PETER CAREY was born in 1943, in the Victorian country town of Bacchus Marsh, near Geelong. He was educated at the local state school and transferred to Geelong Grammar at the age of ten. He studied Science at Monash University, but failed his first year exams.

Forced to find a job, he went to a Melbourne advertising agency and at the age of nineteen began the two careers he has pursued ever since—writing advertising copy and fiction.

His first book of stories, *The Fat Man in History*, was published in 1974. With favourable reviews in Australia, England and America, Carey seemed well established as a short story fantasy writer, a reputation he consolidated with the publication of *War Crimes* in 1979, when he won the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award.

But after two books of stories, Carey was attracted to a broader canvas, surprising and delighting readers and reviewers with his first novel, *Bliss* (1981). The protagonist is an advertising executive, Harry Joy, who believes that he is living in hell. *Bliss* won the Miles Franklin Award, the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award and a National Book Council Award.

*Illywhacker* (a type described in *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* as ‘a professional trickster’) was published in Australia in 1985 by University of Queensland Press and in America and England by Faber and Faber. Herbert Badgery, the one hundred and thirty-nine year-old liar for whom the book is named, almost immediately became as engaging a character in the public mind as Harry Joy. *Illywhacker* was nominated for the Booker prize in 1985, and was awarded the Age Book of the Year Award.

Carey's work has received critical acclaim from many international newspapers and magazines, including *The Observer, The Times, The New Statesman* and *The Times Literary Supplement*.

The interview with Peter Carey took place at his flat in Sydney. Externally one of quite an unprepossessing block of flats, inside it is comfortable and attractive. A water view from the dining area—a converted sunroom—adds a feeling of tranquility and a sensation of being a long way from the busy inner-city suburb outside.

To the right of the entrance Carey has a well set-up study with a Brother electronic typewriter. A long living-room leads to the small kitchen and dining areas, and the polished pine floorboards are covered in attractive scatter rugs. Although the flat is small, and both Carey and his wife, Alison Summers—a theatre director and script editor—work from home, he remarked that they only find the conditions cramped when they have friends to stay.

An understated attraction in the flat is an extensive collection of Clarice Cliff pottery. Displayed on a pine bookshelf, the collection is enough to make any antique collector's eyes light up. ‘I bought it all in junk shops years ago,’ said Carey, ‘and until recently we used it every day. I might add that I treat it with more respect now.’
Carey is a cagey interview subject. He doesn't like being interviewed and only agreed on the grounds that he could ‘turn it into a complete facsimile if I want to’. Initially shy and reticent, he parried the questions he was unsure about, but once he had overcome his distaste of being asked to provide information about himself, he became friendly and open.

He seems to have the perfect life-style for a fiction writer. His job, as part-owner of his agency, McSpedden Carey, is to write advertising copy. Usually he has no need to go into the office and conducts the day's work by telephone. Sometimes there is no need for him to ring at all. He enjoys what he does for a living, and it gives him enviable financial freedom. As he pointed out, it also gives him a certain security as far as his work is concerned. ‘If what I'm doing is no good,’ he explained, ‘it doesn't matter. I don't have to be published in order to earn money. I can throw it away and start again.’

Perhaps that feeling of security was in part responsible for his ability to undertake the mammoth task of his seven hundred page novel *Illywhacker*.

1985 was a year of mixed personal and professional blessings for Carey. *Illywhacker* was published internationally to high critical praise, but critics at the Cannes film festival were less than kind about *Bliss*, which was adapted from his first novel. However, *Bliss* was vindicated later in the year at the Australian Film Institute Awards when it won Best Director, Best Script—adapted from another source and written by Carey and Ray Lawrence—and Best Film. After a tumultuous period in his personal life, Carey met and married his second wife, Alison, at Kinselas, Sydney's well-known theatre restaurant. Shortly before they were married his father died.

Although they both currently work from the flat, Carey and his wife and some friends are buying a place near Church point as an escape from the city and to provide them with a more peaceful place to work.

Carey is now working on a novel set in Australia in the eighteen-sixties.

INTERVIEWER: We've been talking about the effect a good or bad cover might have on the success of a book. What do you think?

