Jack Maggs Short Guide

Jack Maggs by Peter Carey

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Contents

Characters

Carey's novel merges elements of Great Expectations with events from Charles Dickens's life, blurring fact with fiction, or as he states in his epigraph, "The author willingly admits to having once or twice stretched history to suit his own fictional ends." The novel's eponymous hero is moved from the margins of the nineteenth-century text — where he was little more than the troublesome source of Philip Pirrip's wealth—to the center of this late twentieth-century reworking. In contrast to the insipidity of the British characters surrounding him, Maggs is a vibrant and strong protagonist who represents —albeit unwittingly—the opportunities on offer in Britain's penal colonies.

In contrast to the rather nondescript clothes of the other characters, Maggs dresses in a bright red waistcoat. Physically he is an imposing figure, in direct contrast to the stunted growth that adds to the feelings of inadequacy which dog Tobias Oates. A selfmade man, Maggs is industrious and obviously resourceful, having converted the infertile land given to him with his ticket-ofleave into a brick-works. Although lacking in social refinement, he possesses compassion, both for his dead first-love, Sophina, and also for the fatherless Mercy Larkins.

Indeed, Carey seems to have transferred Dickens's well-documented empathy and kindness to Maggs, for the author's textual representative is almost completely devoid of these traits. This act of transference is reflected in the surname Maggs, which has been drawn from Thomas Mag, who was to have been the hero of Mag's Diversions, one of many titles Dickens considered for his semi-autobiographical novel, David Copperfield. In renaming Charles Dickens Tobias (to bias) Oates, Carey exemplifies his awareness of authorial subjectivity and the way in which all narratives reflect the positioning of their writers. Through removing Dickens from his authorial position of omniscient power and planting him within the narrative as a protagonist, Carey mounts an assault on the canon through demonstrating that no narrative can be fixed, not even a history. Moreover, Oates's name is also loaded with connotations of unfulfilled potential, since it is the same name as of one of Pip's dead brothers in Great Expectations. In a novel so concerned with fabrication, its resemblance to that of the perjurer Titus Oates can hardly be a matter of coincidence.

The author depicted by Carey is an exaggerated Dickens figure who is morbidly fascinated by the Victorian underworld to the point of obsession. Unscrupulous, ambitious, and living well beyond his means, Oates exploits Maggs's affliction with tic doloureux, a painful facial convulsion, to hypnotise him, thus enabling him to extort Maggs's life story and appropriate it for himself—the implication being that the novelist is lacking in imagination and can only steal stories. Carey's reinvention of Dickens—often regarded as the greatest English novelist—as a libidinous hypocrite is clearly bound-up with a desire to reconfigure his artistic relationship with the English literary tradition. Carey's hostile portrayal perhaps results from the creative constraints that the literary canon has imposed upon him and from which he is seeking to liberate himself through overturning the "master narrative" and the authority of its writer simultaneously.

Oates's wife, Mary, is a fairly minor figure, but the narrator clearly has a great deal of sympathy for the way in which her husband's financial and personal carelessness has left her in an extremely vulnerable position, while his vibrant and strong personality seems to have eclipsed her own altogether. Unlike Dickens's wife, Catherine, who is usually portrayed by biographers as a rather passive and dull figure, the reader is offered some insight into Mary's psyche, and she is also given a degree of autonomy that could not have been enjoyed by a middle-class woman in the nineteenth century.

Thus, when Mary guesses that her sister is expecting Tobias's child, she does not turn a blind eye to her husband's misdemeanors as one would expect a model Victorian wife to do, but instead takes the unlikely step of procuring some of Ma Britten's abortion pills. Just as Carey frees Maggs/Magwitch from the margins of the text, so he also liberates Catherine Dickens/Mary Oates from both social and spatial restrictions by allowing her to walk across London. The journey itself mirrors one of Dickens/Oates's "slumming expeditions" into the East End to see the lives of London's underclass, but it is also of importance because the character is permitted to enter territories that would have been off-limits to her nineteenth-century counterpart. Mary truly comes into her own in the wake of Lizzie's death, and it is clear that she is far from being the "slow and famously dim-witted creature who was commonly thought not to understand half of what her famous husband said." Rather, it is Mary who, while racked with guilt at having, as she believes, killed her sister, takes control of the situation and manages to make the death appear as a tragedy, thus saving both herself and her husband's reputation.

