

# ‘Motherhood’ in His Illegal Self by Peter Carey

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Peter Carey’s new novel *His Illegal Self* exemplifies his career obsession with double lives, fakery and the breaking of rules-legal, moral and personal. Carey is a thoroughly modern writer, smashing genre boundaries, ranging in tone from wild comedy to grim tragedy, viewing the past with a decidedly contemporary eye and firmly placing the late twentieth century adventures like *My Life as a Fake*, *Theft: a Love Story* and *His Illegal Self* in social and cultural contexts.

The novel *His illegal self* deals with how a boy is separated from his parents at the end of World War II, after members of the underground assassinated a collaborator outside the family home. Alone and afraid, he is taken to a police station and punched in to dark cell. “All about him he could feel the presence of the man who must be in there somewhere”. The gentle voice of a woman gives him relief. As the woman pulls him close to console him, the boy smells sweat and something strangely sweet–perfume, he thinks. But it’s blood. The woman who comforts him is one of the assassins, a ‘terrorist’ in the words of the soldiers who imprisoned her. Her actions lead to the death of the boy’s parents, but he does not know that, nor does Che. Still, as Che holds him, he hears “her heart pound, really much too hard for someone who was just comforting someone else”. Years later he sobs when he learns Che has died; ‘Che was resurrected together with all Che had meant to him, hidden there in the darkness’. This very notion, this truth-that a child in distress is hard-wired to seek protection from a woman, whatever her failings, her confusions, her ideology- is the heartbeat that races through Peter Carey’s enthralling new novel, *His Illegal Self*, a book as psychologically taut as Patricia High Smith thriller and as starkly beautiful as Muslich’s modern classic *The Assault*.

In his tenth novel titled *His Illegal Self*, Peter Carey gives us a glimpse of the United States population under the age of thirty or so, during the 1960s and 1970s for whom the anti-war activism seems remote and obscure as some medieval conflict. Carey takes us into the heart of the era, with the profound and moving story of a young boy and his professor forced to face those circumstances in real time. Carey packs his psychological thriller love story with the theme of terror of international abduction and connecting to radical bombers who bungle like a child kidnap plot. Meeting in spring 1973 on East sixty second street in midtown Manhattan, seven-year-old protagonist Che David Selkirk (so named by his parents, as part of Weathermen-style offshoot of the Students for a Democratic Society), and newly hired Vassar English professor Anna “Dial Xenos”, a hippie, he misidentifies as his mother, bond beneath a welter of verbal flak from grandma Phoebe Daschle Selkirk.

The book opens in the midst of a thoroughly disorienting family crisis which the narrator

makes even more disorienting clinging to the misinformed perspective of a child. Che has no memory of his parents; he only knows that they are unpopular sixties radicals who have been forced into camouflage after being involved in some anti-government violence. Che's sentient years have been spent in the custody of his uppity upper-class grandmother, who raised him in a doting, anti-social, television-less cultural quarantine split between upstate New York and the Upper East Side.

Che is born in 1965 to radicalized Ivy Leaguers. After his mother stumbles during a protest against Robert McNamare at Harvard and rolls under a car in the motorcade, the 1-year-old Che clutched to her like a football, Grandma Selkirk takes over her grandson's care. His father burns his draft card in 1966; he sets his course toward Harvard-style radical civil disobedience and more treacherous criminality. Because the boy's mother joins students for a democratic society's bank robbery in 1968 in Bronxville north of New York City, a judge passes the three-year-old to his stern grandma, a wealthy Manhattanite separated from her philandering husband. So grandma gets permanent custody of the child.

Che's grandmother is a high-brow woman old fashioned and rich. She calls him Jay. She does not let him watch television with the idea that Che does not see his parents nor has any references to his parents. She is developed as a person of power and is described as a woman with little sympathy for her rebellious daughter but with great love for and devotion to her grandson. In order to shield the young boy from exposure to the illegal and high profile nature of his parents, the elderly grandmother has made a lifestyle out of removing any interaction with news media from Che's senses.