CAREY: I don't care that much about covers. In the end, after disliking almost everything, I've decided it doesn't matter all that much. Mind you, I thought the first *War Crimes* cover was really putrid.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think writers ought to be allowed more say when it comes to design and covers?

CAREY: There was a stage when I did, and as a matter of fact I had quite a lot to do with the UQP cover of *Bliss*, which I used to like but I now think is terrible. The nicest cover I've ever had is the one for the English version of *Illywhacker*. But for the most part I expect to be a little disappointed. I care a lot about *War Crimes*—I mean the first cover not the reprint—because I think it's crude and nasty, but on the whole it's silly to mind too much.

INTERVIEWER: *Illywhacker* is your latest book. In it, you gave yourself a marvellous amount of scope by having as your protagonist a one hundred and thirty-nine year-old liar. How did you create him?

CAREY: He wasn't orginally as old as that. He became one hundred and thirty-nine simply because having re-written the first third of the book a number of times, I didn't want to lose him. My original plan was that the three parts would cover three generations, and Herbert would have tailed off and disappeared somewhere in the middle of the second book. But as I came more and more to grips with him in the third person narration, I didn't want him to die. And characters like his son Charles, whom I'd roughly fleshed out, I didn't love enough to allow them to carry the rest of the book. I was sitting in the doctor's surgery in Paddington one day waiting forever, when I suddenly thought, ‘Well, he's a liar anyway, perhaps I can make him a one hundred and thirty-nine year-old liar and keep him all the way through. That means I can use first person when I want to, and because he's a liar and becomes part of
the fictional process, I can use third or first person through him. It doesn't matter that he wasn't there to observe what he describes, that would never stop him'. So that's how it happened. From then on lying became a much bigger part of the book and I was able to develop it as a major theme.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go through many drafts to get the right tone for Illywhacker?

CAREY: I had an odd, nervous way of working with it. The way you're supposed to write, so I'm told, is to write from the beginning through to the end and go back to the beginning again. But I'm starting to write in a way that I can only describe as being a bit like cantilevering, where I go about forty pages and lose confidence and scurry back, then do another sixty pages and go back again. I keep on going back to make my base more secure. So it took me about three or four of those sorts of drafts, with the first one being about seventy pages, to get a grasp on the style. Even then it wasn't until the very end of the book, several years later, that I knew it had worked. Although I knew what the end was, and I had all the points mapped out, there were so many things to work out along the way.

INTERVIEWER: It took you three years from beginning to end— from the first time you thought of it— or three years to write?

CAREY: Three years to write.

INTERVIEWER: It must have entailed a lot of research. You cover everything from goldfields to old aeroplanes and theatre . . .

CAREY: I did a lot of research along the way, but much of what feels research is actually made up and vice versa. I suppose I did a lot of reading around the sorts of things I was interested in and occasionally if I wanted something extra I'd go to a library. A lot of the stuff about aeroplanes and cars for instance are family stories I grew up with and I just needed to bone up on the odd technical detail. There's probably less research than there seemed in one way, but in another way every book I chose to read during that time had something to do with Illywhacker, so even though I'm a bad reader and I don't absorb things very well, I was working on it.

INTERVIEWER: In terms of the fantasy content—or fantastical content—it seems to be an obvious successor to your other books, and yet it's also very different, particularly from the short stories; it's not a spare book. Were you surprised by the way it developed?

CAREY: I was terrified when I realised after two years what a big book I was writing. I was genuinely scared, and that's not mock drama. I thought, ‘God, another year, and maybe it won't work, and maybe it's too long to get published’. I was also nervous because it wasn't quite like anything I could lay my hands on. Often one likes to be comforted, especially if you've got a long job in front of you. You can say, it's all right because it's a bit like such and such, and that worked. I suppose one could say that it's a bit like Tristram Shandy, but that's hardly comforting and it isn't really like it. Anyway, I think it's better structured than Tristram Shandy. But if you simplify what it's doing, its basic metaphor could have made a short story. If you think of it like this: that you have all these people who end up becoming pets in an emporium, then you can see it—it sounds like something from The Fat Man in History. Now that sort of concept is relatively easy to sustain in a short story, but as you said, this isn't a spare book, and it wasn't conceived as one. This was a work planned to cover three generations, and it becomes a more difficult matter. These rather incredible situations have to be made credible. They need props, if you like. This makes the book longer. So even if the book appears to be discursive and garrulous, there is not a single page of it that is not structurally necessary to sustain the whole.

