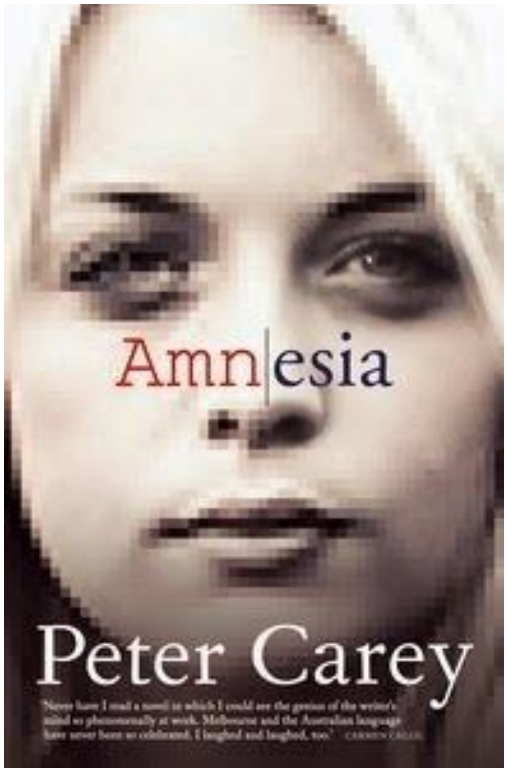

Book **review**

Where Angels Do Not Fear to Hack Back:

Peter Carey. ***Amnesia***. Melbourne: Hamish Hamilton, 2014. 376 pp. ISBN 9781926428604

Nataša Kampmark

Peter Carey is the master of dramatic, intriguing and far-fetched opening sentences, starting with his first novel *Bliss* ("Harry Joy was to die three times, but it was his first death which was to have the greatest effect on him"), through to his first short-listed Booker Prize novel *Illywhacker* ("My name is Herbert Badgery. I am a hundred and thirty-nine years old and something of a celebrity."), and to the second Booker Prize winning *True History of the Kelly Gang* ("I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false."), to name but a few. In his thirteenth novel, Carey treats his readers to another arresting beginning in the style of Jarmusch's 1991 *Night on Earth*: "It was a spring evening in Washington DC; a chilly autumn morning in Melbourne; it was exactly 22.00 Greenwich Mean Time when a worm entered the computerised control systems of countless Australian prisons and released the locks in many other places of incarceration, some of which the hacker could not have known existed" (3).

Much in the manner of an abstract of a scholarly article, within its four first pages Carey's novel captures the gist of the entire book on several levels of critical interest, namely in terms

of characters, themes and style. Felix Moore, "a sole remaining left-wing journalist" (6), as he likes to think of himself, might have been lucky 98 times before, but by the 99th time not only are his pants on fire, but so is his family home. If he had been a phoenix, he might have been able to rise from the ashes on his own, but as Carey would have it, he is just lucky enough to have a shady old mate, the corrupt property developer Woody Townes, to always get him out of trouble. While Woody's motives remain unresolved as much as the end he meets, Carey uses the mechanism of the unreliable narrator as the mouthpiece for truth, as he has done on previous notable occasions which include *Bliss, Illywhacker* or *My Life as a Fake*. As Felix is literally kidnapped and kept within the confines of (ever changing) house arrest, Carey toys with the notions of truth and freedom hinging on the issue of identity both in a political context, as he scrutinises the relationship between the US and Australia, and in a personal context, as he portrays the lives of his principal characters: the Australian hacker behind the infamous computer worm, Gaby Baillieux, who is delivered into this world just as the Labor Whitlam government is dispatched from it; Gaby's mother and middling actress, Celine Baillieux, whose conception violently put an end to her mother's virginity as well as to any innocence in the Australian-American relationship on Australian soil during WWII; and Felix Moore, a disreputable journalist sued for defamation, known as "Felix Moore-or-less correct" (151), hired in order to write the truth which will set him (and, presumably, Gaby) free.

