



His Illegal Self

Peter Carey

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When the boy was almost eight, a woman stepped out of the elevator into the apartment on East Sixty-second Street and he recognized her straightaway. No one had told him to expect it. That was pretty typical of growing up with Grandma Selkirk . . . No one would dream of saying, Here is your mother returned to you.

His Illegal Self is the story of Che "raised in isolated privilege by his New York grandmother, he is the precocious son of radical student activists at Harvard in the late sixties. Yearning for his famous outlaw parents denied all access to television and the news, he takes hope from his long-haired teenage neighbor, who predicts, *They will come for you, man. They'll break you out of here.*

Soon Che too is an outlaw: fleeing down subways, abandoning seedy motels at night, he is pitched into a journey that leads him to a hippie commune in the jungle of tropical Queensland. Here he slowly, bravely confronts his life, learning that nothing is what it seems. Who is his real mother? Was that his real father? If all he suspects is true, what should he do?

Never sentimental, *His Illegal Self* is an achingly beautiful story of the love between a young woman and a little boy. It may make you cry more than once before it lifts your spirit in the most lovely, artful, unexpected way.

His Illegal Self Details

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Michael says

I was captivated in many ways with this unusual story, often moved in surprising breakthroughs, but for the most part unfulfilled by the mash-up of perspectives and non-linear narrative.

We have a precocious and lonely seven year-old boy, Che, being raised by a wealthy grandmother in New York, who through a confusing series of events, ends up hiding out in a semi-jungle region of northern Queensland, Australia, with his former babysitter/housekeeper, Dial. He's a real trooper, very resilient. He yearns to connect with his real parents, who are SDS radicals in hiding from the FBI, but comes to love Dial as a substitute. She listens to him and reads to him. They try to make a go of gardening in a little community off the grid composed of outlaws in hiding and hippies. The place is strange and alien, but wonderful in many ways for a boy raised in a city. He begins to bond with a renegade neighbor who begins to teach him survival skills.

That's the main core of the story. There is little issue of spoilers with this general synopsis. The art of the novel is in its presentation. The timeline moves back and forth and sideways on the path between New York and Australia. Half the time we are with the boy's perspective, mostly in the present, some in memory, and occasionally from some point years later. The other half of the time we are in Dial's perspective. Often we are frustrated with the poor choices she makes that lead her to the status of kidnapper. But we admire her for her combination of selfish and selfless love for Che. And in many ways she is the only voice of sanity among all the characters. There is nothing romantic about the radicals, hippies, and outlaws that populate the story, but lots of self-centered blundering.

Maybe the key to digesting this tale lies with parsing the meanings of the transplantation of the broken bits America in the early 70's in the form of two true humans to the never-never land of remote Australia. It does put the realistic love between Che and Dial on some kind of platform, with echoes of a lot of post-apocalyptic fiction, McCarthy's "The Road" in particular. But I didn't rate that book very highly either. In another way, the book reminds me of the collision of hippie and survivalist cultures in T.C. Boyle's "Drop City," which by contrast I like better because its more comprehensible social commentary and relief in satirical humor.

So far I've loved Carey's "Parrot and Olivier in America" and was less satisfied with "Jack Maggs", both historical fiction set in the 19th century. Maybe I should stick with his more admired historical fiction in my next outing: "Oscar and Lucinda" and "The True History of the Kelly Gang."

Molly Jones says

Worthy of another Booker prize?

No.

Fascinating with some literary merit?

Yes.

Carey tells this tale mainly from two characters' perspectives: a boy/son/grandson, Che or Jay, and a mother/kidnapper/revolutionary, Dial or Anna. Confused? Try reading the novel. The prose isn't necessarily dense, but it often demands rereading phrases or sentences in order to interpret what, exactly, is happening in the novel. Carey never uses quotation marks, which, surprisingly, isn't the cause of the confusion. He, instead, layers metaphors or deliberately "gums up" a sentence in order to obtain what I imagine he feels is a sense of art or what he believes embellishes his plot. What is the plot? In the Vietnam Era, an eight-year-old boy being raised by his very rich grandmother (lives on Park Avenue) is delivered to and/or kidnapped by a friend of the boy's mother/a former employee of the grandmother's so that the boy may visit with his felonious, underground, biological mother. The boy never actually reaches his intended destination, however, and spends most of the book in a socialist commune in Australia. What happens beyond those facts is rather trivial and incidental.

