



**PETER CAREY**

**IN CONVERSATION WITH EDMUND WHITE AND CLAIRE MESSUD**

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**LIVE from the New York Public Library**

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**South Court Auditorium**

**FLASH ROSENBERG:** Hello, hello. I'm Flash Rosenberg, and I'm the artist in residence here for LIVE from the New York Public Library. And what that means is, because you probably think, "artist in residence at a library?" What I do is while these talks are going on, I draw them in real time to create something called conversation portraits. I translate what's said into what my mind sees. These are not caricatures or

court reporting, but a sketch of what it's like to be all of us listening. I try to capture how the ideas between all the speakers mingle and then land on us and enter our thoughts as we nod, wonder, and argue with what's been said.

At my drawing station there in the back of the room, my doodles are videotaped and will be edited into an animated summary. So you can see what I'm talking about, we're now going to show two brief samples. The first is from a conversation between the Portuguese writer António Lobo Antunes and Paul Holdengräber. The second piece is a snippet from a new book of recently discovered writings by Mark Twain. To see more of these works that range from Dada to the Holocaust, you can go to [vimeo.com](https://vimeo.com) and then enter my name, Flash Rosenberg, and do a search. Thanks! Bye.

**(conversation portraits play)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** It was an honor to welcome António Lobo Antunes, but tonight it is another great honor to be welcoming all of you. And I think you saw from Flash Rosenberg's work the kind of work we are trying to do here, which I call in two words a form of cognitive theater. Thank you very much, Flash Rosenberg. **(applause)**

My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of Public Programs here at the New York Public Library, now known as LIVE from the New York Public Library. Many of you know already that my goal here at the Library is quite simply to make the lions roar and to make this heavy institution levitate. To help achieve this goal we have tonight

Peter Carey, who is joined by Claire Messud and Edmund White, and coming up LIVE from the New York Public Library this spring, to further advance our mission, at the end of April I will be interviewing Patti Smith, followed by an evening with Christopher Hitchens on the subject of his forthcoming memoir. Yes, Christopher Hitchens has written a memoir, which is called *Hitch-22*, followed by a conversation with John Waters, Lena Herzog, and we will end the season with an event on soccer, yes on the World Cup, on June the 15th, so stay tuned for that.

Libraries matter greatly to the life of our nation. I don't know if you knew but you should that Keith Richards, one of the founding members of the Rolling Stones, is writing his memoir—it seems everybody is—due out in October. In it he confesses his secret longing to be a librarian. “When you are growing up,” Keith Richards writes, “there are two institutional places that affect you most powerfully: The church, which belongs to God, and the public library that belongs to you. The public library is a great equalizer.” I plan to invite Keith Richards—indeed, I already have—to be onstage come October to discuss, among other things, the role that libraries play in our democracy. I think I might speak with him about a few other subjects as well.

I urge you therefore—you might have heard the plea—to become a supporter of the New York Public Library, to support our collections—which, if you didn't know, go seven floors underground under Bryant Park, fifty-two million items. So become a Young Lion if you are young enough, or a Conservator, or consider becoming part of the President's Council, but nobody here should leave this room without becoming a Friend of the New

York Public Library. For just forty dollars a year, you can become a Friend of this institution. A pretty cheap date, if you ask me, and you get discounts to all LIVE events and all of that.

After this three-way conversation you will have the opportunity to ask questions to our three participants, and I recommend—you've heard me make this plea, it mostly doesn't work, but I'll make it again, for the next five or six or seven or maybe nine years.

Questions, with the word quest in it, rather than comments. Questions, as you have probably heard me say as well, usually last about fifty-two seconds. Our wonderful independent bookseller, 192 Books, have books of all the three participants, who will sign the books after the event, after the Q and A.

It is a pleasure now to welcome back Edmund White, who I had the great pleasure of speaking to on this very same stage, about his autobiography *My Lives*. He's also the author of *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*, as well as studies on Proust, Genet, Rimbaud, and recently *City Boys*. He was a Cullman Center Fellow at the New York Public Library, I think in 2005, and it is a great pleasure to welcome you back, Edmund. **(applause)**

It is a great pleasure to welcome I think for the first time to the New York Public Library at least LIVE series, Claire Messud, an author I greatly admire. She is the author of *When the World Was Steady*, *The Last Life*, *The Hunters* and *The Emperor's Children*, so welcome to Claire Messud. **(applause)**

Claire Messud and Edmund White are here to question and delicately probe Peter Carey, whose new book is just out. They have come together to discuss it *Parrot and Olivier in America*. Carey, who I also we think welcome for the first time LIVE from the New York Public Library is the author among many works of *The Fat Man in History*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, *True History of the Kelly Gang*, and *My Life As a Fake*. Peter Carey is a two-time winner of the Booker Prize. Now please warmly welcome to this very stage Edmund White, Claire Messud, and Peter Carey.

**(applause)**

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Good evening and welcome. Thank you, Paul. It's wonderful to be here, and I just wanted to say I discovered that Peter and Ed met in 1988 in Adelaide, which is about the time that I discovered both of your work, and *A Boy's Own Story*, which had already been out for a little while, but I was a little slow, and *Oscar and Lucinda* were such important books for me and the books that you have continued to write have continued to be important, but I thought maybe we might start. I was reminded in some ways, reading *Parrot and Olivier*, I was reminded a little of *Oscar and Lucinda* and I was reminded that when I interviewed you a long time ago and asked you about writing a historical novel, you said, "well, I didn't think of it really as a historical novel, I thought of it as a science fiction of the past," and I wondered if you would talk a little bit about that and maybe if you had anything to say about that as it might pertain to this novel and maybe it doesn't.

