Anthony Hassall

HOW DO YOU KNOW?


In August 2007 the National Gallery of Victoria was advised that one of its prize paintings, Head of a Man, attributed to Vincent van Gogh, was a forgery. While the experts agree that it remains a very good painting, its monetary value has plummeted. Responding to the story, artist and cartoonist Bill Leak, who confessed, perhaps tongue-in-cheek, to an early but soon abandoned career as an art forger, wondered why it took so long to work out what he said he had recognised when he first saw the painting as a student. The setting of Peter Carey's latest novel, Theft: A Love Story, is this murky world of fine art authentication, where the financial stakes are enormous, forgery and theft are commonplace and unscrupulous operators abound.

The Theft in the book's title refers to the serial skulduggery in the art world that it satirizes. Paintings are stolen and substituted, forgeries are passed off as authentic works, critics have no eye, and artists' reputations soar and plummet randomly. Early in the book the painter Michael Boone asks: "How can you know how much to pay when you have no bloody idea what it's worth? (41)" a question he repeats later (213), and for a third time as the book's final words (269). Unlike Oscar Wilde's cynic, who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing, the art world Carey depicts knows neither the value nor the true price of anything.

The second part of the title, A Love Story, which at first sight seems incongruous with the first, refers to the story of Michael Boone and Marlene Leibovitz, both of whom are engaged in various kinds of theft. "Butcher Bones," as Michael is known, describes himself as "a thieving cunning man" (39). He is deeply embittered by his divorce and subsequent imprisonment for stealing back from his ex-wife some of his own paintings deemed to be "Marital Assets" (3) by the court. Apart from the divorce, where he sees himself as an innocent victim, Butcher is unspiring in characterising artists like himself: "Artists are used to humiliation ... Shame, doubt, self-loathing, all this we eat for breakfast every day" (212). For her part, Marlene is determined to get rich in the mad world of art by any means available to her, including urging Michael to forge a Jacques Leibovitz painting, and marrying Leibovitz's son to get access to the droit moral, the right to authenticate his paintings.

Theirs is a very different love story from Oscar and Lucinda's. Those earlier lovers were unworldly innocents, and their incandescent passion is not only unconsummated but undeclared. There is nothing undeclared, and certainly
nothing unconsummated about the passion of Michael and Marlene. Both are shopsoiled and at times morally ugly, and both have other agendas and ambitions that preclude any “all for love” engagement between them. Theirs is a sour, desperate world, in which the redemption offered by their genuine love for one another can only ever be partial and impermanent.

There is another love story, and in a book in which nothing can be accepted at face value, it may be the real one, between Michael Boone and his burdensome brother “Hugh the Poet and Hugh the Murderer, Hugh the Idiot Savant” (8). The two brothers tell their story in alternating chapters of first-person narration. Employing a strangely damaged second narrator is a typically venturesome strategy on Carey's part. Hugh's idiot savant status is reflected in his frequent resort to gnomic sayings, which are printed in capitals in the text to emphasise their commonplace wisdom. The narrations of Butcher Bones and Slow Bones, as Hugh is also known, are a vivid repository of the Australian vernacular of the 1980s, when the book is set, one of many ways in which the exiled Peter Carey nostalgically revisits a remembered Australian past. The brothers' complementary narratives are both adroitly differentiated and recognisably fraternal. Despite his potential for violence, Hugh is the nearest thing in the book to a moral touchstone, and the reader, like Michael, is strongly drawn to him.

While the plot is dense and intricate, a furious, page-turning pace is maintained. The progressive release of information, spiced with proleptic hints of what is to come, is managed in Carey's usual masterful manner, engrossing the reader from beginning to end.

Michael Boone begins his narration self-consciously: “I don’t know if my story is grand enough to be a tragedy, although a lot of shitty stuff did happen” (3). Theft: A Love Story is not a tragedy like True History of the Kelly Gang and Oscar and Lucinda. It is a love story of sorts, but there is no love lost on art in its telling. If the artist of the book is a metaphor for the writer in general, or even, as some readers have suggested, for Carey himself in particular, it is a sourer, more jaundiced depiction of the writer than the storyteller of Bliss, or even the opportunistic Tobias Oates of Jack Maggs. Harry Joy began as a liar, but his later, forest stories were life-enhancing. There is not much life-enhancing about the artistic career of Butcher Bones, whose ultimate occupation has nothing to do with art, though in a final act of creation he wrote the story of his lost love, his fall from grace and his compromised apotheosis. While Theft: A Love Story is one of his blacker books, Carey's many fans will relish the blazing energy of the writing, and marvel at the artistry with which he exposes art's dodgy practices.