



## The Chemistry of Tears

*Peter Carey*

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## **The Chemistry of Tears** Peter Carey

An automaton, a secret love story, a man and a woman who can never meet, and the fate of the warming world are all brought to incandescent life in this haunting new novel from one of the most admired writers of our time.

When Catherine Gehrig, a museum conservator and clock expert, finds out that her very married lover of thirteen years has dropped dead, she has keep her grief a secret. But with no outlet other than vodka, her sorrow is close to driving the hyper-rational Catherine mad. The only person who knew of their affair--her boss--tries to distract and rescue her by giving her a project that demands all of her attention: the reconstruction of an elaborate nineteenth-century automaton. In the crates containing its bits and pieces, Catherine discovers a series of notebooks written by Henry Brandling, who, in 1854, commissioned the extraordinary, eerie mechanical creature in an attempt to bring joy to his consumptive little son. Henry's is a personal account of his adventures in the wilds of Germany, a diary that brings Catherine unexpected comfort, fellow feeling and wonder. But it is the automaton itself, in its beautiful, uncanny imitation of life, that links Henry's life to Catherine's, as both are confronted with the miracle and catastrophe of human invention, and the body's astonishing chemistry of love and feeling.

## **The Chemistry of Tears Details**

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Author : Peter Carey

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## From Reader Review The Chemistry of Tears for online ebook

### E. Adeline says

I really wanted to like this book. I should love this book, as the blurb on the back makes it sound exactly like the sort of novel I would not only pick up to read once, but return to again and again.

Sadly, this is not the case.

The book centers around Catherine Gehrig, a conservator at a London museum, who tries to deal with the grief of losing her lover. As she grapples with this grief, her boss entrusts her with a mechanical bird he wants her to restore. The crates bearing the different parts also include a set of ten notebooks written by the man who commissioned the bird to be built for his ill son. The reader, then, gets chapters from the point-of-view of Catherine, the man (Henry Brandling), and a mixture of the two. As the back of the book states, "Through the clockwork bird, Henry and Catherine will confront the mysteries of creation, the power of human invention, and the body's astonishing chemistry of love and feeling." Sounds awesome, right?

The book had so much potential. Its first mistake comes from the fact that the mechanical bird, easily the most interesting aspect of the novel, becomes completely overshadowed by domestic issues. There is far less of the restoration process and an excess of Catherine's problems, which I really couldn't be bothered to care about. I had a difficult time connecting with Catherine. Henry was quite a charming character, and I thought his motivation to construct the bird was endearing, but both of them could use more complexity behind their actions. Soon enough, how they felt just became repetitious and I stopped seeing character growth. As someone who adores character novels, I would have liked the novel more if the characters had been given more room to grow. This was a character novel, but not a well executed one.

The level of absurdity within the novel was maddening, as well. I can't begin to understand the motives behind Eric (who needs a hobby so he stops interfering with other people's business) and Amanda. Neither of them made any sense to me at all and their actions constantly disoriented me and took me out of the novel.

I enjoyed the fairy tale aspect of the novel, but it could have been built up a bit more. Some of the prose was also quite beautiful and clear.

What ultimately maddened me the most and is the reason I only gave the novel two stars was the end. I felt that the text hadn't earned the last twenty or so pages. The question of human existence and other worlds hadn't been prevalent throughout the novel, then it was suddenly shoved into the narration and made to be this huge deal. It wasn't clear what it brought to the overall story arch and what its purpose was within the space of the novel. Were there interesting questions brought up? Yes. These questions weren't developed, though, and could have been developed a lot better.

Thus, not a book I enjoyed. It's tolerable at parts, but holistically there are far too many character and plot holes to make me want to read this book again.

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### Teresa says

#### 3 and 1/2 stars

I read Carey's "Oscar and Lucinda" with an online group many years ago and I'm wishing I could've done the

same with this, my second of his novels. Though I recognize his many merits, I'm just not sure Carey is for me.