**PETER CAREY:** I wish—I probably did say that to you.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** You did. I can find it.

**PETER CAREY:** But I stole it from somebody.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** That's okay.

**PETER CAREY:** And it was Jonathan Miller, who had or had not read the book but was certainly nice about it and said, "I know what this is! It's a science fiction of the past," and I thought, "My God." So I sort of knew what he meant, but not really quite, but it seemed very complimentary and I liked it.

**(laughter)**

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** What did you think it meant?

**PETER CAREY:** Well, really, that you're I didn't know this at the beginning, because I was very frightened of writing about the past, but really it is that you are inventing another world that—in a way that is no different from writing science fiction—you've got to find what are the forces, what are the physical forces that work in that world, what physical things that contain your characters and limit them, and the thing was of course

when you're writing about the past, everybody has an opinion, or they think they know, and when you're the poor writer doing it, you think they know, too, so it's a rather more anxious sort of thing to sort of check that you're quietening all these people who are going to not believe you if you get something wrong.

**EDMUND WHITE:** I wanted to ask you a question about technique in this book and actually all your books. In *Oscar and Lucinda*, I think anyone who's ever read it remembers this vision of the glass church floating up the river, and in this book it seems to me that oftentimes chapters end with a tableau, for instance on page thirty-five at the end of a chapter, "Squatting beside her shivering, girlish in my lace, I saw the great oily stillness of our neglected leeches in their prison, unneeded and forgotten, starved to scum, their sucking stilled, all my glory dreams turned to broth and black corruption." Tableau, and it seems to me like so many of the chapters end in that way, and do you start with those images and work toward them?

**PETER CAREY:** No, I'm trying to get myself out of a web where I am and so really, really it's never occurred to me that I do this.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Oh, really, until this very moment?

**PETER CAREY:** No. That's why you're being paid so much.

**(laughter)**

**EDMUND WHITE:** But you do it so brilliantly. There's example after example. There's a moment when you say, "I could smell the wheat starch powder of his wig." You know, you have these fantastic details.

**PETER CAREY:** It's a science fiction thing, isn't it? You know, like, in the sense that you've really got to invent the world you do not know and then you've got to sort of figure if you're writing science fiction, I mean if you're writing science fiction, you might have to sort of worry whether the trees have different names than the trees we have now, for instance, and things like this, but in this case, you really have to find out what are the forces at work in that world. What is somebody going to smell, and what will a smell tell you and I've never thought about wig powder, so I started thinking about wig powder, and I really want the reader to be alive to every second of the world, you know, so that every second you feel it and smell it and see it, while, at the same time your narrative's moving.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I'm curious about to what extent you feel bound to actual fact and to what extent you're—I mean, I found myself—there are so many wonderful, extraordinary details throughout the book, but there were moments when the impounded pigs—when people are rioting outside to try to get their pigs back in New York City I found myself thinking, "Were there really people rioting to get their pigs back?" And absolutely believed that there were because you made me believe it.



**PETER CAREY:** There were. There really were, and if you don't believe me, there's a really wonderful book called *Gotham*, and on page whatever it is and line whatever it is, you'll find a very nice account of people who had their pigs impounded and they get upset and they got to collect around downtown, and they released them and I thought that was fabulous. The notion of building a New York, you know, where there are pigs wandering the streets and eating cabbage stalks.

**EDMUND WHITE:** They were the garbage collectors.

**PETER CAREY:** Very easy to imagine for some reason. I don't know why.

**EDMUND WHITE:** I was wondering do you still think of yourself as an Australian novelist and if so what does that mean? I mean, certainly you've set even quite recent—even though you've lived here, what, twenty years now, you've set very recent books in Australia, and in this book there was quite a sizable section.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Weren't you impressed? I was so impressed that in *Parrot and Olivier in America* you managed to get Australia in, importantly.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Importantly and naturally, but I mean do you still think of yourself as an Australian novelist, or does that mean anything?

**PETER CAREY:** Well, I've been confused by this new Danish citizenship I've just taken up. I thought I'd give that a try for a little bit. It's difficult carrying so many passports, so I'll leave that one at home. I don't even know really how to properly justify the part of the book, you know, the whole business about Australia, you know, it serves all sorts of functions, it does all sorts of things, but I really—another person could have written this book with these things in it and that not been there, I just had to do that for some particular—what do you want to say? “My heart tended to drift towards home,” I don't know, I think, I missed—if you really want to know—I think I missed a big opportunity when one is dealing with the fact that Olivier's come to the United States to deal with the notions of the prisons in the New World and how the French might benefit from that and of course Australia—Australia only exists because there's been a war of independence and the British cannot any longer send prisoners to this country. So therefore at that moment Australia is necessary and so there must be prisons in Australia and my character Parrot although not having been imprisoned there has been sort of transported to Australia. So I think there was something thematic in the book that I could have possibly strengthened.

**EDMUND WHITE:** It also seemed to me like both Parrot but especially Olivier are always speculating, as Tocqueville did, about what is the meaning of democracy and what do you gain and what do you lose, and, in a way, Australia's an even more extreme example.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** And certainly there are comments that Parrot makes about Australia where he says—that I read in light of the comments that are made about—that Olivier makes about, or others—Du Ponceau makes about America, where he says, you know, wealth is—that the only equality is in the marketplace. And that resonated for me in the moment when Parrot says the currency in Australia was rum.

**PETER CAREY:** Which it was.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** And I thought, so they're the same but different.

**EDMUND WHITE:** As they are to this very day.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** As they are to this very day.

