

Singing the country: a first look at *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright

Much of the action of *Carpentaria* takes place in or around the mixed-race settlement of 'Desperance', close to the Gulf of Carpentaria. Think Burketown or Normanton, if you're looking at a map. But be prepared to think big, very big indeed, and in an almost entirely new way, because this is a novel the likes of which we have never seen before. There is a serpent, far underground, who is arguably the book's foundation, though it has nothing to say. It stretches in a diagonal across the continent, which puts its tail near Esperance on the south coast, at the western edge of the Bight. Australia is built on a mighty scale, and for white Australians, one theme of our history is hope, which, via the language of the French, gave Esperance its name. At the biting end of the serpent, in a remote settlement building its hopes on the prosperity of a company called Gurfurrit (Go-for-it?), white and black miners do the bidding of a New York-based multinational, while other blacks, loathing the operation, and taking up the concept of native title, try to block its progress.

Thus it may seem that the book is about a struggle between the miners and their opponents, the modern world of international capital and an earlier way of life ...

... and it is, and yet again it's not. There! I've stated the contradiction which is at the heart of my view of *Carpentaria*, and I'd better say straight away that the book is so new to me that I've only had it a few weeks and read it no more than twice. Those who know the book better than I do will notice shortcomings in

this essay, I'm sure, but the book is so innovative, so exciting a development in our literature, that I want to set down my first, not-yet-matured thoughts while they're fresh.

Esperance and Desperance: hope and something like despair. The mayor of Desperance is a man called Bruiser, rough, tough and smart. He lords it over the local cop, runs the town, and sees that blacks stay in the scrub on either side. There's a western mob, of whom we learn a great deal, and an eastern mob, and they don't get on. Bruiser knows that if you divide the blacks the centre rules. And so it is for most of the book, but, and amazingly, by the end of the conglomeration of stories which makes up *Carpentaria*, the whites have fled, Desperance is destroyed, and fires set off by a party of raiders have wrecked the mine. Late in the book, as gulf waters flood the town, Will Phantom, son of the almost-eternal Norm Phantom, flees the hotel where he's been taking refuge. He looks back and sees 'not a hotel left far behind but a small castle for the recreation of spirits'. At this point, and not for the first time, we realise that spirits of one kind or another are the very substance of the book. These spirits, in the mind of Alexis Wright's people, are much more than the superannuated spectres of the white imagination.

It was at this point he realised how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man

had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making. Was he shocked? Bugger the hotel, he thought, it could go with the rest. The bulwark of the spirits rose from the waters, and he saw nothing monstrous or hideous in this new creation taking shape, moving, rolling, changing appearance, and beauty in its strident crashing back into the water.

The sight of the devastation was nothing short of salubrious as far as he was concerned. The macabre construction resembled a long-held dream of the water world below the ground where the ancient spirits of the creation period rested, while Aboriginal man was supposed to care for the land ...

Whitefella reporters sending accounts of this Desperance-dammerung to the cities of the south would probably talk about 'an unparalleled natural catastrophe' or something of the sort, it being necessary for the European mind to separate man from nature. Alexis Wright's people will have none of this. As she says, Aboriginal man was supposed to care for the land, and this had better be done well because if the spirits wake in a fury at what they see, all hell will break loose. As it does!

This is perhaps the moment for my first attempt to 'place' the book, or at least its creator's viewpoint. In an earlier essay I discussed Barry Hill's account of Theo Strehlow's life; both Strehlow and the Aranda men of his time knew that an ancient way of living and knowing was being destroyed. Yet, late in the book, if you remember, Strehlow is amazed to find that much of the ancient culture has survived. The old knowledge may be scrappy, it may be

held in the minds of people who only know part of its operation, the old knowledge may be jumbled in with whitefella knowledge, but it's still there, hanging on, informing the lives of those who know it, however inadequately. There is something left to build on.

This is the situation throughout most of *Carpentaria*. The blackfellas may be mixed-race-fellas, but they know who they are. They've all got *people*, and they're all connected to the spirits whose world crowds on their own, pressing them to live the right way. The amusing and sometimes very amusing thing about it is that whitefella and blackfella concepts are jumbled; thus, we have not only the spirits already referred to, but also Buckingham Palace, Handel's *Messiah*, UFOs, a stack of Tim Winton novels to be studied, elves and fairies, Queen Elizabeth's Christmas Message, boats with oars and outboard motors, helicopter gunships, the whole catastrophe!