I was reminded of Oscar as I read about Henry. Both are men who find themselves on a strange journey in a strange place due to an obsession, obsessions that border on madness and have to do with the building of a folly at the intersection of Art and Science. Henry is not the only one with an obsession, however. The past and present are full of obsessors.

I alternated between liking and not liking the voices Carey used for his main characters. I didn't like Catherine's and then I did. I liked Henry's and then I didn't, but that may have been because Sumper's voice (through Henry) basically takes over Henry's at many points, and I found Sumper, for the most part, boring -- but isn't that the case with obsessors we are forced to listen to -- even Henry tells us he is bored with Sumper. I admired the flawless construction when Carey mixed Catherine's voice with Henry's.

I think I would've benefited from reading this book with a group, being able to bat around ideas, of which there are many -- especially when it came to the ending, which I thought was brilliantly written and yet I'm still not sure what it all means.

And even though Carey may not be for me, I still intend to read his "Jack Maggs."

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### **Angela Elizabeth says**

Disappointing for the latest book from such a significant writer. I've never been much of a fan of Carey, but this book is even more disappointing than I expected. I was hopeful I would love it, as the subject matter was right up my alley. The plot is wonderful, a gift for any author - following the death of her secret lover, an antique watchmaker and antiquities specialist at the British museum is forced to grieve in complete silence lest her secret be discovered, until she learns some friends already know and are her willing allies, whisking her away to a quiet warehouse where she may grieve in private and work on a mysterious new piece to take her mind off things. Great! I loved the character and wanted to know how she would survive. When she discovers a secret journal among the boxes in which her mystery object is packed, the mystery deepens and a wonderful new character is introduced to the novel. Unfortunately, this is where it all begins to go wrong! Had Carey focused on these characters, telling their stories and interweaving their private grief, this would have been a wonderful novel. But instead, Carey digresses and introduces a plethora of new characters the point of whom I still fail to fathom. The novel starts off wonderfully, but unfortunately, Carey loses his way. I hate to see a good idea go to waste - this one could have been great!

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### **Annabel Smith says**

This novel seemed promising but never really reeled me in.

Catherine Gehrig, grief stricken at the death of her (secret)lover, throws herself into her work at a London museum, restoring an enormous complex automaton. Along the way she learns the story of Henry Brandling, who commissioned the design of the automaton for his dying son, a century earlier.

Neither Catherine nor Henry are particularly sympathetic characters. Catherine is prickly and difficult and though this is attributable to her grief, it didn't make me like her anymore. Henry is endearing, especially in his love for his child, but his story unfortunately becomes hijacked by the story of the automaton's creator,

the annoying and verbose Sumper, whose own story also gets hijacked eventually by the story of Sumper's mentor. Which I found all rather dull.

There was some lovely writing - "Henry's saw-tooth pen strokes had cut wormholes into time...Through one of these wormholes, as thin as a drinking straw, I had seen all that bright and poisonous invention" - and I found the relationship between Catherine and her assistant dramatic and interesting to read.

But overall the book was just too cryptic for me. At one point Catherine muses on Henry Brandling's story: "what was initially confusing would never be clarified no matter how you stared and swore at it. One learned to live with fuzziness and ambiguity" But I'm afraid I didn't learn to live with fuzziness and ambiguity. At the end of the book I understood that some epiphany had occurred but I didn't know what it was and I wasn't sufficiently interested to re-read it and work it out. Which isn't really the mark of a great book, is it?

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## Ron Charles says

Peter Carey's new novel is about robots. I think. And grief. Yes, I'm positive it's got something to do with grief. And art restoration, computers and global warming. And possibly space aliens, but don't quote me on that. The Australian two-time Booker winner, who lives in New York, is one of my all-time favorite novelists. For more than 30 years, he's published dazzlingly smart stories about con artists and fanatics with deceptions nested inside confusion tied up with madness. But his latest novel pulls those strings of madness a little too tight to unpack. It took me back to A.S. Byatt's "My Life as a Fake" (2003), he scanned the slippery lines of a fraudulent poem; in "Theft" (2006), he swirled through the palette of art forgery. In "The Chemistry of Tears," his heroine picks through hundreds of corroded springs, tarnished silver rings and glass rods gunked up with old glue. Descended from a line of clockmakers, she's a horologist who could recognize the angle of Whitworth screw threads since she was 10. She quickly realizes that the pieces she's charged with reassembling compose something like the mechanical digesting duck that Jacques de Vaucanson constructed in the mid-18th century. Or they may hold the evidence to humanity's impending destruction. Or I may have been snacking on too many paint chips from an old windowsill.