**PETER CAREY:** There was a man named Du Ponceau who really did say that, not that that matters, that's a sock that I've dropped on the floor that I've stuck under my narrative. The thing that occurred to me about Australia and the United States and about democracy and so on, and it's very easy for those of us who were not born in this country to forget the extremely radical notion of the United States, and again which I guess you never forget, but those of us who have grown up in the great imperial age of the United States sometimes forget. You know, what a radical thing the United States was, this is a country without kings and queens. Now, when I—and one starts because they're both relatively, although Australia is a newer institution, that you suddenly realize, now hang

on, we do this, we didn't actually fight to have a democracy, we actually were a prison—we were a bureaucracy, and we never ever fought to be a republic, and we still can't even vote to be a republic. So for me this was the sort of discovery that one makes in writing it and comparing the two.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Well, the—yeah, is that enough?

**PETER CAREY:** I'll go on and on. I was worried that I was going on and on.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** In an interview you were asked “do you write for Australia?” and you said, “Yes, I have to.”

**PETER CAREY:** Yes, and now I don't know. I'll give you an example, and I think sometimes—well, I would say you know one answers different questions and answers them in different ways at different times. Somebody asked me that yesterday, and I said, “well, I don't write for anybody, I write for myself, I write is that sentence right, is that thing, does that work, and so on.”

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Unlike Mark Twain, who wrote for the man who was falling asleep.

**PETER CAREY:** So good. Those of us whose line is to read to people do know all those characters and we do them and know the man who falls asleep, but he always has a nice wife who stays awake.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I have another related sort of Australia/America question. This—we were talking a little earlier about how this novel embodies various arguments, that the arguments that might go on inside your head are here given to Parrot and Olivier and other characters so that they can carry on the discussion in this way and it enables us as readers to encounter very ambivalent points of view about this country. I'm not sure whether you consider yourself a political writer.

**PETER CAREY:** Is it possible to not be?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** No, but the only other American novel, as it were, that I think of you having written is *Tristan Smith*, which for those of you who haven't read it is a sort of science fiction and America comes up under another name. Doesn't look too good. America doesn't come off too well in that particular novel and I guess I wondered whether this—whether you've changed, whether your view of America has changed, whether the arguments that come up in this novel are actually serving the characters in the novel rather than the ideas that might have been going on in your head, but I wondered if there was some sort of political movement in you.

**PETER CAREY:** Well, I mean, they're both triggered by different things. I think one needs and try to answer this sensibly to address the triggers. I mean, *Tristan Smith* was invented really, because at least to my belief and many of my friends the United States of America interfered in the internal affairs of Australia, so if your really think that, that's a pretty disturbing thing to believe, and my greetings to people from the consulate, and I was always amazed by how we can talk about—I won't bore you with the circumstances. Many of us would refer to this occurrence as a coup, but they'll at the same time absolutely insist that nothing had ever happened that was wrong, so I thought if we really do believe this, somehow or other we've got to continue this friendly relationship with America, because we believe that, we believe Americans are nice people, but on the other hand, did they really do this to us? We think they did. So that's what that book is born out of, and the relationship between the two countries and I wanted to invent the countries because I really didn't want it to be just about whether or not something or other had happened in Australia.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** But it's also about cultural imperialism.

**PETER CAREY:** It's absolutely about cultural imperialism, yes.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Which in some ways is addressed from a different angle in this book.

**EDMUND WHITE:** In this book I think it's so interesting that especially Olivier, the Tocqueville character, expects that Americans are going to be completely devoted to Europe and European ideals and that they're going to be terribly impressed by a European, and he keeps meeting this sort of smugness in Americans, this desire to define themselves as being wonderfully different from anything European. And I mean all the travelers who came from Europe at that time, including Mrs. Trollope, Trollope's mother, they all noticed that about Americans, that they were very cheeky and very sure of themselves.

**PETER CAREY:** How many Australians are here. Right? We know what this feels like, right? One of the really weird things about this sort of research. I thought, you know, "I can't write about the United States. I can't write about New York. I'm a foreigner." And as I started to get into this, drawn in by the ideas, I suddenly see all the things that are very, very, very familiar, you know, and one is this sort of boastful, sort of the new country being boastful, bragging about itself, and actually being continually rude and disparaging about places they'd never been to and—and like when I was a teenager and a little bit older, the first thing a journalist or anybody, a celebrity would arrive in Australia, and they'd still be in the airport, and there'd be the curtain with, you know, boomerangs on the curtain materials, and they'd be saying, "How do you like Australia?" So there was something of this in this and also their incredible—the Americans were sort of very vulnerable also to the opinions of aristocrats, I mean, they really wanted to be admired, and we've been worse than that really, we've been very vulnerable to the

opinions of visiting English aristocrats and grocers as well, so one recognized all of those things.

**EDMUND WHITE:** One of the things that strikes me is that I think you're a lot better novelist than you are a nonfiction writer.

**PETER CAREY:** He said this offstage, it's really offensive, and actually while I was waiting I was sitting there. I think when we're onstage I'll ask him what's the nonfiction he has in mind, because I really don't recall I've written too much.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Actually, behind this insult is buried a compliment.

**(laughter)**

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** If you'll let it get out.

**EDMUND WHITE:** What's great about a novel like this one is that you're able to dramatize ideas without having to take a stand yourself. I mean, in other words, I think that if you take your question of, like, can Americans, as part of a democratic society, can Americans produce beauty and beautiful works of art? And of course the Tocqueville character, Olivier, thinks no, they can't. And Parrot reminds him that even the great English painter—Turner—that his father was a barber with a wart on his nose, so I mean in other words that the ability to make beautiful works of art, and of course in here there's



a kind of Audubon-like figure who's drawing the birds of America and who's not by any means an aristocrat.

**PETER CAREY:** And there is indeed the book itself, which, well, I won't say, but the book itself in a way formally, as to who's written the book is evident, that art can be produced by people in a democracy.