We have the whole wide world with the word 'globalisation' thrown in!

So what don't we have? What's left out in this new, aboriginal, blackfella piece of story-making? Eh? I point my lips, you'd better be watching my signal. What's not there?

To raise this question is to realise what an unusual book *Carpentaria* is. So much of what we, with our European minds, expect to be in a novel, is missing. And surprisingly, the reader hardly notices. It all seemed so necessary, but after reading *Carpentaria*, it no longer seems needed. The blackfella mind and the whitefella mind have been brought closer by this book.

What's not there? Freudian psychology, motivation, 'character', as we've defined it in the past. There are any number of characters, quite a line-up in fact – Norm Phantom, Will Phantom, Elias, whose body dominates whole chapters of the book, Angel Day, Mozzie Fishman, Joseph Midnight and Danny the Oirish priest, not to mention Mayor Bruiser and Truthful the cop. These people, especially the last three, may seem like caricatures – and are they ever! – but they are also – particularly the blacks – closer to the figures in some ancestor tale. That is, they are well on the way to being spirit people themselves. Their comings and goings, appearances and disappearances, their movements over land and the seas to the north, are produced by, they follow, not the inner propulsions of a mind schematised by European analysis, but the lines produced by tale-tellers down the thousands of years when the blackfellas looked at the land with their feet and the night skies with their imaginations, their eyes leading their minds and not the other way around.

Who's in charge of this book? Who's running all this? The first page tells readers that Alexis Wright is a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria. I take this to mean the Barkly Tablelands, though one can't be sure. Wright's voice is very distinctive, but it's the voice of a people, not a person seeking individual tribute. This is signalled at the very beginning:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the

ground. Looking down at the serpent's wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

This is not conceived, and neither is it punctuated, in the way of the whitefella; notice how it goes on:

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 sea water following in the serpent's wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves, soon changed colour 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, the narrative voice tells us, creates many rivers, then one last river, the place where it will live.

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 is, I must assume, the Waanyi people's equivalent of the Book of Genesis: the story of how it all began.

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.

Alexis Wright, the Waanyi spokesperson, takes her time, but she makes sure we understand the irrelevance, the piffling nature of Desperance in this cosmic scheme.

... a town intended to serve as a port for the shipping trade for the hinterland of Northern Australia.

In one moment, during a Wet season early in the last century, the town lost its harbour waters when the river simply decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometres. Just like that. Now the waterless port survives with more or less nothing to do. Its citizens continue to engage in a dialogue with themselves passed down the generations, on why the town should continue to exist.

For a while, we're told, the settlement saw itself as a barrier to the Yellow Peril, but when that danger ceased to exist, a more contemporary reason for existence had to be found.

To keep a good eye out for whenever the moment presented itself, to give voice to a testimonial far beyond personal experience – to comment on the state of their blacks. To do so was regarded as an economic contribution to State rights, then, as an afterthought, to maintaining the decent society of the nation as a whole.

I think I am correct in reading a challenge in those last words, not only to whitefella hypocrisy, but also to the alleged – claimed – superiority of the whitefellas as a whole. This brings us to the

dangerous frontier where cultures judge other cultures according to standards they've created within their own boundaries but feel free to apply outside, always a mistake. Empires are created within a thunder of propaganda, blocking people's ability to think outside the prescribed way. Those who are being overcome are ridiculed, and certainly not listened to because to listen might lead to understanding, and understanding to a different settlement entirely. This is why *Carpentaria* is such an important book. Like the work of the Papunya painters, and other indigenous artists around the country, it pushes its way into the thinking of white society, creating revisions, and divisions, as it goes. What does white superiority rest on? The noise of its own claims? What does white superiority rest on? Do the black people really believe that they, together with their underground serpent, are superior to the Lord God of Hosts?

Or is this a wrong way to think?

How can we think, once we've begun to digest the messages and the many assumptions of *Carpentaria*?

