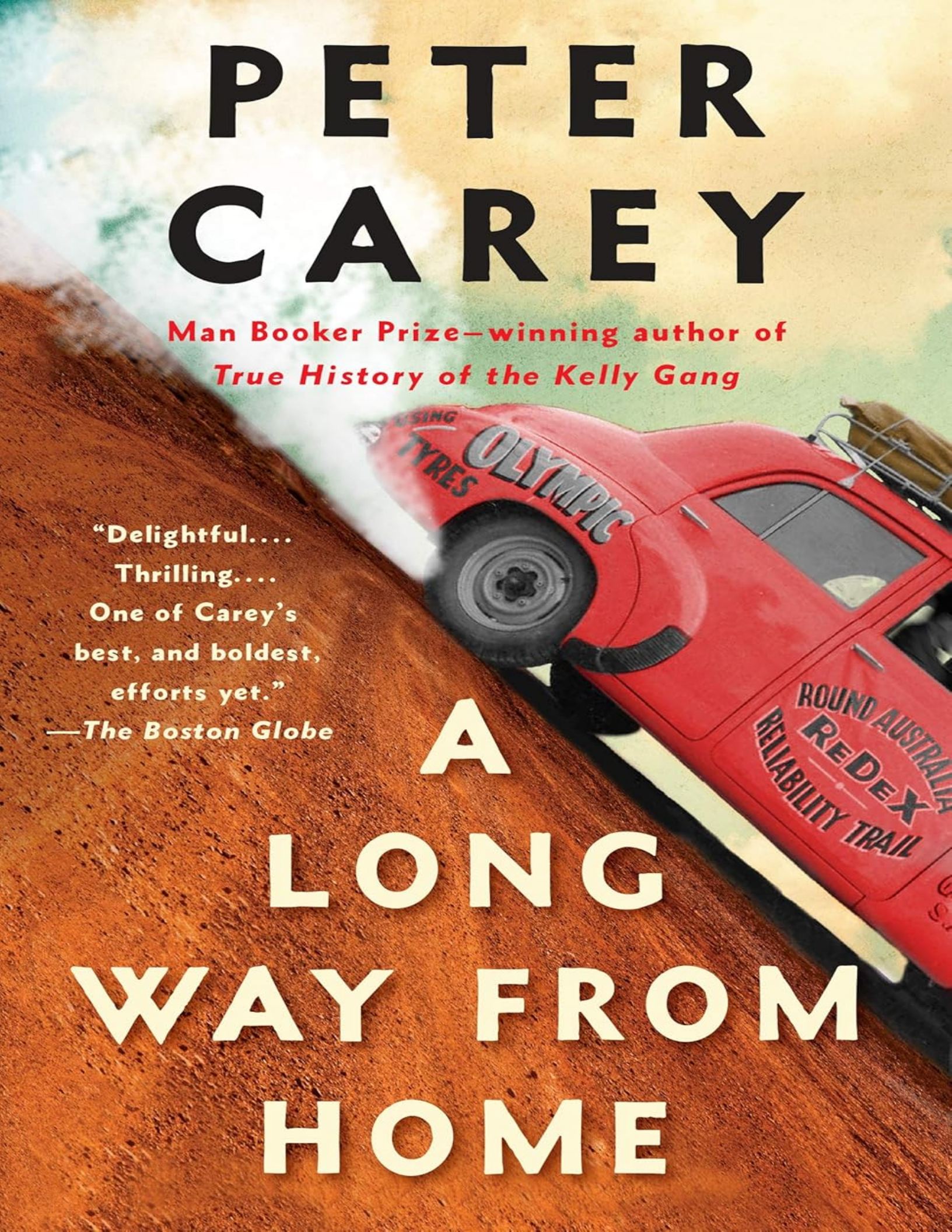
# PETER CAREY

Man Booker Prize–winning author of
*True History of the Kelly Gang*




"Delightful.... Thrilling.... One of Carey's best, and boldest, efforts yet."
—*The Boston Globe*

# A LONG WAY FROM HOME

# ABOUT THE BOOK

Irene Bobs loves fast driving. Her husband is the best car salesman in western Victoria. Together they enter the Redex Trial, a brutal race around the ancient continent over roads no car will ever quite survive.

With them is their lanky fair-haired navigator, Willie Bachhuber, a quiz show champion and failed schoolteacher whose job it is to call out the turns, the grids, the creek crossings on a map that will finally remove them, without warning, from the lily-white Australia they know so well.

This thrilling, high-speed story starts in one way and then takes you someplace else. It is often funny, the more so as the world gets stranger, and always a page-turner, even as you learn a history these characters never knew themselves. Set in the 1950s amid the consequences of the age of empires, this brilliantly vivid and lively novel reminds us how Europeans took possession of a timeless culture – the high purpose they invented and the crimes they committed along the way.

Peter Carey has twice won the Booker Prize for his explorations of Australian history. *A Long Way from Home* is his late-style masterpiece.