INTERVIEWER: Did the pet shop exist?

CAREY: No. I don't think so. Only something I had vaguely in my mind. It was perhaps triggered by the pet shop they used to have at the top of Dymocks, and then influenced by the Strand Arcade. But no, it did not really exist anywhere, or was a conglomeration of all sorts of different pet shops. I found out
quite a lot about the subject. For instance, there used to be pet shops in Campbell Street. There were pet shops in front and brothels at the back—there's a whole different story there, isn't there? But my pet shop, the best pet shop in the world, was made out of scrap, bits and pieces from here and there, from the head keepers of birds at the zoo, for instance, who spent a lot of time with me. The keeper of reptiles was the same—not merely informative about architectural matters, sizes of cages and so on, he also gave me recipes for feeding them, he took me to the place where they breed ‘pinkies’—baby mice, and persuaded me that a goanna that lived indoors would need an ultra violet lamp for its wellbeing. Terry Boylan, the keeper of reptiles, also took me into the cage to see the Komodo Dragon, but that was more of a cheap thrill than a structural necessity.

INTERVIEWER: You must have felt an enormous sense of relief when you finally laid down your pen.

CAREY: When it was finally typed, yes. Although I think the moment when it's really finished is when someone else reads it, not actually when you've completed it. So it was when friends read it and Robert McCrum (from Faber and Faber in London) read it and telephoned me to tell me that he liked it, that's when I felt relieved. There was a time before that, one year before, when I did something I never imagined I would do, that was to send Robert the whole of the first book—which was just about as it is now—and a third of the third book. I suddenly thought to myself that it wasn't working, and I would never have done that before—make myself that vulnerable to one other person's opinion. But it was fantastic. He told me to keep going, and he made one really good comment about the middle book, asked me a couple of questions about what the hell I was doing in the third book and made another good suggestion about that. He was immensely supportive and I went straight back and got stuck into it again.

INTERVIEWER: Hadn't you showed work in progress up until then?

CAREY: No. Oh well, occasionally a friend would come in and I'd show them four pages because I'd had a nice day and a couple of glasses of wine.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a set pattern for working?

CAREY: I usually sit down in the morning and work until lunch, and I almost always type four pages. The size of the pages has altered over the years, they used to be quarto pages with double spacing, now they're foolscap at one and a half, but it's still four pages. I've read interviews with writers who say they write all day, and I can't understand how they do it. By the time I've done my morning's work I'm mentally exhausted. It's only in later drafts when I really know the material well that I can work all day. So I've always felt rather guilty about the amount I do.

INTERVIEWER: What sort of typewriter do you use?

CAREY: I've got an electronic Brother with a two page memory. It's like a primitive word-processor, but it's appallingly slow for editing.

INTERVIEWER: Could you see yourself working on a wordprocessor?

CAREY: I could now. I couldn't before. In fact when I first got this machine, which was the first electric typewriter I'd ever had, I didn't understand how it worked and I kept losing things; I thought to myself why have I done this? I spent a really irritating week trying to master it, so I'm pleased I didn't get a word-processor because I'm sure I would have thrown it out the window. But now that I have mastered it, I think a word-processor would be great. I've always said it would be no good to me because I like to be forced to go over and over things, but now, when I've finished my four pages and I've still got some time left I can go back to a page in the memory and tinker with it. There's real pleasure in that refinement and a word-processor doesn't necessarily stop that, in fact it aids it.

INTERVIEWER: Most imaginative writers still hold out against them, don't they? There's a perverse
pride in sticking with a twenty-year-old manual. Perhaps it's a key to their mentality, that writers are basically old-fashioned or rather, antitechnology.

CAREY: I'd like to think that wasn't true. However, I know that it is true and I'm trying to think why it might be. I don't like it being true, but I certainly resisted going electric. There was an element of snobbishness in it, you know: ‘It's all right for writers who . . . but I take care of my product. I refine it and refine it. You can turn out all this mass-produced junk if you want, but I don't need to’.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you began your career in advertising?

