

ESSAY
Aboriginal Lit

By JANE PERLEZ
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When "Carpentaria," Alexis Wright's epic novel about Aboriginal life, appeared last year, readers in Australia were slow to warm to its magisterial yet colloquial voice, which transformed the oral tradition of the country's indigenous people into a swirling narrative spiked with burlesque humor and featuring a huge cast of eccentric characters. Despite highly laudatory reviews, Wright's 500-plus-page tale of the tortured relations between blacks and whites in the sparsely populated desert country around the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Queensland languished on bookstore shelves. With a few exceptions, the independent bookstores run by political liberals, who have often expressed embarrassment at the sorry treatment of Australia's indigenous people, were reluctant to promote it. Too difficult stylistically, said the salespeople at the Macleay Bookshop and Bookoccino, two of Sydney's top literary outlets, where Wright's novel was hard to find in the months after its publication.



Gaye Gerard/Getty Images
Alexis Wright in Sydney, June 21.

But today "Carpentaria," published by the small literary house Giramondo after it was rejected by every major publisher in Australia, has become a literary sensation. It is in its sixth printing, with sales of 25,000 copies, far above the usual 2,000 to 3,000 for a literary novel here. In June, the book won the country's most prestigious prize, the Miles Franklin Literary Award, beating out Peter Carey's "Theft" and other novels by more established writers. Wright, 56, the author of a previous novel, "Plains of Promise," has also taken several other prizes for "Carpentaria," including the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. (The book does not yet have an American publisher.)

It was the first time a novel by an Aboriginal writer had won the Miles Franklin outright. In 2000, "Benang," by Kim Scott, shared the prize with Thea Astley's book "Drylands." The judges this year were wholehearted about "Carpentaria." "Richly imagined and stylistically ambitious, it takes all kinds of risks and pulls them off with the confidence and assurance of a novelist who has now discovered her true power," the citation said.

If the booksellers found "Carpentaria" difficult, Wright intended it that way. "I wanted this book to concentrate on our world," Wright said in a telephone interview while on a promotion tour to her old haunts in northern Queensland and the Northern Territory. "I didn't want a book that suited the mainstream."

Her major theme is the dispossession of ancient Aboriginal lands by white newcomers, and in particular by an international mining company. The novel is set in Desperance, a town of red, parched earth and roaring rivers not unlike the rough outback town of Cloncurry, where Wright grew up.


The vivid Aboriginal characters include Normal Phantom, a fisherman-turned-

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taxidermist who stuffs all manner of fish with horsehair and then delicately paints them so they look like "priceless jeweled ornaments," and his wife, Angel Day, the queen of the rubbish dump on the outskirts of Desperance that is home to Aboriginal families. Wright describes Angel's gutsy ingenuity this way: "Her fortunes were growing out of hand. She now possessed dozens of Heinz baked bean tins and pickle bottles full of nails, loose screws and bolts. She became a genius in the new ideas of blackfella advancement. Bureaucratic people for the Aborigines department said she had 'Go.' She became a prime example of government policies at work and to prove it, they came and took pictures of her with a Pentax camera for a report."

The white people live in a separate quarter, known as Uptown. Stan Bruiser, the mayor, is a thug of the first order, with "a scarred face set like concrete, sweat running down from his hairy skull over his lumpy forehead and onto his exposed brown teeth," which he tends to bare "like those of a savage dog." Life in Desperance is completely segregated, including the drinking, a favorite sport for both sides but a special affliction for Aborigines, who for decades have experienced high rates of alcoholism and alcohol-related violence. Wright describes the pub: "A little window lot separated the Barramundi bar from the ugly, stained mustard-colored walls of the snake pit next door, which was crowded to overflowing with the 'darkies.'" Violence is everywhere, between the Aborigines and the whites, and among the Aborigines. There are storms and cyclones, and the ancient spirit world is not exactly peaceful either.

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Jane Perlez is a London correspondent for The Times.