Throughout my reading of the book, I kept waiting for the ah-ha moment when I would realize why this author was twice awarded the Booker prize; it never came. I appreciated some of his sentences and the way that he handled a few pacing details (ie. "years from now he would remember . . ." or "when he was a baby he used to . . ." you get the point). Initially, I enjoyed being confused and felt that the sentence structure added to the suspense of the novel; however, two-hundred pages into the book, it felt like Carey was only filling-in empty spaces between the action sequences of the plot and trying to meet some page quota, which was very annoying. [I suspect his editor no longer line-edits his too-famous manuscripts.] I don't mean to be disrespectful, but Peter Carey, you should have a discussion with Joan Didion about her most recent work; you both have a lot in common. Next time, please have a little more consideration for the integrity of your work and don't fall back on your previous success. Your readers will be oh-so-grateful.

Liz says

confusing, implausible, curiously apolitical, utterly obsessed with loose breasts bouncing around within shirts as a motif of countercultural affiliation, and festooned with symbols of Emotional Moments while failing ever to make the characters emotionally believable. read Dana Spiotta's superior Eat the Document instead.

Lisa Osur says

I don't often get to the point when I decide I can't read anymore but I did with His Illegal Self. I had been looking at this book for a long time and finally picked it up to read. What I found was extremely confusing. Who is the boy? Who is his mother? Is his father really the Che? How is the grandmother involved? Is his mother really his mother or someone else and what or who is she hiding from? Then the mother sacrifices herself but did she really? The story jumps around locations and time periods, the characters are like Mexican jumping beans and I just couldn't figure it all out. I tried- I really did- and I still feel that if I could have stuck with it it would have come together in the end, but I just couldn't do it- can you tell I feel a little guilty about not finishing the book? Sorry- but there is so much out there that I want to read that I had to give up on His Illegal Self.

Barbara Ellison says

Peter Carey is one of the few authors whose works I've read in their entirety. I've enjoyed some very much and others were blown away by. I think he should get at least as much attention and fame as Ian McEwan. However, "His Illegal Self" is a misstep. The novel reads like a draft--something quick and dirty that Carey had to get out to the publisher in order to fulfill a contract having already spent the advance.

There's nothing to hold on to in this book--if character makes plot then there's no story as not a single character as drawn has a ring of truth to them especially Anna whose actions and expressed or imagined motivations are never clear. Take him away, keep him, send him home, no wait, don't let's pick him up in a scene like *Thelma and Louise* run in reverse. Just weird.

The other protagonist, Che, was sometimes precocious and sometimes a big baby. Teaching Trevor to swim, Carey writes, "No matter how sad you were, swimming always cleaned your soul. The boy said those words exactly." No, no it he didn't say any such thing. Why? Because the boy never said one profound thing out loud in the entire book let alone make a reference to something so abstract as a soul or so esoteric as a metaphor, so why start at age 8 on page 248? Other times he just wants to be stroked and petted like a cat or a baby and when the story is in his point of view the narrative takes on the choppy disconnected thoughts of a highly distracted child.

Except for Trevor who is a criminal with an ax to grind (what else is new) I have no idea why anyone did anything in this book and the abrupt shifts in point of view didn't help me get there either. The style may be innovative but to me it's sloppy.

Lacey says

I had the exact opposite problem with this book that I did with the last book I read. The problem with this book is that the story is good. It's interesting, if a bit cliche, but it takes some turns that intrigued. The problem is the writer is not a terribly good writer.

I know it's in vogue not to use quotation marks, but if you're virtually incapable of distinguishing between your characters' voices, it's probably necessary. It's not that the character's were unbelievable, but they seemed to all think in the exact same way, and use the exact same words and logical processes, regardless of age, gender, life experience, etc. And the problem is, ages and genders and experiences presented HUGE differences. This should have been made a bit more clear.

The story itself is interesting, and might have benefited from a bit more historical context, but in all shows promise that this particular writer can create an interesting world for his characters to inhabit. I just wish that the quality of writing were more enjoyable, that I actually wanted to spend time with the book, rather than feeling I had to suffer some mediocre prose to find out the ending to a story that genuinely had me hooked.

