

The desperado from down under

Peter Carey goes inside the mind of outlaw Ned Kelly but can't quite explain how he stole Australia's heart

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It is history Mr Kelly it should always be a little rough that way we know it is the truth." So speaks a school teacher in Peter Carey's fictional autobiography of semiliterate Australian outlaw Ned Kelly. The novel, based on a historical figure, is as compelling as the truth, and occasionally as rough. A folk hero in Australia, Ned Kelly was hanged in 1880 at age 26 for murder, bank robbery and half a dozen other crimes, all of which the outlaw believed he was forced into by the unfairness of colonial rule. He's been the subject of countless historical books, a rock opera and at least three films (one of which starred Mick Jagger). He's Bonnie and Clyde meets Robin Hood meets Robert Emmet -- at least the way Peter Carey tells it.

Carey, who won the Booker Prize for "Oscar and Lucinda" in 1988, tells the novel from Kelly's perspective. This is supposed to be the manuscript he leaves for his daughter -- and as such, is filled with slang, run-on sentences, bad grammar and dialogue without punctuation. It takes a little getting used to, and the first half of the novel can be slow-going.

Carey treats Kelly sympathetically, spending page after page outlining his impoverished youth and the external pressures that force him into crime. All this goes on too long. We learn more about Kelly's poverty from a short scene where Harry Power buys Kelly his first pair of real boots and his first pair of socks than in the dozens of pages that go before.

Likewise, though we are told early that Kelly's criminal path was set without his say-so (he came from a family of criminals, his mother apprenticed him to the outlaw Power), it's not until a third of the way through that we believe it. Kelly's early troubles could have been overcome somehow, but not his first murder. Carey delivers this section masterfully: Power riling young Kelly up; Kelly and Power confronting the man who dishonored Kelly's mother; the surprising attack from the frightened man; and Kelly's single true shot, fired instinctively and without intent to kill. It's one of the most humanizing moments in the book, utterly convincing and utterly sad.

There aren't enough of those moments in the first half of the book. Writing about a legend can be tricky; finding the man who became the hero is hard work. Carey has flashes of

brilliance and insight -- the boots and the murder among them -- but the second half of the book, where Kelly is a confirmed outlaw and Carey can write about the man who commits crimes rather than how he got there, is where the novel really takes off. We meet the gang: opium-hazed Joe Byrne, little brother Dan Kelly and the crazy cross-dressing Steve Hart. We meet Kelly's love Mary, a woman with a dark surprise in her past who bears Kelly's daughter. We get the exploits, the bank robberies, the courteous hostage-taking, the carefully laid battle plans against the police, the building of the incredible -- and ultimately useless -- metal armor that's an integral part of the Kelly legend. The action moves toward the final shootout, swift as galloping horses and almost as gracefully.

Language is critical in the second half, for by the end words are rushing headlong to disaster. In the riveting final shootout, an omniscient narrator takes over, and the language becomes clear, precise and beautiful. "He emerged into the night air, walking with the slow dream-like gait which was the necessary consequence of the one hundred and twelve pounds of armour hidden beneath his long oilskin coat." The carnage is related in the same dreamy, elegant language, and the images of children shot and hostages burned are even more distressing for it. And the man who betrays the Kelly gang is the most poignant character in the book, though he merits but a handful of paragraphs. Small and pathetic, he is haunted and haunting.

It is the betrayer who questions why Kelly has become a hero. "What is it about we Australians, eh? . . . What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might we not find someone better than a horse thief and murderer?" This is a good question, and one that Carey never truly answers. Kelly's story is compelling, but Carey never fully articulates why this outlaw became an icon. Writing from Kelly's perspective provides a wealth of details, but keeps us from seeing how the common people viewed him. Newspaper articles and police opinions about him add some perspective, but there's little comment from the regular joes to whom Kelly was a hero. Without that, we don't understand why there have been so many books about Ned Kelly -- this very artful one included.

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