

Peter Carey, A Long Way From Home, covers indigenous past



Author Peter Carey covers indigenous Australia in his new book. Picture: Jake Nowakowski

- Stephen Romei
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‘I am 74 years old. It’s about f..king time I did this. I could have had a heart attack last week, or last year, or two years ago and wouldn’t have done it. I prefer to have done it.’

What on earth is Peter Carey talking about? The mind boggles. Is it about driving across Australia, as do the main characters in his new novel, *A Long Way From Home*, which spins off the inaugural Round Australia Trial in 1953?

Is it about relocating to his homeland after almost three decades in New York? Is it about sensual adventures? Well, more on these questions later. They are not irrelevant.

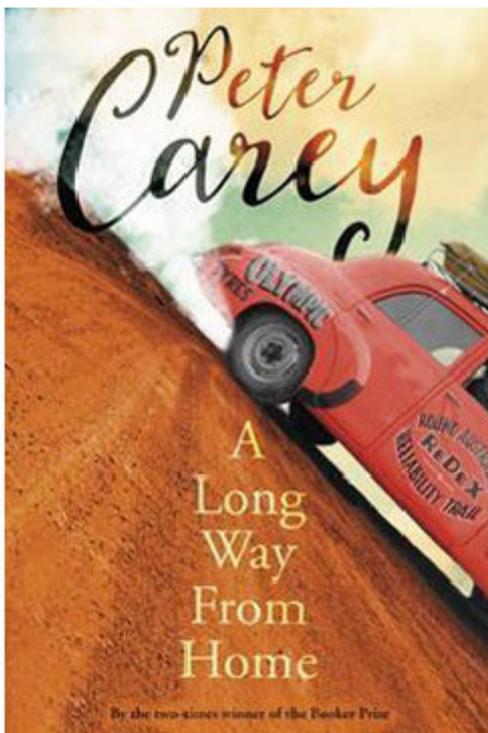
What it is about, though, is writing a novel that at its core is about the dispossession of indigenous Australians and the white rewriting of their history. It’s a delicate, broken ground the dual Man Booker Prize winner has not walked on to until now.

On the surface, including on its burnout cover, *A Long Way From Home* is about that front-page, prime-time radio (Jack Davey was a driver, in a Ford) madness of putting

cars to a cross-country endurance test. Ordinary cars, the ones “Joe Blow drove to work”. It is about “200 lunatics circumnavigating the continent of Australia, more than 10,000 miles over outback roads so rough they may crack our chassis clean in half”. It was dubbed the Redex trial, after the oil additive brand that was a sponsor. But as the race progresses, as the story develops, we, and the characters, have to face up to Australia’s grim history.

I don’t want to spoil the plot, but it’s fair to note indigenous characters become important. A massacre site is stumbled on. A child’s skull is retrieved and becomes part of the gear carried by one of the competitors. She thinks it’s precious and wants to do what’s right. Others dismiss it as baggage. When it’s handed to a town cop he labels it: *Abo infant skull found near Funnel Creek/Finch Hatton*.

The Redex drivers and their navigators are following maps. But there are other maps, ones that existed for ages, ones that have been obliterated by pencils, and by wood and wire. In the town of Quamby Downs, one admits: “I had finally seen that all Aboriginal culture was based on country, on journeys, on tracks now cut up by fences.” He now understands that such a town is “a sort of prison” where it is “impossible to honour the moral and religious obligations of singing country”. The indigenous people are “exiles, denied the meaning of their lives”.



A Long Way From Home by Peter Carey

Asked how a novel about a car rally turned into one about Aboriginal Australia, Carey, who I call at his home in New York, suggests the question is sort of the wrong way around.

“Ostensibly, from a reader’s point of view it is about the rally. But from my point of view when I started to think about this and when I looked at Redex newsreels what I saw was white fellas pissing around defining the country.

“Of course by now we all know a great deal about Aboriginal stories and how the stories cover territory and connect borders and are also connected to sacred stories.

“I thought they’re [the Redex racers] making a map but there are already a whole lot of other maps. That’s when I started to think I had a book, when I started to think of a lot of maps laid over a lot of other maps, of the maps that we white people thought about and the maps that have been there a long time.”

Fair enough, but why now? Carey’s 14 previous novels, from his advertising satire debut *Bliss* in 1981 to his bushranger impersonation in *True History of the Kelly Gang* in 2000 to *Amnesia* in 2014, with its Julian Assange-like character, have by and large dwelled on Australia, Australian history and Australian life.

Carey recalls being at a writers conference in Canberra in the mid-1980s and listening to an address by indigenous writer, actor and activist Gary Foley. He told the audience he understood white writers wanted to help but, and here Carey paraphrases, “it’d be a big favour if you didn’t write about us. We’ve got enough shit to deal with.”

“I thought that was a really fair point,” Carey says. “In the books I wrote thereafter I tried wherever possible to acknowledge what their history was based on. Gary Foley was always in my head. I thought he was right, and I sort of still think he’s right.”

And yet. “On the other hand, you can’t be a white Australian writer and spend our whole life ignoring the greatest, most important aspect of our history, and that is that we — I — have been the beneficiaries of a genocide.

“It’s a black story; it’s also a white story. I just thought, ‘I can’t spend my life not writing about this, and if I make a dick of myself, well I will but at least I’m going to have a try’.