In any case, the key to this historical, mechanical and possibly metaphysical mystery is 11 faded notebooks found among the decrepit machine parts. The peculiar style of the handwriting convinces Catherine "that the writer had been driven mad," which sounds a little crazy itself, but hang on. Violating the museum's rules (and common sense), she takes these notebooks home and begins reading the remarkable tale of a wealthy young man named Henry Brandling. In 1854, Henry got it into his head that only a replica of Vaucanson's duck could cheer up his sickly little boy, so he traveled to Germany in search of a clockmaker capable of re-creating such a machine. (The logic of that motivation may be the rustiest spring in this novel.)

As Catherine slowly reconstructs the automaton in her modern-day workshop, alternating chapters take us back into the Black Forest, where Henry has employed a manic, and possibly murderous, genius. The mysterious manuscript, the increasingly bizarre picaresque voyage, and the grotesque characters Henry meets along the way are all classic Carey tropes, and very quickly several fascinating themes start to shoot and snort out of this Rube Goldberg plot.

Catherine notes that "it was highly 'inappropriate' to give a grieving woman that task of simulating life." But like us, she can't resist wanting to see what this thing can do. The violation of that line between animate and inanimate haunts her, just as it disturbs Henry in his journal. They both know the way grief drives us toward inventions that can't satisfy the heart. "Really, truly," she thinks, "anyone who has ever observed a

successful automaton, seen its uncanny lifelike movements, confronted its mechanical eyes, any human animal remembers that particular fear, that confusion about what is alive and what cannot be born.” Dr. Frankenstein to the aviary — stat!

Henry realizes too late that he’s employed a craftsman who has something much more radical in mind than a mechanical duck. Is it blasphemous to create such artificial life? And is 19th-century Germany a safe place to be scratching at superstitions? As the gears of this story start to spin, I worried about losing a finger amid all the flying parts: the Brothers Grimm, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Charles Babbage’s calculating machine, the internal combustion engine, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, global warming, Prince Albert, extraterrestrial life.

Don’t worry, I literally can’t give away this plot. .??.

Amid the smoke of mysticism rising from these pages, how reassuring it is to come upon Catherine’s complaint that “the account was filled with violent and disconcerting ‘jump cuts.’ . . . In fact, you soon learned that what was initially confusing would never be clarified no matter how you started and swore at it. One learned to live with fuzziness and ambiguity in a way one never would in life.”

That warning should be printed on the spine of “The Chemistry of Tears” for anyone tempted to peer into this “sea of ambiguity, delusion, wonder, possibility, amongst all the murk and confusion.” No other popular literary author is so wily — so willful about letting us remain in the fog. That confusion can be intoxicating, but several things make all this more frustrating than engaging. First, the plot has none of the steam-engine propulsion we’re used to in Carey’s novels. Shiny things twirl here, but they don’t go anywhere. And thematically, the story is full of feints and dead-ends meant to make us admit the limits of our humble vision. (Uncle!)

Finally, what Carey can create like no one else are rough, hypnotic voices. The scoundrel in “True History of the Kelly Gang,” the servant in “Parrot and Olivier in America” — each one is a larynx constructed of ink and paper. But, ironically for a novel all about artificial life, Carey can’t seem to pull off his signature magic. Henry and his mad clockmaker have their moments, yes, but Catherine’s grief is so extravagant and arch that we can see the pulleys and wires beneath her skin. No one reading these pages will ever scream, “It’s alive !”

