

On Reading Carpentaria

A review of Alexis Wright's Miles Franklin award winning novel
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Orientation Note. This is a version of my review of *Carpentaria* intended for the journal HEAT and / or a publication to interpret the poetic of the novel for a mostly northern hemisphere (non Australian) readership. It is submitted to the proceedings of the ANZSJA October 'Subjectivity' Conference as a background to my contribution to the panel session on Sunday 21 Oct.. (on Indigenous mythos/nature/Jung's reflection a cited in Memories Dreams Reflections p144 .

There are a handful of people in Australia who have attuned to a psychological acknowledgment of the vitalising value of the faculty of imagination - in the context of the local environ or 'country'. Some of those persons are present at this conference, in person or in influence, and each has contributed to the strength of mind of each other. These are personal associations, subjectively nuanced. Many of us have met repeatedly in specific environmental settings- including the various 'Sense of Place' seminars and we have pooled experiences which are not confined to the reading of journals and citing of distant texts. To my mind Alexis Wright is one of those persons of affinity. I have been associated with Alexis, now closely now at a distance, in some dangerous and demanding activities in the Aboriginal domain. Her three books, *The Grog War*, *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* and her politically oriented activities and essays display her approach to the special value of a specifically located indigenous imagination related to ancestral themes and to nature experienced contemporaneously.

For this reason I offer the ANZSJA conference this review as an acknowledgment of her work which is, I believe, a companion piece to our engagement with the theme introduced by Jung.

This review may go through some revision before publication.

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... wherever they found the going good on those well known tracks. Meanwhile a thane of the king's household, a carrier of tales, a traditional singer deeply schooled in the lore of the past, linked a new theme to a strict metre.

Seamus Heaney/ Beowulf p59

1. Illuminated Fish

The opening lines of *Carpentaria* go thus -

'The white dove bearing an olive branch never lands. Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday, who look around themselves at the human fallout and announce matter of factly, Armageddon begins here'.

I have not yet brought myself to the final lines of this novel. I read forward reluctant to come upon the finale. I read the same passage again and again, reading *Carpentaria* back and forward and back. This becomes a vitalising experience. It holds me in a position of self recognition. (I will explain this later.) Certain passages, I repeat as, when young, I repeated *sotto voce* Rimbaud's paragraphic hypnotic, *Illuminations* – and fragments of *A Season in Hell* - but then in those days I was beginning and looking for navigation. Now I am an older man and I read with pleasure those books which hold the maturation of a culture steeped within them. I take pleasure in deep down

simple things. I take pleasure in feeding chooks. And the illuminated fish of Norm Phantom. I spent my childhood in a desiccated Australian country town like that of Desperance in *Carpentaria*. I have lived in the Northern Territory, in Central Australia, in and around the town of Alice Springs. A town like that; tacked on the fringes of Aboriginal country. Alice Springs is where Alexis Wright passed her time (feeding her own hens and rooster) and wringing out this novel.

Alice Springs has more inflicted murders, per capita, than almost any other place in the country. The Australian Institute of Criminology notes that the N.T. has a rate of 8 in a 1000, as against 1.5 per 1000 for the rest of Australia. 'We live in murderous times and I am writing this account because I want what is happening within Alexis' story to be appreciated by those of you whose remnant family and forbears foundered upon these coasts and made of it what you willed. The Aboriginal domain has attracted mingled peoples, Chinese, Macassans, Pacific islanders, Lutherans, Greek islanders, Italian builders, Catholic Irish dissidents, Anglican woolgatherers, merchant brokers, Scot's islanders, sheepmen, Angus cattle breeders and sundry refugees from the holocausts of the world. These are fates which still whisper in the backwaters of this self assured 'aspirational nation'. Alexis, being herself a mingled woman with a strong line from an indigenous ancestry, has the responsibility to carry a true tale and the right to be deeply attended to by dissident and foundered persons in several strict and loose metres at once. The human brain is composed of many parts.

