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The Fishman lives the lore

Elizabeth Lowry

- *Carpentaria* by Alexis Wright. Constable, 439 pp., £16.99, March, ISBN 978 1 84529 721 3

Nine hours' drive east of Darwin, where the Northern Territory of Australia and Queensland meet, you will find the Gulf of Carpentaria, the sea that separates the top lip of the continent from New Guinea. The surrounding area features in tourist brochures as part of a rugged 'real Australia', home to cattle farming, barramundi fishing, a thriving mining industry, a national park and a nature reserve. It is an orthodox, homogeneous picture of bucolic peace and productivity in which you would be hard-pressed to discover any references to the Aboriginal land wars that have been part of life in the area for the last four hundred years, or, indeed, to the tensions between the indigenous population and the Queensland government over Aboriginal land rights that are the stuff of day-to-day contemporary politics.

Open Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*, however, and the topic becomes live at once. The book – the first novel by an Aboriginal writer to win Australia's Miles Franklin Award outright – is dedicated to two of Wright's 'countrymen', Clarence Walden, the former mayor of the Aboriginal settlement of Doomadgee in north-west Queensland, and the Aboriginal land-rights activist Murrandoo Yanner. In 2006, Walden unsuccessfully opposed ministerial proposals to reform the permit system that restricts public access to Aboriginal lands. Yanner waged an energetic but ultimately just as fruitless campaign in the late 1990s against plans by the Queensland and federal governments to circumvent the Native Title Act and establish the Century Zinc Mine in the Gulf territory. Wright, who is descended from the Waanji people of

the highlands of Carpentaria and has herself worked widely to raise awareness of land rights, has described Yanner as ‘our hero in the Gulf of Carpentaria’.

Carpentaria is a political novel, but like all good political novels, it is also deeply personal. In *Grog War* (1997), her scrupulously observed account of the impact of alcohol on the indigenous population of Tennant Creek, Wright says that ‘Aboriginal people are still being forced to hold much of their contact history with white people locked away inside of themselves.’ *Carpentaria* is a conscious attempt to redress the balance, to unlock this private history. But it is much more than that. By avoiding mere reportage in favour of a narrative that is a blend of fact, folklore and the surreal, Wright’s prose, with its shifting syntax and telescoping perspectives, its forays into dreams and the supernatural, imitates the cultural and inner processes it describes. It’s a method that owes something to the magic realism of such writers as García Márquez or Alejo Carpentier. The effect is of a heightened reality in which elements of the marvellous appear without seeming unnatural or forced; as here, in the book’s first few sentences:

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.

The narrative voice of *Carpentaria* is a storyteller’s voice; its narrative context, an eternal present as lived by a community for whom history and myth are interwoven. Just as the serpent is both the region’s river system and the totemic Rainbow Serpent of Aboriginal creation stories, so the novel occupies two parallel time zones, or streams of activity, one linear and the other part of an infinite spiritual cycle. The here and now is represented by the book’s immediate setting, the fictional Gulf town of Desperance. Desperance is divided between a white Uptown enclave, whose inhabitants are descended from Victorian pioneers, and two camps of Aboriginal Pricklebush squatters, ‘living in a human dumping-ground next to the town tip’, which have been at war with each other since time immemorial over their respective rights to the land. The Eastside mob is led by the shady Joseph Midnight, the Westside mob by an old tribal greybeard called Normal Phantom. Phantom’s ghostly, peripheral status is summed up by the insistence of the white families that ‘the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all.’ While the Pricklebush squatters haunt Uptown, the whole of Desperance is haunted by the spectre of a nearby multinational mining company that does its best to inflame the community by concocting ‘numerous short-lived profiteering schemes’ while pillaging the region’s

mineral treasure trove. Desperance seethes with violence on the ground while electrical storms and freak cyclones suggest that the ancestors, too, are disgruntled.

The scene is set, then, for conflict on an operatic scale, and Wright explores its possibilities through a nicely gauged combination of pathos, politics and farce. The ease and confidence with which she populates her epic world is one of the book's greatest pleasures: her characters fit the landscape they inhabit – dramatic, often abrasive, always robust. Norm Phantom, with his taciturn air of authority, his inside knowledge of the coastal region and intimate contact with the spirit world, comes closer than any other figure in the novel to an indigenous ideal, yet even this portrait is qualified by a wry awareness of the extent to which he's been compromised by the realities of modern Australian life: once a fisherman and descended from generations of fishermen, Norm is now a taxidermist who makes a living by painting stuffed fish. While some of the book's most eerie and powerful passages are constructed around Norm's numinous encounters with the spirit beings that dwell in the Gulf (there is a blisteringly erotic scene, late in the book, involving his seduction by the devil woman Gardajala on the beach), its most comic moment involves a delegation of council representatives from Uptown accosting him while he is busy sewing up a crustacean:

It had never escaped Norm's notice that somehow Uptown had encumbered him with the title with all of its glory – leader of the Aboriginal people. They said they wanted him to get those people who had moved out of Westside, and were now living in abandoned car bodies and their makeshift camps behind people's housing, to start living like white people, if they wanted to live in town.

'Couldn't give a stuff about them,' Norm grunted, still bent over his taxidermy efforts on a giant prawn.