**EDMUND WHITE:** We learn at the very end of the book that there's a secret author who's been writing this whole book, not the objective universal person we imagine.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** But isn't Olivier's concern not so much about the production as about the reception of art? I mean, he has a lot of concern about the lack of sensibility of the potential audience—

**PETER CAREY:** Yes, the lack of education.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** The lack of education. If there are no aristocrats, who will appreciate it?

**EDMUND WHITE:** I've always said, I lived in France for sixteen years, and I've always said France has a lot of great readers and not too many great writers at this moment, and America has a lot of great writers and no great readers. **(laughter)** And I mean I think it is sort of a way of saying that.

**PETER CAREY:** But we have forgotten how to read and I was thinking recently how extraordinary it is that we really do accept the—that children, and the population generally, is not going to read great literature and that we've given up on this. I think this is really serious, and in fact they're really threatening to the fabric of the whole society that we've lost this thing which was so hard to get, and if, you know, we're sitting here saying, there will be a hole in the ozone layer—I'm sorry, there already is—you know we could stop that when we would be doing everything to stop it, the fact that we've really just throwing away our reading skills means we've become really, really stupid. It's worth every amount of money to fix this.

**EDMUND WHITE:** And when you think about Americans in the nineteenth century with all these athenaeums scattered across the country where people like Emerson were coming and discussing important ideas, when I think of my humble grandparents, who were almost—just barely literate, but who had the Harvard five-foot shelf of classics, you know, and they would try to work their way through these books, some of them quite dull, but still there was this tremendous respect for high culture and the feeling that we should be absorbing it—all that's gone.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Well, I always think in 1947 when Camus came to America and he hadn't yet been translated into English but they put his picture on the cover of the *New York Times* because it was important that people know that Camus was coming to America. The idea that, you know, who—I don't know who the French equivalent would

be, but the idea that they would, I don't know, put whoever it was on the cover of the *New York Times* is preposterous. You know, we'll have Lady Gaga, but not—it's a different moment.

**PETER CAREY:** So you know when you start to get into these arguments about democracy and the Olivier character or Tocqueville's fear about the tyranny of the majority. I always thought that you know, really, the majority would be educated. Not just literate but educated. And the minute you have an educated, informed electorate, then maybe, you know, Olivier needn't be so frightened. But we've given him everything to be frightened of and there's so really wonderful clips of people who would vote for Sarah Palin, being interviewed about why they'd vote for her and what they think and what they've read and so on.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Or she herself.

**PETER CAREY:** To be more scared than you are already—I'll get it to you.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** That leads me to another question, which is the extent to which talking about it as a science fiction of the past, but also it's a sort of palimpsest, it's a historical novel, but it's also very much about issues that are current and in what ways as an enterprise, you know, the historical—why not write a novel set today in which all those issues—why not write a novel in which Sarah Palin is you know shouting on a podium and people aren't reading.

**PETER CAREY:** That would be sort of nonfiction, and I'm no good at that. **(laughter)**

So that's the first thing. I agree with him by the way. I can't lie straight in bed, I really can't. Every time I've set out to write nonfiction I end up sort of making stuff up and if you are a journalist you go to jail I think or lose your job for doing that, so I can't do that. I'm sorry, what was the question?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** The question was why Tocqueville now? Why not take some of these ideas and write a contemporary—I mean, you write contemporary novels as much—as often as you write historical ones.

**PETER CAREY:** I've always been fascinated when one finds something in the past that really reflects on what's happening in the present, or something in the present that really illuminates the past. And so we are part of history, of course we are, but we like to sort of—in Australia again when I was growing up and I don't think you'd see this in Sydney anymore, if you got in a taxi and you got in the front seat of the taxi, that was fine, but if you got in the back, say you'd just arrived from New York and you got in the backseat, you're going to your hotel, and after about ten minutes, the taxi driver would be quite capable of turning to you and saying, "What's the matter, mate, do I smell?" There is in our society, you know, a really, really deep hatred of servility and if you want to trace that back to a penal colony, I don't think you'd be a tiny bit mistaken, because there are so many other bits of evidence like that.

And so for me thinking about Australia is sort of a thrilling thing, you know, to see the past emerging in the present. And when reading *Democracy in America*, firstly it was thrilling to sort of really realize the way Tocqueville had been taught in American colleges and schools was by leaving out most of the things that reflected badly on America. So there are things in Tocqueville, things that I have actually stolen, with the result that I've been accused of misrepresenting Tocqueville as a snob, that did help the argument I was mounting and also you could find things that were really, really so were just like now, it's almost if you're finding 1831, and you're having someone being worried about this terrible dumbed-down culture which would be the inevitable result of a democracy. You sort of do have to pay attention if you've been worrying about that sort of thing yourself.

**EDMUND WHITE:** I think what's great about your book, though, is that it's not just a vulgar presaging of what is going to happen later, there also are lots of differences and I think one of the things that's wonderful about this period and that you capture is how optimistic Americans were. I mean, now, I mean, I was saying to somebody the other day, twenty years ago if I said, "People in the future will think such and such," I meant they'd be better than us. Now when I say "people in the future," I think, "oy." You know, but I mean I do think there is a kind of general depression that's overcome Americans whereas here in this period in the 1830s, I think they were so optimistic. If you think about how recent the American Revolution was, how recent the French Revolution was, and both of them representing these enormous upheavals that suggested that society could be changed.

**PETER CAREY:** Because that was their life experience.

**EDMUND WHITE:** That's right. And there were so many utopian people in America trying to set up utopian colonies at that time who would just be laughed off the face of the continent now, but anyway, I think that you capture that very well, though.

