of the CIA-funded Australian Association of Cultural Freedom of which McAuley was a founding member.

Other figures such as Alf Conlon, headed the Directorate of Research and Civil Affairs in which Kerr served as deputy-director and Conlon's right hand man. The function of the Directorate is something of a mystery since there is little documentation about its purpose, but it is supposed that it was a front organisation, in which McAuley and Stewart also served. The Directorate was a highly political outfit and one of its concerns was the planning of the reoccupation of New Guinea by Australia after the defeat of the Japanese in the Pacific. This unit bred some very right-wing figures in the post-war period, McAuley being one of them, who became a Cold War warrior, converted to Catholicism and became a founding member of the conservative publication, *Quadrant*.

The Stalinists in the Communist Party of Australia also weighed in against the Angry Penguins, and although they publicly condemned the means by which the modernists were "exposed" they nevertheless applauded the result.

Despite Carey's talent and skill, none of this tense and complex atmosphere is ever felt in the novel, and possibly because of this, none of the characters or their circumstances is ever raised to a level of concrete depiction. The characters evolve not out of particular circumstances that propel them towards an inevitable course of action or idea, but rather remain trapped in the closed world of Carey's fiction.

Carey explains in an interview with Alan Mudge of *BookPage*, that "This book is not about the Ern Malley hoax, I don't mean to sound too grandiose, like Miles Davis uses 'Bye Bye Blackbird'—to make something new. If the book has to be about anything, it's about the power of imagination and the sort of magical thinking that novelists often have that if they write something, then maybe it will come true."

In another interview with Robert Birnbaum of the *Morning News*, he says, "I don't like being bored. In the beginning, as a young and ignorant man in my early 20s I discovered there were such beautiful things in the world like *As I Lay Dying*, for instance and *Ulysses*. The thought that one might actually make something very beautiful, that had never existed before was really what I wanted to do. And in the end that's what I want to do."

The novel may have been a wonderful experience for Carey in attempting to create something "new and beautiful" but the end result is that *My Life as a Fake* is a lifeless construct, derived not from a desire to enlighten or provoke the reader on any profound level but to show the supposed power of—in this case Carey's—imagination. What a discovery!

The so-called "narratives within narratives" which provide the supposed connections and continuity of the characters and events are bewildering and tiresome. For instance, in a confrontation with Slater, it is revealed that Sarah has fictionalised portions of her own past, such as her mother's suicide, her father's sexuality and her own lesbianism. These epiphanies, revelations and confessions seem too arbitrary and an artificial means of dealing with the supposedly broader issues and complexities raised by the hoax and those involved in it. The link however, because it is not organic, is tenuous.

The same can be said about the relationship between the poet and his creation, McCorkle. In the end, it is not clear whether McCorkle is Chubb's alter ego or nemesis, or entirely a figment of Chubb's feverish imagination. Nor does it really matter since there is little to persuade the reader that the consequences of the hoax really matter very much.

In the Birnbaum interview Carey also suggests that the reason for the original hoax may have been anti-Semitism. That may have been true up to a point, but it overlooks the fact that all of modernism came under attack in Australia. In any case trying to make a case for anti-Semitism as the basis for the hoax in the novel does not work either. There is no context established by which Chubb's anti-Semitism can be explained. It

seems to happen in an historical vacuum.

Although Carey has a flair for witty and creative verbal acrobatics and at conjuring up vivid images, the images do not form a unified whole. There is an extreme eclecticism at work here that seeks to create something masterful out of a very limited understanding of the social forces that produce the Chubbs of the world. Chubb himself seems too much of a mediocrity and therefore unlikely to set off the chain of events that the novel describes. The original hoaxers—also mediocrities—were encouraged, and abetted by an atmosphere and forces that went beyond their own meagre poetic capabilities and spitefulness. This atmosphere is entirely absent from the novel and it is why the convoluted plot seems to be chasing itself, leading nowhere.

Carey claims to have done extensive research for this novel, but he has concentrated on minutiae. For instance, he traveled to Malaysia on several occasions to research the country and get the settings right for things like brothels and cabarets and learnt about concocting poisons and cures, ostensibly to achieve artistic verisimilitude. These things have not assisted the characters from rising above being mouthpieces that merely function to propel the falsely complex plot from one incredible incident to another through to its ludicrous end. Consequently the novel has little emotional or intellectual impact, although certain critics were impressed, marveling at Carey's subordination of concrete depiction to the chaotic web of intrigue the author has woven. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Peter Craven praises it as "a rich if imperfect piece of literary art" or more ostentatiously from Thomas Mallon in the *Washington Post* as "a poetic riddle wrapped in a modern mystery inside a baffling enigma."

Winner of the Booker Prize twice, for *Oscar and Lucinda* in 1988, which was also made into a feature film, and *The History of the Kelly Gang* in 2001, Carey is considered one of the best contemporary Australian writers. His previous novels such as the critically acclaimed *Jack Maggs* also suffered from the same problems found in *My Life as a Fake*. Based on Dickens' *Great Expectations* the novel was told through the eyes of Magwitch, the convict who was shipped to Australia. Again, the imagery is vivid but the characterisations are shallow and in a similarly self-reflexive style, the plot revolved around the attempts of a writer to tell Magwitch's story. With the exception of *The History of the Kelly Gang*, which deals with the outlaw Ned Kelly, this type of approach is characteristic of Carey and is evident, to varying degrees, in most of his work.

It is not necessary for Carey to include factual material or even to refer to the events in order to create an imaginative and interesting story. The point, however, is that these events have to be understood in their historical and social context so that they can be refracted through an artistic medium more concretely. That is, the author *feels* and *sees* things as they were in a certain time and place and this is then translated aesthetically, either to reveal something about this particular incident or as a catalyst for broader issues, not superimposed on an already preconceived idea about the event. Carey's 'snatch and grab' approach to history and social life has not produced an imaginative story, but a preposterous and tedious one, generating little more than mild curiosity about the value of the Malley poems, which subsides when the novel meanders off into its own literary self-importance.



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