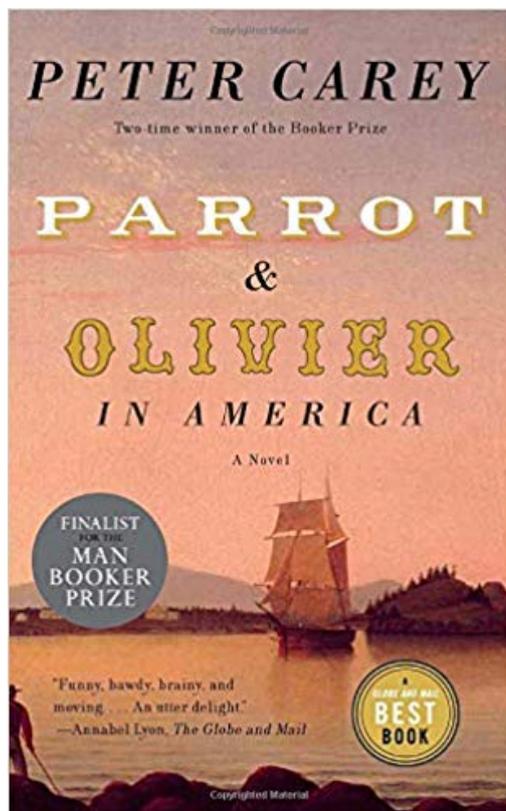


Parrot and Olivier in America *by* Peter Carey



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From the two-time Booker Prize-winning author: an irrepressible, audacious, trenchantly funny new novel set in the 19th century and inspired in part by the life of Alexis de Tocqueville. With dazzling exuberance and all the richness of characterization, story, and language that we have come to expect from this superlative writer, Peter Carey explores the birth of democracy, the limits of friendship and whether people really can remake themselves in a New World. The two men at the heart of the novel couldn't be any more different: Olivier is the son of French aristocrats who (barely) survived the French Revolution. Parrot is the motherless son of an itinerate English printer. But when young Parrot is separated from his father (after a stupendous conflagration at a house of forgery) he runs into the powerful embrace of a one-armed marquis who will be his conduit - like it or not - into a life as closely (mis)allied with Olivier's as if they were connected by blood. And when Olivier sets sail for America - ostensibly to make a study of the American penal system, but more precisely to save his neck from the latest guillotineurs - Parrot, unable to loosen the Marquis's grip, is there too: as spy, scribe, comptroller, protector, foe and foil. As the narrative unfurls, shifting between the perspectives of Olivier and Parrot, between their picaresque adventures apart and together, in love and politics, prisons and finance, homelands and brave new lands - a most unlikely friendship begins to take hold. *From the Hardcover edition.*



Reviews of the **Parrot and Olivier in America** by Peter Carey

Jelar

After reading the exceptional novel, *The True History of the Kelly Gang*, by Peter Carey, I was intrigued to read his fictional interpretation of the visit of Alexis de Tocqueville to Jacksonian America. I was not disappointed. Carey is an excellent writer of historic fiction, making the characters and times come alive with a Charles Dickens-like approach to larger than life characters in larger than life situations. Carey writes very well and I was amused throughout the relatively long book with his commentary, observations, and irony. The novel is a reflection on the Old World and the New World through the eyes of both main characters, Parrot and Olivier. It is a novel of classism and the breakdowns of class distinctions. It is also very funny.

The journeys and observations of Tocqueville are reflected in the fictional character of Olivier, a nobleman from France experiencing the wild and growing American of Andrew Jackson. This was a time of innovation, creativity, and expansion of the American boundaries and development of a true American character. Olivier observes it but his servant Parrot lives it and the contrast is telling.

Early chapters on the lives of both Parrot and Olivier and moving, much like the early chapters in *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. Carey obviously has a love for the human condition in all its foolishness and potential and the observations of Olivier probably also reflect Carey's wry observations.

I would recommend *The True History of the Kelly Gang* to anyone interested in Carey's writing, for it is his masterpiece, but this book is a fully amusing and thoughtful read.

