

The date in May 1831 that Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont, the deputy public prosecutor at the court of Versailles in France, first arrived in the USA to study the young nation's prison and judicial systems

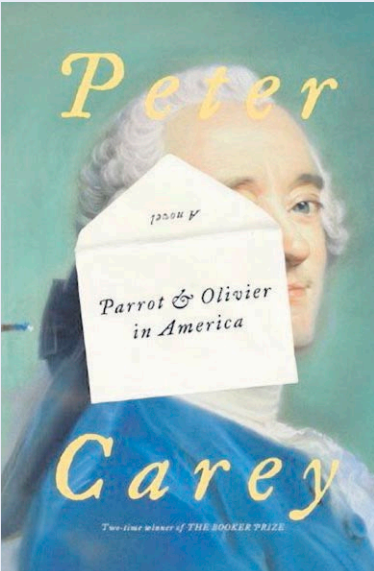
A master of the art

Peter Carey offers a wittily subversive homage to Tocqueville, writes Gaiutra Bahadur

Among the many things about democracy that annoyed the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville during his 1830s tour of America was the shape-shifting quality of language under its influence. He complained, in his classic treatise *Democracy in America*, that the restless spirit of citizens under this political system led to the constant creation of new words and new meanings at every turn. There was a chaos and a swagger to these linguistic innovations that the nobleman, happier with the changeless hierarchies of the *ancien regime*, could not bear. "Thus rope dancers," he wrote, "are turned into acrobats and funambulists."

Peter Carey – whose new novel, *Parrot and Olivier in America*, fictionalises Tocqueville's American field trip – is an accomplished and unapologetic funambulist when it comes to prose. His sentences walk tightropes, and the thrill to be had from them can be described as verbal vertigo. Consider how Ned Kelly, the hero of his *True History of the Kelly Gang*, sums up his displaced forefathers: "our brave parents was ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history." Carey proves Tocqueville's point about language in America; his writing is rambunctious and innovative, as befits someone who adopted the United States as his home two decades ago. He had not fully adopted it as his subject, however, until now. *Parrot*, the Australian writer's 11th novel, is his first principally about his new home.

Olivier-Jean-Baptiste de Clarel de Barfleur de Garmont, Carey's



Parrot and Olivier in America
Peter Carey
Knopf
Dh100

creation, closely resembles Tocqueville, starting with the multi-syllabic name strung with titles that imperil him in revolutionary France. Both the real-life man and the character lose a grandfather before birth, in the same way: citizens of the blood-born republic interrupt dinner at his château to claim him for the guillotine. Both inherit as childhood tutor a beloved family priest who imparts his conservative politics and literary style. And both go to America on the pretext of surveying its prisons, but are re-

ally there to escape more political turmoil at home.

Carey remains faithful to history, like a servant to his master; but there is a caveat, since, as Tocqueville recognized, the old state of relations between servant and master no longer obtained in America; he mourned the loss of the intimacy that evolved as one family valeted for another over generations, such that the two were "parallel lines which never meet and never separate". Carey may serve history, but he also separates from it, cavortingly.

He gives Olivier a travelling companion the like of which Tocqueville never had: a servant nicknamed Parrot, an Englishman orphaned at 12 after the arrest of his father, whose crime was to work unwittingly for a printer that concealed counterfeit currency and its counterfeiters up chimneys and under floorboards. Despite natural gifts as an artist and nimble copier of accents, dialects, whole tongues, he ends up a lackey to a one-armed Frenchman hiding at the nest of forgers when it was busted. That Frenchman connects the two men four decades later, sending Parrot along to America to keep tabs on Olivier at the behest of the nobleman's mother (whom the Frenchman loves). The tale of their respective childhoods, affairs of the heart and adventures in America is told by master and servant, in turns. The lines meet and separate often, in resentment, mutual bewilderment and warped affection.

With these alternate narrators, Carey sets himself up as mimic, too; he's convincing doing saucy,

sarcastic Parrot, whose "unsettling democratic grammar ... and broadness of speech" define Olivier's first impression of him, as well as the mannered, pompous Olivier. When dealing with the latter, however, Carey again departs from history. Tocqueville, tutored in Greek and Latin, wrote in a conservative style, sober and direct, anachronistic for the Romantic period he lived in, graceful but colourless. Carey nonetheless performs like an acrobat in the sections narrated by Olivier. Quakers at a wharf are "wrapped like ravens, furred like umbrellas in the low, sad mist". Olivier denounces a Romantic writer's sentences as the "overblown chrysanthemums he put in the nation's vase". A pencil portrait of his mother is "light as the dream of a child that was never to be born".

Carey suggests a subversive explanation for Olivier's flair. His handwriting is awful, and his English isn't great either. He dictates letters and notes to Parrot – a rudely eloquent calligrapher extraordinaire, self-taught on subjects from Wordsworth to the Romantic painter JMW Turner. The first clues Parrot might be fiddling with Olivier's words come aboard ship. Parrot, ordered to make Olivier's scribbblings legible, says: "It was a mistake to trust me, for he never had the patience for proofs." Briefly, Olivier wants Parrot's lover. He dictates a letter to his mother about being painted by the lady in his cabin, with the door locked, and the dirty, impolite document that results reads more like Parrot's jealous hallucinations



Carey's latest novel, his first explicitly about the US, draws extensively on Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. Mychele Daniau / AFP

than anything a Garmont would tell his *maman*. A final dedication informs us that "this unreliable history", the picaresque story of shifting perspectives we have just read, "was cobbled together by me, jumped-up John Larrit" (Parrot's formal name).

Carey's depiction of America isn't all wholesome: a New York banker who sells a house on credit to Par-

rot's lover, though she has neither job nor money, provides a clear premonition of the subprime crisis. Overall, however, Carey sings the nation electric, portraying a place where servants can become masters and where words whirl about dizzily at the heights of invention.

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