**PETER CAREY:** I think, going back to the science fiction point again and about optimism, maybe we have to date it from the moment when science fiction movies went from being shiny to rusty. You know, that when we're imagining a future—it's like when you look at the beginning of *Blade Runner*, say, you know, and that really wonderful invented physical world at the beginning of the film when it's sort of dirty rain and ugh. And when did we stop things being shiny? I think that's the moment when we thought the future was going to be better and then the time came when, the seventies, as it were, when we started thinking it was going to be worse.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I have to say you know, when you say twenty—you're an optimist, twenty years ago you were still saying, because my memory is I couldn't believe it when my friends started having children because I thought the nuclear holocaust was—I thought my childhood was overshadowed. Now people whose childhoods are overshadowed by global warming and, you know, not enough water and not enough food for the people and all that stuff, you know, there's good reason to be glum. But it seems to me—I remember seeing a Chekhov play in my early twenties—which one was it,

*Uncle Vanya*, maybe, and, you know, there's—is he a utopian? Who's a utopian?  
Somebody's a utopian. And there's hope for the future.

**PETER CAREY:** But they're chopping down forests, aren't they?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Yes, they are.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Let me ask you a different question. All three of us teach creative writing. Do you feel that teaching it has helped you out as a writer, changed you, hurt you, taught you more about technique, or been totally beside the point?

**PETER CAREY:** I'll go last.

**EDMUND WHITE:** You like that?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Totally beside the point?

**PETER CAREY:** No, I mean you guys should—

**EDMUND WHITE:** I thought you were choosing my last option.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** So did I, it's why I said totally beside the point.

**PETER CAREY:** I remember when I was first in New York and I was teaching at NYU, and I didn't really know how to teach very well, and my poor students sort of taught me in a way and I used to think, "Well, why am I wasting my time reading all this crap? I should be reading great novels and sort of becoming a better writer." But as time's gone on, and I've become a better teacher and at Hunter College now I've been blessed with really amazing students. I know I've become a better writer from inhabiting their work, and really trying to help them do what they want to do, not what I want to do. And so I think it's been really, really good for me. But it took me a long time. I think maybe I had to become a better teacher in order for that to happen.

**EDMUND WHITE:** And maybe to be blessed with better students, I don't know.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** It's interesting, because I teach some of Peter's students at Hunter, and last year we had a discussion in class about what happened to—what's happened to literary groups. We'd been talking about the Bloomsbury group and why don't these things exist anymore? And one person in the class said, "well, aren't writing programs the literary groups of today?" and we had a whole discussion about that. It makes me—it's actually a question I have for both of you, as someone who's been an expatriate writer and as someone who is an expatriate writer. It's an interesting choice to step away from what would naturally seem to generate your group, to have a willed group or lack of a group, you know, a literary group. What is behind the choice to expatriate? What are you doing here?



**PETER CAREY:** I was never really part of any group, and if I were to think about the things that made me a writer among them would be the fact that nobody would ever let me finish my sentences—that's how interesting I was—so I didn't really feel that I was—so I wasn't part of a group. I began to know writers a little bit when I was published, and even then I was terribly, terribly shy about and, of course, full of sort of that—that proud sort of rage about not having your genius recognized by them and all that sort of thing, but I was never part of a group. And you?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** No, I'm never part of a group.

**EDMUND WHITE:** I was quite literally part of a group called the Violet Quill, which was a group of gay writers, and I think it was partly because as a minority group we were trying to forge an identity, figure out what we were going to write about—nobody had ever written about this stuff, so I think that was quite different. I think for me becoming an expatriate was partly a way of being alone with America and alone with the English language, too. And one of the very practical things that I noticed is I was always so irritated with people speaking to me in French when I barely knew the language, when they would have these very complex sentences. Like we are doing tonight. I mean, it would enrage a foreigner who's just learning English to listen to us, because we don't finish sentences and we jump all over the place, and so I began to really appreciate people who could speak simply and directly. And it affected my style. It made it much more simple in English, because I knew what a battle it was to say something clearly and

simply and to have it be received by the other person, so that was a very practical effect on my writing.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** That's fascinating. That's fascinating.

**PETER CAREY:** And you've lived in four different countries—how many passports do you have?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I have a couple, but I mean it's an interesting—I've not lived in a country where I couldn't speak the language. I mean, I've lived in Anglophone countries. But I'm interested—I was thinking about, you know, Ed has spoken about this—I've heard Ed speak about this fact of possessing the English language, you know, and it's something that's fascinating to me. Because every writer wants to do that, in some way, it's about finding the way that you can own the language and be free in it. And voice is so important in your work and Australian voices or Cockney voices, but in some way it's not an American vernacular.

**PETER CAREY:** I think I could live here a hundred years and never be able to set a novel, say, in the Bronx—you know, there are people we know who have just been growing up in the city and it is deep in them, and I can't do that, and I shouldn't make a fool of myself trying, so I don't know.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I'm wondering is it a liberation—

**PETER CAREY:** Is it a limitation?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** No, I said is it a liberation to be here. To be here—none of those Australian people in the audience are going to speak to you just now. We're speaking to you with our American voices and then an Australian voice is yours in your head. Is that ever a fact, or am I just making it up?

