

BOOKER PRIZE

Peter Carey: Chronicler of a time long gone

Peter Carey's compulsion to often go back to a time long gone stems from his desire to revisit history and the sites where early settlers constructed their individual, familial and community identities, writes Syed Manzoorul Islam

WHEN I saw this year's Booker prize long list in the literature page of the *Daily Star*, I immediately hooted for two names I was familiar with: Beryl Bainbridge and Manil Suri. While I've read two novels of Bainbridge, including the one for which she was listed this year (*A Quiet Life*), I am yet to read Suri. My support for him actually took the form of an 'ethnic empathy' since the quiet Mathematics professor cum author now settled in USA comes from South Asia (the same reason, more or less, for which many South Asians honked for V. S. Naipaul for getting the Nobel). None of them made it to the short list though, which was a disappointment. I was dazzled by Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* when I first read it the story of an Oxford don who goes to a prostitute (dons were not allowed to marry back in the 19th century) and dies 'on the job'. *A Quiet Life* is half as dazzling as *Master Georgie*, but equally moving. The short list contained names that were, perhaps, too inevitable to ignore, such as Peter Carey. He had been there a couple of times before (for *Illywhacker* and another novel the title of which I forget) but won it in 1985 for *Oscar and Lucinda*. *Oscar and Lucinda* is one of my all time favourites. The story of a puritan priest addicted to gambling whose father had effectively destroyed his childhood with his obsessive domination of the motherless boy, and an heiress who shares his addiction, the novel is actually many things in one: a search for national identity (in an interview, Carey once said, "Almost everything I have ever written has been concerned with questions of 'national identity'"), a painful journey through childhood and adolescence (by extension,



Peter Carey: Interested in creating a viable Australian origin myth

Australian outback to a priest he considers a romantic rival. I could feel, the moment Oscar started the journey accompanied by a motley crew, that the partly Dickensian, partly Garcia Márquezian and partly Borgesian plot would wind itself up at an improbable moment when the great eddy of events would spiral down to one last quiet moment of repose and reflection. Yet, that moment, when the glass cathedral sinks in the Belling River, taking down Oscar with it, is also the moment of triumph for the novel. As "the long-awaited white fingers of water tapped and lapped on Oscar's lips," and he "welcomed them in as he always had, with a scream, like a small boy caught in the sheet-folds of a nightmare," we realize how, all along, Carey had been investing a lot of his descriptive power and plot-building skill in the glass cathedral terrifyingly brittle thing, like Oscar himself, only to stand it up as Oscar's double. Oscar's scream echoes the tinkling of shattered glass, or the other way round. For Oscar, it is a journey back to his childhood: the boy whose dreams had been taken

of time and place, fact and history. *Oscar and Lucinda*, set in the nineteenth century, does the job better, but without slipping into the inner confusion, non-logic and intangibility of his early stories.

My reading of *True History of the Kelly Gang* was not the kind of leisure, laid back encounter I relish. I had to read the book in one night. It was a difficult proposition, given the sharp and racy style and the attention that the narrative demands from the readers. *Kelly Gang* comes in the shape of "13 parcels of stained and dog-eared papers, every one of them in Ned Kelly's distinctive hand" and written to his unseen daughter. The language is Ned Kelly's, and Carey makes no effort to change it, or so he tells us an old trick which novelists from Sterne to Doctorow have applied with varying degrees of success.

But here, in narrating the first hand account of the bushranger, Carey takes his style to new experimental limits. Remember, Carey's protagonist is a late 19th century outback Robin Hood, a poor Irishman who turns into an outlaw because of police brutalities against him and his family, and is not the most well read man around. His language is supposed to show the cracks and fissures of a 'rustic discourse' which can barely hold itself together. On a first reading, Ned's uncanny accounts of his life seem to gush out in monologic streams, taking the reader down with it. Yet, after a period of adjustment, the narrative begins to show an inner strength and an inner beauty which make it simple yet profound; naïve, and at times prudish, yet direct. "Your grandfather were a quiet and secret man he had been ripped

ment with its bare, down to earth and unsparring accounts much as Ned's homemade suit of armour topped with a bucket for a head gear thwarted attempts to gun him down (until the last fateful encounter at Glenrowan hotel in 1880). In a recent interview, Carey talked about Australian history, and about how the country, passing through some relatively short years of a convict colony, could never actually come out of the impact those years had on the nation's psyche. The convicts who were the early settlers, "had been cast out and tortured and had been sent to the moon.... They really had been propelled into outer space." So, in the subaltern imagination of these convicts and their children and grandchildren, finding (an authentic) voice was tied to finding a place of their own. The penal colony was turned into home; and the language of their forefathers had to be freed from elite embraces of class, wealth, status and so on. Ned Kelly's narrative takes the reader back to what comes nearest to a subaltern voice.

