

Alexis Wright Interview

This interview with Kerry O'Brien for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation '7.30 Report' programme was televised on 21 June 2007.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Coincidentally tonight, as governments continue to grapple with the on-going social crisis in Aboriginal communities, Indigenous author Alexis Wright has just been announced as the winner of the Miles Franklin Award, Australia's most prestigious literary prize, for her second novel *Carpentaria*.

An Indigenous member of the Waanyi nation of Queensland's far north, and long-time activist on Aboriginal affairs, Alexis Wright's sweeping, poetic book explores the rich mythology, chequered history and present day drama of her Gulf country homeland, and was praised by judges as the standout in a highly competitive field, which included dual Booker Prize winner, Peter Carey.

Alexis Wright, who has also been shortlisted twice for the Commonwealth Prize, has clearly arrived as an important Australian writer. She would have viewed today's action by the Howard government with mixed feelings, having written a book called *Grog War* ten years ago, about how hard it was for the Aboriginal Community of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory, to have alcohol restrictions introduced in the town. I spoke with Alexis Wright, as the Prime Minister was preparing to announce his national emergency in Aboriginal affairs.

Alexis Wright, you've been a long time getting to this point. What have you sought to achieve with *Carpentaria*?

ALEXIS WRIGHT: Oh, a fine book, a fine novel. That was the hope, that I would do a good and honourable piece of writing that celebrated something of who we are, but also contained our realities and was done as authentically as I possibly could make it, because it was telling a big story and it was based in the Gulf country which I consider is my traditional homeland.

And I wanted to give something back to a lot of people who've given me a lot over the years and have spent time trying to help me to understand who we are and the sort of person I ought to be.

K. O'B: Describe the influence of your grandmother in Cloncurry on your life and ultimately on your writing.

A.W: At a very early age from about the time, I think when I was about three, I would run away from my mother and go down to my grandmother's place. She lived a couple of kilometres away. I just knew the way. So I spent a lot of time with her and with her taking me round in the bush and down the river and all around the place,

outside of Cloncurry. And she talked all the time about the Gulf country and always wanting to return there and the way she described it was only something that I could imagine at the time.

K.O'B: You've said that, like many Aboriginal people, your grandmother collapsed history and assimilated the remote Dreamtime into the present in order to explain her attachment to Country. What do you mean by collapsing history?

A.W: We come from a long history and association in this country, we have got ancient epical stories that tell about how the land has been created, and that is still very important to Aboriginal people whether they live in urban areas of the country or remote areas.

And the way people tell stories; they will bring all the stories of the past, from ancient times and to the stories of the last 200 years (that have also created enormous stories for Indigenous people), and also stories happening now. It is hard to understand, but all times are important.

I have also studied writing and literature from overseas, where other writers have a long association with their country. Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Eduardo Galeano, South American writers, and also the French-Caribbean writer, Patrick Chamoiseau.

K O'B: What have you learnt?

A.W: What I have learnt is that they have shown me how to write all times. How you write a book like *Carpentaria* that incorporates all times. Carlos Fuentes once said: 'All times are important in Mexico, and no time has ever been resolved.' And for Indigenous Australia that's the same, we have the same feeling and same understanding. It's about weaving history and myth into the present situation, and that's what I've tried to do, and through the narration of the novel.

K O'B: When you talk about that history, how vulnerable do you think Aboriginal history is to the attack of those who would seek to reduce it to *Tales My Granny Told Me*? Because it is largely oral history – it has to be – with mostly only *white* historical documentation to back it up ...

A.W: What do you mean?

K.O'B: To the extent that Aboriginal history has been told through white documentation of the last 200 years of that history; that documentation has often been held up to be superior to the oral history that has come from the Aboriginal side

A.W: That's right, but white documentation a lot of times doesn't really tell ...

K.O'B: ... it's incomplete and inaccurate ...

A.W: ... yes, incomplete and often inaccurate, and deals with what it needs to deal with at the time ...

From an Indigenous writer's viewpoint, I am trying to bring out the way that we think as people, and something of our humanity, something of our character, something of our soul. That's what I've tried to do in *Carpentaria*.

K O'B: But you have seen attempts to undercut the authenticity of Aboriginal history, by putting it down as Tales My Granny Told Me ...

A.W: Oh, look, I have seen that and what happened to the people from the Stolen Generation, and how disturbing it was for the people involved who went through that process, and the court cases that happened over that, and a number of people in this country who say the history that we know happened didn't happen, or didn't happen to the extent we say it happened. I understand all that, and where it is coming from and what it is trying to do; to demean the Aboriginal people, and who we are in our culture, and to homogenise Australia.

K.O'B: Even in your own family history there was violence way back, wasn't there, in terms of what happened with Aborigines up in north-west Queensland. With your grandparents, your great-grandparents?