Penguin
Random House
Australia

Peter Carey

# A Long Way From Home

HAMISH HAMILTON
*an imprint of*
PENGUIN BOOKS

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# 1

For a girl to defeat one father is a challenge, but there were two standing between me and what I wanted, which was – not to fiddle-faddle – a lovely little fellow named Titch Bobs.

The first father was my own. When he discovered that I, his teeny Irene, his little mouse, his petite sized mademoiselle, had, all by herself, proposed matrimony to a man of five foot three, he spat his Wheaties in his plate.

Titch's father was number two. He came out of the gate at a gallop, one hundred percent in favour. I was a beauty, a bobby-dazzler until, in the hallway by the coat stand, he gave me cause to slap his face.

My sister was older and more 'experienced'. She could not see why I would want so small a husband. Did I plan to breed a team of mice? Ha bloody ha. Beverly was five foot two and a half, and always breaking off engagements to lanky Lurch or gigantic Dino, or the famous football player whose name I am not ignorant enough to mention. I would have been afraid to shake his hand, forget the other business.

Beverly made her bed and got what you might expect i.e. thirty-hour labours and heads as big as pumpkins. My own children were as tiny and perfect as their daddy, ideal in their proportions, in the lovely coordination of their limbs, in the pink appley cheeks they inherited from Titch, the smile they got from me. My sister could not abide my happiness. She would spend years looking for evidence that it was 'fake'. When the first husband ran away to New Zealand she wrote me a spiteful letter saying I was more interested in my husband than in my kiddies. She said her boys were everything to her. She knew, she wrote, I only married Titch because of the money I could get from him. She was upset, of course. Why wouldn't she be? She had married a bastard. She was divorced 'without a penny' so could she

please go and live in the childhood home we had both inherited and whose sale she had always managed to impede? Could Titch and I have used the money? She didn't ask. Would it have changed our lives? Of course. I agreed on a peppercorn rent and kept my feelings to myself.

Beverly liked to say that I was wilful, which was an idea she had got from Mum. But Mum liked me being wilful. She got a real kick from seeing how I got my way. Of course she was a bit the same, Mum, and she was blessed with such neat level teeth and cheekbones, you would do anything to see her smile, even if you had to buy her a washing machine to make her do it. She got Dad to purchase the Ford which was what brought Titch to our door in Geelong, Victoria, Australia. It was Victory in Europe Day, May 8, 1945.

No-one will ever know how Mum planned to utilise the Ford. Drive down to Colac and see her sister after church? That was one story not even Dad could swallow. Didn't matter. He went on and wrote the cheque to the salesman, Dan Bobst who, as I discovered when I opened the front door on V-E Day, had thrown in 'free' driving lessons which would be supplied by his sonny. Oh Lord, what a sight that sonny was, there on our front porch with his cardboard suitcase on a Tuesday morning. I learned he was to stay with us.

Poor Mum, alas, she never got to put the key in the ignition and everyone was so upset and busy with the funeral, no-one told the young man that he should leave. He had nowhere else to stay, so he unpacked his 'port' and 'awaited instructions' as he later liked to say. The Ford was parked in our drive, with no sign that it was now part of the deceased estate.

My mum was in the Mount Duneed Cemetery and the new boarder was the only one who helped me go through her things. He said nothing about the car or about the lessons he had been expecting to give to the deceased. He asked me if I knew how to drive. I told him that if he could be home by six at night he could have tea with us. In the midst of all the sadness the pretty red-cheeked man was a great comfort I could not do without. I held my breath. I cooked for him and he scraped his plate clean and helped with the drying up. He was neat. When I cried, he comforted me. He left talcum powder on the bathroom floor.

In the nights at Western Beach, when you could hear the forlorn anchor chains of the old warships anchored in Corio Bay, he told me stories of his father which he thought were funny. These were more important than I

knew. In any case my eyes stung hot to hear that the lovely boy had broken his arm swinging the prop of the wretched father's monoplane, and that the old bully had taught him to land by sitting behind him in the navigator's seat and thumping his slender back with his fist until he pushed the stick down sufficiently, that he abandoned him to stay with a pair of old Irish bachelors at Bullengarook until they had learned to drive their purchase. The sonny was named Titch although he was sometimes Zac which was what they called a sixpence and a zac was therefore half a shilling or half a bob, which was, of course, his father's name. Forget it. He was always Titch, God Jesus, and it seemed I was put on earth to love your tortured body and your impy joyous soul.

How could I predict, dear Beverly, what sort of life my heart's desire would lead me to? Our dad was still alive on the day I first set eyes on Titch. My babies were not yet born. I couldn't drive a car. We had not yet arrived at the era of Holden Versus Ford. There was not even a Redex Around Australia Reliability Trial although that, the greatest Australian car race of the century, is the story I will get to in the end.

