

High Wire Act: Peter Carey's My Life as a Fake

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Abstract: This essay examines how Carey displays the multiple fakeries of fiction in *My Life as a Fake*. It notes the multiple inter-textual references to the Ern Malley hoax and the gothic horror of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It examines the three unreliable narrating voices, the uneven characterisation of Christopher Chubb, and the magic realism seeking to animate Bob McCorkle and his present/absent book *My Life as a Fake*. It argues that the dazzling display of meta-fictional complexity, much celebrated by reviewers, contributes to the book's failure to create engaging characters and a credible narrative.

Keywords: fiction; fakery; meta-fictional complexity; inter-textual reference; unreliable narration; engaging characters; credible narrative

I

Peter Carey's *My Life as a Fake* (2003) is a typically risk-taking venture. Its spectacular exposure of the multiple fakeries involved in telling the stories of fictional characters is compelling, but it is less persuasive in rendering those fictional characters credible and sympathetic. The first of Carey's books to be published by Random House, it did not emulate the spectacular success of *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Initially uncertain of how to respond, some reviewers devoted more space to re-telling the Ern Malley story than to the book itself, which understandably frustrated the author ("Carey's take on snub?" 1).

There were also enthusiastic reviews, Peter Craven commenting that: "Carey takes an extraordinary story and reimagines it with great beauty and strangeness" ("That redeeming black magic" 14); John Updike describing it as "confidently brilliant" ("Papery Passions" 100); and Andreas Gaile noting that "[t]he psychotic and deeply traumatised figures that trade the stories of their lives in the novel prey on the reader's mind" ("Life-giving Lies" 11).¹ Despite this praise and a number of award short-listings, the new book was, in fact, less warmly received than its predecessors, and its sales by Carey's standards were disappointing.²

Carey began exposing the meta-fictional complexities of storytelling early in his career in "American Dreams" and "Report on the Shadow Industry." He has pursued this process in his novels using inter-textual references to Gosse's *Father and Son* in *Oscar and Lucinda*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in *Tristan Smith*, Dickens' *Great Expectations* in *Jack Maggs* and

the Jerilderie Letter in *True History of the Kelly Gang*. It is therefore no surprise that in *My Life as a Fake* he chose two such inter-textual references: the hoax poems and fake biography of Ern Malley, and Mary Shelley's nineteenth-century gothic horror story *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*, which he morphs into a highly self-conscious study of the deceptions and perils of literary creation.

II

The young Australian poets James McAuley and Harold Stewart set themselves an inherently contradictory task when they decided in 1944 to ridicule Max Harris and his modernist literary magazine *Angry Penguins* by sending him some pseudo-modernist poems.³ Most literary fakes are designed, like Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love*,⁴ or Helen Demidenko's *The Hand that Signed the Paper*,⁵ to bring their authors fortune and celebrity, as these both did before they were exposed. Michael Boone's forged painting in Carey's *Theft: A Love Story* (2006) also aims to deceive, and the painter has no intention of exposing the forgery when it is accepted and hung by a major gallery. This was not, however, the intention of McAuley and Stewart's planned deception. They wanted to ridicule what they saw as the pretentious fatuity of modernist verse, and this meant deceiving the editor of *Angry Penguins* with a plausible but specious product. The counterfeit poems, and the accompanying biography of the supposed poet, had to be good enough to convince Max Harris to publish and praise them, while at the same time bad enough to humiliate him and to discredit the fashionable movement he championed, when the hoax was revealed. When Harris obliged by taking the bait and lauding the "fakes" as genuine modernist poetry, the authors gleefully claimed to have concocted them in an idle afternoon by stringing together random quotes from some very unpoetic sources.

In an even crueller and more bizarre twist, Max Harris was prosecuted and convicted for publishing "indecent." The hoaxers were, however, also hoist with their own petard and Harris has to some extent been vindicated by the verdict of history. The hoax became a *cause célèbre* when a number of able judges like Herbert Read argued that the poetic pranksters had actually written better than they knew and that many of their intended parodies were, in an eerie echo of the forgeries of Thomas Chatterton, poems of real quality.⁶ The poems have since been republished and are currently included in *The Penguin Book of Modern Australian Poetry*, a respected anthology. In the "Author's Note" at the end of *My Life as a Fake* Carey cites Max Harris's continued belief in the story of Ern Malley, an acknowledged fiction which contains, for Harris, a universal truth (277-8). Ern Malley may never have lived, but his poems and his story refuse to die.⁷

