

DON'T TELL EVE

by Airlie Lawson

Vintage

\$32.95 pb, 343 pp, 978174166784

In the vein of classical Hollywood films such as *The Lady Eve* and *All About Eve*, Airlie Lawson's debut novel recounts a familiar narrative involving a mysterious career woman named Eve. A kind of *The Devil Wears Prada* for the publishing industry, *Don't Tell Eve* scrutinises the dealings of Papyrus Press, 'a respectable, old-fashioned publishing house' – until the arrival of the new boss, that is.

Eve is a flamboyant, vulgar woman; 'she seemed too much like a plump middle-aged Barbie doll', her staff complain, 'to be able to run a prestigious, venerable company like Papyrus Press'. The novel examines the lives of these employees. With the rapid cutting of costs (and staff), they struggle to work with Eve and her sadistic assistant, Hilary. Hidden agendas are rife. The story meanders into a series of mysteries, which involve the arrival of remarkable dolls on the doorsteps of newly fired employees, an anonymous publication of a radical management book and, of course, the figure of Eve herself.

Lawson's characterisation is exceptional. Eve and Hilary are memorable creations, each carefully balanced between the comic and the ridiculous. Lawson's prose is sharp and candid. There are weaknesses, however. Lawson has too many primary characters; their individual storylines make the novel confusing and slightly convoluted. Also, the narrative begins sluggishly; it would have benefited from a more strenuous edit.

Overall, *Don't Tell Eve* is an intriguing and often hilarious novel, full of surprises and astute social observations: 'It was a thank-God-that's-not-me-don't-catch-anyone's-eye-least-of-all-Eve's kind of silence.' Ultimately, it offers insightful and entertaining glimpses into the publishing world. One beguiling question remains at the end of *Don't Tell Eve*: if Miranda Priestly, from *The Devil Wears Prada*, was based on fashion's head honcho, Anna Wintour, who inspired the hideous Eve?

January Jones

Alchemic brew

A bravura performance from Peter Carey

Murray Waldren

PARROT AND OLIVIER IN AMERICA

by Peter Carey

Hamish Hamilton, \$49.95 hb, 452 pp, 9781926428147

In life and in literature, Peter Carey has been as attracted by the pull of the past as by realities of the present. Then there is his recurrent fascination with the two-country divide, where the lure of exile vies with the sentiment of 'home', and the schism between country of choice (or country that 'chooses' you) and country of birth means that neither is ever fully suitable.

Such equivocation he attributes to a generational impulse (Carey is now sixty-six). In his case, it meant that 'growing up in Australia was to inhabit a colonial situation where your real place was somewhere else'. Not too much should be read into this statement, given personal and cultural changes over the past half-century, but it does offer some insight into the sense of longing for the forgone that infuses much of his work. As it does his latest offering.

The winner of two Bookers, three Miles Franklin Awards and two Commonwealth Writers Prizes, Carey is among Australia's most lauded authors, yet, as he has ruefully noted, such eminence carries its own baggage. His last novel, *His Illegal Self* (2008), disappointed many, justifiably, with an uncharacteristic paint-by-numbers flatness and an ending that seemed more abandonment than realisation. It followed two others, *Theft* (2006) and *My Life as a Fake* (2003), that had managed to divide readers into the enraptured and the underwhelmed.

For all his prizes and international stature, Carey is yet to garner the kind of public affection that Tim Winton and David Malouf enjoy. Carey is a fabulous fabulist of epic intent, but his work is too prickly and irreverent for those

who like their menace safe or their expositions worthy. For each *Bliss* (1981) or *Oscar and Lucinda* (1988), with their subtle subversions, there has been a corresponding *The Tax Inspector* (1991) or *The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith* (1994) or even *Illywhacker* (1985), whose humour was so black as to verge on the macabre. Carey himself, understandably, has been exasperated by what he sees as nitpicking and a tall-poppy meanness from some critics. He is a risk-taker, with vaulting, poetic ambitions.

This time, however, Carey should have little cause for discombobulation: any suggestion that his literary power might be on the wane is allayed by *Parrot and Olivier in America*. With his eleventh novel, Carey is back to his *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) best, delivering a bravura performance in which he is high-spirited and mischievous, provocative and wily. A series of adventures and stage-sets, his novel is vastly entertaining.