At this crucial moment a woman dressed as a hippie and called Dial (her nickname which derives from the word Dialectic), her original name being Anna... appears. She tells Che that she would take him one afternoon out for a day, with the permission of his grandmother, promising to give him a big surprise. Che's privileged and sheltered life changes all of sudden with the appearance of this woman that this outing for Che is a kind of brief, clandestine reunion with his mother. Dial is not his mother but his former baby sitter, a South Boston scholarship girl, a friend of the radical movement and she arranges to pick up Che and take him on a surreptitious visit to his mother but ironically she hears that Susan has blown herself up while making a bomb.

Ever since he can remember, Che Selkirk has imagined vivid portraits of his mother and his father. He picks up snatches of information about his parents from the people around him. A teenage neighbor of 15 years age, Che's baby sitter Cameron Fox gives him a full-page picture of his father from Life magazines. "You have a right to know", Cameron tells Che. "Your father is a great American". Then his mother's pictures were strewn about the apartment and the grandmother's place in Kenoza Lake, New York. He collects bits of truth and secures them in his bag as a means of sifting out his identity- the Uno cards, the poker pack, his ticket to Shea Stadium, a business card, a coin, three bills, a stone, and the folded page from Life Magazine. Critic Cathleen Schine, in a review for New York Review of Books, refers to the child's paper stash as "childish documentation, visas to a nation of which he has no memory" (Schine, 2008).

Better mom promises to lend him to a big surprise. Che can hardly believe himself: first his mothers, now he will soon meet his real father. "His real life was just starting", he thinks, "He

was going to see his dad” (HIS 5). Unfortunately for the boy, Dial can deliver no such happiness. As it turns out the “angel” is not his mother as Che had hoped, but a woman who wants to be addressed as Dial and whose surprise for the boy never seems to materialize. Instead the mission she has been sent on, to bring the son Che over to visit his real mother Susan Selkirk, for a one-hour “play date”, has gone horribly awry.

There is a shift in the narrative voice at this point where Carey explains how motherhood never managed to dampen Susan Selkirk’s radical philosophies. Nevertheless, desperate for a glimpse of her son before she again goes to the lam, she pleads her friend and one-time fellow activist, Dial to arrange for a meeting between mother and son. But before the meeting takes place, Susan is accidentally killed in a bomb explosion she was trying to rig and Dial and Che’s mugs are all over the evening news. For mysterious reasons Dial has agreed to pick the boy up from Phoebe’s apartment in order to make the son and mother meet together in her safe house. But before the visit goes through, Che’s mother dies and Dial and the boy are instantly all over the evening news, panicking, she turns to the revolutionary underground, and before she’s thought things through they have packed her off to Australia, where the help she’s been promised stubbornly fails to materialize. Che and Dial flee and one minute they are in Bloomingdale with grandma, the next they’re running into the subway-an unfamiliar experience for Che and trying to catch a bus to somewhere called “Philly” (Philadelphia). On the journey, Che and Dial arrive at a safe-house, a dismal dump with a porch littered with discarded carpet and books stacked in boxes. He begins to read a book and comes across the line which contains some ray of hope for him; “nothing that had mattered before would matter now”- his hope of reunion with his birth parents. Dial feeds Che with chocolate bar and other meals. Dial has Joel the barber, cut and dyes Che’s hair black as disguise. To the adventurous child, the buzz cut is a form of liberation, a connection with the hippie alternate lifestyle of the 1970s. This reveals the theme of emotional and physical sustenance and the surrogate love expressed by Dial towards Che.

At this point there is an abrupt change of plan. Dial hustles him to a scuzzy motel. There, flickering on the television screen, Che sees a photo of himself. ‘Something very bad had happened. He did not know what it could be’. Soon Che becomes the subject of a nationwide kidnapping appeal. So once again they are on the run suddenly to Oakland, California, and Seattle. Along the way, they encounter the rogues, grotesques, deadbeats, marginal figures lacking in sociability, one of whom is Che’s unidentified birth father, David Rubbo. Like a homing device, the boy gathers hints at his identity; “had to listen through the wall-his history in whispers, brushing, scratching on the windowpane”, a gothic image fraught with unspecified terrors he has yet to encounter in the flesh. The journey (travel) rather of Dial and Che symbolize their development emotionally and spiritually though it pushes them to the brink of mental and physical destruction at the same time.

