



The Tax Inspector

Peter Carey

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Granny Catchprice runs her family business (and her family) with senility, cunning, and a handbag full of explosives. Her daughter Cathy would rather be singing Country & Western than selling cars, while Benny Catchprice, sixteen and seriously psychopathic, wants to transform a failing auto franchise into an empire—and himself into an angel. Out of the confrontation between the Catchprices and their unwitting nemesis, a beautiful and very pregnant agent of the Australian Taxation Office, Peter Carey, author of **Oscar and Lucinda**, creates an endlessly surprising and fearfully convincing novel.

The Tax Inspector Details

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From Reader Review The Tax Inspector for online ebook

John Kenny says

The Tax Collector by Peter Carey tells the story of a young heavily pregnant Tax Inspector called Maria Takis tasked with conducting an audit of Catchprice Motors in the small backwater of Franklin on the outskirts of Sydney in the State of New South Wales, Australia. That may sound boring, but it's the Catchprice family that are the real stars in this ever so slightly bizarre novel. Granny Catchprice, who believes she still runs the company, is wonderfully realised as a character, and the flashbacks to her childhood and early adulthood and the original dream she had for the business are worthy of a novel in their own right. Her son, Mort, who manages the repair end of things, is one of the most repellent characters I've come across in a long while and yet Carey doesn't resort to any of the obvious clichés in letting us know what he is really like. Her daughter, Cathy, does run the family business, along with her husband, but dreams of extracting herself to pursue her career as a Country and Western singer. Granny Catchprice's grandson, Benny, who is continually passed over for promotion and actually fired by Cathy at the beginning of the book, simply won't stay fired and secretly wants to become an angel.

Benny becomes obsessed with Maria despite a big age difference, and Maria is drawn to Mort's charismatic brother, Jack, who has pursued a career as a property developer and returns to Catchprice Motors to stave off the imminent disaster of her discovery of long standing tax evasion. As several of the characters become increasingly unstable and things spiral out of control, the story becomes one of lost dreams and the awfulness of being trapped in the stifling confines of other people's failed dreams. I read recently that Carey's family ran a car dealership when he was a child and I wonder how much of this novel is based on actual experience. I hope it's very little; the Catchprice family is one of the strangest dysfunctional groups of people you're likely to encounter in literature.

David says

This story, published in 1993, has many of the features that seem to be characteristic of Carey's novels:

- * gothic family drama played out by eccentric, larger-than-life (yet oddly appealing) characters
- * dark simmering family secrets (nearly everyone is haunted by ghosts from the past)
- * sporadic alcohol or rage-fueled acts of extreme violence
- * at least one character (generally male) who is completely batshit crazy
- * a wildly original plot, whose plausibility doesn't hold up under careful scrutiny, but which is made palatable by
- * the author's natural gift for storytelling (excellent pacing and tight construction) and
- * writing that is polished and highly readable

There are worse formulas, and so far I've not read anything by Carey that's been a complete dud. "The Tax Inspector" falls in the middle of the pack - an enjoyable read, but not his best, in my opinion. Aspects that I thought didn't work all that well included:

MINOR SPOILER ALERT (though if you haven't figured out by page 20 that this story is going to end with a bang, you're not paying attention)

Things were just a little too gothic - the rampant dysfunction within the Catchprice family, ranging from the gelignite-toting grandma to the psychopathic 16-year old, Benny, (whose initial meltdown precipitates the havoc that unfolds as the story progresses), is just a little too over the top to carry much of an emotional charge

Why does the deep dark family secret always have to be incest propagated across the generations?

Practically the first thing we're told about Granny Catchprice is that she carries a stick of gelignite in her handbag at all times. Which means, by a simple application of Chekhov's law of the loaded gun, that we know how things will turn out. So where was the suspense?

The whole Sarkis story arc seemed entirely tangential and added little to the overall development

For that matter, the tax inspector character was dull, and the integration of her story (such as it was) with that of the crazy Catchprice clan was kind of clumsy

These criticisms are actually pretty minor. Because, as in his other books, Carey's gift for telling a good yarn, his ability to pull the reader into the eccentric milieu of his characters and make us care about those characters (even the weird ones) more than compensate for minor structural weaknesses. So that this was a very enjoyable read. While I don't think it qualifies for a fourth star, it does make me want to keep reading his stuff.

Have I mentioned that Peter Carey has a wicked sense of humor?

Henry says

The first Peter Carey novel i have read and i really enjoyed it. He creates memorable, believable almost unforgettable characters with immense skill an so you end up forgiving him the over the top aspects as it all seems so believable. But at the end i did think, so what was the point in that and wasnt it a bit desperate in the use of sexual trauma for drama but he seemed to have a lot of fun writing it and i had a lot of fun reading it.

