

True History of the Kelly Gang, by Peter Carey

reviewed by [Ben McDonald Coltvvet](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

In a 1995 *Simpsons* episode "Bart vs. Australia" the mischievous Bart Simpson gravely offends the Australians and is forced to travel Down Under with his family to formally apologize. As a State Department operative briefs the Simpsons by flipping through slides of Paul Hogan, Jacko (an Aussie spokesman for Energizer batteries), koalas and vegemite, he says, "As I'm sure you remember, in the late 1980s the U.S. experienced a short-lived infatuation with Australian culture. For some bizarre reason, the Aussies thought this would be a permanent thing. Of course it wasn't." In typical over-the-top *Simpsons* fashion, this G-man presents Australia as a country that can't think for itself--a land longing for American cultural acceptance today just as it sought British imperial approval a century ago.

Peter Carey's latest novel demolishes this line of thinking. In *True History of the Kelly Gang*, the famed outlaw Ned Kelly scrawls out his life story on scraps of paper and gives voice to an authentically Australian worldview. Carey's narrator-hero demonstrates that national identity springs not from the refined imaginations of those who fret over approval abroad, but from the everyday needs of the lower classes. As Walt Whitman or Mark Twain might attest, this principle could be applied to other former colonies as well.

Kelly was an Australian bushranger who became a folk hero in his 20s for defying the crown, supporting the common people, and outwitting the colonial police for nearly two years until he was caught in 1880 and executed in Melbourne. In Carey's novel inspired by this history, Kelly scribbles his own story in grammar-challenged but emotionally compelling prose.

This book, the 2001 Booker Prize winner, is a lively tribute to Kelly's fighting spirit and ingenious mind. His intoxicating turns of phrase and disarming honesty are brilliantly portrayed. For readers with little prior knowledge of Kelly's context, the book provides an intriguing portrait of colonial Australia from its underside. It will

also interest anyone wishing to examine poverty, resistance and subjugation at close range.

As the eldest son of an Irish convict, Kelly never has it easy. His father attempts to stay on the up-and-up after enduring a brutal prison sentence, but his hard work brings little food home for his growing family. Kelly becomes impatient with his father's broken spirit, and starts his life of crime at age 12 by stealing and killing a calf to feed his family during a drought.

In two years' time, he is apprenticed to Harry Power--that's Power, not Potter--a renowned bushranger who teaches young Ned how to live off the land and slide beneath the police's reach. Before long, though, Kelly ends up in prison, emerging as a hardened man. His loyalty to his family, and above all to his mother, brings him back to the Kelly farm. Circumstances--destitution, his mother's coterie of suitors, and his inability to kowtow before unjust authority--conspire against Kelly, who ends up the focus of a manhunt involving hundreds of policemen.

Against this backdrop he sets out to gain a moral footing by telling his story from the beginning. Because his fellow Australians have come to know him through newspapermen who are bent on vilifying him and his gang, he puts pen to paper and attempts to "straighten the record." The result is history from the perspective of the oppressed. Kelley's language, his interpretation of motivations (both his own and those of the police), and his understanding of colonial history (including fascinating sections on Ireland's troubles) contrast sharply with the views expressed in the newspaper clippings he occasionally inserts into his story.

Like revolutionaries before and after him, Kelly claims that each crime he commits is born from a desire to level the playing field. He argues, through gripping anecdotes rather than the pretentious language of rights, for the intrinsic value belonging to his family and other poor farmers, especially when their lives and fates are pitted against the institutionally supported greed of the large landowners.

Kelly is waging a war of opinion as much as leading a struggle against the colony's wealthy establishment. He describes the moment in which he realizes that he has become a hero of the poor folk: "The good people of Greta & Moyhu & Euroa & Benalla who come drifting down the track . . . arrived in broken carts & drays they was of the type THE BENALLA ENSIGN named the most frightful class of people they couldn't afford to leave their cows & pigs but they done so because we was them

and they was us and we had showed the world what convict blood could do. We proved there were no taint we was of one true bone blood and beauty born."

Kelly's story is a chronicle of dangerous hopes, uncompromising loyalty and a burning desire for justice; yet reality looms dark on the horizon. The book opens with an account of Kelly's capture, and the reader cannot forget that Kelly's hopes will be dashed. But the story is so well told that it mesmerizes even though the outcome is preordained.

In *the Simpsons*, a helicopter spirits Bart away from the enraged Australian elite. There is no such rescue for Kelly. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, Carey, through the voice of Kelly, has carved a distinct identity for a nation 20 years before its independence. Not a bad bit of work, mate.