Peter Carey's compulsion to often go back to a time long gone stems from his desire to revisit history and the sites where early settlers (no Mayfair borne pilgrims but convicts transported on slave ships) constructed their individual, familial and community identities. Collectively, they form, for Carey and many others, the national identity, whose search remains an important preoccupation with Carey.

Beryl Bainbridge in a perceptive review of *Oscar and Lucinda* in *New York Times Review of Books* (May 29, 1988) tried to give an explanation of Carey's obsession with the past. Novelists from Charles Dick-

TRAVELOGUE

Trooping through Tripoli

Through a maze of narrow alleys dotted with old hammams, khans and mosques, we walked through the vegetable market, past the fish section and entered the spice market. Here were living symbols of everyday life. Here are tailors, jewellers, perfumers, tanners and the famed Tripoli soap makers that have maintained their working traditions over the past 500 years, writes Raana Haider

THE drive north from Beirut to Tripoli in Lebanon (65 kms from Beirut) along the highway is completely built-up. Global representatives exist in the form of McDonalds and Burger King, Benneton and Spinneys Supermarket. Also to be found are Lebanese clothing outlets, fast-food outlets and any number of restaurants serve the famed Lebanese cuisine. Only while approaching Tripoli does one come across the barren and desolate mountains that characterised much of the route from Beirut to Tripoli some thirty years ago. The last time I had made this journey. In those days, there was no highway linking the two cities. We made the trip via a winding Mediterranean coastal road. We drove up hills and down to the coastal azure blue Mediterranean Sea. We skirted the lovely Jounieh Bay and looked up at the famed Casino de Liban. I confess a preference for the older route. I now reflect that was a more refined time when life was about the quality of the journey and not how fast one got there. Does not a Taoist saying note that "The journey is the reward."

Clumps of date palm trees dotted here and there remind me of large grove of palm trees to be found in Palmyra, Syria. According to various references in historical texts, the cultivation of dates goes back to at least four thousands years ago. There are not only historical and religious importance but also medicinal and nutritional benefits of the date. Aside from sugar, the main component of the date fruit, other major ingredients include cellulose, iron, vitamins A and B, phosphorus, calcium, magnesium and large quantities of minerals. The breaking of the Ramadhan fast with a glass of water or juice and a date is widely practiced all over the Muslim world.

Representatives of all Near East civilisations have trooped through Tripoli through the ages. The name is appropriate to its nature, for there was a federation of three seaports connected together Arcadus, Sidon and Tyre in the fourth century BC. While Tripoli has not been extensively excavated, due to much of the ancient sites lying buried beneath the modern city; periodical findings have revealed evidence of the late Bronze Age, Iron Age, Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Fatimid habitation. In the ninth century B.C., the Phoenicians established a small trading station at Tripoli. Its strategic position has always been in the natural port, offshore islands and access to the mainland interior. Tripoli was well located both for maritime trade and the Near Eastern caravan trade to its hinterland. African gold and ivory, slaves, corn and cattle mingled with Asiatic metals and Egyptian textile in a sprawling commercial trade.

The Phoenicians, original inhabitants of ancient Lebanon were more true traders rather than calculated colonialists as they traveled westward and established an empire and civilisation. Their realm stretched from the eastern Mediterranean coast of present-day Lebanon and Syria to the northern coast of the African continent, including Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Tunisia and Morocco; the southern coast of Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey; and the island of Cyprus. They had important settlements in Sicily, founded towns such as Barcelona in north-eastern Spain and the town of Marseilles in Southern France. More sailors than soldiers, Herodotus recorded that some Phoenicians sailed in ships down the Red Sea at the bidding of Pharaoh Necho II (609-593) to circumnavigate Africa, a feat which they accomplished in just under three years, stopping each year between seed-time and harvest to provision themselves before continuing their journey.

The city of Carthage in present-day Tunisia is the finest, largest and most revealing of all Phoenician towns and cities both for its architectural and literary evidences. Carthage was founded in 814. The gem of all Phoenician cities fell to the Romans in 146. I had the opportunity to see this fabled city in the winter of 1976. Its extensive ruins lay on hills overlooking the clam blue Mediterranean. It was Hannibal of Carthage who crossed the Alps to conquer Italy.