CAREY: The same age I started writing. I was nineteen and it was 1962. At that stage in my life I would have voted for Sir Robert Menzies. I didn't really start getting an education until I worked in advertising with people like Barry Oakley and Morris Lurie—and Bruce Petty had an office next door. But I wrote copy in that place for a year and a half before I got anything accepted. At the same time I said I was going to write a novel, because Barry Oakley was writing, Morris Lurie too; besides which everybody was suddenly criticising me for being in advertising, and I was stunned! Why? So I said, ‘Oh well, it's all right, I'm going to write a novel’. I was trying to redeem myself really. I think one sometimes begins these things for the most dubious of reasons.

INTERVIEWER: Oakley tells how you'd show your work around, and would receive advice varying from ‘keep going’ to ‘don't write another word’.

CAREY: Well, Lurie kept trying to make me give up for a long time. Right up until The Fat Man in History when he reviewed it and described it as, ‘rhythmless broken-toothed prose’. Which was a curious thing because when I first knew Morris I'd actually been in a crash and had a broken tooth. Barry was more encouraging. He was very encouraging. Although I used to get angry with him. I mean, I actually wrote three novels before I wrote those first stories. I'd think I was a genius and I'd done this terrific novel and he'd say, ‘Well, it's interesting, but it just doesn't work’. I'd say, ‘Why?’. He'd be reasonable and nice, and tell me why, and I'd think he was old-fashioned and didn't understand. Then when I showed him one of the stories that went into The Fat Man in History, that was the first time he didn't criticise me. So I'd say he played a large role in my career—certainly in reining me in for a couple of years.

INTERVIEWER: He's also remarked how annoying he found it that you were getting better and better at writing advertising copy. Did you enjoy it?

CAREY: I came from the car business, and my family was involved in selling things every day. Selling wasn't at all alien or odd to me. My father was a car dealer, my mother worked in the business, and my sister, my brother-in-law and my brother. All these people were involved in what was probably the only honest car business in the whole of the country. They never cheated anybody. I remember how incensed they'd be at the suggestion that they'd wind back the speedo, and used cars always ended up costing them money because they'd spend so much fixing them up. So what I'm saying is, there was nothing morally wrong for me in selling things. Barry, on the other hand, came from being a school teacher into working with this monstrous thing called advertising, and the first thing he asked me about was moral dilemmas. Well, I'd never heard of a moral dilemma in my life, so we were coming from different angles. Barry's humour and his way of approaching things like advertising is to willfully refuse to understand them, and from his refusal to understand them a large amount of his humour comes. He's very funny when he does this personal look at the world—understanding it extremely well in one way and refusing to understand it in another.

INTERVIEWER: You now have your own agency, McSpedden Carey. How long has that been going?

CAREY: We've had the agency for four years. I've managed to work part-time for seven or eight years, and for a great deal of that time I was able to live in the country, come down to the city occasionally and
escape back again. Now I'm in Sydney, I still pretend I'm in the country. I keep my distance, use the telephone, and only visit the office occasionally. The agency has provided me with the most marvellous security. When I write a book like *Illywhacker*, I don't have to worry about money. I don't have to worry about whether it's going to sell. If I want to throw it out at the end of two years I can afford to—I've got enough to panic about artistically. So it provides all that for me and gives me all the time I want to write every day, and that's the wonderful thing about it. And now that I'm in the situation where I could consider getting out of advertising, ours is one business—among all the grubby advertising businesses with all their bullshit—which is honest. We employ six people and it won't get any bigger. It's not sexist, it's not hierarchal; it's very open and the clients we work for, we want to work for. So now that I could start thinking about getting out, I'd be pulling the rug out from under people I care about. All that has a lot to do with how I feel about advertising.

INTERVIEWER: You're probably one of the few writers of quality fiction in Australia who doesn't have to worry about money.

CAREY: Yes, that might be true. One would like to see an Arts funding policy that made this possible for more writers. It is great not to have to worry if something sells or not. With *Illywhacker* for instance, I thought I was cutting myself out of the American market entirely. I thought, ‘They won't possibly understand all this, all these words and Australianisms’. If I'd been worrying about money I might have changed it. I would not only have damaged the book, but damaged it needlessly, because—as it turns out—my American publishers loved it. But when I started planning the thing almost five years ago, no one was going around saying that Australia was the flavour of the month in New York, which they've been saying in the last year or two. Of course, whether every New Yorker is aware of this is another matter.