**PETER CAREY:** Well, you know, when you inhabit, when you're swimming in the water you're not really—I don't really notice how you speak particularly. No, you're here, and I'm in the United States, I'm in New York, I expect people to speak in a different way.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I just mean when you write, no? It doesn't—

**PETER CAREY:** Well, depends. You see, it's always a question of what in God's name can I write next, you know, I am walking out on this plank so having sort of established and making grandiose claims like the invention of Australia is my business, you know, and things like that, one pushes oneself out a certain way, and then coming to this country, which was certainly not a careerist move, you think, "well, what on earth can I do?" And so, you know, and each of the choices that I've made of trying to address the issues of my country and this country. And then realizing that I can write about Ned Kelly if I wanted to, and I'll write about Australia all my damn life and I don't care what

you want me to do, that's what I want to do, and then wanting to do something else. But I'm in a bad situation in a way, you know, I mean, it's always sort of a perilous sort of situation, isn't it, because one's—

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** But I guess I'm—

**PETER CAREY:** I'm cut off in a way. I'm not living in Australia. So, and I am not connected to the roots, the literal roots of this—

**EDMUND WHITE:** I think this hurts writers who are very kind of primitive writers. Like James Jones, when he moved to Paris—the one who wrote *From Here to Eternity*. When he moved to Paris it was a total disaster. Because he wrote about soldiers, about working people. He was a good mimic of the way people talked, and when he moved to Paris and he tried to deal with French subjects, like he has a book called *The Haymaker* or something, which is about 1968 in France and the '68—horrible book. I mean, he couldn't write anymore. And oftentimes critics will say that about one, that, “oh, one has lost one's talent because one moved to France or America,” but the truth is that I don't think it applies to sophisticated writers. You know, in other words, it's not as though we ever were taking dictation from our unconscious or our next-door neighbors. We were always aware of technique as technique and what we were doing. You're one of the great mimics, I think that should be said.

**PETER CAREY:** I'm actually not.

**EDMUND WHITE:** You're not?

**PETER CAREY:** Not in real life.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Not in real life, but as a writer.

**PETER CAREY:** In death, yes, absolutely.

**EDMUND WHITE:** No, but in writing you are extraordinary about capturing all kinds of voices. And this book, if people haven't read it, I really recommend it, because it's one of the great polyphonous performances. There are so many voices crowding each other out. They're all rendered so brilliantly and beautifully.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** And there's also—the language is extraordinary. Sentence by sentence—it's extraordinary. I do think of them, you know, the Poundian exhortation to make it new.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Make it new.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** And there's—not only is the country new, but you make the sentences new. And I actually in my illegible handwriting I wrote down just one, which is

actually—it's a random sentence when Parrot and the Marquis are walking across—I guess it's Dartmoor, is it? Yeah. Watch me mangle it. I'll look it up.

**PETER CAREY:** I trust you.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I'll look it up in the actual book.

**PETER CAREY:** Also I won't remember.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** But just to give you an idea, sentence by sentence, and then we can—so they're walking and he's—"On and on, shoes squelching, water dripping down the neck, I held out the compass like a divining rod, leading the way to nowhere. Always the queer, rooty perfume of the marinated moor, bogs and boggy life, mire in the valleys, blanket bog on the higher land, marsh plume thistle, devil's bit, scabious heath, spotted orchid, saw-wort, purple moor grass, also the seething and quaking bog with a thin layer of sodden moss above black slime and water."

**PETER CAREY:** That's the second lot of black slime we've had tonight.

**(laughter)**

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** But that's just—you know?

**EDMUND WHITE:** That's amazing.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** That's one sentence and there we are and we're in it. We're there.

**EDMUND WHITE:** I think it's your most beautiful book and I absolutely find it an amazing virtuoso performance with a lot of heart. Because I think oftentimes virtuoso books, there aren't very many of them, but the few of them that there are usually don't have much heart. But this one does have a lot of heart, I mean, it has characters that we care about and real—a lot of sexy writing. Mathilde is a wonderful—

**PETER CAREY:** She's hot.

**EDMUND WHITE:** A hot character. All right, Dickens, talk to us about Dickens. Talk to us about Dickens. What influence has Dickens had on you? Have you read Dickens all your life? Because so many of your characters seem to me to come out of Dickens, of course you wrote a book about Mag, Magwitch. But tell me a little bit about him.

**PETER CAREY:** Well, you know, in 1985, I published a book called *Illywhacker*, and it was very well received in the UK and everyone started comparing it to Dickens and so the general assumption made by people who review that are all much better educated than I was was that I'd read a lot of Dickens, and so I disappointed them continually by saying that actually, no, I'd never read Dickens.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Was that true or untrue?

**PETER CAREY:** Well, it was true. That—and then, but no one listened to me anyway. So when *Oscar and Lucinda* came out, I was even more Dickensian than I had been before. And I think I'd read the lecture Nabokov gives on *Bleak House*, which is a wonderful lecture, it's very convincing. So I started to read *Bleak House* around then but I got to this nauseatingly saccharine little girl, so I put it down, so I didn't read any more Dickens for a little bit. But then I read *Culture and Imperialism* by Edward Said, an unlikely sort of way into this.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** That does seem unlikely.

**PETER CAREY:** An essay who completely understood the role of Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. Now I knew about *Great Expectations* because I'd seen a movie, but I hadn't read it, so I understood roughly what he was talking about, but the whole notion, the whole character of Magwitch the convict who's been cast out, who goes to Australia, where he's a prisoner for seven years, gets out, becomes rich, could stay there free forever and would rather go back to home, to England, where they're going to hang him if they can. So I had to read Dickens. And—

**EDMUND WHITE:** This is after *Oscar and Lucinda*?

**PETER CAREY:** Well after. So, you know, I read a little bit of Dickens.



**EDMUND WHITE:** And did it—

**PETER CAREY:** I thought—I didn't read a whole lot of Dickens, but I certainly read *Great Expectations* and I read a much later book, *Our Mutual Friend*, and I was really shocked to see him phoning it in occasionally, you know, which wouldn't have occurred to me before. I mean, it's really fabulous, so much of that is very beautiful, but to me if you think about those early scenes, the scenes with the dinner with the Veneerings, it's clever, but it's really, it's so within his range, and so easy for him, although it probably wasn't easy.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** It's interesting, though, the comparison to Dickens, and I wonder if it doesn't stem in part from your relation to character. I think you've said, you know, that when you first started writing you weren't especially interested in—

**PETER CAREY:** I would have said I despised the notion of character, I think.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Because it would have seemed lowly.