The unprimed canvas for Carey's painterly exposition was Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, the French noble's analysis based on his 1831–32 visit to the nascent union. This became both the catalyst for *Parrot* and, in many ways, an abstract of its intellectual excavation. In the introduction to his work, Tocqueville noted: 'In America, I saw more than America; I sought the image of democracy itself, with its inclinations, its character, its prejudices and its passions, in order to learn what we have to fear or hope from its progress.' Carey has taken this as a mission statement, and run with it. This alchemic brew of possibilities and potentials is the medium, but the

method is more catholic, satirical and, for all its authentic-seeming lip service to the tongue of the times, retrospective. The twenty-first century New York-based, Australia-imbued Carey takes from Tocqueville and others, but it's what he makes of his sources, and what he makes up around them, that transforms his novel into a picaresque opus of the magnum variety.

Carey's *Odd Couple* pairing of the aristocratic Olivier-Jean-Baptiste de Clarel de Garmont, whose heritage, sensibilities and inbred superiorities make him both an anachronism and a danger to himself in his native land, and the older, self-educated artist-printer John Larrit, a masterly mimic (hence Parrot) whose Dickensian progress from English moor to American amanuensis via the loss of his forger father, transportation to Port Jackson, the interceptions of a mysterious nobleman guardian and a shady French sojourn, is the framework for exploration as he alternates chapters in the men's contrasting voices.

Within this duet, Carey weaves a swirl of back-stories and vibrant secondary characters, some historically edged (an Audubon-like bird painter, for instance), others garish creatures of larger-than-life force. This is a showcase novel of life and love and loss, careering with careless sangfroid from one exposition to the next as it examines ideas and possibilities.

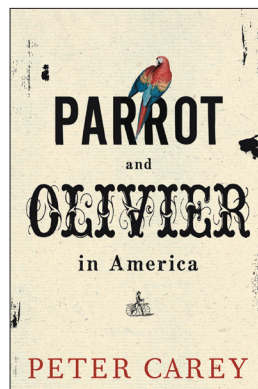
Yet for all its energy, *Parrot and Olivier in America* is never out of control. Carey knows the sideshows are amusing, but his central act is always the big wheel: the alliance of Olivier and Parrot. Cranky misfits, they are reluctant allies, with Parrot co-opted as an occasional spy reporting back to his master's mother. The two men gripe and squabble about each other and about the world and their changing place within it from a default position of mutual disdain. This ambivalent master-servant relationship, which mutates as they experience travel and travails together, mirrors the novel's debate on the nature of democracy as it is being made in America. The cosseted, born-to-rule Olivier, a traumatised survivor whose family has known the terror of Madame Guillotine and mob rule, moves from

noblesse oblige to embrace the *possibility* of democracy; Parrot, who might in a later era have been a devout shop steward, is radicalised into an elemental conservatism that has him welcoming democracy's *probability*.

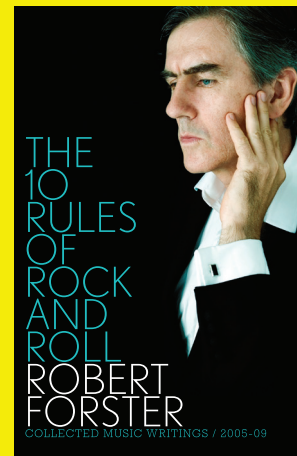
Parrot and Olivier in America is set at the philosophical crossroads where the Old World was colliding with the New (it is no stretch to see intimations of Robert Johnson-like devilish dealings for the social soul). Within the uncertainties of the time lie aspiration and despair, loss and possible rebirth. All is change – inevitable but never comfortable. As Parrot notes,

I suddenly *comprehended* that the entire house was occupied by people who had occupations suited for the present age. They lived in the New World ... I was abandoned to this New World, but I was a habitual servant to a dying breed ... I had no art, no trade, no purpose. I had travelled all my life to arrive here, but here was an abyss.

Carey toys with ideas and ideologies, comparing and contrasting post-Bonaparte revolutionary France and the emergence of a rough-edged if resilient democracy in America. In the process, he gives *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* a sly working over. Beyond that, Carey offers an inventive tale of great exuberance that is aware of the paradoxes at its heart, yet remains, for a novel of ideas, paradoxically large-hearted. ■

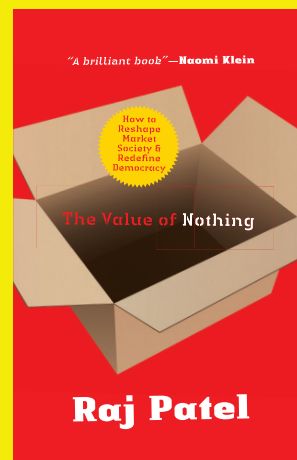


Murray Waldren's new book, *The Mind and Times of Reg Mombassa*, has just been released.



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