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Synopsis Books:

"What is it about we Australians, eh?" demands a schoolteacher near the end of Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang*. "Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might not we find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer?" It's the author's sole nod to the contradictory feelings Ned Kelly continues to evoke today, more than a century after his death. A psychopathic killer to some, a crusading folk hero to others, Kelly was a sharpshooting outlaw who eluded a brutal police manhunt for nearly two years. For better or worse, he's now a part of the Australian national myth. Indeed, the opening ceremonies for the Sydney Olympics featured an army of Ned Kellys dancing about to Irish music, which puts him in the symbolic company of both kangaroos and Olivia Newton-John.

What's to be gained from telling this illiterate bushranger's story yet again? Quite a lot, as it turns out. For starters, there is the remarkable vernacular poetry of Carey's narrative voice. Fierce, funny, ungrammatical, steeped in Irish legends and the frontier's moral code, this voice is the novel's great achievement--and perhaps the greatest in Carey's distinguished career. It paints a vivid picture of an Australia where English landowners skim off the country's best territory while government land grants allow the settlers just enough acreage to starve. Cheated, lied to, and persecuted by the authorities at every opportunity, young Kelly retains no faith in his colonial masters. What he does trust, oddly, is the power of words:

And here is the thing about them men they was Australians they knew full well the terror of the unyielding law the historic memory of UNFAIRNESS were in their blood and a man might be a bank clerk or an overseer he might never have been lagged for nothing but still he knew in his heart what it were to be forced to wear the white hood in prison he knew what it were to be lashed for looking a warder in the eye ... so the knowledge of unfairness were deep in his bone and in his marrow.

Ned Kelly as literary hero? Strangely enough, that's what he becomes, at least in Carey's rendering. Pouring his heart out in a series of letters to the country at large, Kelly wants nothing more than to be *heard*--and for the dirt-poor son of an Irish convict, that's an audacious ambition indeed. It's not so surprising, then, that his story continues to speak to Australians. Like all colonial countries, Australia was built at a steep human price, and the memory of all those silenced voices lives on. *True History of the Kelly Gang* takes its epigraph from Faulkner: "The past is not dead. It is not even past." And like Faulkner's own vast chronicle of dispossession, it's haunted by tragedies as large as history itself. --*Mary Park*

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