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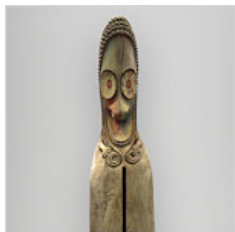
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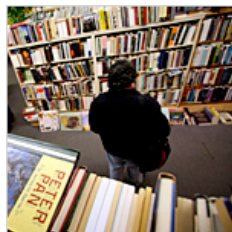
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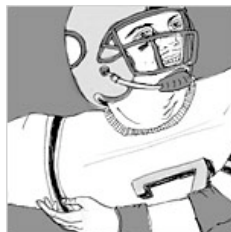
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White Australian writers have long tried to tackle Aboriginal subjects, starting with Herbert Xavier and his "Capricornia" (1938), a sweeping social protest novel that described the subjugation of Aborigines at the hands of white settlers. (Wright said she chose the title "Carpentaria" as a celebration of the ancestral lands that her mother and grandmother, members of the Waanyi nation, were forced from, and not as a nod to Xavier.) In more recent decades, Australia's indigenous people have begun telling their own stories. "Wild Cat Falling," about a young man drifting in and out of jail in the Western Australian city of Fremantle, was hailed as the first Aboriginal novel when it was published in 1965. Though family genealogical research later surfaced suggesting its author, Mudrooroo (born Colin Johnson), was of African rather than Aboriginal ancestry, a loose school of Aboriginal writing formed around him, and he has continued to publish fiction and nonfiction books about indigenous experience. More recently, a new group of indigenous writers has appeared, including Anita Heiss, Samuel Wagan Watson and Tara June Winch, 23, who won acclaim this year for "Swallow the Air." In the semi-autobiographical novel, Winch describes a young Aboriginal woman fleeing family dysfunction who travels across Australia seeking a sense of connection.

The success of "Carpentaria" comes at a particularly fraught moment in relations between Aborigines and the Australian government. On June 21, the day "Carpentaria" was announced as the winner of the Miles Franklin, the conservative Prime Minister John Howard announced a ban on alcohol and pornography in the Northern Territory as part of an effort to combat child abuse, which a government report found to be widespread in Aboriginal communities. Soon thereafter, small groups of Australian soldiers were dispatched by the government to Aboriginal settlements to enforce the no-drinking edict.

Suddenly, Wright, a longtime indigenous rights activist who had participated in an extended struggle in the 1980s to make the Northern Territory Aboriginal town Tennant Creek dry, found herself asked to appear on television and radio not only as a novelist, but also as an expert. In her nonfiction book "Grog War," she documented how efforts at Tennant Creek were undermined by local white governments, the white-run liquor industry and the white-dominated police. The move by Howard was too little too late, and motivated by electoral concerns, she said.

Last month, in his first real effort to reach out to Aborigines in his long tenure, Howard announced plans for a "New Reconciliation" with Australia's indigenous people, promising to call a referendum on changing the preamble to the Constitution to reflect their enduring contributions to the country. Wright, echoing some Aboriginal leaders, again questioned the timing of the announcement. (Days later, Howard called a general election.) More deeply, she said, Howard had little idea what true reconciliation meant. "In the words of Angel Day: 'Where is the trust, anyone mind telling me that?'"

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Still, Wright says the positive reaction to "Carpentaria" gives her a sense of a new spirit among white Australians. "There are a lot of Australians of good will who are wanting to find out more about the indigenous people of this country and who want to be more grounded in the indigenous story," she said. "There's more worry in the country about [climate change](#). People want to know: How did the indigenous people survive?"

"Australians are saying, 'This meanness towards other people is not us,'" she added. "I've had to rethink how I think of my own country."

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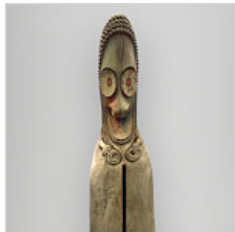
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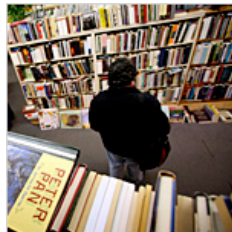
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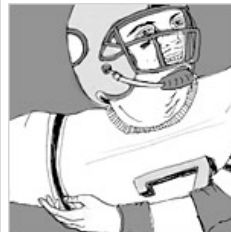
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