III

The influence of *Frankenstein*, Carey's other major literary source, is less auspicious. Christopher Chubb's frenzied pursuit of his hated creation Bob McCorkle echoes Frankenstein's attempts to escape from his created monster, and both exemplify what Michelle de Kretser identifies as the "Romantic dread of the double who was believed to destroy a man's true self" (*The Lost Dog* 213). Like *Frankenstein*, which has attracted readers for 200 years, *My Life as a Fake* works powerfully as an idea, but the realisations of both stories are less convincing. Carey powerfully engendered science fiction horrors in a number of his early stories, but the confected gothic horror of *Frankenstein* casts an uneasy shadow over *My Life as a Fake*, particularly its final sections. Mary Shelley is no Dickens, and no

Carey either: the writing of *Frankenstein* is at best undistinguished, and when *My Life as a Fake* draws on it, it too strains for effect:

The room was not like now, Mem. It was ruled by the living creature in his giant teak bed. I beheld the wretch—the miserable creature whom I had created . . . And there he lay, the thing that I had brought to life, the brutish genius, glistening in the dark. His sweaty eyelids had retracted and the eyes were bulging from his shining face. He had become disgusting—gaunt, emaciated, the ribs nearly breaking through his wet and slippery skin. (260)⁸

It is difficult not to describe Bob McCorkle's death scene, of which this is a part, and in which the language of *Frankenstein* is closely echoed, as verging on the "tiresome bombast" (257) that Christopher Chubb complains of in McCorkle's journals. It is, of course, Chubb who is imitating Mary Shelley here, though there is no internal suggestion that the well-read Chubb is aware that he is re-enacting the *Frankenstein* story and echoing its language. It can be argued that his imitation of it is in character, but that only serves to highlight some of the problems that the narrations of Chubb and the other two principals in the story create for the reader.

IV

In his recent books Carey has been particularly concerned to create authentic voices for his characters. As he told Susan Wyndham, he began writing *My Life as a Fake* in Bob McCorkle's voice ("For my next trick" 3), but in its final form the book comes to the reader through multiple narratorial filters. Its first-person narrator is Sarah Wode-Douglass, editor of the English literary magazine *The Modern Review*, whom John Lanchester describes as: "the posh, prim, English, buttoned-up, closet lesbian editor" ("Hall of Mirrors" 2) who lives in the hope of one day discovering and publishing a literary genius. The book is her account of the fateful consequences of her chance meeting with Christopher Chubb in Kuala Lumpur. Her narration includes the story of John Slater, whom she has known all her life and who invites her to accompany him to Malaysia. Slater, who knows a good deal of the history of Christopher Chubb, serves as companion and interlocutor to Wode-Douglass. He also knows the ugly truth about the suicide of her mother, which she either does not know or has concealed from herself. Ironically, perhaps, despite a hugely bestselling novel and "a famous book of 'dirty' poems" (1), he is not regarded by her as an important writer, let alone a literary genius.

The third narrator/storyteller is Christopher Chubb, the Australian poet who perpetrated the celebrated McCorkle literary hoax. Wode-Douglass chances upon Chubb reading Rilke in a bicycle shop in Kuala Lumpur and is captivated by the single page of poetry he shows her, which she believes to be the work of a genius. Chubb then insists, Ancient Mariner-like, on telling her his life story before he delivers the rest of the poems, and her compulsive pursuit of the great poet she hopes to "discover" keeps her in his thrall. Much of the book consists of Chubb's account of his life to Wode-Douglass, which she somewhat improbably writes down during and between his visits, rather like Pamela Andrews breathlessly scribbling down Mr B.'s assaults on her virtue as they occur in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. There is nothing to indicate that Chubb is a reliable narrator, though the external events of his hoax are on public record. There is also no confirmation that Wode-Douglass has reproduced his narration accurately, or that she is herself a reliable narrator. The reader is thus firmly situated in the uncertain world of stories and lies that Carey's fiction has consistently inhabited.

Chubb keeps Wode-Douglass listening by promising an ever-deferred reward. Having famously exposed and humiliated one magazine editor, he seems intent on manipulating another. The first, David Weiss, was driven to suicide, and Wode-Douglass's life is, we learn, ultimately blighted by the obsession that Chubb feeds and exploits. Her own story is engaging to begin with, and the novel's opening chapters are compelling; but when she becomes an amanuensis for Chubb the reader's interest in her declines, and her obsession with Chubb's access to the supposed poetry of genius, which never materialises, generates limited sympathy for her. There are some enlivening revelations about her childhood, her private sexuality and the truth about her mother's death, but by the end she is lost, another victim of the McCorkle story. Carey has succeeded in making the voices of Wode-Douglass and Chubb plausible; but their stories, particularly Chubb's, are increasingly unlikely and unlovely, and the continuing emphasis on the fictionality of those stories further disengages the reader from them.