Lizzie Warriner herself is a far cry from the young and innocent Mary Hogarth upon whom she is based. Apparently more attractive and intelligent than her sister, Lizzie's transgression with her brother-in-law is at odds with the moral propriety that is usually (albeit erroneously) ascribed to the Victorians. Her death scene is, whilst entirely plausible, completely at odds with the demise of Dickensian heroines like Little Nell. Instead of welcoming death as a just atonement for her crimes or embracing it as a passing to a better place, Lizzie oscillates between remorse and aggression, at one point rejecting her sister's ministrations with the response, "No, damn you!"

As the vendor of the concoctions which kill Lizzie and as Jack Maggs's foster mother, Ma Britten is an important catalyst. Her rise to prosperity at the expense of the misfortune of others mirrors Britain's own economic and industrial advancement during the nineteenth century, while her selfish neglect of Jack parallels the mother country's lack of concern with either the poor or with colonial exiles. With the exception of the opening pages, when Jack returns to visit her and the scene in which Mary obtains the tablets, Ma Britten is, along with her scheming son Tom, the criminal Silas Smith, and Maggs's first love, Sophina, presented to the reader through Jack's eyes. It is therefore difficult to obtain an unbiased perspective of this figure, and in a novel so concerned with the subjectivity of the narrator, this is an important point of which to be aware.

Just as un-endearing as Ma Britten is Percy Buckle. Initially presented as a philanthropic figure, Buckle is responsible for saving Mercy Larkins from the life of prostitution that her mother has been forced to consign her to. A former grocer and seller of fried fish, Percy has inherited a fortune and an extremely chaotic household.

His physical appearance is slightly ridiculous and he walks like a duck. He initially seems to be an innocuous enough figure: bookish, kind, and totally uncomfortable with the social niceties that should have accompanied his sudden rise to prosperity. Yet instead of conforming to the Dickensian stereotype of the slightly quirky gentleman with the heart of gold, Percy succumbs to jealousy of Jack Maggs when it becomes obvious that Mercy is attracted to the convict. Buckle is rapidly transformed into a malevolent schemer, willing to manipulate other characters, like Henry Phipps, in order to rid himself of Maggs.

The English characters on the whole are presented as deeply flawed and selfish.

Having received Maggs's money, Henry Phipps flees his benefactor because of his criminal past and lack of gentility. Significantly, none of the English relationships are fruitful, thus pointing to a fundamental sterility and lack of creative impulse in the mother country. Phipps and the footman Constable are both homosexual and therefore cannot reproduce. Oates's child with Mary is sickly, while the child conceived by Lizzie is unwanted and must be destroyed at all costs. Finally, Mercy and Buckle's relationship does not yield any offspring.

Of all the English characters it is Mercy alone who possesses charisma and vitality; she is also the only figure who is willing to tell the truth. She jeopardizes her future by incurring Buckle's wrath through aiding Maggs. She is also concerned enough about Maggs's well being to tell him some home truths and to point out that his future should not lie in England. It is therefore inevitable that she returns to Australia with Maggs to care for his children and, in a new and more stimulating environment, to bear infants of her own. Since there is no mercy in Carey's rendition of Victorian England, Mercy must be transplanted overseas where she is able to reinvent herself as "a disciplinarian."

She is also able to build a strong, prosperous, and loving family that is identified not only as a "clan," but also, significantly, as a "Race," putting her practicality to good use in a land willing to offer opportunities to those with skill and energy.

Social Concerns

The social concerns addressed in Jack Maggs may be divided into two categories: those of the past and those of the present. This is not to suggest that the two groups are mutually exclusive, for one of the text's major concerns is the way in which the past has shaped the present.

While the nineteenth-century issues are evident to the sensitive reader, the twentiethcentury concerns are more subtly embedded within the narrative.

Carey picks up on the need for radical social reform so often encountered in the works of Charles Dickens. Carey's city of London is just as bleak, dark, and pestilent as that of his literary forebear, and the despair of the metropolis is heightened by occasional comparisons to the prosperity that Maggs has left behind him in Australia.