**PETER CAREY:** Because it seemed old-fashioned, and I wanted to be very modern, something. I mean, I really did want to make—I mean, the writers that excited me about literature were Faulkner and Beckett and Joyce and, of course, the last thing I was going to notice—and I'm thinking of *Ulysses*, not *Dubliners*—the last thing I was going to notice

was character, really. I was noticing language and things being mangled and put back together in a very interesting way. So if there was character there, I wasn't aware of it. What I was aware of was language.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** But it's interesting, because there is some—I think part of the thrill for me as a reader is that it is a—don't take this as an insult—is almost a pre-modernist conception of character. That Edith Wharton—I love this because it's so Edith Wharton. Edith Wharton said we—"People are like great estates. We know that portion which abuts our own." Only, you know, you only say that if you have a great estate, but, you know, Olivier could say it. But this idea that we are known—if you follow someone's outline in the world very closely that is how best you know them. Actually, amazingly true, because it's the truth of life, but it's also—modernism, Woolf, say, is precisely the antithetical attempt, it's saying, "I will produce in literature what is impossible in life, which is I will produce a character from the inside out." You will spend an entire book inside Mrs. Dalloway's head as she goes shopping for flowers, and it's a very different approach to in some way what a person is. And there is something—there is something making new, Poundianly new, to have these characters in all their complexity and sometimes disjunction. I mean, sometimes they do things or say things that surprise one, the way that people do in life, but it's not from having them, you know, lie on a sofa and think.

**PETER CAREY:** I've always sort of put people in—I always call it the modernist past, which of course it is. I think—well, certainly for me, modernism, which was terribly

attractive in all sorts of ways finally led me into a sort of position where I'd have four pages of the word "etcetera," which was interesting to look at and so on, and it was Gabriel García Marquez and the *Hundred Years of Solitude* that sort of gave me permission. I was just discovering, really, story. But I think that was—that was such a liberating book and of course I misunderstood it totally and was influenced in absolutely the wrong way, but it was a liberation from modernism.

**EDMUND WHITE:** Oh!

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Is it time?

**EDMUND WHITE:** No. I don't know. When do we have to have questions?

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I think we could move to questions pretty shortly.

**PETER CAREY:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, I've had enough.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** You've had enough questions, so now we'll have some more questions. We could do that now. Okay!

**Q:** On the subject you were just speaking about I wondered if when someone asks you what kind of book do you write how you describe it in the current vocabulary, because I

find myself often thinking of Hawthorne's definition of romance, and I don't know what the contemporary corollary would be.

**PETER CAREY:** I have no way to begin to talk about that. I mean, when you started talking. It's sort of funny we sit here anticipating people's questions, and my mind's going off like this, you know, I'm thinking of who's going to ask me—Well, I'm sitting there role playing, you know. And where my head goes to with that question isn't where you're going. It's the person who says, "well, what do you do?" "I write novels." "Should I know your name?" "Only if you're literate." **(laughter)** I don't know. So as for the thing that I wish to do. What I wish to do is to make something very beautiful that never existed in the world before. I don't have any formal notion or any particularly spiritual but for me that's why I wanted to write. It took me a long time to remember, you know, why reading *As I Lay Dying* made me want to be a writer, because I'd found this exquisitely beautiful thing which as far as I knew, there could have been thousands of them and still would have been the first to me. Something beautiful that hadn't existed in the world. And I think that's a reason to get up in the morning, and to break things and put them together in new ways and try to make it new.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** António Lobo Antunes said—when he said each work of art is a victory over death. That was so beautiful.

**EDMUND WHITE:** I think too that critics and even literature students seldom talk about the importance of originality, but it's the main thing that drives writers. I mean,

because—since critics are always comparing your work to something earlier, like Dickens, that I mean, because it’s the only way they can discuss something, because originality’s very, very hard to talk about, but it’s interesting when you read the notebooks of somebody like Edgar Allan Poe, he’ll come up with a wonderful idea for a story, but he’ll say, “but I won’t write that because it’s not original enough,” and you’ll see that real writers are constantly censoring and reworking their own ideas to make them more original.

**PETER CAREY:** But how else—what other justification do any of us, or did any of us ever have for saying “I will be a writer,” when we know what has been done. I would say because I didn’t really know what had been done, but I’m talking about more normal people who actually might have read something before they decided to be a writer, so you’re going to walk out onto the field where Virginia Woolf was there, Proust was there, Conrad is there. What possible, what arrogance and madness could let you go out there? And we all do it, hundreds of thousands of us do it, and originality surely has to be it, huh?

**Q: (inaudible)**

**PETER CAREY:** I really don’t like to go anywhere much. **(laughter)** There are so many places in the U.S. that I haven’t been to, I’m mean, I’m like all of us here, I’ve been on book tours. I could write a book on the minibars of this country. **(laughter)** I haven’t really—of the places that I’ve spent extended periods of time, very, very few. I mean,

I've spent a long time with a friend in the Mojave Desert for a while, which was really, really interesting and sort of scary, but I enjoyed my time there. I spent quite a lot of time in the Catskills—for longer periods than your average weekend, but like that. But after that, I'm just trying to know where I am here, which feels to me like quite a serious undertaking. It's sort of a very dense, layered city with a lot of complications, but if I can know a corner of—

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Does this feel like home now?