"As explorers, in antiquity, the Phoenicians were second to none, as colonizers to few, save perhaps the Greeks. As traders and merchants they fetched and carried raw materials and manufactured goods throughout the then known world. Their prowess as doughty fighters was shown, not only in Carthage's long drawn-out struggle with Rome, but also in the resistance that Tyre and Sidon put up against Mesopotamia and other conquerors and in the services

their navy rendered to Persia. But all these things pale before their highest and most enduring memorial, the alphabet. This is where they impinge most strongly on all subsequent civilizations of Old World origin. All Indo-European and Semitic tongues indeed all subsequent alphabetic scripts have employed the medium developed by the Phoenicians and rapidly adopted by many other nations round about them, including the Greeks." So does Donald Harden hail the Phoenicians in his authoritative book "The Phoenicians". Yet the Phoenicians left little in the way of written records and what we know of them comes from the accounts of foreigners or their

once gilded in glimmering gold, these 53 and 36 metres high statues had even escaped the destructive wrath of the Mongol leader Genghis Khan Dr Lowry Burgess, professor of art at Carnegie Mellon University elaborates: "Surely, every time a culture confronts another one that it doesn't understand, part of its initial instincts are to obliterate the other completely. It's kind of a human instinct that goes back into the dimness of time."

The Mameluke Sultan Qalaoun defeated the Crusaders in 1289. Tripoli became a part of the Ottoman empire for over four hundred years from 1516 to 1918 while

some point between the tenth and eleventh centuries.

At an altitude of more than two thousand metres, we came across the fabled cedar trees of Lebanon. These ancient trees are descendants of an immense primeval forest of cedars and other trees such as cypress, fir and oak that once covered most of Mount Lebanon. There are known to be twelve trees over one thousand years old and some four hundred that date more than one hundred years. The imposing and slender cedar trees can reach sixty metres in height. The trunks can reach between twelve to fourteen metres in circumference. They stand regal before us. The cedar tree forms the national emblem and can be found on the flag (a cedar tree on a horizontal strip of white, bordered by strips of red). The cedar is the noble and majestic symbol of Lebanon.

The cedar tree is an historical entity often mentioned in the Bible and ancient texts. It has played an important role in the culture, trade and religious practices in the ancient Middle East. Serious exploitation of the forest began in the third millennium BC. Over the centuries, Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians made expeditions to Mount Lebanon for timber. The Phoenicians made much use of the famed cedar for shipbuilding of their large merchant fleets. According to Donald Harden in "The Phoenicians" "The inner sanctuary, for example, of Solomon's temple was panelled with cedars from floor to ceiling and its ceiling was of cedar beams and planks forming recessed panels." Nebuchadnezzar boasted on a cuneiform inscription: "I brought for building, mighty cedars, which I cut down with my pure hands on Mount Lebanon." Prized for its fragrance and durability, the length of the great logs made cedar wood highly desirable. The Egyptians used cedar resin for the mummification process and pitch extracted from these trees was used for waterproofing. Cedar wood was widely used by the Egyptians for temple and palace building.

In the distance, we could see the village of Becharre shimmering in the sunlight due to the dark red tiled rooftops of houses perched along the edges of the mountain-side. This is the birthplace and burial place of the most renowned Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran. Born in 1883, he spent a good part of his life in the United States. He died in New York in 1931. His remains were brought to Becharre and buried in his home, now a museum. He is the poet who wrote "The Prophet" his most known book.

On our return journey to Beirut we stopped by the Jeita Grotto. The sixteen year-long Lebanese civil war (1975-1991) had a crippling effect on many fronts. One of the casualties was one of the natural wonders of the world -- the Jeita Grotto. I saw it for the first time during our stay in Beirut in the late 1960s. My husband (his first and my second following a thirty-year gap) now made the journey through the mountain and valley of Nahr el-Kalb (the Dog River) to enter the most stunning of natural creations. The Jeita Grotto was reopened to the public in 1995 following a twenty-year closure during the civil war and the rebuilding and restoration of the entire surrounding complex and facilities within the Grotto.

The caverns are on two levels: The lower gallery was discovered by chance in 1836 by Reverend Thompson and opened to the public in 1958. On the boat-ride, one can see some 500 metres of the 6200 metres actually explored. The upper gallery has to be viewed via a walkway. It was discovered by Lebanese speleologists and opened in 1969. Here one can be enthralled for some 750 metres of the 2200 metres explored by experts. The temperature remains stable in both the galleries during the entire year (16°C and 22°C). Thus it was comfortably cool when we visited in summer and warm in winter.

