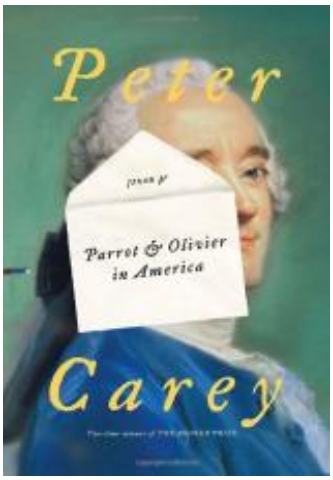
Parrot and Olivier in America

by Peter Carey



About the Book

A tour de force of historical improvisation and vocal acrobatics, Peter Carey?s new novel looks at postrevolutionary France and America through the eyes of two unforgettable narrators: Olivier and Parrot. The result is a vivid counterpoint and two wildly divergent perspectives on the same tumultuous period. It is also the story of a most unlikely friendship between a French lord and an English servant.

Olivier de Garmont is the scion of a noble family, Parrot the son of an itinerant printer. As the novel begins, Olivier?s family has retreated to Normandy in the wake of the French Revolution and the Terror of 1793. Olivier is a sickly, sensitive child, and when he stumbles upon an engraving of Louis XVI being beheaded, he is forever after haunted by the guillotine. Olivier grows up to become a lawyer and to develop liberal views that put him at odds with the restored monarchy. To keep him out of harm?s way, his family ships him off to America, where he is tasked to write a book on America?s prison system.

The childhood of John Larrit, also known as Parrot because of his talent for mimicry, is even more perilous. He barely survives when he and his father are rousted out of a printer?s house engaged in producing counterfeit paper money for Monsieur de Tilbot, the one-armed Marquis who fiercely resisted the revolution and who is a close friend of Olivier?s mother. Tilbot saves Parrot but also turns him into his servant, thus beginning a role of deference and self-denial that will ensnare Parrot for many years to come. It is through the Marquis de Tilbot that Olivier and Parrot?s fates will intersect when Olivier?s mother enlists the Marquis, and the Marquis in turn enlists Parrot to protect --- and spy on --- Olivier in America.

Both Parrot and Olivier are profoundly affected by the democratic leveling of class distinctions they find in America. Olivier is alternately repulsed and fascinated, disdainful and admiring of the new democracy, while Parrot, after drifting aimlessly, finally finds the freedom he?s been denied all his life. By showing us their reactions to the fledging democracy, Carey gives readers a visceral sense of just how thrilling and baffling a place America could be for new

arrivals from Europe --- and how unsettling of old-world social conventions. The typical relationship between servant and master is gradually subverted as Parrot and Olivier move from mutual contempt to genuine affection and friendship.

The novel is filled with subtle parallels between America in the early decades of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first. Olivier is appalled, for example, by the wanton destruction of America?s Eastern forests and the national obsession with acquiring wealth: ?It is strange, in New York and Philadelphia, to see the feverish enthusiasm which accompanies Americans? pursuit of prosperity and the way they are ceaselessly tormented by the vague fear that they have failed to choose the shortest route to achieve it? (p. 237) --- an observation as accurate today as it was 170 years ago.

Written with Peter Carey?s unmistakable narrative brilliance, **Parrot and Olivier in America** is a historical novel in the best sense of the term, in that it inhabits a historical era with utter accuracy and authenticity but in doing so holds a mirror up to our time as well.

Discussion Guide

1. Why does Carey choose to let Parrot and Olivier narrate their own stories? What makes their narrative voices so distinctive and engaging? What would be lost if the novel were told from a single perspective or by an omniscient narrator?

2. In what ways are Parrot and Olivier uniquely positioned to represent the huge social changes that were sweeping across Europe and America during the late-18th and early-19th centuries?

3. As he arrives in America, Olivier remarks that ?the coast of Connecticut was the most shocking monument to avarice one could have ever witnessed, its ancient forests gone, smashed down and carted off for profit? (p. 144). What other instances of American greed does he observe? What is the irony of a French aristocrat being appalled by the greed given free rein by American democracy?

4. Carey?s prose style in Parrot and Olivier in America is vivid, richly metaphoric, and often extravagantly sensuous. When Parrot and Mathilde make up after a fight, for example, Parrot writes that her ?hands were dragging at my clothes and her upturned face was filled with cooey dove and tiger rage. Her mouth was washed with tears. I ate her, drank her, boiled her, stroked her till she was like a lovely flapping fish and her hair was drenched and our eyes held and our skins slid off each other and we smelled like farm animals, seaweed, the tanneries upriver? (p. 148). What are the pleasures of such writing? Where else in the novel does the writing reach this pitch of overflowing metaphor?

5. What does Olivier find to be the most appealing characteristics of America?s fledgling democracy? What does he find most baffling?

6. Olivier is loosely based on Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat and author of the classic Democracy in America. In what ways does Olivier resemble Tocqueville? In what ways does Carey depart from the historical figure to create his own character?

7. How do Parrot and Olivier initially regard each other? What are the major turning points that lead to their unlikely

friendship? Why is their friendship possible only in America?

8. At the end of the novel, Olivier argues that America?s young democracy ?will not ripen well,? that it will suffer the ?tyranny of the majority? (p. 378), and that the American people prefer their leaders to be just as undereducated as they are. He goes on to tell Parrot: ?You will follow fur traders and woodsmen as your presidents, and they will be as barbarians at the head of armies, ignorant of geography and science, the leaders of a mob daily educated by a perfidious press which will make them so confident and ignorant that the only books on their shelves will be instruction manuals?? (p. 380). Parrot attributes Olivier?s harsh judgment to being heartbroken and having suffered as ?a child of the awful guillotine? (p. 380). But to what extent have Olivier?s predictions come true? In what ways can this passage be read as a sly commentary on recent presidents and the sorry state of the press in America?

9. How are Olivier and Parrot differently affected by the leveling of class distinctions in America? Does Parrot benefit from being in America?

10. Why does Amelia break off her engagement to Olivier? Does she make the right decision? Is Olivier better off without her?

11. Of the banker Peek?s mortgage loan to Mathilde, Parrot says: ?For Peek had played Shylock with her, himself lending her the capital and loading her to breaking point with every type of extra fee, compulsory insurance, brokerage, advance payments on taxes I am still sure that he invented? (p. 272). How surprising is it to see this version of today?s housing boondoggles played out in in the 1830s? What is the significance of these schemes having such a long history?

12. After he discovers that Mathilde, Eckerd, and Watkins have burned down their house for insurance money, Parrot exclaims: ?You are scoundrels, all of you.? To which Mathilde replies: ?We are artists. We have a right to live? (p. 314). Is Parrot right to call them scoundrels? Or is Mathilde?s point of view the more sympathetic one?

13. What are some of the funniest moments in **Parrot and Olivier in America**? What makes Carey?s writing so humorous?

14. What does the novel add to our knowledge of the early period of American democracy by seeing it through the perspectives of Parrot and Olivier? In what ways does the era described in the novel mirror our own?

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

"I have been reading with astonishment and envy **Parrot and Olivier in America**... Carey is a writer I prize not only for his remarkable Dickensian plots but also for the brilliance of his style... He is the most exuberant stylist at work in

English today."

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