V

Carey has shown a predilection for damaged and unattractive characters from his early stories to *The Tax Inspector* and beyond, but their fictionality was not insisted upon as it is in *My Life as a Fake*. For all their moral ugliness, the Catchprizes are credible citizens of a grittily realistic Sydney. The congenital deformities of Tristan Smith, which lead Felicity's doctors to recommend euthanasia, initially repel the reader, but as the improbable Tristan develops a credible humanity, the reader is drawn into his physical, mental and emotional struggles with his broken body. For her part Sarah Wode-Douglass begins as credible and reasonably engaging, but Chubb and McCorkle, whose inter-textual fictionality is foregrounded, are less so, and their increasingly melodramatic pursuits in ever more exotic settings render them ever less engaging and believable. Chubb is also inconsistent. Like the original hoaxer Jim McAuley, he is said to exude "attractiveness to women" (85) as a boozy young jazz pianist,⁹ a characterisation at odds with its context. Immediately before it, for example, Wode-Douglass describes him as an anxious cultural cringer:

The boy from Haberfield was known for the small number of poets he would allow into his library: Donne, Shakespeare, Rilke, Mallarmé. He had been born into a second-rate culture, or so he thought, and one can see in that austere bookshelf all the passion that later led to the birth of Bob McCorkle—a terror that he might be somehow tricked into admiring the second-rate, the derivative, the shallow, the provincial. (84-5)

She is deeply unimpressed by forty-three of his "own" poems:

[N]ot one of these lines bore the vaguest resemblance to that single page that had so excited me . . . If this was his 'real' poetry, then I preferred the fake . . . these dried yellow pages were priggish, self-serving, snobbish. The Poet in these verses was a paragon of art, of learning. (86)

The characterisation of Chubb in the remainder of the book accords more with this unlovely image of a boring, culturally insecure, wannabe poet, than with a seductively raffish young jazz pianist. After the suicide of David Weiss, the editor he hoaxed, Chubb retreats into a guilty solitude: "[he] was a murderer . . . He stayed away from . . . places where he might run

into fellow poets and artists” (85), and it was in this condition that he wrote the poems that Wode-Douglass found so pedestrian.

In Carey’s next novel, *Theft: A Love Story*, Michael Boone describes the chronic self-loathing of the artist:

Artists are used to humiliation. We start with it and we are always ready to return to real failure, the shitty bottom of the barrel, the destruction of our talent by alcohol or misery. We live with the knowledge that, alongside Cézanne or Picasso, we are no-one, were always no-one, will be forgotten before we are in the ground.

Shame, doubt, self-loathing, all this we eat for breakfast every day. (212)

The Christopher Chubb depicted after the fatal outcome of his hoax may represent an extended portrait of this self-loathing, which he in turn projects into the vengeful McCorkle’s hatred of his creator. That said, the suggestion that such a delusional creation could become so real to his creator as to torment him for the rest of his life, stealing the person and the affections of his daughter, and further becoming so alive to that daughter and to Mrs Lim that they will kill Chubb to protect his legacy, is drawing a very long fictional bow.¹⁰ They may all, of course, be imagined characters in Chubb’s tormented mind, though the presence of Tina and Mrs Lim in Kuala Lumpur, where they are encountered by Wode-Douglass who may well be telling the truth about them, suggests otherwise. It is never made clear in *My Life as a Fake* just how the reader is to interpret these fictions. Do they belong to the world of magic realism? Are they delusions, and if so, whose? Is the show a tour-de-force exposé for the delectation of theoretically sophisticated readers happy to be reminded that novel “characters” are always already fictions? Or is Carey’s *Fake* itself a fake, like Michael Boone’s *Le Golem électrique*, a hoax on a hoax?

VI

The innermost of the book’s narratorial Chinese boxes, and the most extreme challenge to the reader’s suspension of disbelief, is the story of Bob McCorkle. From his first “appearance” at Weiss’s trial, McCorkle appears to escape from his role as a character created by Chubb to expose Weiss. It is not, however, clear whether he escapes into Chubb’s guilt-ridden, delusional mind or into a larger world independent from it, and if the latter, how is that possible? Chubb’s claim that McCorkle appeared at the trial is not supported by the testimony of other internal characters or by the transcript of the trial (56-9), and that suggests that he “exists” only in Chubb’s mind. He can then be seen as Chubb’s creative *doppelgänger*, a threatening psychic other who emerges when he is inspired by the divine afflatus; but Chubb clearly does not see it this way, and the book does not encourage such a Hyde and Jekyll reading.