They finally come to a desolate spot, a hippie commune in Queensland, Australia, known as the Crystal Community, to ride out a cyclone in a trailer park. The weather parallels Che’s apprehensions, “punched and hammered so unpredictably, with such force, it seemed his thing might really kill them”. like an anchor-less womb where Dial has purchased fourteen acres of arid ground by force populated by a handful of ramshackle structures and a group of equally dubious inhabitants (here the readers get a clue to the fact that Carey as a native Aussie is obsessed with geographical metaphysics of his home continent). Dial turns her back on her academic career. The ‘Movement’ gives Dial money and spirits her away to Australia. The tumbling shelter, like an anchorless womb, jolts its passengers, causing Dial to murmur mom-fashion, “we’re OK, baby”, and a solace that becomes her mantra.

It is not surprising that Dial felt she had no choice but to run to different cities over a short period of time and after having clocked many motel hours together, she had to run as fast as she could with the boy in order to escape especially when she knew Che's grandmother had the federal authorities looking for her. As they run in 'hand in hand, slippery as newborn goats', Che feels his entire life changing all at once but in his life nothing is certain. When the woman tells that she has a surprise, Che is happy. As the two of them move around the country, however, holing up in cheap motels and playing endless games of Uno, the surprise is quietly dropped. Their travels speed up until, very abruptly, and they are in Queensland. At this point Carey cuts back in time and tells the story again from Dial's point of view, briefly dropping the jagged narrative style he is designed to convey the boy's confused thoughts. One is plunged into Che's head as he struggles to make sense of this great swirl of alien impressions that's suddenly engulfed him: the running woman 'with her titties like puppies, fighting inside her shirt', the mysterious man with 'watery grey eyes', who hoses him down after he poops his pants and who might just be his father...

The first part of the novel is seen from the boy's perspective and so it's comprehensive. There's also Dial's indecision, the frantic flight across the globe, the garbled news reports of the missing boy and other events. While the second (ending) part of the novel though satisfying to the readers, seems to ignore the reality of the situation for the characters. Insubstantial shelter parallels the anxiety of a child far from familiar relatives. Che rejects the crooked hippie house that Dial provides for them, a loose-boarded hove lighted by a propane lantern and stabilized with black butt timbers in a style that Carey calls "alternative architecture", a makeshift hideout suited to the sensuous, humid rainforest.

The second part of the novel begins with Dial and Che's life in Australia. Usually the story narrated by children are nearly always flawed and tiresome, yet Che's narration is as convincing a child as any: he is beady as a boy scout; innocent and yet so knowing; brining with watery nostalgia for states he has never even known. Growing up with grandma, we are told, he had been treated like some kind of 'lovely insect', expected to know things through your feelers, by the kaleidoscope patterns in the others' eyes', and it is this Che who pulls the long middle section, when Dial seems incapable of organizing anything, bar the odd pan of tomato sauce.

Much of the story takes place in this commune and depicts their life in detail, there. Theo Tait in the London Review of books states "Carey writes fiction on the grand nation-building scale: by his own admission, nearly everything he has ever written has been concerned with questions of national identity". Carey wants to show that it does not take a parent to love a child, nor a wholly good and clear thinking person, and as the novel reaches its climax, there is no doubt that we believe in the emotional noose that binds Dial to her contraband charge. So Dial and Che find themselves in an untenable situation. Dial has given up all she's ever wanted to achieve and is devoid of any hope. But Che firmly believes that his father will come and save him. He is increasingly upset with Dial and begins to spend more time with Trevor, a black man, who is abused as an orphan but who is determined to live an independent life on his own terms.

Carey sketches with painstaking tenderness and care the emotionally complex relationship between Dial and Che...sometimes warm and more often tense and challenging- that's at the heart of the novel. The centre of the novel drags on with the bleakness of Dial and Che's life

and the reader is left depressed at the hopelessness of their situation. It's not until they learn to clutch to the love they share, and the glimmer of hope that provides, that they can reach any fragment of acceptance and inner peace. His *Illegal Self* is concerned with loss of innocence but also with the painstaking creation of personal trust... it is a sad story with a warmth and directness... a fine novel".-(James Ley, *The Age*).