The brilliant parts of this novel make it sound like another Carey masterpiece, but sometimes even though a thing walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s not.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

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## Adam says

I enjoyed Peter Carey's Parrot and Olivier in America in which the author tells an interesting tale using two separate 'voices', those of the two protagonists named in the title. The Chemistry of Tears also uses the same formula, but with a difference. The result is the narration of a peculiar adventure using a fascinating interweaving of two connected plots.

One of the voices speaks to us from times long past, the other from a woman rather than a man (ie the author). Thus, Carey set himself a fascinating challenge: to convince the reader that he or she is experiencing both the past and also that a woman is 'speaking' to him or her.

Catherine, who works as a clock restorer in a small London museum, is in mourning for her recently

deceased lover, a married man who also worked in the museum. Catherine's superior, Croft, is the only person who knew about this illicit relationship. He feels sorry for her, and gives her a new project to try to distract her from her grief. He leaves a number of crates in her office, and tells her to tackle the project when she feels up to it. She begins almost immediately.

The crates contain the dismantled components of an automaton built during the mid-19th century. They also contain a manuscript written by Henry Brandling, who commissioned the construction of this mechanical toy to entertain his ailing son.

Henry, writing in the 1850s, narrates what happened when he went to Germany to find a clock-maker capable of manufacturing what will turn out to be an extremely ingenious device. Chapters from his curious and somewhat sinister narrative alternate with Catherine's account of her life and problems that occur whilst she pieces together the extraordinary automaton.

Henry Brandling speaks from the past in language that makes one believe that the manuscript was actually written in the 1850s. This ability to make me convinced that I am hearing words from history whilst I read is what particularly appeals to me about Carey's historical writing.

In portraying Catherine's thoughts, Carey puts himself into a woman's shoes, so to speak. While he uses her voice successfully to advance a thrilling story, I am not really sure that I was convinced that I was reading words written by a woman. Nevertheless, this novel is original, intriguing, and highly enjoyable.

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## Julia says

I am not usually a fan of Peter Carey, but this is the first book I have *ever* read that I wanted to start reading again immediately I finished it (and I think I need to, now I have read the ending). I will not write here what the book is "about", as it has been written already in enough reviews and so it would be redundant. But what other reviewers have said the book is about, ie obsession, grief, etc, is what it is about *on the surface*. I am astounded only one other reviewer has noted another aspect of this, the deeper aspect. The clue is in the ending, where Catherine asks herself "am I too stupid to see this is a critique of the industrial revolution?". And there is your answer to the book. Every reader should ask themselves the same question.

Peter Carey juxtaposes the incredibly beautiful silver swan (go to youtube and find the Silver Swan at the Bowes Museum--it is the exact silver swan Carey's swan is based on) against the horrors of the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. He shows how machinery can produce such beauty, but at the same time be able to be responsible for killing us all; destroying the planet. That perhaps there is an element of Lucifer in where we have taken machinery today. In other words "look where the industrial revolution has taken us". It also asks questions about humans and souls--like the protagonist in Hugo (the film) finds out--humans are not just part of the machinery, cogs in the clockwork, to keep things going. What is the soul? (because we can't see it... another clue in the book, engraved on the swan's beak and ranted about by Sumper!) How do we feel emotions?

In my opinion, after reading this book, Peter Carey IS a genius. I bow down to him.

(PS--you can also find the Vaucanson Duck, reproduced and working, on youtube.)

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## **Sarah says**

Well, that was disappointing.

I love the title. I *love* the premise. I thought this would be dark, and quirky, and funny, and poignantly sad. I thought I'd be drawn into the world of an eccentric genius. Instead, I feel as though I was cornered by a tedious drunk who monologues, gets lost asides, and reiterates the same point over, and over, and over again. By the end, I wasn't even paying attention. I was nodding politely and edging my way to the door.

But I finished it...more or less.

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## **Marialyce says**

In two words...very disappointing. I have read and enjoyed two other novels by Peter Carey and was looking forward to this book as well. Although it started out intriguing with a man, a woman, and an automaton, and the meaning of love in its states of that of a father for his son and a woman for her lover, it ended without an ending as our author seemed to lose his way frustrating this reader.

