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Folded Brains, Squashed Ambitions


Maria Tumarkin

In Theft, Peter Carey puts pure poetry into the mouths of two big, red-blooded, raving sons of a butcher from Bacchus Marsh. Carey delicately threads an uncommon tenderness through the novel’s chunky paragraphs, which are punctuated by the cursing and moaning of the brothers, who take turns to tell their tales. As foreshadowed by one of them, Theft is probably not “grand enough to be a tragedy”, but it is certainly vast and disarming enough to be a real love story.

Brother number one, Michael ‘Butcher Bones’ Boone, was once a famous artist, a greedy recipient of fame, critical acclaim and cash. Now, in the 1980s, he has fallen out of favour with collectors and galleries. Broke and embittered following a nasty divorce, Butcher Bones is close to becoming a caricature: a man with a bottle in one hand and a discounted paintbrush in the other. Wherever he runs, following close behind is his shadow, brother number two, the untamed Hugh ‘Slow Bones’ Boone. Unfit for school or work, Slow Bones is a 220-pound lump of pink, moist flesh; an “idiot-savant” not allowed to touch the light switch.

The brothers’ parallel narratives drive the book, sometimes at a sharp counterpoint to each other and at other times distinguishable only because of Slow Bones’s love of capitalisation. Slow Bones’s mad, poetic thoughts are startling in their vicious accuracy of characterisation, while Butcher Bones’s manic speech, bursting from his mouth, is by turns obscenely self-obsessed and giddy with love. Their narration is beautiful and funny as all hell.

And we need humour, no matter how angry or hurt, when things are so bad that the brothers Bones find themselves at the mercy of Butcher’s biggest collector, Jean-Paul Milan, a proprietor of a chain of dodgy nursing homes and an insatiable art acquisitionist. It is to his “house of few possessions”, an architect-designed mega-retreat in Bellingen, northern New South Wales, that the two brothers flee at the start of the book. Jean-Paul is their saviour and they are to be his home’s well-behaved, grateful caretakers.

And it is to this house, which the brothers proceed to trash, each in his own imbecilic fashion, that Marlene finds her way. Femme fatales are usually boring, but she is almost as intriguing a character as the two brothers whom she draws into – and this is simply the only way to describe it – the ride of their lives. Marlene is the daughter-in-law of the late Jacques Liebovitz, as influential a figure in the world of art, it seems, as his contemporary Picasso. She has come from New York to the god-forsaken shithole of Bellingen to authenticate a Liebovitz painting owned by Butcher Bones’s wealthy neighbour Dozy Boylan. Not that Dozy has told Butcher anything about his
valuable possession, despite the long conversations they have been having, lubricated by wine from Dozy’s cellar. Conversations, mind you, about plants and insects – Dozy’s great passions – and never about art.

Essentially, *Theft* is the story of three things: art, love and, of course, theft, which here means fraud, treachery, con-artistry. Love and deception are the bread and butter of literature, but *art*? As Carey has noted, novelists usually get it desperately wrong: “I had always sworn I would never write about painters or painting. Writers tend to misunderstand the nature of painting … it’s such a physical, difficult business.” But when Butcher Bones goes on an art-making rampage – 47 continuous days of compulsive painting comparable only, as Bones states without a hint of irony, to Van Gogh’s 60 days in Auvers-sur-Oise – Carey’s prose is so rich you could almost dip your fingers in it:

I screwed up my eyes and plunged the whirling shaft into the heart of Mars black, carbon black, graphite, two hundred and forty volts, one hundred rpm, phthalo green with alizarin crimson and I had started. I was in. I shook the drips off the last mix, what a very cold light-sucking black was lying there, a lovely evil thing captive in a can.

Reading this, you can feel Butcher Bones shaking; feel his lust for paints, the electricity between his fingers. He and the other two principal characters of *Theft* are so carefully rendered that readers see all the brushstrokes, all the undercoats, all the pigments of their colours. These are thickly layered, exhilarating canvases. The closer you come to them, the less you can be bothered to judge; you stare, close your eyes and breathe them in.

Then, as advertised, there is theft. Not simply theft, but lies and fraud, and the art-police knocking on the door. Fakes extolled and then destroyed by museums; millions of dollars changing hands; *droit moral*, the right to authenticate. Underneath it all is the tricky matter of art’s true value, and Butcher Bones’s unanswered question: “How do you know how much to pay if you don’t know what it’s worth?”

There is almost as much love in *Theft* as there is art and its attendant deceptions. And it is not all about Marlene or “two hundred and forty volts” of carbon black. It is about the relationship between the two brothers, which precedes and surpasses all the other love stories. Two brothers who know each other to their bare bones and deeper still, and who love each other in a heartbreaking way:

I embraced the huge smelly ridiculous thing, holding his bristly neck while he squeezed the breath from me and cackled in my ear … Who could explain the dark puzzle of Slow Bones’ folded brain …

Two brothers, who are each other’s keepers and each other’s undoing. Folded brains, squashed ambitions, farts galore.