

Peter Carey’s latest novel takes us back to an unthinkable time when American students made bombs and went on strike, protesting against the Vietnam War and allying themselves with the Black Panthers. It’s 1972, the Students for a Democratic Society have gone underground and a certain Susan Selkirk, daughter of a rich New York family, is a celebrated criminal hiding out.

However, His Illegal Self is not about Susan but about her seven-year-old son, Che, who hasn’t seen his mother for six years. He lives on Park Avenue with his patrician grandmother until he is spirited away by a young woman he believes is his mother, though we soon learn she is not.

Carey’s narrative voice is as usual chaotic and impressionistic. He expects us to trust him, to read on for clarification which may or may not come. You often find yourself riffling through pages already read in an attempt to make sense of some new information: more so than in his previous books, and this means it takes longer for the narrative to grip, though when it does it is as tenacious as ever.

Meanwhile we are being imperceptibly charmed by Che and his hapless captor Anna, known as Dial, who has fallen into an outrageously improbable predicament, and stranded herself and the boy on a Queensland commune among hippies who hate Americans. Carey’s capacity for pulling you in behind the eyes and ears of his characters is phenomenal. Every lurch of fear they experience is felt in the reader’s stomach. The fugitives’ hideout slowly and faltering evolvs in their minds from a dank itchy hostile hovel to a home, a shelter they don’t want to abandon. Similarly
their feral neighbour Trevor gradually loses his menace and becomes a trusted ally. Even the aggressive hippies begin to show some redeeming features.

Nevertheless, the Carey magic is not quite flawless in *His Illegal Self*. Sometimes it’s hard to distinguish between the points of view of Che and Dial; and ambiguities arise from the current irritating fashion for eschewing quotation marks. And at first the narrative seems too obscure, too dependant on background knowledge. There is the slightest inkling of patronising disregard for the reader, as if Carey’s saying – just keep up, you don’t need to understand everything. Sometimes the telegraphic style seems to come pat, as if he is just going through the motions. But none of that persists beyond the halfway point. By most standards this is a wonderful novel. If by Carey’s standards it’s less than great, it doesn’t have the overwhelming generous life-force of *Tristam Smith or Theft*, it’s still not to be missed.