The state is depicted as having neglected the impoverished children it has failed to provide for, with figures like Percy Buckle and Mercy Larkins being saved from lives of toil or degradation through individual acts of kindness. Percy receives a legacy, whilst Mercy's redemption from a life of prostitution is dependent upon the whims of her master, leaving her far more vulnerable to sliding back into the gutter and without any hope of assistance from the society at large.

Maggs, as an outsider returning from exile, serves as a device to comment upon this world of squalor, the source of so much misplaced nostalgia for nineteenth-century Australian settlers and their descendants.

Whilst England is initially a highly attractive place for the outcast Maggs, Mercy Larkins gradually brings Jack to an awareness of the futility of his quest to be accepted by his alarmed protege, Henry Phipps.

She also makes him realize the ludicrousness of leaving behind a life of abundance in the colonies, not to mention his own children, to risk death from a state which demands that he remain in exile, In giving voice to these opinions, Mercy, who implicitly takes on the authorial voice here, seems to be striking a blow for modern Australian identity. She declares with passion of Jack's sons who are, by extension of the parentchild allegory, Australia itself, "And while these little boys wait for you to come home, you prance round England trying to find someone who does not love you." She, alone of all the characters, seems to recognize Britain as a society in decline and understands that Maggs, and by implication Australia, will not be able to progress until they are able to leave the past behind them. Carey's novel, then, is concerned with dispelling the sentiment attached to the mother country and with forging an independent, autonomous identity.

Techniques

Jack Maggs is a text obsessed with writing and rewriting. When Maggs agrees to allow Oates to mesmerize him every day for a fortnight he stipulates, "I won't have nothing written down," thus manifesting a deep suspicion of the written text. There are multiple narratives in play in the novel, and each narrative has multiple layers. Maggs is afraid not only of exposure to the authorities, but also of having his story stolen.

Whilst Oates keeps two sets of books in a bid to outwit the convict, Maggs writes his own version of events in invisible ink so that the story of his life may only be read by Henry Phipps.

Passages from Oates's work in progress, The Death of Maggs, are interspersed with Carey's narrative and Maggs's own version of events. It is therefore, at times, somewhat confusing for the reader who is required to tease out "fact" from "fiction" and to determine which of the narratives are "true."

Carey himself plays with facts as a way of drawing attention to the relativity of all writing. Although he is scrupulously accurate in recording key dates that correspond to important moments in Dickens's life (for example Lizzie Warriner's death coincides with that of Dickens's sister-in-law, Mary Hogarth), his attitude to naming is much more cavalier. The forenames of characters belonging to Oates's family are all drawn from figures surrounding Charles Dickens, yet Carey deliberately jumbles them up, naming Oates's son after Dickens's father, Oates's wife after his sister-in law, Mary, and his lover, Lizzie, after Dickens's mother.

This technique is a means of making the reader suspicious of facts and history and it also serves as a constant reminder of the revisionist process. Indeed, the novel's final paragraph acknowledges that rewriting can never be definitive, by depicting Mercy Larkins as having expunged the Oates's dedication from no fewer than seven volumes of his novel, The Death of Maggs. Thus while the novel, along with Maggs's letters to Phipps, becomes a piece of archive material in Sydney's Mitchell Library, it is, like all documents that purport to be authoritative, both incomplete and flawed, having been revised itself.

Themes

The novel is a deliberately loose adaptation of Dickens's Great Expectations (serialized 1860-1861), and in order to appreciate fully the subtleties of Carey's revision at least some knowledge of the plot of Great Expectations is desirable, although of course, there is no substitute for the text itself.

In brief, and focusing only upon the elements of the story which resurface in Carey's reinterpretation, Great Expectations is the story of Philip Pirrip, or Pip, an orphan who is raised by his ferocious older sister and her weaker husband, the blacksmith Joe Gargery. One Christmas, when he is a child, Pip aids an escaped convict, Abel Magwitch, by stealing food for him.

