

Faber Firsts

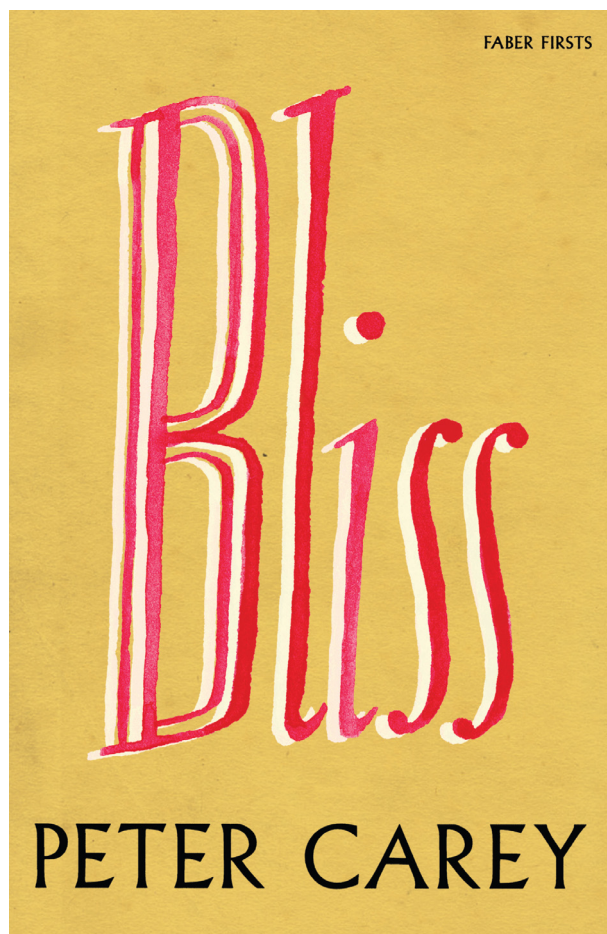
Bliss by Peter Carey

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Bliss by Peter Carey

In brief

Bliss begins with the death of its hero, Harry Joy, albeit for nine minutes only. Joy, a happy, successful 39 year-old husband and father who works in advertising, is resuscitated from the heart attack of which he 'dies' and awakes in hospital. On awakening he begins to believe that he really has died and that the life that he must carry on living is in fact Hell. He comes to see his wife, children, colleagues and friends as evil inhabitants of the Underworld, in a series of set pieces that illustrate the truth about the life he was leading and the darkness it contained. It is only when he meets Honey Barbara, a hippy, healer and whore, that he realises he must die again in order to leave Hell and reach Paradise. Filled with flights of fancy and hugely imaginative scenes - as well as a considerable amount of social commentary - this modern fable is as powerful today as it was on its original publication in 1981.





Background

For a debut novel, *Bliss* straddles an astonishingly wide variety of genres: it functions as satire, tear-jerker, political commentary, religious parody and comedic romp. When Harry Joy dies, it could be the start of any number of family novels. But when he awakens believing that his family are cohorts of evil, the novel takes a turn for the altogether more imaginative.

It turns out that his wife is having an affair with his partner, his daughter has become a Communist and his son is an avaricious young man with aspirations of becoming a drug dealer. Instead of putting these things down to a result of the life he has been leading, or the world to which he belongs, Joy can only assume that he was ended up in Hell.

Has Harry Joy gone mad, or has he really died? His family seem clear that it is the former, as they then try to institutionalise him. This

Written at a time when the environment or globalisation did not loom large on the political agenda in the way that they do today, it serves as well as a modern day cautionary tale. Carey went on to look at the 'hippy' lifestyle that Harry Joy seems to be yearning for through a 21st century eye in his most recent book 'His Illegal Self'.

For discussion

- The lead character's name is 'Joy'. Do you believe that this is a deliberately ironic gesture on Carey's part? Do you think that there is anything to be interpreted into other characters' names?
- Much of what occurs in *Bliss* is beyond belief. Do you think that this works in context? It can be read as a fable, but does it still feel engaging to you?
- Do you think that *Bliss* has stood the test of time? Much of what Joy is protesting about in the novel seems more pertinent now that it did in the early 1980s. Does this make the novel feel more exciting to you, or is it simply a snapshot of an era in your opinion?
- Do you find the supporting characters credible, or do they only work as vehicles for Joy's experience? Some reviews have been divided on this over the years. Discuss.
- What techniques has Carey used to make his characters engaging? Or do you find them unsympathetic?
- How effective do you think the humour is in the novel? Do you think it heightens the satire on topics such as religion, the police or big business, or does it undermine it?
- The city in which the events of *Bliss* largely take place in is not specified. Do you think this ambiguity makes the novel more effective, or do you prefer locations to be more precise? Why do you think Carey did not name his city?
- There is much use of religious imagery in the novel. How do you think it compares to older, 'classic' texts that explore the contexts of heaven and hell? Do you think *Bliss* works as a modern interpretation of those novels, or should be read independently?
- At the time of original publication, some reviewers commented that the novel feels as if it is in two distinct 'halves' with the latter part involving Honey Barbara a weaker section. What did you think?
- *Bliss* was one of the first novels to express ecological concerns at a time when such issues were only just becoming part of the political agenda. How do you think that it compares to later novels by other authors, and how do you think it may have inspired them?
- *Bliss* does not follow a traditional narrative structure – it is somewhat more fluid. What did you think of the fact we discover about the narrator at the end of the novel?
- Have you read any of Peter Carey's later novels? Can you spot any recurring themes in his work, or do you find them all unique?