**PETER CAREY:** We are allowed to have more than one. Particularly when you reach my level of income. **(laughter)** Just joking, guys, I swear. But, you know, it's not weird—it's not weird to feel a really strong emotional attachment to more than one place. This city is full of people who you know really have very strong attachments to other places and I don't think—

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Although Parrot speaks when he's remembering Australia, he says “it was home but I didn't understand that it was home because when you were there home was always elsewhere.”

**EDMUND WHITE:** To go back to England.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** To go back to England.

**PETER CAREY:** Well, that speaks to us, I think, and it speaks to our historical situation, that we were there—and my grandfather, who was born in Australia, called England home, and it's part of that sort of—the drama of settlement and separation and feeling that you were part of the British Empire and all of these sorts of things and I know that numbers of Australian friends have read that particular bit that you're talking about and it's spoken very strongly to them and I'm pleased about that, and I think that is the sort of weird sort of situation that, of course, younger Australians will say, "We don't feel any of that," and they might be telling the truth.

**Q:** As an Australian, thank you very much, Peter, for coming tonight. It's lovely to hear your voice. I was just wanting to touch on what the panel seemed to go into a little bit earlier, which was I sensed your dismay in what's happening with literature when it's I guess really a world of *Twilight* series about vampires instead of focusing on great literature, so do any of you have an opinion on where we are going or what you see as the future?

**EDMUND WHITE:** I don't think that it's literature that's lacking. I think it's the readers that are lacking. I mean, we have many great writers in this country. And I lived in France and I would say France has many great writers who unfortunately don't get translated. I mean, part of the problem, in terms of the international commerce of ideas, is that the English-speaking world only translates—that only 5 percent of the books published in the English-speaking world are translations whereas in France 35 percent of the books that are published every years are translations. So I think that—you could say

that they are good world citizens in a way Americans aren't, and I think that that's shocking. But I don't—Anyway, I don't think the problem is a lack of writers, I think it's a lack of readers.

**PETER CAREY:** There was an article in the *Times* last week by Nicholas Kristof, whose work I admire, and he was talking about a report on boys and reading and how the boys are falling way behind, and the girls are reading and the boys can't do it, and so the sort of remedy for this it appears to be is to then select the sort of books that boys will read, you know, which—so I don't know—it involves something like inflicting multiple stab wounds on bears, or something like that. Something. I can't really remember, I'm misquoting, of course, but he did say these books should have one explosion—not he, but he was reporting. I really think, you know, if we've got to the situation where we can't teach children to read, let's just say, Shakespeare, because it's just so far beyond their life experience or the language is different, but I think we're in a really, really bad place, and we don't need to be recommending books with one explosion or multiple stab wounds or whatever it is, and I think it's so deep that we've sort of accepted, we've let this happen, and we know it's happened, and we know it's happening, and we're still continuing to let it happen.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** It's related to so many things, though. I mean it's—you know, there's a whole discussion we could have about the Internet, and just the time—the time that it takes to read and the time in which you're not doing something else, the time when you sit down for three hours with a book, which is something—you know, who has had



three hours nonstop to sit down with a book in the last two weeks? Some, some, that's good, it's a good audience, good audience, but I think if you were to poll the general public, people would say, "I don't do anything for three hours, there's nothing I do for three hours," and that's part of the problem, and I feel that attendant upon this, or related to this, is the fact that as certainly as a culture but more broadly, we're losing the capacity to reflect, just to think, we're losing the capacity to think at all.

**PETER CAREY:** So where do we start? Reading would be a—I mean, I agree with you. But if we can't read, we can't think, and we're clearly not thinking. So it's a scary place to be.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Yes, we're all agreed on that.

**(laughter)**

**PETER CAREY:** So if this was really life-threatening, what would we do. If we said, yes it is life-threatening, that would be a start.

**EDMUND WHITE:** How much more—

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** I don't know.

**PETER CAREY:** Can I go?

**(laughter)**

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** Is there one last question?

**Q:** Do you think that younger Australians—Australians a bit younger than you, in their twenties and thirties, are more apt to stay in Australia or New Zealand? Katharine Mansfield and Patrick White, and all those people had their time in Europe and England. Do you think that younger Australian writers are just saying, “I can write about this and I don’t have to leave.”

**PETER CAREY:** No, I think we’ve been able to stay there for a long, long time. I mean, my reasons for not being in Australian have nothing to do with writing or being published or being recognized, and I think there was a generation just before mine, Robert Hughes and Clive James and Germaine Greer, who really, really did have to go to be who they could be, but I don’t think I did, and I was read in Australia, acknowledged in Australia, and there’s a home—when you have—like, all histories are full of lies and denial is ours is no exception, so if you want to think about who we are and what we are, there’s enough to keep us busy. You know, just knowing who we—I mean, I think one of the great drives for writers, or for this writer, anyway, is like who am I, and this does get involved in their place and in the culture of your place and so on so I don’t think there’s any need to do that. People—Australians whose will tend to travel more. I think this probably still is—well, I believe they do, and we certainly used to and I think—

**EDMUND WHITE:** And for long periods, like a year.

**CLAIRE MESSUD:** It's so far, right?

**PETER CAREY:** It's a long way to go back. So that's a very sort of, that's not the right sort of up ending for an evening like this.

**(laughter)**

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** We can become very acidulated with a sense of culture and feel that we should be drinking Drano in the morning because the world is becoming a terrible place where nobody reads, and yet, you know, you've gotten an audience here of people who have come—and I think that there are reasons to despair, but there are also reasons to delight. People do at times spend a fair amount of time being attentive, perhaps less so than we would like. If Tocqueville were here now, Peter, what would you wish to ask him?

**PETER CAREY:** Did you bring some wine?

**PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:** That's not a bad way to end.

**(applause)**