A. W: Yes, that's right, yes there was indeed. My great grandmother was taken by the pastoralist Frank Hann when she was just a little girl, at a time when ... I don't know what might have happened to her family, if they were massacred. My great-grandmother and another little girl were taken away with him. And I don't see how they could have volunteered to let their young daughters go with a strange white cattleman and his workers, and there's a history that's been well recorded of the massacres that took place by some of his workers, and the kind of person that he was.

And so, I don't know what happened and I can't tell, I wasn't there. We've had to put the pieces together, records that exist and also through the stories that our family keep telling.

K. O'B: You wrote in an essay five years before *Carpentaria* was published that you'd inherited all the words left unsaid in a family to save the peace. 'Words that have buried a thousand crimes and a thousand hurts.' What did you mean by that?

A. W: It's very hurtful for our family sometimes to talk about that history. And I think it gets passed down to the next generation through the following generations of not wanting to bring up hurtful things, hurtful things that happen to us even now, and the family will just say, 'Let it go, don't say anything.'

K. O'B: What is the heart of this book?

A. W: My Gungahdia countrymen, up in the Gulf country, Murandoo Yanner and also Clarence Walden, they would always say, 'We're of one heartbeat,' and I hope the book is of one heartbeat. Not only for us, but for everybody in Australia as we move towards the future and try to understand better.

K. O'B: You've quoted Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet, at the start of the book, if I can quickly read a part of that. 'My only drink is meaning from the deep brain./ What the birds and the grass and the stones drink./ Let everything flow/ Up to the four elements,/ Up to water and earth and fire and air.' Why have you put that in this book?

A.W: There are a lot of things happening in Australia today, and a lot of things we're dealing with as Aboriginal people and a lot of those things are not of our making and, in spite of it all, I wanted to feel that when I was writing this book there was more happening in our world, and to bring the soul of our world into the book. And that's the Country, that's the land and it's the land I love.

K. O'B: What do you think of where Aboriginal people are today in terms of gains and losses in your lifetime?

A.W: Well, I'm very disappointed. I've worked for many years and so have many other Aboriginal people have worked for many years trying to do a lot of things with poor resources, and often very poor policies from government, and I think we're at an all-time low.

K. O'B: Exactly ten years ago you wrote a book called *Grog War* about the impact of alcohol on the Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek. In the past two weeks two more reports, one from the Northern Territory, one from Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute, fundamentally about the same issues. You must feel very frustrated when you see today's headlines and reflect on how little you've travelled down that road?

A. W: Well, that's right. The book that I wrote for the people, the Aboriginal people in Tennant Creek, the Warramunga people, *Grog War*, it is a book that they asked me to do, to document ten years of an enormous struggle that they had to introduce some, I don't think

they were major restrictions, simple restrictions on the availability of alcohol in Tennant Creek, and they took ten years just to bring in some restrictions in that town and they had to fight every inch of the way. And then, when the restrictions came in, that created even more problems of licences for instance not wanting to honour of those restrictions, other people not wanting to honour those restrictions.

K. O'B: You wrote in *Grog War*, 'Aboriginal people are still being forced to hold much of their contact history with white people locked away inside of themselves. The best parallel which describes that hidden history is to say that it's trapped like angry hornets inside Pandora's box.' Those words must still resonate with you?

A. W: Well, they do. If we expose our anger, sometimes if we express our anger, we're criticised for being too emotional, too angry.

K. O'B: Do you feel those angry hornets in you?

A.W: Yeah, there's anger there, and there's also a lot of other things in my heart, and I hope I've been able to express them in *Carpentaria*.

K.O'B: After *Carpentaria* and with Aboriginal, Chinese and Irish blood in your veins, you reflected upon what might constitute a lasting form of reconciliation. You wrote, 'I've often thought about how the spirits of other countries have followed their people to Australia, and how those spirits might be reconciled with the ancestral spirits that belong here. I wonder if it is at this level of thinking that a lasting form of reconciliation between people might begin, and if not, how our spirits will react.' Do you see a glimmer of that kind of reconciliation today?

A.W: I think there's great efforts on *our* side to try to reconcile the spirits, and to think about those ideas, because we're quite spiritually-minded people, and we're dealing with spirits of our country all the time, and trying to honour the spirits of the ancestors. I think we need to think about where our hearts and minds have come from, and how they might live in this country.

I think we're making the effort and we work very hard in what we do, and it'll be a good time to start talking about reconciliation from that level of where our spirits connect.

Thanks to Greg Miskelly, producer of the 7.30 Report, Ivor Indyk of Giramondo Press, and Alexis Wright for permission to reproduce this interview. A shorter version can be viewed on the ABC's website: www.abc.net.au