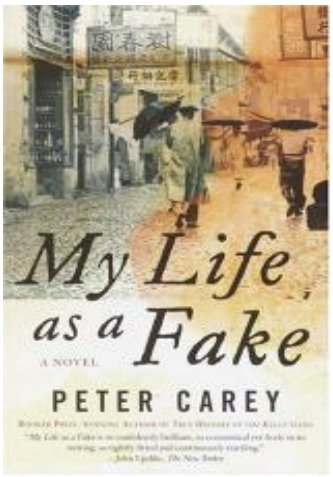
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My Life as a Fake: A Novel

by Peter Carey



About the Book

Fiendishly devious and addictively readable, Peter Carey's **My Life as a Fake** is a moral labyrinth constructed around the uneasy relationship between literature and lying. In steamy, fetid Kuala Lumpur in 1972, Sarah Wode-Douglass, the editor of a London poetry journal, meets a mysterious Australian named Christopher Chubb. Chubb is a despised literary hoaxer, carting around a manuscript likely filled with deceit. But in this dubious manuscript Sarah recognizes a work of real genius. But whose genius? As Sarah tries to secure the manuscript, Chubb draws her into a fantastic story of imposture, murder, kidnapping, and exile--a story that couldn't be true unless its teller were mad. **My Life as a Fake** is Carey at his most audacious and entertaining.

Discussion Guide

1. My Life as a Fake opens with a satirical description of London's literary elite, placing the fictional John Slater within the company of such real-life figures as Robert Lowell, Dylan Thomas, and the "Faber crowd," which establishes Sarah's literary credentials as the editor of *The Modern Review*. How does this portrait set the framework and tone for the rest of the novel?

2. Is Sarah's fascination with John Slater based solely on her suspicions about the role he played in her parents' lives? Why, despite her antipathy to travel, does she agree to accompany him to Malaysia? What are his motivations for asking her?

3. Is Slater's account of the McCorkle hoax [pp. 19--21] designed to pique or discourage Sarah's interest in the scandal? What particular details support your answer?

4. At the end of her first meeting with Chubb, Sarah says, "Chubb appeared monstrous --- malicious, anti-Semitic, so grotesque and self-deceiving in his love of 'truth and beauty'" [p. 33]. What insights does this harsh evaluation offer into

Sarah's decision to pursue the poet and the manuscript he briefly shares with her?

5. In describing the Australian character and culture, Slater says, "Remember, this is the country of the duck-billed platypus. When you are cut off from the rest of the world, things are bound to develop in interesting ways" [p. 19]. Chubb, however, chooses to see his homeland as a victim of the "Tyranny of Distance" [p. 29]. What do these views reveal about differences between an outside observer (Slater) and a native? Is Chubb's viewpoint shaped by his lack of recognition? In what ways does it color his description of David Weiss [pp. 30--31], a Jew whose privileged childhood and early success Chubb openly resents? What impact does it have on his account of the obscenity trial [p. 56]?

6. McCorkle's rant against the prosecution of Weiss and his vow to exact justice "not just for the sake of David Weiss but of art itself, and for a country where we seldom understand that we must be prepared to fight for issues bigger than an umpire's decision at the Melbourne Cricket Ground" [pp. 77--78] is an escalation of Chubb's criticisms of Australian society. Why has Carey put these words into the mouth of the "phantom poet"?

7. When McCorkle recites one of Chubb's contrived parodies, Carey writes, "This lunatic had somehow recast it without altering a word. What had been clever had now become true, the song of the autodidact, the colonial, the damaged beast of the antipodes" [p. 82]. What does this imply about the nature of literature? About the relationship between a writer and his or her audience?

8. How does Carey use minor characters--from David Weiss, the rival Chubb hopes to expose, to Noussette (who, Chubb declares, would "try anything . . . could be who she wished" [p. 93]) to Mulaha, the master of poisons Chubb encounters in the jungle --- to explore the role of deception in human lives? In what ways do these incidental figures help define the moral universe of the novel?

9. "I went to bed with the disconcerting knowledge that almost everything I had assumed about my life was incorrect, that I had been baptised in blood and raised on secrets and misconstructions which had, obviously, made me who I was" [p. 133], Sarah writes after learning the truth about her mother's death and her father's dual life. Why do Slater's revelations free her to divulge the story of her own long-term love affair? Does the relationship reveal something about her character that was previously hidden? Does it make her more or less appealing?

10. McCorkle quotes Milton's **Paradise Lost** when he demands that Chubb give him a birth certificate [p. 95]. What other quotations or literary references extend the scope and resonance of the story? What purpose do they serve in the overall scheme of the novel? For example, what do they suggest about Carey's feelings about "serious" literature and its acolytes?

11. The creature's hold over Chubb reaches a climax when he kidnaps Nousette's baby and raises her as his own. How does Chubb's unrelenting pursuit of the pair --- as well as the creature's ability to convince the little girl that Chubb is an evil spirit [p. 208] --- mirror the creative process and the fears, hopes, and ambitions that drive an artist?

12. My Life as a Fake is narrated by Sarah, but the voices of Slater, Chubb, and McCorkle take over at various crucial points. What effect does this have on your reactions to the events? Whose point of view seems the most reliable and why?

13. On his deathbed McCorkle gives Chubb a manuscript with the "fierce sarcastic title, **My Life as a Fake**" [p. 256]. In

what ways does the title sum up not only McCorkle's life, but also the life stories of each of the other three major characters?

14. While the Ern Malley scandal is familiar to Australian readers and students of literary hoaxes, it is probably unknown to most American readers. In what ways might this affect the reader's response to the novel? Does it stand entirely on its own, or would knowledge of the actual events enhance the reading experience? Why do you think Carey chose to explain the sources of the novel in an afterword rather than in an introduction or a prologue?

15. In Mary Shelley's **Frankenstein**, the monster destroys Victor Frankenstein, the brilliant scientist who created him. One of the major themes of that novel is the danger of unfettered scientific inquiry and experimentation. Are there similarities between Chubb's motivations and those of Dr. Frankenstein? In drawing on the theme and structure of **Frankenstein** for **My Life as a Fake**, what is Carey saying about the nature of genius? Are superior minds and talents exempt from the ethical guidelines of ordinary society?

16. Carey appropriated and reanimated the plot of Dickens's **Great Expectations** in his previous novel, **Jack Maggs**, and his Booker Prize--winning **True History of the Kelly Gang** retells the story of one of Australia's most famous real-life legends. In My Life as a Fake, Carey exploits both literary devices, imposing the framework of a classic work of fiction on an historical event. How does the juxtaposition illuminate Carey's definition of "creativity" and the role of the fiction writer? To what extent does the history of literature represent an ongoing endeavor to conflate reality and make-believe to give the world an utterly original creation?

Author Bio

Peter Carey is the author of 14 novels. In addition to the Booker Prize, his honors include the Commonwealth Writers? Prize and the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Born in Australia, he has lived in New York City for more than 25 years.

Critical Praise

"**My Life as a Fake** is so confidently brilliant, so economical yet lively in its writing, so tightly fitted and continuously startling."

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