Sinéad Morgan says

A recurring trope in writing Australian suburbia is escape and transcendence of suburbia or outer suburban Franklin in Peter Carey's novel *The Tax Inspector* from and of suburbia as the site of physical and psychological abjection. Robert Dixon feels that Carey's outer suburban allegory misses the mark in its conflation of systemic corruption with private transgressions (45). Maria's the Tax Inspector's investigation of Catchprice Motors reveals more private transgressions than those to do with tax evasion when she becomes embroiled in the sordid Catchprice family legacy of sexual violence. Dixon's criticism of Carey's novel as an effective outer suburban allegory rests upon his assessment of the novel as flawed in its employment of sexual transgressions as a mode of representation of broader issues of social decline.

Certain forms of sexual abuse, such as incest are often conceptualized as a pathology and as such, Carey's project pathologizes outer suburbia. In two almost identically worded moments in the novel, Granny Catchprice rehearses a narrative about her daughter, Cathy Catchprice's early childhood musical affinities.

The first of these moments occurs almost directly after the disturbing seduction scene between Benny and his father, who started molesting Benny when he was a toddler with the result that as a sixteen-year-old, Benny comes to symbolise the corruption of outer suburbia, a product of an ill-defined social decline. Almost seventy pages later, the passage is repeated with minor variations, following Granny Catchprice's reflection that:

[She] had made her life, invented it. When it was not what she wanted, she changed it. In Dorriggo, she called them maggots and walked away. She had gelignite in her handbag and Cacka was nervous, stumbling, too shy to even touch her breasts with his chest (228).

Then comes the revelation that precipitates Granny Catchprice's decision to finally put her hoard of gelignite to use; not only did her husband molest Benny but also Cathy, who implicates her in this transgression as having sat by knitting. The repetition of these two passages perhaps indicates them as a narrative Granny Catchprice rehearses as a form of selective amnesia of trauma. Indeed, if outer suburbia is represented as a pathological physical and psychological landscape in the Carey's novel, then Granny Catchprice's excision and elimination of Catchprice Motors at the conclusion of the novel fit the framework of this metaphor.

While Dixon's specific criticism of the novel is that it fails to diagnose the structural corruption that the private narrative of sexual transgressions the Catchprice family represents, there is perhaps an answer for this in the final lines of the second repeated passage, after Cathy confronts her mother about her childhood sexual abuse at the hands of their father:

She had the gelignite in her handbag when she met him. She had it in the butcher's. The detonators clinking around her neck. She had it there from the beginning (233).

These lines and Granny Catchprice's ultimate facial maiming after she sets off the gelignite to destroy Catchprice Motors imply perhaps that the root of the diseased landscape that is outer Australian suburbia lies within the older post-war generation and their values and ideals. The final solution according to Granny Catchprice is excision and removal, a clearing of the landscape just as she blasted tree stumps from earth decades earlier to establish a clean slate of land for her flower farm.

Margaret says

Did not finish. Not my kind of book. I will not read Peter Carey again

Tony says

Readers talk about Peter Carey's Hits and Misses. For me, his 'historical' novels, like *Jack Maggs* and *The True History of the Kelly Gang* are the home runs. The more contemporary he gets, in characters and themes, the less jaw-dropping he becomes. That was true, certainly, with the forgettable *His Illegal Self* and it's true here with *The Tax Inspector*, an earlier work. When one of the main characters is Johnny-turned-Vish, a Hare Krishna, the reader can be certain he is treading into the caricature form.

Still, it's Carey, so the book is undeniably readable, plot-driven. And when you see a few pages of solid dialogue coming up, you can be sure to be in for a treat. As when one self-deprecating character admits, "I ain't no oil painting."

You could do worse.

Denise Greenwood says

I was drawn in immediately. A strange story and disconcerting. I felt quite miserable at the end so I wouldn't want to read this again.

Andrea DeAngelis says

I'm not sure how Carey does it but he manages to tie in a flailing, failing car dealership, ne'er do well aspiring country western musicians getting their final break, the elderly matriach losing her mind and control over her children and their brood resorting to explosives to regain her power, a Hare Krishna grandson who keeps on becoming re-attached to his "attachments", a 8 month pregnant tax inspector conducting an audit on this outrageous family and the youngest of the Catchprice brood who is successfully losing his mind and becoming an angel of lust instead.

I think it is the strangest Peter Carey novel I've read yet. I expected so little of what happened. It's like a cult film I'll never get out of my head.

Rubberboots says

3.5 - From a slow start to being real page-turner, this is one of the most original stories I've read. The author takes us to unexpected places in the blink of an eye and does so very smoothly. Just the cast of characters makes this book worth reading. A 3.5 rating as I thought a couple of loose ends could have been expanded or tied up better, but overall a really enjoyable read.

Carmel McCartin says

Well-written, I liked his style but found the story to be strange and rather disturbing.

