
Reviewed by Gillian Dooley on Writers Radio, recorded 1 July 2006.

Peter Carey’s new novel *Theft* is set in the international art world, with intrigues and thefts and forgeries, and fortunes to be won and lost.

His protagonists, who share the first-person narrative equally, are brothers who grew up in the sleepy Victorian town of Bacchus Marsh, sons of the local butcher. Michael Boone is a painter who has had a few years of success but who is currently out of fashion. He has a huge ego and talent to match. However, he is rather lacking in human perception, while his ‘slow’ brother Hugh has no ego and buckets of insight. One of the many thefts in the novel is the theft of Hugh’s birthright – the butcher’s trade – by his younger brother because it is felt that Hugh, with his particular mental deficit, is not to be trusted with the butchers’ knives. But of course Michael - nicknamed ‘Butcher’ – wants to be a painter and has no interest in butchering. This is one of many tensions between the brothers. *Theft* is subtitled ‘a love story. Michael thinks the love story is about the enchanting but amoral Marlene Liebovitz, daughter-in-law of a famous dead artist and chief engineer of the novel’s plot, but the enduring love, the one that redeems him, is the fraternal bond. Hugh – ‘Slow Bones’ – is destined to become one of the enduring characters of Australian literature. His narrative tumbles from him, full of vivid metaphors, capitalised clichés and biblical echoes inherited from his mother, who had been fond of embroidering grim religious texts and hanging them on the walls of the family home. When Hugh is narrating the story is compulsive. The image of him charging through Sydney at night, on and off ferries and up and down the crowded streets of Balmain, carrying his beloved folding chair, is something no reader will be able to forget. Hugh is hugely
entertaining and hugely loveable. The vivacity of the novel is Joycean but this stream of consciousness is not obscure, and none of the characters, once introduced, is forgettable.

Carey has an astonishing imagination and sure knowledge of his subject – in this case the world of art, its techniques and outlandish economics – and the settings of Bacchus Marsh, country NSW, Sydney and New York are conveyed with almost shocking immediaiy by his two highly unreliable first-person narrators. He makes it look easy, but the consummate craft and skill with which he controls a galloping plot without ever sacrificing characterisation or setting should not be underestimated.