Amnesia can be said to be a book about freedom inasmuch as "THE ANGEL OF LORD BY NIGHT OPENED THE PRISON DOORS, AND BROUGHT THEM FORTH" (4), but also because it mercilessly probes and unabashedly questions the freedom of choice: the choice to forget, to resort to the comforts of collective amnesia, and the choice to sacrifice a nation's freedom and in doing so substitute the influence of one imperial power for another. The portrayal of the relationship between Australia and the United States in *Amnesia* echoes that of the colony of Efica and the domineering country of Voorstand depicted in *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith*. Only this time Carey drops the veil of dystopian fantasy. The crucial moments revealing Australia's submissiveness to foreign power, powerlessness and lack of independence, and the central political and historical pivot of *Amnesia*, are the events of 1975 when the government led by Gough Whitlam was toppled through the alleged background workings of the CIA. Subsequently, Australia's democratically elected government was dismissed by the Queen of England's representative, the Governor General. The Whitlam government had brought back Australian soldiers from Vietnam and showed independence and divergence from US policies, approved by previous administrations, that could not go unpunished. A covert operation, discussed also in *The Falcon and the Snowman,* finally removed the elected government from power. It is this part of Australian history which Carey wants to bring back to cultural memory deploying a "pocomo blend" (Gaile, xxv) of literary genres and strategies.

On the subject of the genre, *Amnesia* has been termed a "literary thriller" (Cruickshank) and Carey admits that he wanted the novel to be a "funny and fast-moving story, not a history exam" (*The Globe and Mail*). In spite of that, he delivers a lecture in history in a true postmodernist mix of popular and serious literary genres. The novel has also been called a cyber thriller (Gamerman), a novel about hacktivism, cyber-activism or cyber-terrorism (Kerridge). However, as Felix Moore complains, "if this was a story about hackers I was laughably ill equipped" (128).

If readers expect to read the story of how the hacker moved from place to place and tried to stay in hiding, they are in for disappointment. In the fashion of a bildungsroman, *Amnesia*

covers a sixty-year span and delineates the coming of age—with its inevitable loss of innocence and gaining of wisdom through pain—of its principal characters and of an entire nation. While the dramatic beginning is owed to the release of a computer virus into the prison systems of Australia and the US, the most poignant moments describe the two-day Battle of Brisbane (1942-3, fought between Australian and American soldiers) through the individual battle of Doris against her American rapist, and the bond between two teenagers, victims of dysfunctional families, who, inadvertently, will perfect "a new type of warfare where the weapons of individuals could equal those of nation states" (134).

It might also be added that *Amnesia* is a murder mystery as it deals with the forgotten "murder of [Australian] democracy" (137). Furthermore, it might not be a stretch of imagination to call the novel a morality tale with the theme of psychomachia at its core, as Felix is compared to St. Jerome (303), and progressively referred to as a hermit (306) and a saint (312), while the forces of good and evil, i.e., Celine Baillieux, fervent supporter of the Whitlam government, and Woody Townes, presumably an American spy who prevented Felix from getting to work on that crucial day in 1975, battle over Felix Moore's account and the story he is writing about Gaby. Townes and Celine externalise what might be termed as "litteromachia"—the clash of conflicting versions of narrative; the battle for the power of the text. Felix does not have a say in that, even if he does occupy the dubious position of "Hawkesbury River writer-in-residence" (255).

Another genre springs to mind when one reads what Carey has to say about where the idea for the novel came from. *Amnesia* is surely not a textbook example of *roman-a-clef,* but the actions of Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, and the earlier ones of Christopher Boyce, served as inspiration for Carey, who has "written [*Amnesia*] for Australians who had forgotten and other people who know none of the events and characters" (*The Globe and Mail*). Assange was the reason Carey started writing the book, but he did not want it to be about Assange (Scott). When Carey says that "[he] felt he knew [Assange's] accent and that [he] felt he knew about his history" (Scott), the phrasing is irresistibly redolent of Carey's explanation of how "[he] could inhabit [Ned Kelly's] voice like an old, familiar shoe (McCrum). *True History of the Kelly Gang* and *Amnesia* both speak about colonial anxieties, foreign claims on Australia, outlaws, and above all the lengths individuals will go to get their voice heard and their message across.

What brought Gaby's left-leaning parents together was activism, upgraded to hacktivism by their daughter, and what separated them was the disappointment with their inefficiency in standing their ground and making a difference during the events of 1975, which is the thing their daughter struggles to rectify. Felix Moore is aware that "the Angel Worm was a retaliation" (5), and so *Amnesia* is hacking back into the system of the supreme power using the avenues of computer technology in the way *Jack Maggs* is writing back to the imperial power employing "the master's tools", that is, language and literature. Carey certainly moves and modernises with the times, as tools do, but there are steady threads running through his novels. One of them is the issue of Australia's maturity, its shedding of the colonial cringe and developing into an independent and responsible society (the issues most prominently dealt with in *My Life as a Fake*). Gaby's "Angel Worm" is one such instance which shows that younger generations of Australians may display courage and endurance unlike their parents' cowardice and insecurity, evidenced in their opting for amnesia in the cases of the Battle of Brisbane and the 1975 coup d'état. While Felix sells his signed copies of Manning Clark's *History of Australia* to get the means to check into a hotel, Gaby and her friends do not shy away from leaving homes for the streets, renouncing comfort for beliefs, which is one

of the most optimistic views Carey expresses about the future of Australia. Bravery, endurance, and anti-authoritarianism are actually displayed in the actions of Australians, not solely found in the nation's foundational myth.