INTERVIEWER: Talking about New York and advertising, I'd like to ask you where *Bliss* was set—if anywhere. I thought it was Brisbane, but other people I know have said Townsville or Cairns.

CAREY: Well, they're all correct. I wanted it to be set somewhere like Brisbane, but I wanted to be able to make up the geography, and I remembered that there was a mountain at the back of Townsville which was a bit like what I wanted, and there are things about it which are very Cairns. I wanted to invent a place. I was living near Brisbane, but on the other hand I wasn't interested in using Brisbane as a specific place, and anyway I didn't know it well enough for that.

INTERVIEWER: *Bliss* seemed to me to be about an advertising man coming to terms with advertising. Was there some of you in that?

CAREY: That wasn't the way the book was planned, but I was dragging in things I could use. I'd always been interested in writing a novel about advertising, but I'd never found a way to do it because the two subjects that are most difficult to write about are advertising and hippies. They've often been tackled, usually badly, and I was trying to do both together. Since the late sixties I'd been carrying around the idea of a fellow who was in hell, or thought he was in hell. I'd written it as a short story a couple of times and I suppose I'd put into it a lot of things I knew about advertising. I don't think it was me trying to come to terms with myself because basically I think Harry Joy is a fool, so I can't see his problems as being my problems. My biggest difficulty with the book was to try and think, ‘How could you have a character who really does think the world is wonderful, and will seriously believe he's in hell’. They'd have to be pretty whacky in my view. So even though I've used lots of things from my own experience—and undoubtedly advertising has often troubled me—Harry Joy's journey does not, not in any way, resemble my own.

INTERVIEWER: If you have a motif, it seems to be people changing characters. In *The Chance* where people go into a lottery of personalities, you do it. In *Peeling* perhaps, and certainly with Harry Joy and Badgery. Do you think that's a fair assessment?
CAREY: It is. But I'm not sure what to make of it.

INTERVIEWER: Where do you think it began?

CAREY: Well, it's nice to use metamorphoses to express physically what you see internally in some way. With Peeling—which I wrote very quickly and far more instinctively than anything else I've written—you could say that the metamorphosis I was expressing was that here is this person who has got this mysterious thing, the white doll. The person then tries to explore their personality—whether they are male, female, male, female—and in the end they find . . . the white doll. With that metamorphosis what I'm saying is that the mystery that was there in the beginning is still there in the end. It's an antipsychological view of character as something that can't be touched. And that all works in a sense like a cartoon. But the thing that happens to Harry Joy in the mental hospital is possibly a different thing. The previously unsuccessful man, Alex Duval, who envies him and wishes to acquire the status of Harry Joy—the powerful, liked, popular figure—sets out to do it at the same time that Harry has had all his props removed from him and is crumbling because there is nothing to sustain his idea of himself. You're going to have fun editing this . . .

INTERVIEWER: That's okay. I'd like to pursue it a bit longer, because Badgery too, when he's in Grafton jail, takes on a different physical character in order to survive, doesn't he? Do you think you take on different identities?

CAREY: Badgery does do that. I suppose what I'm aware of is that when I move from social situation to social situation the way I—one—is perceived, can change totally. In one environment you can be a very prestigious character, in another, a total fool, and people will say, ‘Who the fuck are you? Shut up and sit down’.

INTERVIEWER: You think we become chameleons then?

CAREY: We are the products of our social and economic circumstances. Yes. What happens to Badgery in jail is that basically he doesn't want to be hit. He doesn't want to have any violence, so he's smart enough to be frail. He's an old enough fellow anyway and he's surviving.

INTERVIEWER: Another thing about your books is that the sexual imagery in them—either realistic or fantastical—is very strong. Do you think of them as you're writing, or do they occur to you any time?

CAREY: I don't have sexual fantasies if that's what you're asking. I was talking about this to Alison the other day and we were chatting about common male and female fantasies, and I suddenly realised that I don't have them. But maybe I do. I have them in the process of writing so I don't need to have them rolling around in my head at other times.