I think the arrival of this remarkable book is a sign that we are in a time of synthesis, that is, a time when two cultures, having understood each other to some extent, begin the process of merging, each borrowing the strengths of the other and, inevitably, discarding a few weaknesses along the way. It's my view that this has been happening since 1770 (James Cook and his *Endeavour*), but very few, white or black, have seen the interaction of the races as a synthesis until recently. Why? Because the blacks felt defeated, too aware of what they'd lost, too aware, also, of the overweening pride of those

who saw themselves as victors, and the whites were too certain of their supremacy to bother much about the achievements of the blacks. Cultures always nominate the features in which they are most successful as the priorities of civilisation, stepping around the fact that civilisations can be created in any number of ways. I was reminded of this a couple of years ago when staying with friends who had a house at the edge of settlement, that is, on the fringe of bush. Every afternoon, about four o'clock, kangaroos would come onto the lawn, nibbling grass. An hour or so later, they'd disappear. Where were the kangaroos when we got to open a bottle of wine, and talk about books? I didn't know. They'd gone ...

... except that they hadn't gone at all, they were simply somewhere else. Their days, their lives, were cyclical, involving endless movement. Birds are the same, and fish. They don't have homes, they have patterns. The pattern is, for them, what a home is for us. The black people were, at any time of year, somewhere in their pattern, and their lives were also an interaction with the patterns of other creatures whose world they shared. This is neither 'simple' nor 'primitive'; it seems to my mind to require more sophistication than the European habit of assuming the dominance of mankind, up there close to God. I find the writing, the voice, of Carpentaria fascinating; I like watching to see what the narrative voice hears, notices, and either does or doesn't bother to tell us. Let's take a few examples, starting with Joseph Midnight instructing Will Phantom when he's setting out on a journey.

From a borrowed car, Will unloaded into the boat the gear he needed to take to sea. It was simple fare, several water containers, fishing gear, some canned food, spare clothing.

The old man gave him the directions to the safe place of his far-off country – a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen. 'I grew up in the hard times – not that any bugger cares.'

Will knew. The stories of the old people churned in his guts ... Yet, old man Midnight remembered a ceremony he had never performed in his life before, and now, to his utter astonishment, he passed it on to Will. He went on and on, fully believing he was singing in the right sequence hundreds of places in a journey to a place at least a thousand kilometres away. 'Sing this time. Only that place called such and such. This way, remember. Don't mix it up. Then next place, sing such and such. Listen to me sing it now and only when the moon is above, like there, bit lower, go on, practice. Remember, don't make mistakes ...' The song was so long and complicated and had to be remembered in the right sequence where the sea was alive, waves were alive, currents were alive, even the clouds.

'Will, remember, you will only travel where the sea country will let you through.'

An oral culture has to be ready to accept, and make use of, huge bulks of information at critical times, and the recipient, the would-be user, has to be ready. Rules of readiness, of acceptance, had to be learned, presumably at the time of initiation. As in whitefella warfare, the first test is the critical one. The lessons of survival have either been absorbed, or they haven't; this is as much a matter of imagination as of intellect. I find myself very curious to know how the black people maintained this balance. Let's look for another

example. Here's one where modern, whitefella thinking provides a weather report and the blackfella tradition gives us something else:

The day he had left old Midnight and taken his boat to sea he had heard the report of a cyclone hanging south-south-east of Cape York, somewhere in the Coral Sea. What happened to that? The weatherman ended with a short statement about a tidal surge due to the cyclone activity in the region. Will closed his eyes and saw the tremendous fury of the winds gathering up the seas, and clouds carrying the enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds. Country people, old people, said it was the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty, polluted sea all of the time nowadays. Will believed this. Everyone clearly saw what the spirits saw. The country looked dirty from mining, shipping, barges spilling ore and waste. Something had to run a rake across the lot.

Now another, shorter one, though surprising to the whitefella mind:

... it was the familiar Will Phantom's easy stance. On first glance the Fishman was reminded of Norm some thirty years ago, standing in front of him with the same ease: calling it quits to their dual leadership on the religious road.

'You remember Elias's boat?' Will spoke quietly into Fishman's ear – lest the wind heard and told the trees.