Catherine, the protagonist is overwhelmed with grief as she tries to cope with the loss of her married lover. She is given the job of "giving life" back to an automaton" a duck/swan and while doing so, reads the journals of a man who lived in the 1800's who was instrumental in the automaton's beginnings, a man who wants it made to give his ailing son enjoyment by giving this "gift" of this swan to his dying son. Henry, the father to this boy, for reasons unknown travels to the Black Forest where he employs a "crazy" genius to build this "toy." The chapters alternate between Catherine and Henry.

Along the way there are suggestions of aliens, the resurrection of Christ, the BP oil spill, and Charles Babbage. It seemed as if Mr Carey put together a bunch of events and then sorted them into a quasi story which in the end just does not pull together. I do understand that basically this was a story of grief and even rage, but hard as I tried, I just could not work up enough of anything be it caring, frustration, or even interest to find the meaning that I am sure Mr Carey wanted me to find. I was grateful that the book, written beautifully by the way, was short, for I feel that Mr Carey and I would have parted company long before the last page was done.

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## **Peter says**

The Chemistry of Tears is the story of an horologist, Catherine Gehrig, who works in a small London museum. Her lover, Matthew, one of the museum other curators, has just died suddenly and she is distraught. To take her mind off her grief her boss gives her a new job, to restore a mysterious automaton, which may or may not be a replica of Vaucanson's Duck. It arrives in her studio in eight gigantic tea-chests and amongst the myriad of broken parts she finds the diaries of its former owner, a Victorian Lord named Henry Brandling. Henry Brandlings son is dying of consumption and he has promised to build the boy an automaton. So he sets out on a journey to the Black Forests of Germany in pursuit of this goal. As the story goes on the repair of the automaton and also its creation run in tandem and, reading about the people who made the creature, Catherine begins to feel more and more connected with them.

I listened to this as an audiobook and the performances of the two actors as the two narrators was very good.

The worst thing I can say about this book is that I don't particularly like the title: *The Chemistry of Tears*. I can see how it subtly relates to the content and it is explained in the book, but it also reminded me of this fun article in the Guardian about how book titles in literary fiction are somewhat interchangeable...

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/books...>

Peter Carey has a beautiful turn of phrase and all the characters, especially the German clockmaker and his son, are brilliantly drawn. The story itself is a little slight and I wanted things to develop with a few exciting sub-plots, and more of an ending, but really it is not that kind of book. Despite its fairy tale feel it stays in the realms of literary fiction and doesn't stray at all into fantasy and in the end it is an engaging book about grief and loss and how making art is an attempt to somehow capture life.

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## WJ says

*The Chemistry of Tears* is the first book by Peter Carey that I've tried to read. I said 'tried to read' because I actually didn't manage to finish the book. I found the blurb to be quite interesting although I didn't know much about automatons, museum work or about nineteenth century Germany. I wanted to find out more about how Henry and Catherine's two worlds will be linked and was fully prepared to be sympathetic towards Catherine.

However, *The Chemistry of Tears* didn't work out the way I expected. Catherine's said to have been a logical, calm person but her lover's death has unraveled her and made her into an emotional wreck. Indeed she was absolutely awful to everyone, even her boss who's tried to help her find a placement in the Annexe where she will not have to face her other colleagues. Instead she grumbles and moans about the Annexe and doesn't appreciate how kind he has been to her. The affair doesn't appear to have been as well-hidden as the blurb suggests because her boss knows all about it. In fact it wasn't as though Catherine did not have a confidante about her affair, she could have spoken to her boss who had been very understanding about the whole thing.

I was willing to put aside Catherine's horrible attitude because I did like Henry's story. His total belief and fervor regarding the duck and how it would help his son to feel better was incredibly sad because he was simply grasping at the straws. His adventure and mis-communication with the Germans was far more compelling than Catherine's emotional mess and her attitude. However, his story soon took a weird turn as well. I didn't understand anything that was happening between him and the Germans and when that new character appeared and offered to help him, I was so fed up that I really couldn't care about these characters anymore.

