

Review Essay: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

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The Pricklebush Challenge to Global Capital

The title of Alexis Wright's first novel, *Plains of Promise*, has certainly borne fruit in her second, *Carpentaria*. A more ambitious novel with a vast canvas, it gives us contemporary indigenous politics in a way that has not been seen since Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*. Its focus is, however, more contemporary than Mudrooroo's trilogy. It creates a fractious Aboriginal community living on the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria, in a town which Southern bureaucrats would like to call Masterton, but which lives down to its appropriate but deflating moniker, Desperance (strategically and fictionally named for Captain Matthew "Desperance" Flinders, the first European to circumnavigate the continent, and the first mapper of the Gulf of Carpentaria). The Uptown aspirational Europeans serially sabotage the efforts of the bureaucrats from "down south" to rename the town. The town, "in the middle of a warzone" (203), even if it does not know it, shares its pathologies with many another remote settlement like it, in its fetishization of "bigness" and its harboring and honoring, in the name of pioneer history and bush eccentricity, of the three Ms of the Top End: missionaries, mercenaries, and misfits. Always Europeans and re-named Smith (72). The incidental character, indigenous Uncle Micky, who runs a massacre museum (with its displays of "forty-fours, thirty thirtys, three-o-threes, twelve gauges, . . . maps and names of witnesses, details, the lot") is a testimony to the past and the indigenous present, "Fighting, fighting all the time for a bit of land and a little bit of recognition" (11).

On the margins of the town, and forced to interact with European institutions only occasionally, are a variety of fractured Aboriginal communities: the Pricklebush mob make a life adjacent to the tip; a contrasting breakaway group live in car bodies on the eastern side of town and invent a fictitious Aboriginal identity and even a language in order to profit from the mine (Century Zinc) and from Mabo- and Wik-style land rights; a team of underage scholars, urged by their elders to adopt literacy to find out the secrets of Uptown "greatness," despite being flogged for their failures, find no heroism in the history books and more astonishingly, no "sanctified ground" (58); another group of separatist traditionalists led by Big Mozzie Fishman follow the dreaming

paths from across the Northern Territory border in Holden/Fords, which require continual improvised bush-mechanical salvaging ("using tools and parts found only in nature," 120); and this group is loosely affiliated with another led by a Murradoo-Yanner-inspired indigenous guerrilla warrior and they are intent in sabotaging the mine. The manner in which these groups are depicted is reminiscent of Xavier Herbert's rambunctious satire in *Poor Fellow My Country* (1974). The comedy is high and dark; the satiric butts are sharply and quirkily observed; but the difference is that the angle of vision is very much that of an insider who knows indigenous politics intimately and affectionately. Wright is Waanyi and has a long history of working in Aboriginal bureaucracies in the Centre and Top End, and a fine contempt for self-serving small-town mindsets.

This book represents a huge advance on her earlier novel: it is less reactive and more proactive in dramatizing indigenous epistemology and knowledge systems. Not that it does this in any systematic or even in traditional ways, the forms known to anthropology; rather, it mobilizes the mythological in order to argue the interconnectedness of the Aboriginal sacred and political and ecological matters. The novel's opening is deeply ironic: "A NATION CHANTS, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY." Wright works to destabilize just such certainty, and her deployment of Aboriginal mythopoesis does not constitute aestheticization of the matter of Aboriginal Australia for the sake of the aesthetic, but like Herbert's underrated late work, *Poor Fellow My Country*, its key concerns seem to be to mobilize Aboriginal sacred knowledge for political purposes. Wright deploys mythic material in order to argue the inappropriateness on ecological grounds of such developments as mines like Century Zinc. Like Herbert, Alexis Wright is aware of the deep ecological knowledge encoded in traditional storytelling ("ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN", 12). Her evocation of the extraordinary power of the Rainbow Serpent has much in common with Herbert's depiction of the romance between Ol'Goomun (of the Kunapipi increase rituals) and Tchamala (the monsoonal force of the Rainbow Serpent). Wright's representation of the river in the wet season demonstrates the puniness of European constructions and the power of the natural forces that sustain the Top End to spurn human endeavor. Wright can afford to be less didactic than Herbert, who was preaching to a largely untutored European readership; she writes knowingly for a

more ecologically literate readership, and more poetically and authoritatively:

Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into—scouring down through—the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. The seawater following in the serpent's wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves, soon changed color from ocean blue to the yellow of mud. The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country. The serpent traveled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the salt dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland. Then it went back to the sea. And it came out at another spot along the coastline . . . When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river which offers no apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin.