The reader’s instinctive unwillingness to believe in the existence of a McCorkle independent of Chubb is qualified but not overcome by the many reminders that the book’s characters are all invented. McCorkle is different in that he is invented inside the book by another character, not directly by the author. Further, he is based on another fictional character in the public, extra-fictional Ern Malley story about a fictional but plausible poet. Add to this the fact that some but not all of the other characters are fictionalised variations on historical, extra-fictional players in the Ern Malley story, and it becomes clear just how complex and multi-layered Carey’s playing with the intersections of life and art is.¹¹ McCorkle may be Chubb’s

hoax, but he is also Carey's hoax: an extravagant if not self-indulgent assertion that he can con his readers into relating to McCorkle as if such a patently non-existent phantom were a "real" character in a novel.

One reason why McCorkle fails to materialise for readers unsympathetic to gothic fantasy is that his work also fails to materialise. The art that is significantly absent from this artful book is the book within the book, the work with the same title—*My Life as a Fake*—that McCorkle is supposed to have written, and that Chubb dangles in front of Wode-Douglass while he tells his sorry tale. The only "McCorkle" verse included in the book is Ern Malley's, and the worth of that, as we have seen, remains disputed. There is no other evidence to support the claims of some of the characters that McCorkle is a poetic genius, and like his work, he remains elusive, a fictional riff on a fictional creation.

His status is even less clear than that of the monster in *Frankenstein*. That monster kills his creator's friend Henry Clerval and his wife Elizabeth in an attempt to force Frankenstein to acknowledge and help him. These desperate actions are witnessed by other characters, which lends an internal degree of credibility to the monster's improbable existence. In *My Life as a Fake* the main internal evidence for McCorkle's "existence" is Chubb's reported, questionably reliable and possibly insane testimony. This is supported by the devotion to McCorkle and his literary legacy of Tina and Mrs Lim, a devotion so intense that it prompts their murder and dismemberment of Chubb when he threatens this legacy—a bizarre re-enactment of the *sparagmos* of Orpheus by Thracian women—the results of which are witnessed by Sarah Wode-Douglass and John Slater. At the end of the book Wode-Douglass claims that "the only 'fact' I could be certain of was that McCorkle had a physical existence and it was separate from Chubb's" (274), but her own inverted commas qualify this claim, and the reader remains puzzled about the status of McCorkle and his supposed poetic genius.

VII

My Life as a Fake has been widely celebrated for its portrayal of the artificialities of fiction, a subject that Carey has made his own. Reviewing the book for *The Times*, for example, Philip Hensher described it as:

[A] magnificent, poetic contemplation of the lying, fakery, and insincerity inherent in the act of artistic creation. This haunting fable is built around the idea that in great art, the sincerely meant truth may ring hollow; a meretricious lie may have the energy to girdle the earth before it can be retracted.¹²

Carey works multiple variations on this paradox by re-fictionalising an already fictional hoax, one that succeeded in posing as an extra-fictional reality and in creating an enduring extra-fictional furore. He then adds a further level of inter-textual artificiality to this interplay of fiction and history by echoing Mary Shelley's gothic fantasy. He even trumps *Frankenstein* by making McCorkle a poet, like his creator, and a much better poet, thus opposing the implied author of the poems with their actual writer, who also created a (fictional) biography for that implied author. If all that were not enough, Carey adds to the mix the hoax nature of the poems, which appear to be the extra-fictional Ern Malley poems, which were designed to deceive, which are and are not good poetry, and whose ownership is the subject of hostile dispute between the parties.

The risk that accompanies Carey as ringmaster conducting acrobatic feats displaying the skilful fakery of fiction is that while he produces a dazzling spectacle of authorial high-wire agility, what Cathleen Schine calls “Carey’s unsettling virtuosity” (“The Call of the Wild” 13), that may also obstruct an emotionally engaging narrative, as Robert Macfarlane points out:

The deep problem with the book is not an excess of story, or a failure of technique, but an insufficiency of humanity. For this is a novel which, like many recent novels, is all about itself. Specifically, it is about the issue of authenticity in literature. Like other contemporary writers—Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Don DeLillo—Carey rolls this gobstopper of a question around in his mouth in the hope that it will dissolve, but of course it doesn’t. Those supply rendered voices are made to exemplify not the rich substance of human fears and aspirations, but the arid antimatter of literary theory.” (“Dangerous inventions” 24)

Fictions that invite reflection on their own artifice while at the same time persuasively engaging the reader’s affections, as Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* does, are rare. Achieving simultaneous detachment and engagement requires uncommon skill. Some degree of Brechtian alienation may be necessary to draw attention to the artificialities of fiction, but except in the hands of a master like Fielding or Brecht, the trade-off is all too often a dilution of the reader’s belief in, and empathy for, its characters.

