THE AGE

Peter Carey: Venturing into territory he had long steered clear of

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When the time comes to write the story of Peter Carey's life (and someone else will have to volunteer, because he has no interest in doing it himself) the National Playwrights Conference in Canberra, in May 1984, will be recalled as the place he met his second wife, theatre director Alison Summers. He arrived a not-quite-married man, nine years into a relationship with painter Margot Hutcheson, and never returned home to Bellingen.

Another important event occurred there, though, that is less well known: a conversation with Aboriginal activist Gary Foley that had a profound influence on Carey's writing. It would be a form of colonisation for white authors to inhabit the inner lives of Indigenous Australians, Foley told him. In short: "We don't want you guys writing about us."

Australian author Peter Carey: "I don't think you'd want a writer who was writing puff pieces for their country." Photo: Steven Siewert

So for decades, as he wove an epic tapestry of his homeland, a colony founded on stolen territory by convicts and their jailers, Carey omitted Aboriginal characters and stories. His great Australian novels *Illywhacker, Oscar and Lucinda* and *True History of the Kelly Gang* are animated by Scottish and Irish settlers, Chinese and Jewish

immigrants, Englishmen (real and imaginary) and their descendants. The continent's Indigenous peoples are present only in their absence.
In *Illywhacker*, Australia itself is a story told by a liar, spelled out towards the end by fictional historian MV Anderson:

"Our forefathers were all great liars. They lied about the lands they selected and the cattle they owned. They lied about their backgrounds and the parentage of their wives. However it is their first lie that is the most impressive for being so monumental, i.e., that the continent, at the time of first settlement, was said to be occupied but not cultivated and by that simple device they were able to give the legal owners short shrift and, when they objected, to use the musket or poison flour, and to do so with a clear conscience. It is in the context of this great foundation stone that we must begin our study of Australian history."

Carey has alluded to this erasure time and again, without ever drawing on the songlines and storylines rubbed out. "As I got older I thought 'what a shameful thing to have a life of writing, never having addressed it directly'," he says. His new novel, *A Long Way from Home*, remedies this.

Carey and his third wife, literary agent Frances Coady, live in a pre-skyscraper, cast iron and red brick apartment building, between Wall Street and New York City Hall. The open plan living room is lined with tall windows: lots of light, constant sirens and horns, few obvious places to put up shelves. When they moved from their previous flat in Soho, they had to get rid of 3000 books.

Our appointment is at 10am, sadly too early for a couple of glasses of good red wine. "It's probably for the best. Those are the interviews you regret," Carey says, offering to make me a cappuccino. He's all in black, his hair by now all white, his manner relaxed but to the point. Sometimes, when an answer doesn't come right away, the tip of his tongue darts out, like a lizard tasting the air.

Cate Blanchett in Oscar and Lucinda. Photo: Supplied

When he was 10 years old, the Redex Round Australia Reliability Trial passed through his home town of Bacchus Marsh. His parents were Holden dealers, with more at stake than most in the national debate, over a pint, about whether G.M. or Ford made the

better product. At shows, the P. S. Carey Motors stand featured a huge map of the country with "Australia's Own Car" written in flowers.

The race, almost 16,000 kilometres on outback roads, no spares allowed or quarter given, was a yarn to be told. It was only when Carey watched newsreels from 1953, depicting stages from Brisbane to Cairns and Darwin to Broome without a single Aborigine in the frame, that he realised it could be his way into the subject he had circled for so long.

"I'm looking at this car flying up this road and I'm thinking, 'you guys, you've got no f---ing idea where you are. You could be driving through a cathedral and you wouldn't know,' " he says. "The Redex was all about mapping the country, in a way, claiming it, but there's another set of maps: Aboriginal stories. So my notion was that I would find a way to put those maps together."

Carey has lifted from his childhood many times, in particular tales of his grandfather the aviator and his father the salesman. There's a pinch of his Mum in Irene Bobs, a fearless driver who can change a regulator and knows the parts catalogue by heart, and a touch of his Dad, who "did business in pubs and ... was continually pissed" in her husband, Titch. *A Long Way from Home's* third major character, at the outset, is their navigator, an eccentric young teacher of German descent, Willie Bachhuber.

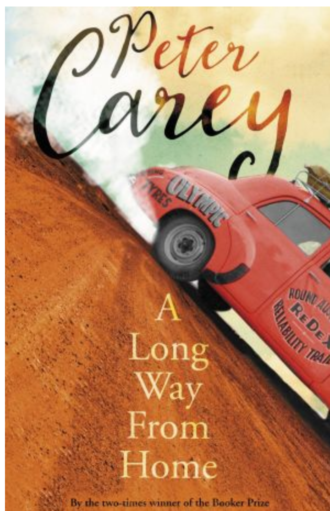
The 1954 Redex Round-Australia Trial. Photo: Fairfax Media

Apart from One Pound Jimmy on the half-crown stamp, Carey didn't see, let alone know, any Aborigines in Bacchus Marsh growing up (although he's had cause to wonder about this, since reading about the tens of thousands of pale-skinned Indigenous children stolen from their parents). The first he was conscious of meeting was an activist, also Jimmy, singing "if you're white, youse all right ... if you're black, get back" at a protest against the White Australia policy in Kooyong, during Bob Menzies' second period as prime minister.

