



The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith

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Peter Carey, a highly respected Australian novelist, has made his reputation by creating vivid characters representing the underdog in society. His third novel OSCAR AND LUCINDA (1988), won Great Britain's prestigious Booker Prize in 1988. THE UNUSUAL LIFE OF TRISTAN SMITH is Carey's fifth novel. It becomes obvious to the reader early in the novel that the word "unusual" of the title is definitely an understatement. The narrator of this fantastical tale, Tristan Smith, was born deformed in the city of Chemin Rouge, in the country of Efica. For this novel, Carey has invented an alternative universe. Efica is a small country made up of eighteen islands and is located "between the Tropic of Capricorn and the thirtieth parallel." The country had been settled several centuries earlier by the English and French and used as a penal colony. The historical roots and the national character of Efica lead one to believe that Carey has created a country that strongly resembles Australia. The other nation that plays a major role in the novel is Voorstand. Voorstand is located thousands of miles away from Efica. As described by Carey, Voorstand is most likely a stand-in for the United States.

Tristan's mother, Felicity, runs a small radical theater group in Efica. She is unmarried and unsure of who Tristan's father really is, although there are a couple of men who claim responsibility. After his birth, Tristan is described as a "gruesome little thing." The first half of the novel takes place in Efica, where Tristan grows up among the members of the theater company. As he grows older, he discovers how the fantasy world of the theater can help him to mask his physical appearance. Unfortunately, powerful forces that emanate from Voorstand become uncomfortable with Felicity's political activities and have her killed.

In the second half of the novel, Tristan makes the long journey to Voorstand. He already had mastered the actor's craft and finds that in Voorstand he can disguise himself to his advantage.

He becomes famous, but he soon discovers how corrupt Voorstanders really are. As Tristan's story unfolds, the novel scales new heights of exaggeration. The plot is extremely intricate and the casual reader could become lost in the details. Yet THE UNUSUAL LIFE OF TRISTAN SMITH remains Carey's most elaborate and powerful novel to date.

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