Nick says

Peter Carey's usual mix of something a little bit mysterious and criminal, and something ironically funny, *His Illegal Self* is a great little comical romp involving an inadvertent kidnapping. Che (He insists on being called "Chay" whereas his grandparents call him "Jay") is snatched from his wealthy grandparents' custody by a friend of his outlaw mother ostensibly for a short visit. When the mother unexpectedly dies, the friend, an Ivy League student from Australia named "Dial", panics and takes him back to Australia to live in a commune. It's the '70's and they refer to themselves as "hippies" even though the Australian outback is not exactly as angstful about Vietnam as America. Still, the "anything goes" atmosphere is an eye-opener for Che, mostly a negative one, though having never lived with a Father he does get some hard-as-nails advice from Dial's somewhat-boyfriend who manages to keep a sort of sanity at the commune, despite the efforts of the handful of other members who want to structure things (with rules such as "no cats"). A very darkly comical view of the world emerges and even after finishing, I still wonder about the darkness that Che will take with him into adulthood.

Jenna says

Carey is such a beastly writing god that I can almost ignore the fundamental implausibility of the impetus behind the central plot. This isn't a work of fantasy or even magical realism - it falls firmly into the modern realist camp, but in places it does have a woozy, dreamy feel, coupled with a storyline that doesn't quite make sense. Why, exactly, would Anna abandon her job? What happened to Susan? What's the deal with the dad? Why Australia? What the hell is going on with all of these nasty hippies?

Carey's writing has a bright, cutting hardness, one shared by many of my favorite Australian novelists (Tim Winton, Richard Flanagan, Murray Bail) that never devolves into gross sentimentality, but still presents characters with compassion and honesty.

Kim says

loving this book
written with such emotion i want to reach and hug or smack the characters far too frequently

i really enjoyed this book. it was so easy to connect with the characters in this book - like or hate them

the story is about a woman who steals a child in America, kind of by accident and then lands up on the run with him, in Australia.

the book very beautifully shows the relationship between this woman and the boy, as well as the relationships they both have with the odd hippies they land up living with. Che, the boy, is a heart string tugging character. He is just an enticing little boy i wanted to hug him and weep for him, and then cheer for

his achievements and strengths. He is a very real little boy dealing with life in that serious way so many kids have when facing adversity.

Dial, the kidnapper, is a character i took a bit longer to connect with. I got frustrated at the start by her dumb decisions, but as she did too, so i realised her mistakes were what made her human, and able to love Che.

stockholm syndrome or real love? - the relationship they develop maybe either. but what it is is what both characters need.

i read reviews about this book after i had finished it and there are all sorts of links to Huckleberry Finn and Call of the Wild. I know neither of those books well enough to be able to comment on this. and honestly, i don't think not drawing the parallels made my enjoyment of the book any less.

I am off to read more of the Carey's i have in my bookshelf

Shirley Revill says

Audiobook. I struggled with listening to this audiobook at times but made it to the end.

Magdalena says

Che Selkirk is a boy whose parents, members of the increasingly violent Students for a Democratic Society, have both disappeared, leaving him with his very rich grandmother. At the age of eight, a woman that Che recognises as his mother suddenly arrives and kidnaps him, taking him from New York to Australia. This is how the book begins, and Che's adventure through hunger, love and loss becomes almost a coming of age tale as he starts to understand who he is and where his future lies.

On the simplest of levels, the book is a super fast-paced race across the globe as Che and Dial attempt to hide from the police and carve an existence for themselves. The plot is propelled by both the readers own dislocation as they come to grips with the distortions between the two narrative voices. Both Che and Dial are presented as equals – joint narrators in this story, but their stories aren't identical. The reader is put in the uncomfortable position of being between them, unable to discount either the intensity of Che's needs, or the combination of confusion and desire which motivates Dial. Both need one another, and continue to work together at avoiding the truth and avoiding the law, at the same time they find themselves removed from their usual lives, and co-opted for causes they don't believe in.

As in so many of Carey's novels, real love and visual artifice become the two forces that move the narrative along. It's a search for a truth that isn't nearly as obvious as one might think. It's about the way love crisscrosses us – marks us, makes us whole, and hurts us at the same time.

Carey handles it all very subtly, weaving privilege, pain and damage together into a beautiful tapestry. Nothing seems stable, and yet there's something solid growing – that "sharp searing pain that didn't hurt" – something real, absolutely true, and physical that stays with us through life's changes.

There are no fireworks in this book – the prose is light and smooth, but looking closely, each sentence is wrought with meaning and intensity. Che is “gooseflesh, head to toes” as he realizes how helpless he is. When Dial hears a girl calling for the lost Che, she recognizes this “dreadful sympathy.” The hippy landscape of Nambour, from the home grown vegetables to the scruffy undergrowth is almost lovingly depicted.