There are a few things that I look out for in every book that I read: compelling storyline, characters that I can feel empathetic about and good writing. *The Chemistry of Tears* had already failed on the first two accounts, seeing as how I didn't like Catherine very much and after a while, couldn't care about Henry's adventure to commission the automaton for his son. In terms of writing, Peter Carey has crafted a confusing tale. I didn't understand what was going on most of the time (and it wasn't for the want of effort).

I wished I could have enjoyed *The Chemistry of Tears* far more and that I could have found it in me to finish the book. Unfortunately I don't think it's something that I will return to and I doubt that I will read another book by Peter Carey again.

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## Blair says

*The Chemistry of Tears* is one of *those* typical literary novels: no surprise that it was already a favourite for the Booker before the longlist was even announced (although it didn't end up being nominated). It starts with Catherine Gehrig, a museum conservator, discovering that her long-term (married, secret) lover has died suddenly. Consumed with grief which she cannot allow the world to see, she immerses herself in a new project to restore a swan automaton. During this process, she discovers the notebooks of Henry Brandling - the man who commissioned the creation of the automaton for his ailing son in the 19th century - and becomes obsessed with Brandling's story. The narrative is split between Catherine's progress, both in restoring the swan and coming to terms with Matthew's death, and Henry's journals.

I found the segments of the narrative dealing with Catherine's grief by far the most interesting. Her love for Matthew was evoked with such painful clarity: it felt very real to me, as did Catherine as a character. In comparison, I found the sections relating to Henry troublesome and sometimes dull. Then there's the fact that, as absolutely *always* with this type of book, everyone in the story is white and very, VERY privileged. I did get a bit fed up of references to everyone's wonderfully upper-class education and all the expensive designer things they owned after a while. And although I liked and empathised with Catherine, I did wonder why on earth, since (so we're told) Matthew was madly in love with her and his wife was habitually unfaithful, he wouldn't just have got divorced and been with Catherine properly?!

Like so many of its ilk, this was a novel I admired more than enjoyed. I thought it was beautifully written, and it held my interest, but the only thing about it that captivated me emotionally was Catherine's love for Matthew. Much of the rest of it left me cold, and I didn't really understand any of the other characters at all.

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### **Amy Warrick says**

Peter Carey, what is this??? You're all over the map here, nothing makes sense, nobody is likable, I am just...incapable of getting this book. It started out promising, woman gets over grief in re-assembling automaton, story of automaton told in alternate chapters, and then, it dissolves into pixels the way my DVR playback does sometimes.

I understand you're a genius and I thought we had a future. We are just too different.

p.s. loved Oscar & Lucinda

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### **Jeanette Lewis says**

This book reveals the slightly off centre mastery and vivid imagination that is Peter Carey. The read follows 2 time lines, one 1854 to relative present day. Sometimes this type of writing can be difficult to keep up with, however in the scenes of this book this isn't the case even with the story revolving around an "automata" with Carey taking from history, 1743 Jacques Vaucanson. The reader will recognise that both the main characters are desperate with their separate losses and loneliness but the one aspect for me was that I was totally frustrated with both of them. Catherine Gehrig really needs to seek a grief therapist and for Henry Brandling probably one not available in 1854 but a priest may have helped.

The whole ridiculousness of the saga that Henry finds himself in with Herr Sumper while in Furtwangen, Black Forest region becomes a little quodidnaly boring. Carey in the end borrows again a tiny bit from history inferring little Carl becomes a famous identity (Google check that reference Karl Benz of Karlsruhe). Present day, (a small mistakes with present day timeline 2010 /2011 does no one do a double check) with Catherine who seemingly has enjoyed a positive life and good job is unable to deal with the death of her

lover, breaks all the rules while falling more and more out of control.

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### **Phrynne says**

Having enjoyed Oscar and Lucinda I approached this book with interest and anticipation only to be really, really disappointed. To me it was a muddle of ideas, a lot of beautiful but meaningless prose and one of the worst endings I have ever read. I actually have no idea of what happened in the last few pages and have no inclination to go back and try to work it out. Carey is certainly an excellent writer but this particular book missed the point for me.

