His Illegal Self by Peter Carey (Faber) R199
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Ernest Hemingway famously maintained that all American novels derive from Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Whereas it's tempting to try to find exceptions to this generalisation, Peter Carey's latest novel self-confessedly conforms to Hemingway's maxim: his characters even read *Huckleberry Finn* to each other to alert the reader to the allusion. Of course, Carey is an Australian, though now living in New York, and his novel is partly set in Australia; but his main characters are American, and the novel does gain an ironic edge by being set next to Twain's classic.

Huckleberry Finn, of course, is Huck first-person account of his "stealing" the slave Jim from his "owner" and their voyage by raft down the Mississippi, a device Twain uses to offer satirical portraits of various aspects of American life. The raft becomes an image of a state of pre-social freedom in which Jim and Huck escape the categories of "sivilization."

Carey, too, gives us the "theft" of a human being, in this instance the seven-year-old grandson of "what they call an Upper East Side woman – cheekbones, tailored grey hair." The boy, Che, is the son of the woman's daughter, the beautiful, talented Harvard dropout, Susan Selkirk, who achieved fame and notoriety as a leading member of the radical Students for a Democratic Society. The novel is set in 1971, in the aftermath of the student uprisings; Susan is still underground and Che has been given in custody to the grandmother, who calls him Jay.

Che's babysitter, in Susan absence, was a young Harvard fellow-student and fellow member of SDS, Anna Xenos, more commonly known as Dial. A scholarship student from impoverished South Boston, Dial is now reaching for respectability and is on the point of accepting a teaching post at Vassar when a call comes from Susan that she wants to see her son. Conditioned to obey the whims of the SDS top structure, Dial collects the boy from his grandmother.

From here, by a concatenation of circumstances too complicated to relate, Dial and Che become fugitives – like Huck and Jim, except that there is no raft trip down the Mississippi for them. Instead they make their way via Philadelphia and Seattle and Oakland to Australia – the outback of Queensland, to be precise, where they settle amongst a colony of somewhat dreary hippies.

Carey has a sharp eye not only for the well-heeled Americans, the spoilt rich children who "dropped out" in the sixties, but also for the unglamorous, dour hippies in their ramshackle shacks and smelly clothes. The boy is, understandably, horrified: he assumes that Dial is his mother, and that his father, a famously beautiful student revolutionary, will be looking for him. How, he reasons, can his father find him in this back-of-beyond place? Dial, on the other hand, knows that she is now an outlaw and will be arrested if she returns to the US.

Not that she feels exactly welcome in Australia. The Australians distrust the Americans: "It's a shame," an earnest young Australian tells Dial, "you never learn more about the countries you fuck with." Dial, for her part, is indeed almost entirely ignorant about Australia: "We didn't even know they fucking existed," she thinks, "and they've been down here hating us."

As in Twain's novel, the social commentary, though acute, is secondary to the evolving relationship between the two main characters. The point of view alternates between the boy's perspective and the woman's, so that we are given a more complete picture than either character is capable of. We know, as the boy does not, that Dial is not his mother; we know, as Dial does not, how the boy processes the puzzling events inflicted upon him. We share their distrust of the resourceful, illiterate Trevor, and gradually, with them, grow to like the man. Indeed, we share also their gradual warming to the place, its natural life and even its people.

The other book that Dial and Che read together is Jack London's *Call of the Wild*, and though here, too, the parallels have an ironic edge (London's protagonist is a pampered domestic dog who is abducted "from the heart of civilization" and becomes a sled dog; Che, too, gets to pull a sled, helping Trevor), there is a sense in which the super-civilised Americans do respond to the wildness of the outback– the hippies, indeed, are called "feral" by the disapproving citizens of rural Queensland.. .

If Carey's student revolutionaries seem self-absorbed and self-indulgent, and the hippies seem drab and joyless, the ordinary citizens of both countries don't offer much of an alternative. The boy's grandmother calls herself "the last bohemian" but is horrified when Dial calls him Che in Bloomingdale's; in Queensland the police seem to have a free hand to persecute social undesirables with the tacit approval of the community.

So although this is not a Twain-like paean to the unfettered existence, or a Jack London-like evocation of the call of the wild, it does offer a wry tribute to uncluttered nature and a life of self-help. But above all, it is an unsentimental but moving account of the unlikely bond of affection between a boy and his "abductor" – in its way as poignant as the "illegal" bond between Huck Finn and the runaway slave Jim.