At the heart of the book is Che's yearning to belong to someone, and his mounting fear that he might be forging the most important relationship of his life with an impostor. His only other comfort comes from the tiny kitten that he adopts- but then the moronic Australian hippies insist he gets rid of it, claiming that it's destroying the wildlife in their muddy would-be Eden. But Che is not the only one who's flailing around for someone to live: Dial is equally lost. An infuriatingly bumptious whinger in many respects-she's always banging on about how clever she is and how big a sacrifice has made-Dial is nonetheless determined to do her best for Che, and her attempts to do so represent her own (belated) passage to maturity.

As always with Carey novels, Australia provides a staging ground for primordial forces. While Dial labors to preserve their walls and her freedom, the boy abhors understanding his new circumstances, unaware that ideology has orphaned him. Carey gives a touching look at the confusion and hope upon which we build our identities. In Che and Dial, and the love and anger which bind them, Carey shows us two naïve, lost souls trying to make sense of a world where nothing is certain. That uncertainty extends to almost every aspect of their lives. They are referred to throughout as 'the mother and the boy'. As such, they become primal, feral figures. Living beyond the law and the conventional society, where nobody is known by their real names, Dial and Che come to realize that the only dependable thing they have is each other. It is the compelling story of the relationship that builds between these two lives that drives the story forward. Carey's handling of their relationship and feelings binds it all together in a flurry of emotions that buffets the readers as well. Thus the mother-son relationship forms the major theme of the novel, the heart of Carey's book and critics agree that the touching bond that develops between the two gives the book its merit. Carey packs a strong emotional punch as he explores Dial's conflicted view of motherhood and Che's desperate love, attachments, and doubts.

Carey's backdrop is no less exotic for its realism, and his close portrait of the relationship between one benighted woman and the child who depends on her is exquisite, enlarging the story beyond the frame of its epoch. 'The personal is political', Dial might say, and Che is that statement's living proof; "the executive will not support this, Dial", a Movement representative tells her early on, refusing Dial and the boy shelter. But Dial cannot think of Che as 'this'. To her Che is 'him'- a person. "She thinks the revolution is a part time job", someone else sneers. Dial is neither a full-time revolutionary nor a full-time child-minder; she's just a woman who learns too late that there is no practical way to combine the two jobs, but whose conscience wouldn't let her sacrifice either one.

So what propels this jerry-built narrative is Che's gradual discovery of his own identity; his realization that Dial is not his real mother, that she stole him from home and lied to him, that his mysterious father is never going to come and find him. Carey shows how this little boy, who carefully carries with him a bunch of news clippings and photos that hold clues to his parents' radical past, moves from delight (at having found the woman he thinks is his real mother) to confusion to anger at Dial and her betrayal. And he also shows how isolation and

necessity force Che and Dial to depend upon each other, and how that need gradually evolves into affection, and that affection into a kind of love, As Dial grapples with the realization that she must return Che to his real life and make plans for doing so without getting herself arrested.

Dial grows depressed, suddenly realizing what she has signed for, while Che being young and optimistic, finally begins to start over a new life. What begins a road novel full of momentum gets to Australia and then grinds to a halt, turning into something else entirely- in part, the story of a woman reluctantly learning to become a mother. So Dial finally realizes Che is her responsibility. He is, in fact, her revolution. Loss and recovery have been the major themes in any literature. It seems that Australian authors very specially have developed this subject of recovery from loss as something though the joining of hearts and emotional cooperation; the forming of a couple or a family. Dial and Che were able to overcome their loss by forming a small rag-tag family. As a result, a certain degree of values is placed on the importance and emotional strength of a family.

Carey gives a message that love can conquer all things irrespective of caste, creed, religion, nationality, and, most markedly age. The portentous tone seems unearned and at odds with the sketchy characters, particularly as the novel jerks to a crassly sentimental conclusion. Dial must admit to the anxious child. Thus the plight of the parentless child dominates his illegal self, a terrifying quest narrative that surveys anxieties of Che David Selkirk. So in Che Selkirk, Carey has drawn a persuasive picture of an identity in search of definition that is distinctive both for its emotional richness in its light touch. His illegal Self is best seen as neither a departure nor a return but a natural development in Carey's impressive oeuvre". - Liam Davison, *The Australian*.

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