'Lest the wind heard and told the trees': is this to be taken metaphorically, or literally? White people, after all, know that if they so much as whisper a secret, it will get out; aboriginal society

can't be any different? Or are we being asked to accept that wind and trees actually talk to each other? I can't say, but I find the proposition fascinating. It may be that 'knowledge' as a concept will have to be unpacked one day for a more careful restatement. Any number of creatures react to their surroundings with what appears to be understanding, even though whitefella science says they have no consciousness such as we have. Did the black people understand this boundary differently from ourselves? Quite likely. Will they tell us, and can we learn?

Who knows?

A few words now about the prose of *Carpentaria*. It has a wonderful roll to it, a litheness, or ease of movement which I much admire. My Giramondo edition (Sydney 2007), has huge drop capitals, six lines deep, at the start of every chapter, to give the coming pages a push-start. I like this boldness, and yet the prose itself seems to borrow much of its vitality from a talkative tradition. Some of the chapters start, not with a full sentence, but the statement of a theme. Chapter 7:

Last wishes ...

The fishroom never kept the silence of the dead. For years Norm Phantom knew this ...

Chapter 8:

Secrets ...

Thousands of dry balls of lemon-coloured spinifex, uprooted by the storm, rolled into town and were swept out to sea.

Chapter 9 is a little different:

Oh! Magic big time. A land full of tricks. The sea full of spirits. Poor land woman devil Gardajala. The sea woman, whose name must not be mentioned because she might be listening, far out at sea, was spinning herself into a jealous rage. She was almost cyclonic ...

It is as if, in a story-telling tradition not designed for the printed page, the group has to settle, be directed a little, perhaps, before the narrative can move with the fullness and force it will require. Again and again Alexis Wright brings this about through referring to the spirit world, or through using one of those major characters named earlier. Here's how we meet Elias.

Once upon a time, not even so long ago, while voyaging in the blackest of midnights, a strong sea man, who was a wizard of many oceans, had his memory stolen by thieving sea monsters hissing spindrift and spume as they sped away across the tops of stormy waves grown taller than the trees.

The mariner, robbed of fear, his navigation birthright and his good sense, did not call to his God, but cursed the raging sea in the foulest language of his homeland. Unheard by the tempest, an austere cyclone called Leda that came this way from across the seas in a once-in-a-hundred-year storm, the man chased after her black wind to recapture his memories. Like a man possessed, he flew through towering banks of waves whose crests collided and rolled with the spirit clouds of the heavens above. Open-mouthed waves roared with thousands of others in that terrible, deafening nightmare of the troubled sea, and rolled poor old Elias Smith down

into the crushing depths of hell before throwing him back up again, flinging him to and fro. And he? Mouth agape, hoarse throat yelling nothing but silence, he kept on chasing the black wind before losing his memory forever.

Elias, as I said before, haunts the book, but he's not, to my understanding, inscribed with a *meaning*; he's simply a force of a certain sort, viewed with awe by all who see him. He and his ally Norm Phantom, another man of the sea, are figures of huge dimensions, but are not characters as conventional novels understand and create them. Though they travel the same earth and sea that are recorded on our maps, they seem to have stepped out of another world, the place where legends live. Silly as it may seem, I keep thinking of the change Ned Kelly made to the way we think of him once he donned that iron suit and stepped out to challenge his pursuers. They brought him to the ground quickly enough, but by issuing his challenge in the way he did, he changed his status forever.

I feel much the same about the characters Alexis Wright gives us. Here's Norm Phantom, for instance:

Normal Phantom turned away from the glory of the storm clouds lacing the sea, to look in the eye, grab by the horns, all the grey-coloured calamities of a man's life. Behold the sight of welcome home, embedded in the never-ending rattling corrugated-iron shanty fortress, built from the sprinklings of holy water, charms, spirits, lures acquired from packets of hair dye, and discarded materials pinched from the rubbish dump across the road.