Like even the blackest of Carey’s novels (and for me, it’s tempting to almost see this novel as the antidote to *The Tax Inspector*), there’s a strong undercurrent of humour. Dial is subsumed in the small-mindedness of Australia, and yet she holds onto desperately to her status: “Her mother would have died to see her genius in a dump like this.” (36) She was an “SDS goddess”, the Alice May Twitchell Fellow – an assistant professor at Vassar College, stuck in the backwoods of Australia where, as with any commune, the pettiness is all pervasive. She puts up shelving for lentils, lines the house with crooked boards, and tries to procure the services of a Zoot-suited lawyer to argue her case back in America so Che can go home, but her ignorance is obvious enough to the hippies whose commune she joins.

Trevor tells her at one point “You’re American. You wouldn’t know if you were up yourself” (70). She begins to know whether she’s “up herself” as the book progresses however. Dial’s painful learning curve is part of what makes this novel work.

In an act of remarkable self-control, Carey leaves the story open, suggesting a long and complex history which the reader isn’t privy to. This last sentence so changes the story that this reader at least went back and re-read it in its entirety, taking in the rich linguistic power which Carey has become famous for. Che is believable, both as the 8 year old boy struggling to find himself, and as the older, wiser narrator he becomes by the end of the book. One can imagine many other landscapes, or books growing out of this boy. But for now, there’s only the reader’s imagination, which Carey has kickstarted with this moving novel.

June says

I will not finish reading this book in protest of the CHEAP novelist's tactic of introducing a beloved pet only to kill it later for emotional effect. For once, can't we have a puppy or kitten that makes it through the whole story and is last seen curling comfortable in its bed at the end of the novel? I can only hope a stingray's barbed tail pierces your cold, cold, kitten-hating heart, Peter Carey, and that this book shows up on remainder shelves very soon.

Rhonda says

I am a huge Peter Carey fan - huge. I can't tell you how disappointed I was in this book. I couldn't see the character, I couldn't find the voice, I didn't see the connections, and don't get me to talk about the ending, how predictable. I'm sorry, Peter, but I don't want you to use bits of your old books either! I will give an extra star to the place they end up living and the grandmother. Both of these are well described and alive, for me.

Stuart says

This is not one of Peter Carey's better efforts. It seems to be one of those books that delights in making it as

difficult as possible for the reader to follow the story. First, we have no punctuation marks on the conversations. OK, I can put up with that if I must. Then we have the chapters being told from different viewpoints (the child or “the mother” – who appears not to be the mother) without making that clear. OK, so I can get used to that as well, once I realize what’s going on. But add to that the time-slicing narrative whereby the story is sometimes in New York, then in Philadelphia, then in nowhereville Australia, looking back at many other places in the USA, and I am now totally lost. And somehow “the mother” gets money, and sews it in her skirt; when did that happen? Sorry, this is too much work for enjoyment. The one good thing I liked about the book was that when the story is being told from the boy’s viewpoint, it is much more believable than some other books I have read (“The Goldfinch” comes to mind) in that the feelings and observations seem to be those of a nine-year-old, not of a twenty-nine-year old. So the boy enjoys riding the No 6 train and seeing Grand Central Station for the first time, for example. But I still found the lack of punctuation exasperating, and the ending was a non-ending, which also annoyed me.

Suzanne says

Another mis-matched audio read. I picked this up not knowing what else to choose. I have made a list since, of books on my tbr, so I will not make a mistake like this again. I do look forward to the 20 or so books I have noted down for myself. Literary fiction is not my choice, but I have wanted to try this Aussie author for some time as I own a couple of his. *Amnesia* is the only one that comes to mind, although I am certain there are more.

As I was not engaged with this one, I ended up missing key plot points on my daily work commute. I am getting extra audio reading in as I am putting my hand up for extra sport taxiing for the kids. I seem to only be able to get moments of solitude this way. This in itself is worrying. (I am reading *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*).

I won’t bother with mentioning the plot, but will mention the narrator mispronounced proper nouns in this reading. I didn’t write anything down as it is a car read, but one I did remember for the Aussie readers of this review is Caloundra. The narrator said ‘Collundra’. Errors such as this should not be missed by the production team, although the narrator was a New Zealander. The imagery of the Australian bush, mainly Queensland was nice.

The funny thing is one of the discs was damaged, and I ended up borrowing the physical book from my work, not even catching up on the missed portion I was that nonplussed. Funny to note the author did not use quotation marks.

This was in no way, for me, a joyous story.