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### **Julie says**

Well.

I will allow that this is probably an excellent book, written by an excellent author. Other reviews have noted that it might have been better to have read it with a book club, as insights would be gained by the comments of other readers.

That comment does make me feel a bit better, because I must admit to being thoroughly confused throughout most of this book. And, that is just not why I pick up a book to read. I like to understand what is going on in a story, I don't enjoy wondering what just happened....what that meant.....

I have never read anything by this author. I picked this book out of the library because it sounded like a good tale. I knew absolutely nothing about automatons. Maybe it would have helped if I did, but since I don't understand how the simplest machines work, all the detail on the "mysterium tremendum" was lost on me! And, Catherine didn't grieve in a way I could empathise with. Her most secret affair was not secret after all, so she did have someone to talk with. She chose not to. So utterly consumed with love, why didn't they marry?? Someone who had worked in preservation her whole life would fling an antiquity across the room?? Why was she so sad while deleting his emails?? He had sent them all to her, hadn't he? Wouldn't everything received and everything send be on her own computer??

See? It is small stuff like this that just didn't fly. But, since he is a prize winning author, I must conclude that I just am not up to the task of reading and enjoying his books. Task?? Reading, to me, isn't supposed to be a task. Reading this book, while I did enjoy parts and soooo wanted to know what was going to be the final outcome, just wasn't satisfying. Am I the only person who wished to know if the duck that turned into a swan cured Percy?? I wanted to know that a lot more than I wanted to have it pointed out to me that machines may result in the extermination of mankind as we know it.

There. My conclusion--this guy writes wonderful books that I don't enjoy reading. But.....maybe.....I will try another..... :-)

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### **Melody says**

I am usually so hard on books. I don't know why. But it doesn't take much to make me lop off a star. But this one I forgave, (although I didn't have to forgive much). I felt so protective of the characters and the story and forgave the fact that there are some things I still don't get.

This is a story of love and hope. Of the inherent good and evil in all things. Of connection. Of separation. Of the past and the present.

The automaton represents the beginning of the machine age. An invitation to taste the allure of oil. A beginning of an addiction. A beautiful, magical thing that belongs to Lucifer. A promise of a cure and a vow to bring a better life. As Catherine attempts to restore the duck or swan or whatever the diabolically perfect little machine is while also restoring her soul after losing her secret lover - a symbol of that dependency on oil spews its bile deep on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico, harming or killing all sea life in its path and inserting itself chemically and emotionally into the chain of all life.

Peter Carey. Sometimes I want to toss your books in that very oily Gulf you refer to. But this one I want to savor and study and talk about.

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### •Karen• says

A hardback. I don't normally do hardbacks, but this was a birthday present to myself.

Hardbacks do feel nice though don't they? It's a pity the appearance of this one is spoilt by a really sappy cover picture that makes it look like a Tasteful Ladies' Romance. Which it is not. Needless to say.

I wish they'd used one of the perfectly splendiferous (false!) illustrations of Vaucanson's Duck:

Or this spiffy Drais:

Also needless to say it's bleeding brilliant, it is Peter Carey after all. Well, OK, he can turn in the occasional turkey, but this is a true swan, just as in the novel the ugly duckling turns out to be a beautiful swan. He's done that trick again of taking the historical and weaving it into the present in a way that illuminates both. This time it takes the form of a set of notebooks from 1854 that are found along with the various component parts of an automaton that Catherine, a horologist at London's Swinburne Museum, is to catalogue and reconstruct, a task given to her as a form of grief management. Carey points to the wonder of machines, how they can be the purest expression of all that is noble in the human mind; creativity and an ambitious desire to overcome our shortcomings, how they can comfort in their regularity and predictability, and yet at the same time they can be the portent of our demise, as illustrated by webcam images of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico that pump through the pages. This idea of creating a facsimile of life that is so central to the whole story can also be seen as a metaphor for the process of writing a novel, so there's another level along with the question of reading, of owning a text, as we see Catherine reading Brandling's journal, indeed stealing it to do so, and being consumed by jealousy when she thinks that her assistant has had privileged access to what she felt was hers and hers alone. Who gets hold of the story and how that affects the truth.