Gom

This book is not for everyone. That is apparent based upon some quite emphatic negative reviews. I think those likely to most enjoy this work will be those who are appreciative of a gifted author's command of the English language. To me, this is primarily a work of human relationships and perceptions, and secondarily, a fictionalized account of an historic event. The writer reveals tremendous skill by deftly describing such interactions between people and their often contradictory views on single events. It is a work of perspectives. I would recommend it to someone who has read a fair number of books which are focused on the subtleties of human behavior and understated motivations. It took me some time to get into this book, but I consider it well worth the initial effort, as it pays off in spades.

Also, understand that much of the work is narrative, from two primary sources - Parrot and Olivier. There is much dialogue as well, but you should be aware of the prevalence of narration (which also contains some of the funniest bits of writing I have ever seen).

I think some fans of Vonnegut (which I count myself as one) will enjoy this simply due to its characterizations of people encountered. Richly drawn characters with human foibles, who often surprise their counterparts with more worth than previously imagined.

It helped me to not think so much about the "plot" of the book, but rather simply enjoy the extremely pleasurable way the author progresses the characters through otherwise quite mundane experiences.

One last bit... This is not "in your face" humor. It is subtle, yet rich, and far more intelligent than the usual fare. There were so many passages where I had to laugh out loud and think 'I have to read this to my wife! She'll really enjoy it!'

I would recommend it based upon said caveats.

inform

Peter Carey's *Parrot and Olivier in America* was marketed as a comic novel based on the adventures of Alexis de Tocqueville, but it is something of a deliberate fraud on both counts. Olivier de Garmont certainly bears some resemblance to Tocqueville, but it quickly becomes clear that comparing them too carefully is a red herring. Olivier's story must be considered as an entity by itself, inhabiting a sort of parallel universe to Tocqueville's rather than a direct retelling (which makes sense: otherwise, why not just name the character Tocqueville?). Similarly, I was a little disappointed to find that, while Carey's writing is shot through with his usual sense of irony, *Parrot and Olivier in America* is not really a comic novel. Sure, there are moments when it sets out to satirize the past, especially the development of American democracy, in various ways, but it lacks any sort of laugh-out-loud passages that characterize the comic genre. You'll smile, but you won't laugh.

It took me a long time to warm to this book. In fact, I read it twice, several months apart, before I could decide that I actually liked it. Part of the problem came from my expectations that it *would* be a humorous novel, and I felt let down by the fact that it wasn't funny the first time through. Carey, however, is a complex novelist, and it took that second reading for me to see the deeper intricacies of what he was trying to do. If you've read some of Carey's other recent books, such as *My Life as a Fake* or *His Illegal Self*, you'll notice a recurring interest in two overlapping themes: the constructed nature of the self, and the possibilities for inauthenticity that arise from this condition. As such, *Parrot and Olivier in America* repeatedly deploys the intertwining notions of copying and the counterfeit, from the fake money manufactured by Parrot's father to the carbon paper that Parrot uses to duplicate Olivier's letters. Underneath this repeated symbolism is a political critique grounded in the thesis that the origins of democracy have themselves been counterfeited, allowing the political apparatus to be delivered into the hands of a new ruling class that uses a rhetoric of freedom and equality to cover up its own inherent injustices.

Although Carey delivers this message with deft subtlety, it is not hard to see why, for most readers, such a conclusion is going to touch a sore spot. It is a view that implicitly challenges some of the most basic assumptions about not only who we are as a society, but also certain cherished enlightenment ideas, particularly the notion that human beings naturally and instinctively desire freedom, one of the key foundations of democracy. Still, Carey's assessment is not grounded in a blind anti-Americanism: like his characters, like Tocqueville, he has seen America for himself (Carey teaches creative writing at New York's Hunter College), and this meticulously researched novel challenges the reader to reject the evasions and deceptions of democracy's birth from an empirical position rather than from mere cultural prejudice.

Parrot and Olivier in America is perhaps not Carey's best book, but it is a fine political novel of ideas that rewards patience and close attention.

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