I was married the same day I got my driving licence. I drove us a hundred miles to Warragul myself. After that we moved to Sale, then Bairnsdale and Titch sold Fords for his father who always short-changed him on commission. My new husband was ideal in almost every way, and I knew that even before I understood his genius, which was the last thing you'd look for in a car salesman. He did not know how to lie, or so it seemed. He never exaggerated, unless to make a joke. He was funny, he was cheeky. He told me he had perfected the art of not being hit which was just as well, seeing the bars he did business in.

We lived in boarding houses and rented rooms and ate whole flocks of mutton but incredibly we were happy, even if his dad was in the room next door. Sometimes we made ourselves sick with laughing, rolling round the carpet on a Sunday afternoon. That should have been enough for anyone.

My father-in-law was always lurking. I did not tell Titch the disgusting things he had suggested to me. He never heard them, thank the Lord. Nor did my husband seem to notice the insults against himself. Dan Bobs was not a handsome fellow but he preened with his comb so constantly he finally lost his hair. Titch was blind to the vanity. He would sit and listen as the scoundrel bragged endlessly about his exploits. I endured all this for years

until the old man found a Melbourne woman who would tolerate him. When he announced his retirement in the *Warragul Express*, I did not dare believe it.

Dan had a lifetime of cuttings in his scrapbook. He had the first pilot's licence in Australia. He had flown planes and got reported when he crashed them. He had raced Fords from Melbourne to Sydney. He had sold cars from farm to farm in the muddy dairy district of Gippsland and flat volcanic plains of Sunbury where he did business in the old-school style, that is, left his son behind to give the driving lessons. Was he giving up the game? Or was this 'retirement' just another chance to be written up?

Edith was already seven. Ronnie had just been born. I tucked him in his pram so I could help shift his grandfather's possessions into his trailer. Ronnie woke up dirty and hungry but I would not go to him until I had lashed a tarpaulin over Dan's oily junk. Even then I waited, watching that red tail-light turn the corner by the Lodge.

Soon we had a postcard from 'Mrs Donaldson' who introduced herself as the old man's 'housekeeper'. Then there came an envelope containing a clipping from the *Mordialloc Advertiser*. He had set himself up as a scrap dealer. Mrs Donaldson said they had a 'grand' backyard. 'Danny' had put a sign over the front gate: THE OLDEST AIRMAN IN THE WORLD. He sold war disposals and the occasional used car. He made another sign: IF YOU CAN'T FIND IT HERE, IT DOESN'T EXIST ON EARTH. A photograph was delivered: we saw he had 'modified' the front verandah so it was now held up by aeroplane propellers.

AVIATOR RETIRES TO WATTLE STREET.

Dan would never ask us direct for money. He would, instead, turn up with, say, a water pump for a '46 Ford. Titch did not need it, but I could never get him to refuse his dad.

Beverly would say I always got my own way, but it was Beverly who got her way, refusing to get a job, or budge from our Geelong house. There was enough money locked up there to start a dealership, but Titch never questioned me, never argued, never insisted.

When Dan had left us to bully Mrs Donaldson I found a property for rent in Bacchus Marsh, a small town in a rural district Titch was long familiar with. Titch had hopes to build up a used car business so we could finally be

Ford dealers. I chose the house with this in mind. It had a huge yard and a big shed spanning the width of the back fence. Titch was tickled pink.

You could say that ’s where the story starts, at the site of our planned business, observed by the next door neighbour, a fair-haired bachelor with a strong jaw and absent bottom, cinched in trousers, crumply face, deep frown marks on his forehead. He found me in my overalls with a spanner in my hand. Himself, he held a colander, some sort of gift, and I saw the sad fond way he had with the kids and I thought it might be a bad idea to be too kind to him, for everything in life begins with kindness.

We had no plan to take advantage of him.

# 2

Mrs Bobs did not know the first thing about me, for instance that I was a chalk-and-talker, recently suspended for hanging a troublesome student out of a classroom window. She did not know that I was sought by bailiffs, that I was a regular on *Deasy's Radio Quiz Show* where my winnings were publicly announced each week. She did not know that I was a mess of carnal yearning and remorse, that my small weatherboard house was now legally a fire hazard, its floors and tables crammed with books and papers. A putative visitor would be compelled to travel crabwise down the hallway, between the illegal bookshelves, from front door to the sink. The kitchen table was a catastrophe, piled high with damp washing and academic quarterlies and musty pulp novels featuring Detective Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte ('Bony') of the Queensland Police Force.

Oh, a bookworm, she would later say.

I spent my entire life in Australia with the conviction that it was a mistake, that my correct place was elsewhere, located on a map with German names. I had lived with the expectation that something spectacular would happen to me, or would arrive, deus ex machina, and I was, in this sense, like a man crouched on a lonely platform ready to spring aboard a speeding train. I had run away from Adelaide when I should I have stayed home in the parsonage. I had married when I would have been happier single. I had fled my wife's adultery, left the only job that ever suited me and come to Bacchus Marsh to teach the notorious second form. And still I waited for my salvation, like the pastor's son I was, with an impatience that made my toes squirm inside my thirsty shoes. I had certainly been anticipating my new neighbours, although I could not have imagined anything like this.