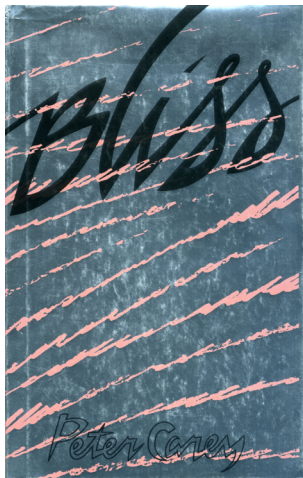


About the author

Peter Carey was born in 1943 in Victoria, Australia. In 1961 he began a science degree programme at Monash University in Melbourne but cut short his study. In 1962 he began work in advertising, which he did in various agencies until 1967. He began writing in 1964.

He returned to Melbourne in 1970 and began to have short stories published in magazines and newspapers. These stories were later compiled in *The Fat Man in History*. In 1976 Carey joined an 'alternative community' in Queensland where he would write for three weeks, then spend the fourth week working in Sydney. During this time he wrote *Bliss*, his debut novel. He moved to New York in 1990 to teach creative writing at New York University.

Oscar and Lucinda was made into a film starring Gilliam Armstrong and Ralph Fiennes. In 2001 he became only the second author to win the Man Booker Prize twice with *The True History of the Kelly Gang*. He has been awarded three honorary degrees and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, the Australian Academy of Humanities and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.



Resources

<http://petercareybooks.com/>

Author's official website

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth03CI1K215612635149>

Author's page at British Council website

Suggested further reading

Fiction

Herzog – Saul Bellow

The Satanic Verses – Salman Rushdie

The Waste Land – TS Eliot

Slaughterhouse-Five - Kurt Vonnegut

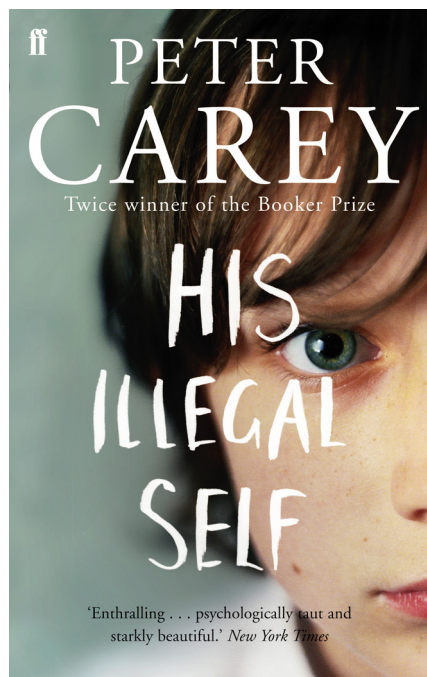
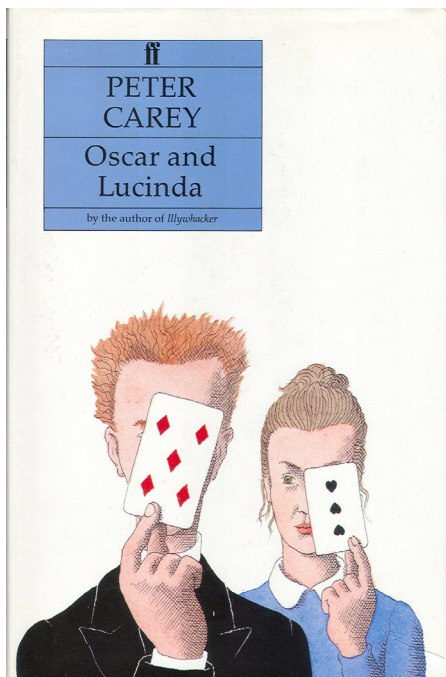
In the Skin of a Lion – Michael Ondaatje

Paradise Lost – John Milton

Non-Fiction

Telling Lies and Stories: Peter Carey's *Bliss* - *Modern Fiction Studies* 35(1989), John Hopkins University Press - Hassall, A.J.

Harry Joy's Children: The Art of Story Telling in Peter Carey's *Bliss* - *Australian Literary Studies* 16 - Natale, Antonella Riem



Other books by Peter Carey

Fiction

Illywhacker (1985)
Oscar and Lucinda (1988)
The Tax Inspector (1991)
The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith (1994)
Collected Stories
Jack Maggs (1997)
True History of the Kelly Gang (2000)
My Life as a Fake (2003)
Theft: A Love Story (2006)
His Illegal Self (2008)

Non-Fiction

A Letter to Our Son (1994)
30 Days in Sydney: A Wildly Distorted Account (2001)
Letter From New York (2001)
Wrong about Japan (2005)

Short Story Collections

The Fat Man in History (1974)
War Crimes (1979)
Exotic Pleasures (1990)
Collected Stories (1994) — Comprised of all the works from The Fat Man in History and War Crimes, as well as three previously uncollected works.

For Children

The Big Bazoochley (1995)