In March 1988, shortly before winning the first of his two Booker Prizes, for *Oscar and Lucinda*, Carey delivered a Bicentennial speech in Sydney about the true meaning of Australia Day. The mental portrait Australians have of themselves, he said, "shows a happy suntanned face". "It shows no sign of the tortures and murders it emerged from." He proposed an annual Australia Week, beginning with a day of mourning, then a day of rage, and closing with a celebration of the country's diversity. "It was really, really unpopular. People came in to the Paddington Town Hall liking me, and they mostly left not liking me," he says.

"The landscape of colonialism is very clear in Australia,"Carey says. "There's the Aboriginal people, and there's the successes of those of us who've discovered that we're the benefactors of a genocide, which is not exactly a nice thing to wake up to in the morning."

Genocide is, to put it mildly, a controversial word in the Australian context. Historian Timothy Bottoms was asked by his publishers to rewrite the introduction to *Conspiracy of Silence: Queensland's Frontier Killing Times*, as it was "considered too confronting" to call mass killings of Aborigines genocide. His history of Cairns, commissioned by one city council, was sat on by the next mayor, who had no desire to publish a book acknowledging that the city was founded by murderers.



A Long Way from Home, by Peter Carey.

Carey suffers no such constraints, and can have a character stumble across a mass grave while taking a leak. The Redex route passed Hornet Bank and Cullen-La-Ringo, where hundreds of Indigenous men, women and children were killed in retaliation for attacks on white settlers. Carey describes families "forced off cliff tops, gunned down, babies brained with clubs", and notes that more than 300 people were shot or drowned during the "dispersal" at Goulbolba Hill alone.

Early in *A Long Way from Home*, Bachhuber studies "maps of the pastoralist properties which lay like a lethal patchwork on top of the true tribal lands". Later, marooned on a cattle station and press-ganged into teaching Aboriginal children, he erases the state borders from his classroom map of Australia, leaving a blank space. "Here, I would have my pupils drawing the paths of ancestral beings from one place to another," he decides. "I would not call them maps."

Carey is aware that he's likely to get it from both sides: from the Keith Windschuttles of the world, who will accuse him of exaggerating the violence done to Indigenous people, and from Aboriginal artists and custodians of sacred knowledge, who will accuse him of appropriating stories he has no right to tell.

He compares writing the book to tunnelling through a mountain from two directions, hoping to meet in the middle: "There's a high degree of risk. There's a high degree of what's unknowable. A continued sense that you might not be thanked for doing it. But

for the moment at least I'm really happy with it, until someone tells me why I shouldn't be."

In *Amnesia*, Carey describes an Australian culture of forgetting, beginning with the first whitewash and continuing into modern times, when enough people were prepared to turn away for a democratically elected government to be overthrown. Reading it, I was reminded of a famous James Baldwin line: "I love America more than any other country in this world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticise her perpetually."

Is this how Carey feels? Is this how he's perceived? He shrugs it off: "I don't think you'd want a writer who was writing puff pieces for their country." He is beloved enough, after all, to appear on a stamp, in the Australian Legends series that began with Sir Don Bradman in 1997 and took in singers, swimmers, scientists, jockeys, tennis players and fashion designers before getting to writers in 2010. This year, with chefs, footballers, feminists, rock bands and war heroes accounted for, the series finally honoured three Indigenous leaders.

Carey's grown-up sons, Charley and Sam, both live in New York, and for this reason, among others, he will not be returning "home" to Australia any time soon. He won't be writing a New York novel either, although people never stop telling him he should. "A lot about my writing is who are we, how did we come to be this way, what are we? And you live here, no one knows shit about Australia, and it makes you think about it even more," he says, adding that James Joyce wrote to friends in Dublin asking for descriptions of things in the shops.

He read about the last gasp of Australia's car industry with dismay, and remains angry about the offshoring policy, now being championed by Europe's nativist right, that warehouses asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island. In global warming, food shortages and the threat of nuclear war, he sees little cause for optimism, and more reason to laugh.

"This is a big deal for me, what I'm about to say. It may not sound like it, but it is: humour's really important," he tells me, an hour into our conversation. "The more you get into [*A Long Way from Home*], it sounds deeper and darker, and it is … but I think humour is the light, and a lot of this book's really funny. That matters a lot to me. Because I can't see any reason we can be optimistic about anything."

In this, he feels a kinship with Kurt Vonnegut, who saw Dresden obliterated by fire, and often compared writing humorous fiction to whistling while walking past a graveyard. And it's true, not that you'd know it from the above, that *A Long Way from Home* is a laugh a minute, to begin with. Carey's flair for a comic scene is peerless, and the Redex is a romp, in the vein of *Wacky Races*, complete with a gelignite-throwing Dick Dastardly.

As a young man in Melbourne, he discovered the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Vonnegut in the same store: the Whole Earth Bookshop on Bourke Street. Reading Borges taught him that "it might be possible to reinvent the world in just a few pages". Reading Vonnegut, he learned that a novel could be a joy to read and still be art. He has been tunnelling ever since, hooked on the exhilarating feeling of striking fresh air.