INTERVIEWER: What about the snakes in Illywhacker?

CAREY: Oh, I don't think the snakes are sexual imagery. I thought there was even a little warning about using them as such. But then again, if you use a snake you're obviously aware that it's a loaded image . . .

INTERVIEWER: So to speak.

CAREY: Well, I really wanted it to be a snake because it was dangerous, because it was likely to be there and because it wasn't something cute. Remember too, that the book is leading towards being about pets, so I wanted to point towards that. The goanna's there because the thing that happened to Emma Badgery actually happened to Ros Cheney, a friend of mine. A goanna ran up her in a school yard and stood on her head—and that's an interesting thing, so it sticks in your brain. I didn't choose a goanna because they have two penises—which they do — I had to go to the zoo to find that out.
INTERVIEWER: Did you? I learnt that working on a woman's magazine, it was the kind of useful information one learnt there. Leaving fantasies aside for the moment, the snake and Phoebe entrap Badgery in the early part of the book into becoming the liar he then remains, don't they? She says, ‘If you're a snake handler prove it’. From then on he's painted himself into a corner. Are you prone to exaggeration?

CAREY: No. If anything I'm more like Charles who is so enthusiastic that the truth will out, that he misses his meal.

INTERVIEWER: You've had a year's break since you finished Illywhacker, are you gearing up now for something else?

CAREY: Yes, but I don't want to talk about it much. It's a novel which is unfortunately set in 1860, which is giving me the shits because I have to do all this work and research which I don't enjoy at all. However, it's something that couldn't have happened at any other time. A lot of it's to do—I think—with Christianity and Christian stories and their effect on our culture. I'm interested in that; I grew up with it around me, but the tales seem to have gone now, just the last echoes of them are around. Although they might be due for a grand resurgence with the born-again-Christians and such people.

INTERVIEWER: Where did your family come from?

CAREY: From Bacchus Marsh, near Geelong in Victoria. When I was a child it was quite a small town; it had a population of about three or four thousand, and my parents—who probably would have been lower-middle class more than anything else—were part of the elite of the town. I went to a reasonably working-class school and I moved from there to Geelong Grammar at the age of ten. Looking back on it, it was probably quite a traumatic change.

INTERVIEWER: When did it first occur to you that you might have an imagination which was a little out of the ordinary?

CAREY: I don't know. It's extraordinary isn't it, I've got no idea! Late. I wasn't a day-dreamer for example. I was always enthusiastic—that was my great strength—even if I didn't do terribly well, I was enthusiastic. I worked hard, but I don't think I did anything imaginative until the very end of my school career when we had a revue and I changed the lyrics from My Fair Lady into a boarding school song. That's the first time I remember people saying, ‘Ooh, that's clever’, and really, it's such a dreary thing to have done. Then when I went to university I started writing poetry, and I did a cartoon strip even though I couldn't draw. But what I thought I wanted to be was a scientist. In fact my mother sent me up some of my school papers the other day, and in amongst them was a pamphlet about a career in atomic energy!

INTERVIEWER: When did you decide you didn't want to be a scientist?

CAREY: I didn't consciously decide, but I think I was always more interested in the symbolism of it more than anything else. I was always sending away for text books on organic chemistry—which I never understood—but it was the alchemy of it that fascinated me, things changing into other things. So perhaps whatever it was I was looking for in organic chemistry I finally found in fiction. Certainly when I went up to Monash University I didn't understand it, in fact I didn't know what the fuck they were talking about. After I'd been going to the lectures for a while I realised that the people who went off to the pub, and went out collecting things and generally having a good time, were in the Zoology department; they liked ‘art’ and ‘culture’ and all that stuff, so I decided I was going to be a zoologist. Not because I had a great passion for it I might add, in fact it took everything in me to cut up a pig-worm in my first term. I'm telling you—I had a lot of things to overcome simply in order to go the pub with the budding zoologists!

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like a good thing—for the scientific world—that you went into advertising . .
CAREY: That's right. I failed totally of course. I had a car accident, a bad one, the car fell to bits and I virtually scalped myself, but that gave me an excuse, although I would have failed anyway. I failed all my supplementary examinations—as everybody knew I would—and then I had to get a job.