Magwitch is subsequently re-captured and banished to Australia for the term of his natural life. Thus, having made the briefest of appearances, Magwitch vanishes from the narrative for several years. In the meantime Pip is taken to meet Miss Havisham, a wealthy old woman who was deserted by her lover the night before her wedding was due to take place. Miss Havisham has remained dressed in her bridal attire ever since and has cloistered herself in her house with her ward, Estella, whom she has reared to use her beauty and wiles to hurt and punish men as a form of revenge for her own abandonment. Pip falls in love with Estella and wishes to become a gentleman so that he may be in a social position to marry her. When an anonymous benefactor intervenes by bestowing money and status upon him, with the promise of more to follow, Pip assumes that Miss Havisham is responsible. He shuns his lowly roots and those who have been kind to him and departs for London to become a gentleman.

He is later horrified to discover that Magwitch the convict is the source of his wealth, having made a fortune in Australia and never forgetting Pip's early kindness to him. Magwitch risks his life to return to England (returned transported convicts were hanged) so that he may be with the gentleman he has created. As a returned convict, or "transport," however, Magwitch has been ejected from the dystopian England which has failed to provide for him. Thus, his freedom of movement is restricted by a need for concealment which leads to Jaggers' constant reiteration to Pip that "You can't have verbal communication with a man in New South Wales, you know." For Dickens, then, in spite of its negligence as a parent, the mother country is still perceived as a home to which the convict will want to return.

Although initially repelled at the "low" origins of his money, Pip later feels a degree of compassion for Magwitch and assists him in an attempt to escape from Britain, where he is in grave danger of being captured once more. The escape bid fails and Magwitch dies in prison, a broken man, but at last having gained Pip's affection. As a criminal, Magwitch's assets may not pass to Pip and the latter is left penniless, but with a heightened awareness of the fact that status alone cannot make a gentleman. He therefore leaves Britain and goes to work in Egypt, returning years later to encounter Estella once more.

As an Australian writer trying to come to terms with his own position in relation to the English literary canon, Carey concerns himself with textual silences and brings Magwitch from the story's periphery. Jack Maggs is a novel particularly concerned with the themes of expulsion and return, excision and revision. Carey has challenged the Victorian impulse towards closure which frequently killed off problematic individuals or jettisoned them into the colonies, never to be seen again. He instead attempts to make sense of his own post-colonial identity and roots in a society of convicts by revising the narrative of the returned "transport" and reinventing Magwitch. In Great Expectations Magwitch is largely portrayed as an inert spectator once he has returned to Britain. He declares to Pip, "And this . . .

and this is the gentleman what I made! The real genuine One! It does me good fur to look at you, Pip. All I stip 'late is, to stand by and look at you, dear boy!"

The very nature of his existence as a returned transport necessitates stealth and a deference to Pip, who has the freedom to wander through the city. Carey, on the other hand, finds this static Magwitch to be a frustrating figure, and when reinventing him removes him from the margins and awards him a far greater prominence.

On one level, it is possible to construe Carey's conception of the static Magwitch as an analogy to his perception of the relationship between British and Australian culture. Just as Magwitch cannot be incorporated into mainstream British society, so too is the (white) Australian writer excluded from the canon of classic British texts. However, because of their colonial roots such authors are unable to assert a uniquely Australian identity (a problematic concept anyway, in the light of the third-class status accorded to Australian Aboriginals) free from the cultural baggage of the past. In reworking Great Expectations, Carey displays an unwillingness to abandon this past altogether and instead attempts to re-order it.

However, in working from an established text, rather than creating anew, Carey places his relationship with the parent country on a somewhat Oedipal footing. He attempts to challenge a legacy of British hegemony through revising or "killing" the master narrative, which itself has been complicit in mirroring life and repeatedly condemning to death the Australian transport.

While the Magwitch of Great Expectations is the subject of both Pip's and Dickens's accounts, Carey's reincarnation of the convict Jack Maggs is a far more reticent subject who constantly insists on his need to tell his own tale. At the beginning of Chapter 42 of Great Expectations, Magwitch declares to Pip and Herbert Pocket, "Dear boy and Pip's comrade. I am not a going fur to tell you my life, like a song or a story-book. But to give it you short and handy, I'll put it at once into a mouthful of English. In jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail. There, you've got it. That's my life pretty much, down to such times as I got shipped off, arter Pip stood my friend."