Norm may be a repository of ancient tribal wisdom, a man true to the covenant of the ancestral serpent, one who 'could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him', but he is also inconveniently married to the resplendently trashy Angel Day, queen of the Pricklebush rubbish tip, who is out to get what she can in a white man's world: '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.' A raucously comic and tough creation, Angel typifies Wright's refusal to sentimentalise her subject matter.

Anti-Aboriginal prejudice is only one of the problems besetting the Pricklebush community; another is its appetite for self-destruction. Flighty, selfish and

ultimately doomed, Angel is grotesquely fluent in the rhetoric of victimhood even while squaring up for a fight with the Eastside faction, and her belligerent self-pity is used by Wright to drily ironic effect. ‘What’s wrong with you people?’ Angel says by way of challenge to Joseph Midnight’s clan, whose sense of entitlement is no less entrenched than hers. ‘You people don’t belong here. Who said you got any normal rights to be hanging around here? On other people’s land for? Just taking what you want, hey? What about the traditional owner then?’

The shrill rhetoric of Native Title claims may be gently spoofed in *Carpentaria*, but Wright eloquently defends, and demonstrates, the significance of the complex network of knowledge and belief that traditionally informs the spiritual and physical dimensions of Aboriginal life. The proposed Gurfurrit mine threatens to disrupt the continuity of life and land, to undercut the mythical infrastructure that is the book’s chief premise. This is not myth as Western culture understands it: not an imagined dimension, but a literal if incorporeal one that bisects and animates the physical world; it makes for marvellous theatre. Mozzie Fishman, Desperance’s resident shaman – who feels ‘as frightened as anyone else of seeing spirits wherever he looked’ – provides much of the narrative propulsion when he challenges Uptown’s insistence on the legality of its cartographic boundaries. Traversing the gulf in pursuit of the songlines, the spirits’ ancient travelling trails, with a convoy of acolytes driving battered Holdens and Fords, ‘noisy exhaust pipes spewing black fumes’, the Fishman lives the lore – and upholds Aboriginal law – by singing the tribal songs, dancing the dances and telling the stories that preserve a knowledge of country. Wright, however, is not interested in invoking the stock ideas of the noble primitive. Halfway through the novel, the Fishman runs off with Norm’s wife.

The Fishman’s bid for cultural authority is a compelling theme in a book in which various narratives jostle for historical supremacy. His nemesis is Desperance’s popular mayor, Stan Bruiser, a representative of the new Australia and a particularly repulsive member of the white establishment. Tellingly, Bruiser, with his ‘Elvis combed-back hair and sideburns’, is described in terms that are subtly American rather than Australian. A hawker turned cattle farmer, he is a ‘self-made 24/7 man’ whose motto is ‘If you can’t use it, eat it or fuck it, then it’s no bloody use to you,’ and whose proposed solution to the problem of the Aboriginal squatter camps is to drive a bulldozer through the lot.

Bumptious though they are, Bruiser and his council, in league with the mine, pose a real threat to the Aboriginal community’s continued psychological link with the land. The human cost of losing the link is evident from the listless, glue-sniffing boys who skulk in Desperance’s rubbish dump, and from Phantom’s own children, an

enervated and literally spiritless bunch: squabbling, obese Janice and Patsy, shrilly promiscuous Girlie; highly-strung Kevin, who suffers a mental breakdown on his first day at work down the mine. 'He heard the ancestor's voice when an explosion with fiery rocks went flying at him – left, right and centre.' The one shining exception is Will, a Yanner-like activist and environmentalist whose confident intelligence is enlisted to bring down the Gurfurrit conglomerate. Here fiction and history intersect, steered by Wright's declared sympathies (and more than a little wishful thinking: unlike Yanner, Will succeeds spectacularly in driving off the usurper). The finale is, as the narrator promises, and such an epic demands, 'majestical'.

Carpentaria is without doubt an important book. Several Australian writers have tried to come to terms with the catastrophic impact on the continent's indigenous population of the arrival of the British at Sydney Cove in 1788, of which one of the earliest attempts and perhaps still the best known is Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia* (1938). Set, like *Carpentaria*, in the Northern Territory, Herbert's novel offers a fictional account of the clash of cultures from which contemporary Australian society developed, based largely on his own experiences as Protector of Aborigines in Darwin. Yet while Aboriginal peoples have been writing in non-literary English genres since the late 18th century, it is only in the last forty years or so that a powerful Aboriginal voice has emerged in poetry, theatre and fiction to challenge white orthodoxies, beginning with the publication of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's (Kath Walker's) poetry collection *We Are Going* (1964). The novelists in particular have faced a linguistic and methodological dilemma: how to write fiction in English – indeed, how to embark on writing a novel, that distinctively European literary form – without falling into the trap of 'thinking white', or 'sounding white'? One solution is to use the master's tools but not to play by the master's rules, and Wright's novel shows that it can be done. By employing a judiciously elastic syntax and orthography that embrace both formal and informal registers, she triumphantly renders on the page the voice of a traditional oral storyteller. *Carpentaria*'s rapid shifts in mood and tone, its contractions of and jumps in time, and its conscious stylistic idiosyncrasies, do not always make it an accessible book, but it is, to borrow a phrase from the narrator, a novel 'on a grand scale of course', because 'our country is a very big story.'

Elizabeth Lowry's first novel, *The Bellini Madonna*, will be published by Quercus in July.