INTERVIEWER: What do your parents think about your work—although your father died recently didn't he? That must have been traumatic for you.

CAREY: It was. But he was very old and sick, and in the end he wanted to die. He's never read anything I've written, but he would have been pleased to see the dedication in the front of Illywhacker. He's had a look at my books from time to time but decided they weren't for him. Still he never read very much so that's okay. My mother told me the other day that she's never liked any of my books.

INTERVIEWER: So it wasn't the, ‘Look mum, no hands’ routine?

CAREY: I suppose one always wants to be admired, but it never upset me that my father didn't read my books, and it doesn't upset me that my mother doesn't like them. It's very interesting. I'm surprised that it doesn't upset me, but it doesn't.

INTERVIEWER: The novel you're working on at the moment will bring your total to three novels and two books of short stories. Do you think the short story is giving way to the novel for you?

CAREY: I don't know. What I love about a novel is that there is so much to find out when you go into it. So much of it is exploration. I think it's much more nerve-wracking writing short stories. You get one done, and then you think, ‘Okay, what am I going to do now’. Finding a good idea for a short story is often difficult, whereas with a novel you only need one idea which then creates its own momentum and you explore a lot of things within it.

INTERVIEWER: But surely you're not saying that you find writing something like Bliss or Illywhacker easier than writing a short story?

CAREY: Well no, of course you present yourself with an enormous problem. But what I'm saying is that by solving that problem you have to invent all sorts of situations, and you find out or remember things you've wanted to talk about, which is wonderful. With a short story you have to be so contained.

INTERVIEWER: How long does it take you to write a short story?

CAREY: It's so long since I've written one, it's hard to say. But I suppose on average a couple of weeks, and the longer ones maybe a month. But what do you do then? You're finished, at least until you can come up with another great idea, and that could be ages. With a novel you can always find something to do.

INTERVIEWER: But if you get that anti-climactic feeling at the end of a story, isn't it worse at the end of a novel? When this thing you've been working with so closely for so long suddenly isn't there any more?

CAREY: No, it's terrific to finally finish it. Even now, because I'm not really in control of this new novel—I've only been working on it for six weeks—I'd love any excuse to stop. I have made a start and I'm working every day, but I don't find it hard to procrastinate. I was pleased to have a year off after Illywhacker; not worrying about a book, and I wasn't at all depressed.

INTERVIEWER: You work from your flat here all the time now don't you—do you miss the place you had at Bellingen?

CAREY: I miss the landscape a great deal, but I think I'm saying that more out of habit than anything else. For the first six months it was painful to think about it; I like it more than anywhere I've ever lived.
in my life and it was beautiful. But I don't really think I miss it now, and there are many things about my life which compensate for the loss of it. Margot Hutchinson, who I owned it with, has just left there, and so we've decided to sell it, but Alison and I are going to buy a place with some friends at Lovett Bay, near Church Point, which backs on to the National Park. We'll all share it, and that will be great.

INTERVIEWER: This is quintessentially a Sydney flat, isn't it, with its Eastern suburbs water views and proximity to Kings Cross. When did you first leave Melbourne?

CAREY: I'd have to say I didn't particularly want to come to Sydney. It was in 1973 and I'd gone through all sorts of domestic and personal turmoil. I was living in Canning Street, in Melbourne, trying to write but not really managing to do it very well, working part-time and hanging about the Albion in a desperate sort of a way, when I was offered an advertising job in Sydney with Grey Advertising, which was a particularly interesting firm. I was such a funny little puritan that I insisted on getting exactly the same money I'd been getting before even though they wanted me quite badly. I suppose I had to prove I wasn't moving to Sydney for money or anything extraordinary like that. I didn't want to go to Sydney. I didn't like it; I thought it was full of nasty, shallow, superficial people. And I also thought that if I left Melbourne I'd lose my past and the layering of friends from different backgrounds. I didn't imagine, for instance, that I'd have any Maoist friends in Sydney, I thought I'd only know people from advertising agencies, and that they'd all be really boring. However, in the end, I went. I wanted to live on the water because I thought no matter how pissed off I am with this terrible place and these dreadful people, at least when I wake in the morning I can be near the water. I also wanted to live in an inner-city suburb, so a friend of mine who'd lived here gave me some advice and I rented a place in Wharf Road, Birchgrove. I didn't know that meant you were a Balmain writer. Mind you, I was pleased to be any sort of a writer. I was pleased to be published!