While Magwitch does then proceed to offer a more expansive account of his life, this information constitutes only one small element of Pip's narrative. Maggs, on the other hand, is all too aware of his potential as subject matter for Tobias Oates and is depicted as constantly resisting the exuberant young author's urges to mesmerize him in order to extract his story. Towards the close of the novel when the literate Maggs has perused Tobias's notebooks and has uncovered Oates's projected end for the story of his life, he attacks the author's sense of omnipotence and sinisterly insinuates that Toby's ending could also be revised: "You are planning to kill me, I know that.

Is that what you mean by painful? To burn me alive?"

"Not you, Jack, a character who bears your name. I will change the name sooner or later."

"You are just a character to me too, Toby" Maggs reiterates his point on several occasions by explicitly accusing Oates of theft and revealing that he has already written his story for himself. However, it is the notion of the author as a mere character which is crucial to Carey's revisionist agenda. The author no longer enjoys an unchallenged position of control as historically marginalized figures such as Magwitch/Maggs are brought to the fore and given voices.

Equally as important as Maggs's sense of his own voice is Carey's view of the England to which his convict returns. In creating a returned transport who can read, write, and quote Shakespeare, Carey attempts to undermine a complacent British sense of cultural superiority. The irresponsibility of the mother country—which was noted by Dickens in his grimy microcosm, Little Britain—is emphasized through the allegorical figure Ma Britten, Maggs's gruesome adopted mother, a seller of back street abortion pills who leads her ward to a life of crime.

A strong sense of the stagnation of British culture is exemplified through the now peripheral Pip, who is reinvented as the selfish and irresponsible Henry Phipps, as well as through Oates's sister-in-law Lizzie's abortion of the author's unborn child.

The aborted fetus and the subsequent death of its mother represent the colonizer-artist's creative irresponsibility. Oates's impregnation of his wife's sister may be viewed as an analogue for his interference in the "other" territory of the Australian settler or, to extend the analogy even further, for the imperial nation's interference overseas. Indeed, the destructive nature of Oates's intervention is evidenced when he vengefully burns the blood-soaked linen in which Lizzie has died: It was Jack Maggs, the murderer, who now grew in the flames. Jack Maggs on fire. Jack Maggs flowering, threatening, poisoning. Tobias saw him hop like a devil.

Saw him limp, as if his fiery limbs still carried the weight of convict iron. He saw his head transmogrify until it was bald, tattooed with deep wrinkles that broke apart and floated glowing but into the room.

A few pages earlier, Maggs had forced Tobias to burn his notebooks, and in this passage the two acts of immolation become equated. A new Maggs emerges

phoenixlike from the flames in a dramatic travesty of the revisionist process, and Oates is finally able to envisage the violent death of his subaltern convict in the wake of the sordid accident of Lizzie's death.

Peter Carey, however, is not faced with the same problem of closure as his nineteenth-century predecessors and unlike Dickens or Oates, he has no ordering impulse to destroy Maggs. Note that Oates's novel is entitled The Death of Maggs, while Carey's is the less destructive Jack Maggs.

Carey is far more concerned with the future which must emerge once the past has been redefined. Hence, the Magwitch of the 1990s is persuaded by the appropriately named Mercy (a trait decidedly lacking from the institutions depicted in Great Expectations) to return to his children and his state, of affluence in the new colony and to abandon his nostalgia for the "old country." Implicit in this revisionist ending is a message to modern-day Australia to free itself from a similar nostalgic allegiance to British culture and to move forward to forge a new sense of national identity which will enable the Australians, as a people, to come to terms with their colonial legacy.

Key Questions

1. Given his previous highly original works of fiction, consider why Peter Carey has chosen to re-write Great Expectations. Why does he adapt the novel so loosely?

2. Jack Maggs is a text concerned with silences and giving voices to those "others" who have traditionally been denied a voice in "great" literary texts.

On one level it might be possible to view the text as a work of post-colonial Australia. Thinking about the idea of suppressed voices, why might this view be subject to challenge?