And another thing that Carey does so well is that delicious wry humour. This is not nearly as exuberant as Parrot and Olivier in America, it has to be more sombre as Catherine is in the most devastating form of grief. She has lost her married lover, suddenly and without even knowing, at first, how and where it happened. There is no comfort for her, no sympathetic hugs or process of leave-taking at the funeral. And yet she is more than a little ridiculous in her distraction, and bears more than a passing resemblance to the hapless Brandling, hilariously and pompously at sea in a culture and language that he does not understand. Indeed

nearly every one of the characters is skeetering close to the edge of madness, toes on the edge of the abyss. Laughable and tragic, both.

And what is it that differentiates us from machines? Our bodies also function like a mechanical system, producing digestive juices and tears that contain hormones that reduce stress and act as a painkiller. That concentration on the illusion of life, the life-like quality of the mechanical swan's movement, brings into sharp focus where the difference lies: "The skin is the largest sensory organ of the body. It contains more than four million receptors. It is our skin that lets us feel the gentle blowing of air, our lover caressing our body. Our skin experiences our reading too, or at least it did in my case: covering me in goose bumps as I read..." Oh yes, me too, Mr Carey, me too.

And now that I've read and reviewed and dusted, this can go and join all the other Careys. At which point I see why I normally don't do hardbacks. They are too big to slot into the Billys that I have fitted out with extra shelves. Dang.

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### **Carol Meissner says**

"Not worth reading..."

Great! How exciting to write a negative review of a book others seem to love. And how annoying! The main character is someone I would never want to know. She is a woman who has been the lover of a man for thirteen years but thinks no one knew of their relationship. Catherine is egotistical and manic. For a "mature" woman to behave with the poor judgment she displays toward one who is kind, over and over again, is reprehensible. Catherine acts like a baby. She drinks, snorts cocaine and feels sorry for herself. Frankly, as a woman, it was easy to tell that the author was a man. Catherine is a caricature of how a man might see a woman in such a position. And, if that is not bad enough, another woman is added to the plot and she is equally crazy and unlikeable. Follow that with a bizarre secondary story about a mechanical contraption and surely you will understand the title. No? Well, that's what is supposed to be so innocuous, right? Hardly. Avoid at all costs or prepare to be irritated.

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### **Lisa says**

Clockwork is a fascinating concept to weave through a story in the digital age. I am old enough to remember winding my first watch but it is many years now since I have had anything other than a digital watch. If I put my mind to considering whether our household has any clockwork mechanisms at all, all I can come up with is a (somewhat twee) Christmas decoration featuring Santa on a music-box merry-go-round and our (rather unreliable) 1930s mantel clock. That's probably typical of most households today. Clockwork has been relegated to the realm of museums, antiques, and nostalgia.

But in a splendid return to the dazzling form which produced *Oscar and Lucinda*, Peter Carey's new novel, *The Chemistry of Tears*, is a deliciously eccentric tale of obsession, centring on clockwork, and grief.

Hidden grief is probably more common than we know. In Carey's tale, Catherine Gehrig is The Other Woman, trying to grieve in secret for Matthew Tinsdale who, until his untimely death, is her colleague and lover at London's 'Swinburne Museum'. No one else knew about their affair, (or so she thought) so she tries to deal with her loss without any of the support that a grieving widow could take for granted. She can't attend the funeral. She receives no consolatory sympathy cards. None of the stilted, awkward words of well-meaning friends ease her way through the raw passage of grief through the human heart.

But it is Carey writing this novel, so Catherine's journey is anything but dignified. Naughty man, he makes his readers smile, chuckle, and laugh out loud at poor Catherine's antics. An obsessive and controlling personality, she is well-suited to her job as the first female horologist at the museum, but try as she might, her efforts to behave as an unfeeling mechanical creature are sabotaged by the madness of her overwhelming grief.

To read the rest of my review please visit <http://anzlitlovers.com/2012/01/26/th...>

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