The Fat Man in History was then in proof stage and there I was, with Michael Wilding living up the road, being called a Balmain writer. It was all very odd.

INTERVIEWER: How did you first get published?

CAREY: Well, it was through Michael Wilding originally. I'd sent him some stories, and he contacted me saying that he was putting together an anthology, which he outlined to me, and he told me that he wanted some dirty, disgusting stories—it's all a bit weird looking back on it, I'm a bit embarrassed by it—so I did one for him, but he said it was too clean. 'Write me another one', he told me, 'one that's really off'. I thought, 'what!', but I wrote one; it was the only time I've ever written something with a reason, and it was a story called Withdrawal.

INTERVIEWER: The one where the pig becomes addicted to heroin.

CAREY: Right. And I've never really liked that story because I did write it to order. What happened then was that the publisher who was originally going to be something called Opens Leaves Press—who I believe were normally publishers of porn—decided they didn't want to do it. Michael then gave it to University of Queensland Press, who had been about to publish three books, and one of their manuscripts hadn't turned up. They saw my stories and contacted me to ask me if I had any more. I said I did, and that's how The Fat Man in History came about.

INTERVIEWER: So that was really your first publishing venture?

CAREY: I'd published a few short stories in Meanjin and places like that, but I hated publishing in little magazines, partly through arrogance—I thought they should go somewhere where I was going to be paid a lot more money and where they would be given a lot more attention—although I never would have admitted that to anybody. As it was I had a disagreement with Meanjin over Peeling, because they wanted me to change all the place names to Australian names and I wouldn't. I'd been living in London and I'd just got back to Australia, but it was triggered by something I'd seen in London. Clem Christessen wanted to change the place names, to make it into 'Australian Literature', and he also wanted me to put inverted commas around the dialogue which I didn't want to do because it was
supposed to be ritualistic rather than realistic. I won the point about the inverted commas and gave in on
the place names. Although I later changed them back when the story was published in The Fat Man in
History.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about the academic status of some publications? Helen Garner talks
about the conundrum of wanting them to like her work, but writing stuff they can't possibly like . . .

CAREY: Well, I suppose I want them to like me a lot, but when they don't like me, my response is to
say, ‘Fuck off then, I've never liked you either’.

INTERVIEWER: If you wrote three novels before you began to get published, you must have clocked
up a lot of experience quite young.

CAREY: I started writing in 1964 when I was twenty-one. I also got married then, and I had my job, but
I used to try and write a few pages a day. Working like that I managed to write a novel, a little of which
was published with Jacaranda Press, in Under 25, which is a curious book to look at now. The writing is
embarrassing of course, but there were a number of good people in it. So that little bit was published,
then I wrote another novel and got an acceptance from Sun Books for that, but somehow that didn't
happen, and then I wrote a bit of another book but didn't finish it. Then I went to London and wrote
another book which had two very enthusiastic reader's reports from Andre Deutsch, but nothing
happened with that either. After that I came back to Australia and wrote The Fat Man in History stories,
and then I wrote a book which was called Adventures Aboard the Marie-Celeste—a pretty silly title now
I think of it—and Outback Press gave me a contract for that, but when I realised that it wasn't very good
they were nice enough to release me.

INTERVIEWER: What advice would you give to young writers who are trying to get published then?

CAREY: To keep going, I suppose. Really, I was relatively lucky because something was always about
to happen, and by the time I realised that my work of genius wasn't going to get published I was well
into the next one. I wrote for ten years without getting anything substantial published. I was very, very
lucky as it turns out. Unlike some young writers I was never very technically skilled or mature, so I was
saved the public embarrassment of somebody picking my books to pieces.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever gone back and tried to use something from your early stuff?

CAREY: No. I don't have a bottom drawer. I've occasionally gone back and hoped to find that it was
better than I thought it was, but it certainly isn't, so I'm grateful that it never got any further than it did.

Sydney, June 1985