What we were looking at were stalactites (crystal formations hanging from the top of the cave) and stalagmites (incredible formations built-up from the lower surfaces of the cave). The Jeita Grotto claims the biggest stalactite in the world. Since the dawn of history, waters from mountainous caves ripple or cascade down to sculpt and shape magnificent creations formulated over millennia. The discrete white light system illuminates and enhances the natural wonders to reveal columns, sheer draperies and breathtaking crystalline formations.

True art is timeless.

Raana Haider is a published author and the wife of the Bangladesh Ambassador to Lebanon.



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enemies and commercial rivals of the past.

Kamal Salibi in 'A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered' credits geography rather than history for the similarities that the ancient Phoenicians and the present-day Lebanese people share. Today, the Lebanese are known to live by their wits, flexibility, resilience and a profound sense of joie de vivre. Salibi graphically notes that "Judging by what ancient Greek literature has to say about the Phoenicians, the urban Lebanese of today do not appear to be much different in character. Like the ancient Phoenicians, they are free-wheeling and rugged mercantilists; adventurous and footloose; yet staunchly attached to home grounds; free-spirited and willing to take on any gamble, yet essentially thrifty; keeping an open mind and adapting to changing circumstances with typical Levantine facility at one level, yet doggedly set in their traditional ways at another; socially playful to the point of irresponsible levity, yet serious, highly alert and efficient, thought somewhat unconventional, when it comes to real business, where they have a marked tendency to live by their wits." Salibi continues "Countries are created by history, but their territories belong to the realm of geography, where history is merely a bird to passage... the unity of the land in terms of natural and human geography always remained." There is ample food for thought in this comment. It reads as a research paper title for academia.

Both the Phoenicians and the Greeks valued Tripoli's naval port facilities. The Roman General Pompey took control of the city in 64-63 BC. The city flourished with the construction of innumerable buildings. An earthquake and tidal wave heavily damaged Tripoli in 551. After 635, the city emerged as a commercial and shipbuilding centre under the Omayyads. Under the Fatimids, Tripoli became a seat of learning. The Crusaders took control of the city in 1109. In the process, the renowned library, Dar ul-ilm and its one million handwritten manuscripts were burnt down.

Famed landmarks have been targeted throughout history. Many stellar landmarks -- churches, mosques, palaces, temples and others -- have been lost to the ravages of time or destroyed in all-out warfare. But others have been selected for destruction for their symbolic meaning. In the recent past, one is reminded of the Taliban destruction of two of the most famed sculptures in Buddhism, which they deemed 'offensive to Islam'. Carved from the sandstone cliffs of Bamiyan in the third and fourth centuries and

EXCERPT

True History of the Kelly Gang By Peter Carey

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.

God willing I shall live to see you read these words to witness your astonishment and see your dark eyes widen and your jaw drop when you finally comprehend the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age. How queer and foreign it must seem to you and all the coarse words and cruelty which I now relate are far away in ancient time.

Your grandfather were a quiet and secret man he had been ripped from his home in Tipperary and transported to the prisons of Van Diemen's Land I do not know what was done to him he never spoke of it. When they had finished with their tortures they set him free and he crossed the sea to the colony of Victoria. He were by this time 30 yr. of age red headed and freckled with his eyes always stung around the sun. My da had sworn an oath to evermore avoid the attentions of the law so when he saw the streets of Melbourne were crawling with policemen worse than flies he walked 28 mi.

through the difficult years of Australia's coming of age) and an attempt to probe the seemingly unreddeable depths of the mind. This dust-jacket like description however, fails to bring out the richness and complexity of the novel's plot, or the magical quality of Carey's style, but a fuller treatment has to wait for some other occasion. It is on *True History of the Kelly Gang* that the spotlight now falls. And I had to read it if only to write this piece on Peter Carey, and satisfy my young editor friend. But I had an inner compulsion to read the book too: I had to see if Carey could top himself up on *Oscar and Lucinda*.

I still wonder how Carey could come up with that improbable plot of the part concerned with Oscar's growing up in a house where the only link between father and son is the memory of a dead woman mother to one and wife to the other but the one where Lucinda bets her inheritance against the odds of Oscar transporting a glass cathedral across the

to the township of Donnybrook and then or soon thereafter he seen my mother. Ellen Quinn were 18 yr. old she were dark haired and slender the prettiest figure on a horse he ever saw but your grandma was like a snare laid out by God for Red Kelly. She were a Quinn and the police would never leave the Quinns alone.