A Different Kind of Courage is the title Charles Taylor uses for his review of Jonathon Lear's² insightful book, *Ethics in The Face of Cultural Devastation* (on the fate of the Crow tribe of Western USA). Charles Taylor (in the New York Review of Books) points up that the consequences of the 'closing down of a culture' are bad for one, despite the proffered opportunities and he and Lear, as others do, notice that narratives of the 'end times' of all world indigenous populations are configured with drunkenness and murderous violence. Lear and Taylor, take up the 'end times', - Armageddon - 'pale rider' matter and head it toward accounts of imaginative survival activities of Crow and Sioux visionary leaders who, variously, imagine, invent, figure pragmatically how to find, use and combine practical expediency with will, with hope; in such a way that 'human beings can find the resources to come back from a virtual dead end and invent a new way: ... in creative continuity with the one that has been condemned...' (Taylor p.8.) The writer of *Carpentaria* lives in our antipodean 'end times'. She has the mental strength to find and project illuminated metaphors of strength and continuity -out- of - chaos. Such metaphors she weaves throughout *Carpentaria*, despite the bruising truthfulness of the end times.

Australasia and Oceania are locations of 'end times' for many, and 'new times' for others. *Carpentaria*, is a narrative of maybe - end times - maybe not. It may be a narrative from a time of grief, and thus it may be as difficult to swallow as fish bones. Addressing a possible difficulty in reading Wright is a purpose of my article, for indeed this beautiful book can be dwelt upon.

I have said that I haven't finished the book, and you may think it audacious to admit this fact. Why am I so far reluctant to come to the end of *Carpentaria*? Why has it taken nine months so far? Why didn't I gut it in one go? Maybe it is not the ending which counts, not a revelatory finale, whatever that might turn out to be. What counts is the marination of oneself in the psychic ecosystem of the Queensland Gulf Country, that country which Alexis Wright's lucid words mirror in a glass; now darkly - now light.

2. Death in The Time of Carpentaria.

The end of a man in Gabriel Marquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* is enfolded into an Hispanic poetic of death which you may recognise., Machismo, crucifixo- fado, maternal pieta, tango

¹ Australian Broadcasting Commission, ABC, radio 'Background Briefing' - interviews 12 August 2007

² Charles Taylor's review for New York Review of Books April 26 2007 of Jonathon Lear's 'Radical Hope, Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation'. Harvard University Press

lamentation. Magical red blood/ white feathers / white lamb / wrecked body on the sand/ kitchen floor. The iconography fits in the Americas mythology of sorcery thought, voodoo ceremony, sacrificial payback, Redemption Heroic, suffering Jesus, maybe

'...They were sitting down to breakfast when they saw Santiago Nasar enter, soaked in blood and carrying the roots of his entrails in his hands.... "Santiago, my son," she shouted at him, "what has happened to you ?"

'They've killed me, Wene child' he said.

He stumbled on the last step, but he got up at once. " He even took care to brush the dirt that was stuck to his guts" My aunt Wene told me. Then he went into his house through the back door that had been open since six and fell on his face in the kitchen."

A Chronicle of a Death Foretold ends thus, upon yet another unnecessary annihilation in borderline American river country, among a country people like so many others who have navigated the violence of indigenous armageddon and the conceptions or abortions of such erotic or despotic meetings. Stories of colonisation have a place in world literature. South American *colonismo* exists. Australia has barely yet achieved an existence, a reality of its own. It is almost unrecognisable yet as genre with a desirable panache of its own ; perhaps because there is no template in the European mind which can recognise what actually passes in the psychic intelligence system of Oceanic indigenous peoples.³

Death in the time of *Carpentaria* has its very own recognisable tenor. The Aboriginal mentality of Australia , the iconic significances of blood, death, burial, silence , fluid passion, sexual nature, storm clouds and the giving of oneself for others is, after all, perhaps not of an order familiar enough to connect with the brain figuration of northern life, and it might seem a bit strangely located somewhere in a border zone that might just seem a little bit insane. The world view of the Desperance population and the rubbish tip Aborigines might seem a bit far fetched, being not quite of the recognisable magical reality of America, not quite black arm band victims, not quite defiant heroes and the poetic shifts in dream elements and metre may seem that *Carpentaria* requires a reader to do mental work. Well this might be true.

