

A mine in Desperance

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Alexis Wright

CARPENTARIA
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On the very day in 2007 on which it was announced that Alexis Wright, an Aboriginal writer, had won Australia's most prestigious award, the Miles Franklin Prize, the then Prime Minister, John Howard, handed down proposals to impose restrictions on the freedoms of Aboriginals. Proposed methods of enforcement would have included sending in the army. For many of Wright's people the award shed "a ray of light", on "a really bleak day". Wright, the daughter of a white father, is a proud member of the Waanyi nation in

the Gulf of Carpentaria, a vast bay dividing the northern parts of Queensland and Northern Territory. As well as the novel *Plains of Promise*, she has written a history of Aboriginals and alcohol called *Grog Wars*. There was a suggestion that she should write a history of conflict between Aboriginals and the mining industry, Australia's most profitable enterprise in the late twentieth century. She chose instead to write a second novel, which would better express her own and her people's consciousness of the issue.

The result is a long book containing many elements, including magic and dreams; *Carpentaria* is, among other things, an expression of Aboriginal communal consciousness; a consciousness belonging, simultaneously yet individually, to numerous different characters. Dreams, fears and fantasies (understood as the voices of the ances-



tors) all have a reality equivalent to the more prosaic realities perceived by whites. The narrative (partly based on fact) is driven by Aboriginal reactions to a mining company, which is run from a skyscraper in New York (memorably personified as always “screaming down the telephone”). Mining brings employment to the half-hopeful, half-despairing town of Desperance (its central white area separating two Aboriginal family-based groups, the Phantoms and the Normals), but mining disregards Aboriginal rights.

Carpentaria is not an activist tract. The whites – Bruiser, a thuggish, corrupt mayor and various functionaries, drinkers and casual rapists – are seen and interpreted in Aboriginal terms. But the Aboriginals, already at loggerheads with each other over land ownership, react in different ways to the mine. The novel’s trouble-making hero, Will Phantom, is almost as unpopular among his own people as he is among whites. If the Gulf of Carpentaria’s landscape (mudflats, sand dunes, wooded hills and deep caves) has a central place in Wright’s work, so has its weather. Beating sun, rains, gales – and tempestuous tides whipped up by them – influence events and perceptions magically as well as physically.

Wright handles her lengthy set pieces skilfully, among them mass panic and flight, a cyclone and several sea voyages, including Will’s journey into oblivion on an island composed of the detritus of the cyclone. In such passages it is difficult to put the book down. Elsewhere, puzzles may slow the reader. Strongly drawn characters may or may not be phantasms. Events become surreal. How exactly is the destruction of the mine contrived? A sort of explanation emerges later, in confused, probably inaccurate reports on the television news.

Carpentaria will engage you, puzzle you and grip you. It is the most surprising novel I have read this year, not least because of its astonishing optimism; at last, it seems to believe, peoples are willing to read each other’s narratives.