This tidal river snake of flowing mud takes in breaths of a size that is difficult to comprehend. Imagine the serpent's breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland, edging towards the spring waters nestled deeply in the gorges of an ancient limestone plateau covered with rattling grasses dried yellow from the prevailing winds. Then with the outward breath, the tide turns and the serpent flows back to its own circulating mass of shallow waters in the giant water basin in a crook of the mainland whose sides separate it from the open sea. (1–2)

The chaotic interpenetration of water and land, water and the humans who live by it, has the character in this novel not only of myth-of-origin, but also of epic and magic realism. This Waanyi-style Rainbow obliterates Desperance in a way that indigenous storying is completely familiar with, but that Europeans cannot imagine (or maybe can, now, since Cyclone Tracy, which totally obliterated Darwin on Christmas Day, 1974):

The Pricklebush mob saw huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town, even inside other folk's houses, right across any piece of the country. Nothing but no good was coming out of puerile dreams of stone wall, big locked gates, barred windows, barbed wire rolled around the top to lock out the menace of the black demon. Pricklebush decided the Uptown boundary must be a gammon one. Then the folk Uptown showed their boundaries which they said had been created at the beginning of their time. The town boundary they showed the Pricklebush mob was there and there, on paper. To prove what they were saying, they said it was invisibly defined on the surface of the earth by the old surveying methods, methods long in

the grave with the original surveyors, when the original pioneers came along and developed the town. (59)

The mismatch of western and indigenous paradigms of space and time, symbolic processes in non-dialogical free-play, have serious implications for mining and settlement more generally. The epic processes of earth-moving and landscape-renewal by the monsoonal cyclonic conditions interacting with fragile landforms are momentous. Not only may huge tropical rivers change course summarily and capriciously flood vast areas (abandoning constructed ports which become dustbowls in the dry), but wildlife and ecosystems can be contaminated by poisonous tailings from inundated open-cut or deep-shaft mines. This is the more serious in the driest continent on earth where water is key to survival and the scarcest resource, and likely to become increasingly potent politically as climate change dries out the populous southeast of the continent and the northern rivers are looked to supplement drying southern river systems. In a period when another great tropical river (the McArthur south of Borroloola, Northern Territory) is about to be diverted for silver, lead and zinc (by Xstrata), regardless of the ecological consequences and indigenous resistance, mobilizing indigenous ecological knowledge via traditional narratives could not be a more important political use for a work of literature. The novel has several climaxes—one involving cyclonic conditions, and another which rivals it in ferocity and which is made to resemble the cyclone, in which, in an orgy of wish-fulfillment, the mine is blown up.

In tune with several contemporary Australian novels emanating from the Top End (Alex Miller's *Journey to the Stone Country*, Kim Mahood's *Craft for a Dry Lake*, Pat Jacobs's *Going Inland*), the environs of Desperance are littered with the debris of failed European settlement: its sea-reefs are supplemented by "thousands of bits and pieces of chipped and broken china—sugar-bears, yellow chickens, spotted dogs, and pink babies of lost cargo" (61), not to mention islands of floating debris, so dense they can support vegetation and human life. The final sequence of the novel, which is highly symbolic, involves the guerrilla warrior surviving for months on one such island of Western debris that floats in the circular currents of the Gulf of Carpentaria. It is built from the remains of Desperance after the town is flattened by a cyclone. Within a short space of time, it is transformed by natural forces, but always already threatened with breaking apart in the next strong gale. Wright challenges European hubris and ecological ignorance.

My expectation is that her Waanyi and indigenous readers will find the integrity of this work empowering in ways that will disturb white Australia, but that her non-indigenous readers will find it illuminating, if puzzling. As I've previously noted in *Antipodes* (19:2, 138–39), the incommensurability of Aboriginal mythological systems and Western representations means there is much to confound European paradigms in this text, and questions of its hybridized genres are part of this: Is it social realism, magic realism, Aboriginal traditional stories straight or fictionalized? Perhaps it is a post-colonial

transformation of all of them. Wright's energetic prose exposes from an Aboriginal perspective a range of all-too-familiar social issues: deaths in custody, race-based murder, petrol-sniffing, poverty, housing and land-rights issues, exclusion from citizenship (imaged, satirically, as the town's safety net). European readers are helped to understand shameful on-the-ground realities: that petrol fumes are an effective antidote against systemic hunger for powerless kids; why jailed youngsters keep quiet and do not serve their own best interests; and the kind of vital and creative existence available in the dump that is not available in the town's excluding, and doomed (by climatic rigors), bourgeois suburban-style boxes is made comprehensible.