MY first memory is of Mother breaking eggs into a bowl and crying that Jimmy Quinn my 15 yr. old uncle were arrested by the traps. I don't know where my daddy were that day nor my older sister Annie. I were 3 yr. old. While my mother cried I scraped the sweet yellow batter onto a spoon and ate it the roof were leaking above the camp oven each drop hissing as it hit.

My mother tipped the cake onto the muslin cloth and knotted it. Your Aunt Maggie were a baby so my mother wrapped her also then she carried both cake and baby out into the rain. I had no choice but follow up the hill how could I forget them puddles the colour of mustard the rain like needles in my eyes.

We arrived at the Beveridge Police Camp drenched to the bone and doubtless stank of poverty a strong odour about us like wet dogs and for this or other reasons we were excluded from the Sergeant's room. I remember sitting with my chillblained hands wedged beneath the door I could

feel the lovely warmth of the fire on my fingertips. Yet when we were finally permitted entry all my attention were taken not by the blazing fire but by a huge red jowled creature the Englishman who sat behind the desk. I knew not his name only that he were the most powerful man I ever saw and he might destroy my mother if he so desired.

Approach says he as if he was an altar. My mother approached and I hurried beside her. She told the Englishman she had baked a cake for his prisoner Quinn and would be most obliged to deliver it because her husband were absent and she had butter to churn and pigs to feed.

No cake shall go to the prisoner said the trap I could smell his foreign spicy smell he had a handlebar moustache and his scalp were shining through his hair.

Said he No cake shall go to the prisoner without me inspecting it 1st and he waved his big soft white hand thus indicating my mother should place her basket on his desk. He untied the muslin his fingernails so clean they looked like they was washed in lye and to this day I can see them livid instruments as they broke my mother's cake apart.

Tis not poverty I hate the most nor the eternal grovelling but the insults which grow on it which not even leeches can cure from his home in Tipperary and transported to the prisons of Van Diemen's Land I do not know what was done to him he never spoke of it," writes Ned to his daughter. And one sees how Ned and Carey have contrived to do away with commas and semicolons and all such little halting devices except of course the sentence ending periods. There are other oddities too, such as the quaint use of abbreviations ("Malbourne was crawling with policemen worse than flies he walked 28 mi. to the township of Donnybrook...") and piling up of adjectives on top of the other. On the surface, the narrative maintains a studied closeness to a talking voice (Ned is actually talking to himself as he goes over his life and rehearses for the ears of an unseen listener) as the narrative itself attempts to be faithful to history. But behind the truth-speaking "rustic" voice, one soon discovers a 19th century subaltern sensibility which is beginning to discover the power of its own discourse which can unsettle the elite establish-

I will lay a quid that you have already been told the story of how your grandna won her case in court against Bill Frost and then led wild gallops up and down the main street of Benalla. You will know she were never a coward but on this occasion she understood she must hold her tongue and so she wrapped the warm crumbs in the cloth and walked out into the rain. I cried out to her but she did not hear so I followed her skirts across the muddy yard. At 1st I thought it an outhouse on whose door I found her hammering it come as a shock to realise my young uncle were locked inside. For the great offence of duffing a bullock with cancer of the eye he were interred in this earth floored slab but which could not have measured more than 6 ft. x 6 ft. and here my mother were forced to kneel in the mud and push the broken cake under the door the gap v. narrow perhaps 2 in. not sufficient for the purpose.

She cried God help us Jimmy what did it ever do to them that they should torture us like this? My mother never wept but weep she did and I rushed and clung to her and kissed her but still she could not feel that I were there. Tears poured down her handsome face as she forced the muddy mess of cake and muslin underneath the door.

to Thomas Mann have at one time or the other been fascinated by the past, but, asks Bainbridge "weren't their attitude shaped by a nostalgic past in which their parents dwelt?" But for Carey, Bainbridge maintains, the trip down the decades into the last century was something like Thomas Wolfe's "roaming across the continents" in time and space and his "raging against the inescapable truth that one can't go home again." For Carey though, it seems to me, a more important question is, what is home. Living in New York since 1990, Carey is still searching for a strong community and a home where, like Ned Kelly's last moments, he can be most himself. His chronicles of the time long gone are, in that sense, records of one's attempt to come to terms with personal and historical realities now or any time, here or anywhere.

Novelist and art critic, Syed Manzoorul Islam is Professor of English at Dhaka University.