First published in 2000, True History of the Kelly Gang by Australian author Peter Carey isn’t merely just any historical novel. Despite its title and the spurious authenticity, it is a brilliant piece of fiction combined with its fair share of imagined historical impersonations. The novel portrays the life of the main protagonist Ned Kelly - the famous Australian bushranger and one of Australia’s most enduring folk heroes. It won the 2001 Man Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize in the same year.

“What is it about we Australians, eh?” a schoolteacher, Thomas Cunrow, demands at the end of the novel. “What is wrong with us? Do we not have a Jefferson? A Disraeli? Might we not find someone better to admire than a horse-thief and a murderer?” Throughout this novel Carey seems to questioning this very popular conception of Kelly just being a thug, a thief and a coldblooded killer.
Most of the novel is from the perspective of Ned Kelly himself. The text accounts for most of Kelly’s life - starting from when he was three to the famous last stand of the Kelly Gang at Glenrowan and thus tracking his rise (and fall) as an outlaw. The memoir, through the means of which Kelly wants to convey his “true history”, is divided up into thirteen ‘parcels’ written by Kelly himself for his baby daughter whom he is yet to see. “I lost my own father at 12 yr. of age” he begins, “and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences”. He promises her daughter that the letters “will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false.”

Set against an Australian background (northeast Victoria to be precise), Ned was born in 1955 to his “brave parents” who were “ripped from Ireland like teeth from the mouth of their own history”, and whose “every dear familiar thing had been abandoned on the docks of Cork or Galway or Dublin”. Born in a period when the “traps” (Policemen) and the “squatters” were mostly of British origin, the novel highlights the injustice these “poor Irish” suffered at their hands. The fundamentally corrupt system even makes one of the characters ask the question - “what did we ever do to them that they should torture us like this?” The childhood events have such an impact on Ned that he wonders in the letters to his daughter “How queer and foreign it must seem to you and all the coarse words and cruelty which I now relate are far away in ancient time.”

Carey throws us directly into the perspective of a 3 year old Kelly who is caught in the middle of this struggle. His very first memory is that of his mother crying because his 15 year old uncle Jimmy had been “arrested by the traps”. The disturbing image of a police officer’s “fingernails so clean they looked like they was washed in lye” ripping his “mother’s cake apart” while on a visit to Jimmy and the mention of his “quiet” grandfather who was captured, imprisoned and later on exiled to Victoria also straight away presents the audience with an idea that his family has been mistreated by the law.

Ned grew up adoring his mother Ellen whose infamous Quinn family name and provocative nature led to many altercations with the police and administration over the years. The reader can’t help but sympathize with Kelly who lived in a society where there was a “doubtless stank of poverty a strong odour” about him
“like wet dogs”, where he was mocked behind his foot for being barefoot, where he lived under a roof that kept “leaking above the camp oven”. Whenever sad, Ned used to bury his face into his “floursack pillow”, and this effect is further exaggerated through his misery at watching his parents argue, wishing that he had known them “when they truly loved each other”. The mind of the young kid is shown to be more affected by the insults rather than the poverty itself -

*Tis not poverty I hate the most
nor the eternal groveling
but the insults which grow on it
which not even leeches can cure

He was forced into a life of crime after being apprenticed by his own mother to the bush ranger Harry Power. The young boy, however, “never knew he were being taught the path of his life.” In 1970, Ned was sentenced to six months of labor under the charges of an assault. The following year he was imprisoned for unknowingly receiving a stolen horse. The troubles and run-ins with the law continued for the Kelly family as Ned shuffled in and out of jail through most of his teenage years. Outraged at the perceived justice after Ellen was imprisoned for three years following a face-off with a police officer named Fitzpatrick; Ned, his brother Dan, together with accomplices Joe Byrne and Steve Hart, became bushrangers and flee to the countryside. In 1878, on some “day of horror”, Ned and his accomplices killed three policemen in a shootout at the outskirts of Melbourne. More raids and bank robberies continued until the vividly detailed final gunfight at Glenrowan in 1980 where all members of the Kelly gang other than Ned were shot down and killed while Ned himself, “clad in solid steel-plate armour one quarter of an inch thick” and a “crude steel helmet like a bucket”, got shot in his legs and is captured.

The presentation and the language used by Carey could hardly be more impactful and unique. The untidy and ungrammatical prose (indicative of Kelly’s illiterate background) coupled with a coarse and ragged flow in an unpunctuated manner
 MAKES ONE APPRECIATE THE LOVELY COMMAS!) TOOK SOME TIME TO GET USED TO. BUT ONCE ONE GETS HABITUAL OF THIS STRANGE YET SEEMINGLY WONDERFUL AND AT TIMES POETIC NARRATIVE VOICE OF KELLY’S, IT ALMOST MAKES ONE IMAGINE HEARING HIS IRISH ACCENT WHILE READING. EACH CHAPTER (‘PARCEL’) OF THIS MEMOIR BEGINS WITH A DESCRIPTION OF IT’S THE “DOGEARED” PAGES. FOR INSTANCE, THE FIRST PARCEL IS WRITTEN ON “45 SHEETS OF MEDIUM STOCK (8’ × 10’ APPROX.) WITH STABHOLES NEAR THE TOP”. THESE TECHNIQUES ADD TO THE FEELING OF AUTHENTICITY OF HIS FICTIONAL TEXT. GIVEN THAT THE LETTERS WERE MEANT TO BE READ BY HIS SWEET LITTLE DAUGHTER, KELLY USES EUHEMISMS TO GRACEFULLY CENSOR THE LINGUAL VULGARITIES IN HIS LETTERS THUS PROVIDING THE AUTHOR A MEANS TO HIGHLIGHT KELLY’S OBVIOUS MOODINESSES AND DIRECTNESS TO THE READERS.

“She cried I would kill the b——ds if I were a man God help me. She used many rough expressions I will not write them here. It were eff this and ess that and she would blow their adjectival brains out.”

Carey uses this non-pretentious narrative voice of Kelly very effectively to lace the text with twinges of wit, humor, full-paced action and deep rooted emotions as he traces his life. As for the story itself, it is an extraordinary and finally a tragic one. It is a brilliant bildungsroman of Kelly’s life that traces his life from the earlier “optimism” to his final “black mood”. Carey’s Kelly is someone who despite a constant desire for an honest life is forced to live his life as an outlaw just because the corrupt society doesn’t let him. He is a thoughtful, sensitive, loyal and brave outlaw of the outback whose love for his mother and Mary Hearn, the mother of his child, has been very beautifully depicted and the thing that he wants the most is for his story to be heard. Carey redresses the notion of Kelly being a cold-blooded killer by introducing an element of remorse in Kelly’s character as his skin goes “sour with death” when the Kelly gang kills the three policemen. He even tells his unborn daughter, “it weren’t nothing to do with death at all it were its very opposite you was my future right away from that moment you was my life.” And the moment he alludes to a Robin Hood routine and raises a band of rebels, the reader can’t help but just root for him during his journey towards becoming a legendary martyr.
The narrative of the text is so overwhelming and the emotions so detailed that the ragged prose of the text is almost hypnotic. The events throughout the novel are as gripping as someone may wish to read be it the ambush or the boxing match, the fight with Fitzpatrick or the final shootdown. Kelly just doesn’t “give an eff” and lays down all the facts on the table for the reader (his daughter) to interpret. Carey has indeed accomplished the enormous task of bringing a distant fairytale back to life in the form of “True History of the Kelly Gang” and that too with an effing bang. Definitely worth reading and “may I burn in Hell if I speak false.”