Most insistently, Wright critiques the Biblical traditions and Christianity in their manifold forms. Big Mozzie, leader of the Holden/Ford Dreaming, trenchantly dismisses Biblical stories as "lived in somebody else's desert" (142), and Christian beliefs as "indoctrination" with consequences as serious as alcohol and forbids both practices for the Holden/Ford Dreaming devotees ("so grog and other people's religions would never do, never on the big Dreaming track," 142). What the novel claims in over-coded and under-coded moments in the text, and what is not well understood in European Australia, is that the genius of the Aboriginal sacred is its faithfulness to the highly specialized locality of the particular territory, and the deep interpenetration of the ethno-biological and geological with the sacred. It is a sacred that, in the words of Wright's barely literate indigenous Desperanians, is already "scientify", even at the point that Europeans want to consign it to discourses of the irrational, the pre-scientific.

Wright seems intent on avoiding the binarism that bedevils Herbert's novel: between the tradition-honoring and Westernized person, indigenous or otherwise, and offers the reader a canvas full of types that are more or less empowered. The novel is funny as well as being visionary and throws up many superb characterizations: Norm(al) Phantom, a man of the sea and land-rights activist in the dump is an artist who miraculously creates a still space in his alchemical workshop out of the chaos that is the Pricklebush in order to transform stinking, colorless, dead fish taxidermically into jewel-like artifacts of perfection, rivaled only in the reefs that are his soul's country (Is this a key symbol of the novel? or an escapist avocation? an expression of Norm's cultural identity as a man of the sea?); forced by the extremity of the need of his grandson, Norm abandons his avocation and reclaims his family and cultural heritage; his wife, Angel Day, who collects nails, screws and bolts in Heinz baked bean tins, and performs an indigenous makeover of a statue of the Virgin, in order to capture some of the "magical powers"(16) of the whitefellas, tragically ends on the slippery slope to death or Redfern, annihilated by booze and prostitution (this character was a missed opportunity and I wonder if there might be another

novel in her?); and Elias Smith, the mysterious prophet-like figure who emerges baggage-less from the sea to the sentimental acclaim of Desperanians (61) and is returned to it (An allegorical representation of white invasion and separatist indigenous hopes? A prophet in the mould of Elijah, but whose wilderness is the sea rather than the desert? A type of the modern "illegal" refugee refused shelter?); and finally, Will Phantom, the separatist guerrilla whose mission is to blow up the mine, who bears the "ancestral, hard-faced warrior demons" (203) on his back, but who is oedipally drawn to his father's more pacifist forms of activism. There are also superb cameos of whacky whitefellas—Father Dan, the Irish pilgrim, a feisty heavyweight boxer who takes on thugs in helicopters, and whose Valiant V8 is his cathedral; he makes no judgments even if his ceaseless attempts to convert prove fruitless; Lloydie who falls in love with the mermaid trapped in the timber in his bar, and who is prepared to die for her; or the constable Truthful who, desirous of the quiet life, fills his cells with pet species of *figus* until the building bursts apart; and Valance, the bleeding-heart liberal southern town clerk who gets in the way of the redneck town mayor, Bruiser.

This sprawling and ambitious novel is uneven, though I would argue its lapses are minor flaws and the novel a magnificent accomplishment. The subversive high-spirited vernacular voice (learnt from Herbert?) that controls the angle of vision often falters and becomes polysyllabic when one least expects it (e.g., in Joseph Midnight's narrative, 159ff). Wright is a learned and widely read writer, and while this scholarship is often strategic and superbly deployed (about whom else would the doomed prodigy, Kevin, write a superb essay that Desperanians don't understand or care about, but Tim Winton?), Wright cannot end the novel as comprehensively as Herbert ends his satire with a series of deaths. Ideologically, she has to be committed to a viable future, but the vision is bleak and separatist. The key reasons to recommend the novel are its bravura, its knowing literariness, which is more than aesthetic, and the excesses that mark its genealogical links to magic realism. Ideologically, it refuses victimhood, elaborating narrative structures of thinking that challenge Europeans to understand the rich scientific knowledge encoded in traditional narratives, and it demonstrates the variety of ways of being Aboriginal in a testing, indeed hostile, European world. The author and Giramondo Publishing are to be congratulated for this astonishing, powerful and confrontational work. □

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