“I spent a lot of time thinking about how I might be able to do that, and it ends up that it’s this book. I think it’s OK. A number of Aboriginal people have read it and I think it passes muster.”

Carey admits he was taken aback by some of the information he found during his research into the time in which the novel is set. In a sense that surprise may have something to do with where he lives. While New York is not a “white bubble”, as he puts it, neither is it a place where books on indigenous Australians stack the shelves. “I was shocked to see a photograph of Aboriginal men in chains ... chains around their necks. I thought that was the sort of thing you see in American history.

“I had a very — pun intended, I guess — whitewashed view of their history. So many of the cruelties that we are now aware of we weren’t aware of back then because, I guess you can say, we weren’t curious. That we didn’t know Aboriginal people doesn’t mean they weren’t there. They were hiding in plain sight.”

I have dwelt on the indigenous aspect of *A Long Way From Home* because I think it’s important, in general and for Carey as a writer. But that’s not all there is to this novel. I think it’s one of his best in recent years. I see it as a love letter to an Australia that no longer exists, one with quiz shows on the wireless, Golden Fleece petrol stations, FJ Holdens and Sparkling Rheingold. I know my mother, who is Carey’s age, will enjoy it. Like him, she remembers being a child in a family that was transfixed by the radio and newspaper updates and cinema newsreel reports on the Redex trial.

There is humour and almost all of the characters are likeable. “I would like to think in an ideal world a writer’s job is a sort of activist, an advocate for his characters, even if they do shitty things,” Carey says. It also has more erotic fantasies, and actual sex, in it than most of Carey’s novels. There’s a moment involving fish that took me right back to that surreal restaurant moment in *Bliss*.



Peter Carey at his parents' car dealership in Bacchus Marsh. Picture: Trish Claringbold

And it has an autobiographical element. The main characters are Irene and Titch Bobs, a happily married couple in Bacchus Marsh, Victoria. They have two young children. Titch is the “most successful Ford salesman in rural Victoria”. His father, 75-year-old Dan, is a narcissistic daredevil who also sells cars. A backstory emerges. The title works on several levels. Almost everyone is a long way from home.

Titch, who is short and handsome, and Irene, who is short and beautiful, want to set up their own car yard. They want to be Ford dealers, but the new kid on the block, Holden, is also on the scene. They decide to go in the Redex trial. Their eccentric neighbour, Willie Bachhuber, a good-looking young schoolteacher who everyone thinks is German, joins them as navigator. He is a radio quiz show star. He fancies his rival on the show, the pretty girl who has to lose to him week in week out. He also fancies Irene.

Carey grew up in Bacchus Marsh, where his parents ran a General Motors dealership. The photo on this page of the young Carey on a Holden was supplied by his sister, Trish Claringbold. The car yard is long gone but Trish and Carey’s 84-year-old brother Paul still live in Bacchus Marsh. He will visit them when he comes to Australia next month, not least to thank Paul for providing all the automotive nuts and bolts used in the novel.



Radio compere Jack Davey.

“I knew nothing!” confesses Carey, who was sent to Geelong Grammar at 11, a removal that informs his literary preoccupation with orphans. He remained a Holden boy — “It’s the family’s football team!” — which makes the novelistic fun he has with the car swerve close to sacrilege

Carey says while he drew on his childhood for the novel, “my mother and father are in no way like the Bobs”. “There are things about Irene Bobs that I do get from my mother, but none of it is autobiographical.” When I say Irene is sexy, he pauses. “Yes, well, that would be a hard piece of imagining, wouldn’t it?”

Carey sort of agrees and disagrees with the rest of this reader’s thoughts. When I mention the sex, he laughs. “Well, I haven’t given up! What do you want to know?” I start to respond but he jumps in. “I think that’s the answer, really.” I wait and he goes on. “It’s neither a reflection of a mad or a renewed sex drive or an abandoned one ... Look, every book demands you go to certain places. Sometimes the places are fun to go to and sometimes they are not.”

He resists the thought that the novel is a love letter to an Australian period or Australian landscape. He points out that he makes the terrain unloving. “The wind whipped the sand into my eyes,” Willie thinks while on the Nullarbor, “and I thought, if Australia had a bottom, this would be the place it did its business.” Earlier, Willie thinks, “If this was our country’s heart, I never saw anything so stony, so empty, so endless, devoid of life other than predatory kites ...”

Even so, I ask Carey the inevitable question. Will he return home? The answer is yes and no. He belongs here. “It’s how I think of myself, it’s what engages me. It’s where I was born and where I lived for 50 years.” But his two adult sons are in the US. “I love them very much and I’m not going to go to Australia and leave them.” He lives in New York with his English wife Frances Coady, a former publisher now literary agent to whom the novel is dedicated.

“I think my books are a very clear view of where my heart is and where my imagination is,” he says. “But where my actual physical body is ... is going to be determined by other things I can’t necessarily control.”

A Long Way From Home, by Peter Carey, will be published next week. (Hamish Hamilton, 320pp, \$39.99 hardback, \$32.99 paperback).

Peter Carey will discuss the book with Stephen Romei at a Dymocks literary lunch on Monday November 13. Details: (02) 9449 4366 or www.penguin.com.au/authors/peter-carey/events