Returning to the issue of truth and (un)reliability, it has become Carey's hallmark to have unreliable narrators tell unbelievable stories, which renders them mad in the eyes of the public and authority, but what the reader should not fail to notice is that they speak for the silenced, as teenage Gaby wants to speak for all those silenced by the corporations, as adult Gaby wants to speak for the silenced voices of her parents' generation, and as Felix tries to tell Gaby's story. Whether that can truly be done is another question which Carey raises as Felix makes an observation about the reliability of the media: "There was no tape recorder ever manufactured that would protect her from a journalist" (129). Even if one agrees with Spivak that the subaltern cannot speak, it does not mean, however, that pointing out the silences is not an admirable effort in itself. Carey does precisely that—points out the voids, absences and silences in Australian historical records as he diagnoses the nation with collective amnesia.

Much like Captain Delano in Melville's "Benito Cereno", sheepishly oblivious to the meaning of the message "Follow your leader," Australians in Carey's depiction seemed to have happily continued slavishly following in the footsteps of the US. Indeed, in an act of emulation, perhaps, they have shown initiative in the same materialist-capitalist direction as the US. Carey foregrounds that point by shifting his focus from history to the present as he has Felix comment on current topical issues such as the plight of asylum seekers, the so-called boat people, and the detention facility in the state of Nauru.

The crucial question for Carey seems to be the ability to differentiate between the two countries and the two nations. Australians went through their Golgotha at Gallipoli where they fought and died in the war Britain declared on behalf of the Empire. Do they have to die in American wars as "colonial no-ones" (351), too? The events of 1975 showed that they do. Can Australians be called traitors by Americans for not supporting an American cause? The case of Julian Assange has shown that they can. That is precisely the disturbing fact that is the driving force behind *Amnesia*. "My book was built on the fact I recognised [Assange] as Australian (...) [The United States] called him a traitor. How the f*** is he a traitor? He's an Australian citizen. He's not yours. You can't call him a traitor." (Kidd)

Similarly, when it is discovered that it was an Aussie worm that opened the gates of American prisons—a fact that Carey points out linguistically even before the discovery is made, by having the worm spread "like a bushfire burning in the roots of trees" (3)—Gaby is condemned as a traitor and wanted by the Americans. However, the most unsettling realisation for the (Australian) reader, as the story of *Amnesia* unfolds, is that it is not the Americans who need to be convinced that Gaby is not an American citizen as much as it is the Australians who need to be reminded to protect their own citizens. Felix is commissioned to write the story of Gaby's life which will present her as a likeable Aussie girl so that her own government and countrymen and women will recognise her as one of their own. "Make it up (…) make the bitch loveable" (52) are the instructions given to Felix. As he undertakes the task, Felix "understood that his own Australian government would never protect him from extradition and whatever variety of torture the Americans might decide was now due to him" (153). That understanding is perhaps one of the most pessimistic messages Carey writes on the wall for Australians.

It remains to be seen whether number 13 is Carey's lucky number and whether *Amnesia* matches the successes of *Illywhacker*, *Oscar and Lucinda* or *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Despite whole pages filled with the dry retelling of political events and a few lapses into polemics, Carey is quick to return to what he is best at: vivid characterisation, gripping storytelling, and the brilliance of language and style.

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Nataša Kampmark holds a PhD in Literature from the University of Novi Sad, Serbia. She is the author of the book *Tri lica australijske proze* (*Three Faces of Australian Fiction*, Belgrade, 2004) and the translator and co-editor of an anthology of contemporary Australian fiction (*Priče iz bezvremene zemlje—Tales from the Timeless Land*, Zrenjanin, 2012). Her interests include the reception of Australian writing in Serbia, Serbian migrant writing in Australia, literatures in English, postcolonial literature, postmodern literature and translation studies.
karanfil@sbb.rs