Norm and his family live next to a rubbish tip, they raid it all the time, and if the things they want are not always to hand, isn't that how they and their people have lived for thousands of years, endlessly opportunist? White people are inclined to think that physical squalor – a word of our invention – means that mental and spiritual squalor are present too. Norm Phantom and the people living on the edge of Desperance are not sucked in by that! Norm has an art, a craft, a hobby ... a vocation of turning dead fish into jewel-like and idealised representations of what they once were, when they lived in the waters that eventually swamp the town. He cuts them open, stuffs them, stitches them together again, then, dipping into endless pots for chemicals and colours, he re-creates them as creatures of the imagination; they hang by the hundreds on lines in Norm's room, which I must assume is a shed of warped and leaky corrugated iron. Norm's not inferior because he doesn't want what the whitefellas want, he's marvellously his own man, he's thunderous, he paddles his boat for days at a time until he reaches the patch of sea he's seeking, and he understands those clouds and waves which are so talkative for him. Here's Norm setting forth in a boat that also carries the body of his friend Elias:

It was a long journey Norm Phantom had set upon into a world that by day belonged to the luminescence of the ocean and above, to the open skies, and by night, to the spirits who had always haunted this world. They say this faraway place belonged to the untamed spirits of fishes, women and sea creatures. This was the realm of mischievous winds and other kinds of haughty souls from above. Who goes there? The quiet wind asked. The following wind answered. It

said there came a man of pain and another, who looked disinterestedly at the world as though it did not exist.

Things do exist in the world of *Carpentaria*, but on the terms of the Waanyi people, not the terms of European, now global, scientific understanding. How then are we to understand the reversal of fortunes at the end of the book, when Desperance is swept away by floodwaters, with the white inhabitants driving at full speed to get out in time? This is the hardest part of the book for the whitefella to understand, because it seems as if one side in a battle has been overwhelmed, except that the forces overwhelming them haven't been fully engaged; that is to say, we have an outcome, a result, when we haven't yet had the battle.

In the sense that I have just tried to propose, *Carpentaria* is grossly, deliberately partial: it's not even-handed at all. From the Waanyi point of view, the later pages of the book show a restoration of at least some of the order that prevailed before whitefellas came. What looks like a disastrous defeat for the white forces is no more than an evening-up, a restoration of some of the balance that had prevailed before the invaders buggered things up. I referred earlier to the Waanyi story of creation as an equivalent of the Christians' Book of Genesis; I don't think there is any biblical equivalent for the restoration of order that takes place at the end, but it is a happy ending, for all the loss and destruction, because it's a restoration of an order known only to a chosen few.

In his heart, Norm knew he had no more journeys to make. Well! Not for the moment. He continued walking ahead, down his memory of the main street of Desperance. He was

met by the bony, hollow-ribbed, abandoned dogs of the town that had run to the hills and back again after the cyclone. Now, having appeared from nowhere, they roamed along streets that no longer existed, searching for their owners. They did not bark or howl. The shock of the cyclone had left them like this: speechless, dumbfounded, unable to crack a bark. Unable to emit a sound out of their wide-opened mouths. Hurling a string of abuse, Norm sent them back to their invisible yards where they sat miserably, waiting for him to go away. He put Bala down on the ground and they walked towards Westside.

‘One day,’ he said to the boy, ‘your Mum and Dad are going to come and get you after the grass grows green, and when the clouds of grasshoppers have come and eaten the grass down and died in the wintertime, and when you have caught one big, fat barramundi in the lagoon. Can you wait till then?’

The boy thinks he can wait, so he and Norm set off for home. This is fascinating, because, in terms of buildings, it no longer exists, but in other terms, those of its placement, its existence in the hearts of those who’ve known it, and in its relationship to the serpent underground, it’s there as much as it’s ever been.

It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh as they walked hand in hand out of town, down the road, Westside, to home.

Home exists in the mind at least as much as in the bricks or corrugated iron that form it; home, as stated earlier, is as much a pattern as a place, and a home is better for the extirpation of all the

excrescences that have been added to it. Norm’s in no doubt that his existence is better for the destruction of Desperance. All he needs is a shed or two, and a life at peace with the spirits that surround him, us, all the time. White people call black people nomadic, perhaps as a way of avoiding definition of the numerous ways in which white civilisation causes its people to move all the time, exchanging one set of polarities for others. This may seem a strange way to look at the dominant civilisation of our times, but there is so much strength in the worldview of *Carpentaria* that one is forced to take on board what it says, doesn’t say, and suggests.