3. How is the outsider from the colonies used to comment on British society in the nineteenth century?

4. Do you consider Phipps's rejection of his benefactor to be tragic? Why or why not?

5. What roles do the women of Jack Maggs play? Consider how they might be regarded in allegorical terms.

6. Maggs is haunted for most of the novel by the "phantom" of his repressed memories that Oates taps into when he mesmerizes him. Do you agree with Maggs that Oates has planted the phantom there himself? Why does Maggs mistake Henry Phipps for the phantom?

7. Percy Buckle moves swiftly from being a weak character to become a schemer who seeks to manipulate others in order to rid himself of Maggs. How does Carey use Buckle to propel the plot's action? Did you find the sudden alteration/development of his character to be convincing?

8. As well as being a re-working of a text, Jack Maggs contains texts within texts.

Why might that be, and why is Carey so concerned with undermining the authority of the written word?

9. Why does Maggs want to return to Britain? How does the novel's narrator feel about this ambition? Compare the descriptions of London to the recollections of Australia revealed in Maggs's trance. Does either place represent an "ideal" society? Contrast the London figures to Maggs. Why does Maggs return to Australia? Why do you think Carey decided to send his character back?

10. The novel begins with a lengthy passage from de Chastenet and de Puysegur's Du Magnetisme Animal which seems to frame the narrative and perhaps to place the reader in a type of trance. Why might that be?

Literary Precedents

Jack Maggs belongs to a long line of adaptations of Great Expectations, including David Allen's play Modest Expectations (1990), in which Dickens and his mistress Ellen Ternan visit Australia, and Michael Noonan's Magwitch (1982), which expands the convict's story without significantly revising it. As Australia has come increasingly interested in its colonial past, rather than seeking to forget its origins as a penal settlement, concern with figures like Magwitch/Maggs has increased. Robert Hughes has produced a compelling history of British settlement in Australia, The Fatal Shore (1988), which vividly depicts the privations endured by those condemned to transportation. Equally, Marcus Clark's For the Term of His Natural Life (1874) and George Dunderdale's The Book of the Bush (1870) provide graphic, and at times startling, accounts of life in the outback.

Carey is certainly not alone in his need to engage with Dickens's novels. Most recently John Irving has drawn upon Dickens texts, notably David Copperfield in Cider House Rules (1986), and A Tale of Two Cities in A Prayer for Owen Meany (1990). Looking forward to post-Carey adaptations, Susanne Alleyn's A Far Better Rest (2000) fleshes out the character of Sydney Carton and rewrites A Tale of Two Cities from his perspective.

Related Titles

Much of Carey's work reflects upon what it means to be Australian, whether in the present day as in Bliss (1981), Illywhacker (1985), and The Tax Inspector (1991), or in the past. Both Illywhacker (the word is Australian slang for a charlatan) and The Tax Inspector are concerned with deception and forgery (interestingly, both texts feature used car salesmen), themes that are important to Carey and his quest for an "authentic" Australian cultural identity that does not simply imitate Britishness. Several of Carey's works, including his collection of short stories The Fat Man in History (1974) and The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (1994), are set in imaginary societies that are identifiable as Australia. This technique is employed as a means of critiquing both contemporary Australia and, what is for Carey, the nation's troubled relationship with Europe. Set in the imaginary land of Efica, a decolonized country that was formerly governed by European powers, The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith allegorizes Australian anxieties regarding its past. The deformed central protagonist's quest to find acceptance for his unconventional appearance is representative not only of the country's fear that as a society it is somehow "tainted" because of its origins, it is also analogous to the independent Australia's own need to find a niche for itself on the world stage.

The text most obviously related to Jack Maggs is Oscar and Lucinda (1988), a novel that portrays a lapsed clergyman, Oscar Hopkins and his efforts to transport a glass church through the Australian bush. The highly impracticable church in which parishioners would have been roasted alive in the Australian heat is the result of a lifelong obsession with glass by Lucinda Leplastrier, who, like Oscar, is a compulsive gambler, but who is also a woman of business. The fragile church comes to represent the settlers' failure to understand the new landscape, the frailty of established religion in nineteenth-century Britain, and also, through its resemblance to Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, British cultural imperialism. Symbolically, the edifice shatters spectacularly on arrival at its destination, before finally sinking into the river while Oscar, who becomes trapped inside it, is drowned.

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