Gallusgal says

The latest in my Peter Carey retrospective. I have to admit that although I read this when it was originally published (1991) I remembered pretty much nothing about this, so it was rather like reading it for the first time.

This is a much more concise book than the previous novels (Illywhacker & Oscar and Lucinda). It is shorter – probably only about half the length – and it is also less wide ranging both geographically and timewise. The story is structured around four consecutive days, involving a relatively small cast of characters, and the occasion of a tax inspection of a failing car dealership in Franklin, a down at heel suburb of Sydney.

The road to Franklin is described as a “drab second rate landscape...[with a] lack of a single building or street, even one glimpsed in passing, that might suggest beauty or happiness” and this is a fitting backdrop for the usual Carey dysfunctional, damaged and (in some cases) deranged characters. The characters are sad, mad, or bad sometimes all at once, but they always seem real. They are given real lives and real backstories which gives even the craziest of actions (carrying around a stick of gelignite for 40 years, living in a cellar and believing you are an angel, loving your abuser) seem logical...to them, anyway.

The Catchpole family of car dealers is dysfunction in the extreme. Senile matriarch, Freida, might actually be the sanest – even with the gelly in her handbag.

The story deals with the generational pattern of abuse – father to son – and the way it is pushed into the shadows within the family, the complexities the relationships and the way that it can be known, but not owned.

Benny, the most abused and damaged of them all, is the most dangerous. Isolated and unhinged he is turning himself into an all powerful angel through the use of visualisation tapes and positive thinking mantra. (His brother has ‘escaped’ into the Hare Krishna movement, his aunt is trying to escape by going on the road with a Country & Western band with her husband who was also once a ‘lost boy’).

Armenian migrant, Sarkis, is recruited as a salesman, another fatherless, desperate boy, degraded by poverty – his further degradation at the hands of Benny is shocking.

Into all of this seething sourness and toxic crossfire walks the Tax Inspector. 30-something, pregnant, unhappy, at a crossroads in her life – but generally a force for good. She was proud to be a part of a clique of unashamedly vigilante tax collectors who go after the rich tax evaders and draw money into the public purse for the good of all. But a new wave of management is sidelining her, and her married lover does not want their baby, and she doesn’t really think that she does either. She has been sent to audit the Catchpoles, and she sees this as part of her punishment. These are not people committing crimes against society – these are victims of the system that she aspires to help rather than criminalise. As she gets drawn into the drama of their lives she becomes a part of a catastrophic unravelling of the Catchpole family story, with a truly explosive finale which is grisly, grotesque but also quite funny! And written with great confidence and style.

Just like in *Illywhacker* and *O&L*, PC focuses on families and the relationships within them, the damage done by those who love us the most, and how difficult it is to escape from their clutches.

He also explores the corrupting power of money and wealth – the luxury experienced at the expense of those who are scratching around in the industrial wasteland without hope of salvation. But he does give us hope – the Tax Inspector is the caped crusader, a modern day Robin Hood. And in *Jack Catchpole* we see the son who apparently has escaped from the family and has ‘done good’ - both financially and morally. And hopefully, the day after the book ends, there is a happy ending for him and the Tax Inspector.

Leigh Haber says

This book was a totally pleasant surprise. I was in Panama, on a way out in the middle of nowhere island, and this book had been left behind by someone. I'd never before read anything by Peter Carey, so decided to try it. I had just finished rereading *Song of Solomon*, by Toni Morrison, and didn't think anything so soon after would satisfy me. But this book had some of the same characteristics and qualities of the Morrison

novel, in that it was the story of a family scarred by history and past generations, although the Carey book takes place on an auto dealership in a town in Australia. I found it to be nearly great---it goes a little over the top at the end, almost descending into horror film territory. Still, there is a lot of greatness in it, and made me feel Peter Carey should be ranked way up there among contemporary writers

Patrick Barry says

Dysfunctional cannot begin to describe the family in this book. The most, no the only, sympathetic character is a tax auditor. The characters are bound to each other and somewhere in there is a plot. As they struggle against each other the book sinks until it is ultimately drowned in it's characters' sea of unlikable traits. There is some good writing here, but I could not like this book.

Sandy says

so far so good

Lthomas2you says

1990s Sidney. A family of broken people: Freida Catchprice, her son Mort and daughter Cathy own a car dealership that is almost bankrupt and about to be investigated for tax fraud. Two grandsons: John (Vishna, as he is now a Hare Krishna) and Lee who has decided to become a better angel. All struggle to realize their dreams. The spanner in the works is Maria Tarkis, an 8-month pregnant by her boss, tax inspector who sees a small amount of redemption in the family. Yet she is morally required to investigate the business. At times, dreamlike in re-telling of Freida's childhood, and sinister in the abuse that the boys in the family endure, the story comes to an explosive conclusion. Dark and disturbing.
Highly recommend