VIII

My Life as a Fake is a chronicle of fakes, failures and absences. By the end, the hoaxer Chubb, his victim Weiss and his psychic nemesis McCorkle are all dead, their lives unfulfilled. The internal book *My Life as a Fake* remains absent, unread and unpublished. John Slater’s literary career, which began promisingly, has petered out. Sarah Wode-Douglass’s pursuit of poetic genius and her relationship with Annabelle both fail. Wode-Douglass’s expatriate mother is another failure, her upwardly mobile marriage into the English titled class and subsequent snobbish discarding of her Australian origin, having ended in disillusionment and suicide. Australia figures only marginally in her daughter’s consciousness, and the concern with Australia’s political and cultural history and identity, so central in Carey’s other books, is here confined to Chubb’s melancholic maunderings. This absence is embodied in the Malaysian setting, which has no obvious connection with any of the principal characters, following instead the exotic setting of *Frankenstein* in the Swiss Alps and the ice-locked northern ocean. Carey’s fiercely inventive creative energy is evident throughout the book, but its realisation in a powerfully engaging narrative is constrained by the shadow of *Frankenstein* and by its insistent exposure of the intricate fakes of fiction.

Notes

1. For additional appreciative reviews see <petercareybooks.com>.
2. *My Life as a Fake* was shortlisted for: the Miles Franklin Award; *The Age* Book of the Year Award; Queensland Premier’s Fiction Award; *Courier-Mail* Book of the Year Award; Colin Roderick Award; and Commonwealth Writers Prize, South East Asia and South Pacific Region, Best Book. It was a finalist for the Kiriyama Pacific Rim Book Prize, Fiction. It was

long-listed for The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. It was not long-listed for the Man Booker Prize.

3. The standard account, on which Carey drew, is Michael Heyward's *The Ern Malley Affair*. See also Michael Ackland's biography of the Ern Malley hoaxers *Damaged Men: The Precarious Lives of James McAuley and Harold Stewart*. On the Jack Milton hoax, rumoured to have prompted the Ern Malley prank, see John Stephenson, "A never ending hoax," *Griffith Review*. 21. 141-44. On the susceptibility of the Australian literary community to authorial deceptions, see Howard Jacobson, "Black swan of trespass: Great hoaxes and the perils of authenticity" *Times Literary Supplement*. 3 October 1997: 14-15. See also Deborah Hope, "Loose with the truth," *The Australian*. 25 January 2008: 13.

4. Published in the same year (2003) as *My Life as a Fake*, *Forbidden Love* was a supposedly non-fiction account of the honour killing of the author's best friend in Jordan. The book was successful and highly profitable until it was revealed that the story was fiction not fact, when it was withdrawn. This hoax was documented in the film *Forbidden Lies*, written and directed by Anna Broinowski in 2007.

5. In 1993, *The Hand that Signed the Paper* won The Australian/Vogel Literary Award for an unpublished manuscript. It was first published in 1994 under the pseudonym Helen Demidenko and won the Miles Franklin Award, becoming the award's youngest winner. In 1995 it won the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal. In 1996 the author's false claims of Ukrainian ancestry were exposed. It was subsequently reissued under her then real name, Helen Darville.

6. On Chatterton's forged medieval poems allegedly written by Thomas Rowley, see Linda Kelly, *The marvellous boy: the life and myth of Thomas Chatterton*.

7. For a fuller account see David Lehman, "The Ern Malley Poetry Hoax—Introduction."

8. It has been suggested that Percy Shelley may have contributed to the [re-]writing of *Frankenstein*, but even if he did, the general quality of the writing suggests that Mary Shelley was the principal author.

9. See Ackland, *Damaged Men*, p.43.

10. When asked if his characters ever haunted him, Carey replied: "No, they don't haunt me . . . because I'm very, very, very, very aware of how made up they are. With luck, my characters live more strongly in the reader's imagination than they do in mine." Ben Naparstek, "Carey's monster," *The West Australian*. 6 September 2003: 15.

11. For a detailed discussion of these interactions, see Robert Macfarlane, "Monstrosity, Fakery and Authorship in *My Life as a Fake*," pp.335-48.

12. Cited on <petercareybooks.com>.

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