Novelist explores art, class in early America

by: GLENN C. ALTSCHLULER
Sunday, May 30, 2010
5/30/2010 4:08:41 AM

What would French aristocrats do in the decades following the French Revolution, asks Olivier-Jean-Baptiste de Clarel de Barfleur de Garmont, one of the two main characters in Peter Carey's splendid new novel. Would they "drown swimming against the tide of history?" Would they enter "the salons of a glorious time as yet unborn?" Or spend their lives "between the thighs of actresses?"

As he wrestles with his destiny, Olivier is transported, against his will, to the United States. His mother, he discovers, has tied his fate to one John "Parrot" Larrit, a journeyman engraver from England, who grew up "hard and solitary beneath the stars." Telling all and sundry that he is "subject to the laws of Newton but not to those of kings, a subject, yes, but always in proud and personal rebellion," the much-traveled Parrot actually wants nothing more than "to be still."

Like Alexis de Tocqueville, the great analyst of American culture and politics upon whom his character is based, Olivier is looking for a model for the future of France. He begins his journey as a "citizen of Myopia," but with Parrot's help he learns a lot about himself, about living and loving, and about a society where "everyone is in a state of agitation, some to attain power, others to grab wealth."

Exquisitely written, "Parrot and Olivier in America" is much more than a meditation on democracy in America in the 1820s. It's a surprising, stimulating, sad, and side-splitting deconstruction of social class, no less "real" because it springs from Carey's imagination. Consider, for example, Parrot's account of the conversation he overhears between Olivier (whom Parrot calls "Lord Migraine") and Mr. Peek, the American banker, about whether they feel comfortable sharing feelings in front of an employee. To Olivier, such intimacy was no different from being dressed by one. "To stand naked?" Peek asks. "Sir, I would not stand naked with my wife." "We do not call it naked with a servant," Olivier replies. "We call it getting dressed."

In the end, although they disagree about almost everything, Olivier and Parrot forge bonds of trust and affection. Unlucky in love, Olivier makes plans to return to France and asks Parrot to come with him. A country without a leisure class, America, he claims, is no place for an artist. Forced to cater to the tyranny of the majority to make his living, Parrot would in all likelihood spend his life "corrupting whatever public taste might struggle toward the light, tarnishing the virtues and confusing the manners" of his adopted country. Parrot loathes the certainty of Olivier's judgment. But he pities him his nightmares. It must be dreadful, he reflects, "to spend your days in terror of the common people, expecting them to tear out your entrails and burn them before your eyes."

Does Peter Carey agree that Olivier's fears are phantoms? Well, not entirely. He gives Parrot the last words of this wonderful novel. And makes sure we'll take them with more than a few grains of salt. In Andrew Jackson's America, the Parrot crows, "there is no tyranny, nor ever could be. The great ignoramus will not be elected. The illiterate will never rule. Your bleak certainty that there can be no art in a democracy is unsupported by the truth."

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

Associate Images:
Parrot and Olivier in America
By Peter Carey
Alfred A. Knopf, $26.95

Copyright © 2010, World Publishing Co. All rights reserved

Return to Story