The people of Papua, the Arafura Sea and the deserts of Australia do indeed do mental work upon the objects, activities and mythos of Christian Europe and diverse Asia. It takes considerable mental effort on the part of an indigenous writer to render that which is still visible (in Oceania) into a form that can be apprehended and appreciated by persons whose familiar myths of love, death, hate, knowledge, truth is enfolded into a European system. The Alexis' story does move cinematically, it does sweep, it is operatic, it does hang cliffs , there are rescues and meetings of triumph, there is a full show of apocalyptic humours, cathartic moments, tristesse, duress; comedy; she does, after all, want to be read and she has, after all, won a prize or two. Nevertheless it is not a conventional novel and not a conventional structure and in reading of *Carpentaria* one may unlearn habitual literary signatures, one may practice suspension of judgement without 'irritable reaching out' for certainty or resolution.

The decomposition of the human presence around the township and the big bastard mine of Carpentaria is enfolded between the breasts of two mythologies, that of the black and that of the white. It is the inter folding and overlap which counts. The pre existing indigenous mythos and way of being is disoriented and disturbed by a predatory viking ravage. This much is probably true. It probably goes the other way also. The visiting vikings (the mayor the policeman the wives and the mine managers) are maddened incrementally by climate and Aboriginal logic. The intersection produces the kind of cognitive dissonance which is poetry or paranoid torture. Depression or the emergence of authentic concern. The indigenous mythos carries on in its primal cyclonic wilfulness and is carried deliberately, wilfully on by the Tribunes of the novel, the Three Magi of Normal Phantom, Will Phantom and the Fishman; accompanied by a few angelic white Falcons, a black Valiant and old spirits wearing beanies and so forth who guard and guide them. (Familiar figures to anyone who dwells in Australian Aboriginal company)

³ Andrew Lattas' anthropological work on Papua New Guinea brings out interesting local notions of madness.

3. Ten burials or so.

Once upon a time, not even so long ago, while voyaging in the blackest of midnights... a strong sea man... had his memory stolen by thieving sea monsters... Carpentaria p 43

There are, in *Carpentaria*, ten maybe nine specified annihilations of bodily life. Murders - suicides - or what you will. Ten or more bodies are disposed of in unusual manner. At least this is my body count so far - up to Chapter 13. I am not counting the fish, the bats, the dogs and unspecified victims of cyclone, explosion and road carnage.

You may have seen the film *The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada*, the Tommy Lee Jones / Guillermo Arriaga eulogy for a singular wetback Mexican who crosses into Texas, works as a cowboy, is stupidly shot by a masturbating border patroller. The body of Melquiades is carried on horseback to Mexico by the border patroller under duress as punishment by the Lee Jones character, a Texan friend of Melquiades, simply because of a promise made by Jones. It is an almost impossible quixotic journey. While reading *Carpentaria* you may find yourself unexpectedly watching this elegiac film as counterpoint to the several journeys of the body of Elias Smith in a tin boat.

Nine/ten murders and perhaps one life saved. And yet this is no pizza western, no 'Wolf Creek' outback falconio fantasy. It is, I have heard, for some readers, a shock to be reading something so relentlessly revealing of the death (wish) in Australian activity, so elemental, so precise in displaying the magical thinking of Australia's white brute, oh yes that, and the undertone of sorcery and the unfathomable paradox of indigenous mentalities. This sad sad tropic. This paradise which naïve northern hemisphericals conspire to invade and inhabit.

Carpentaria is both loved and avoided. The idea of Wright's book has inspired some of our most comprehending writers to recognise her, Tom Keneally for instance and that most intelligent national media commentator, Kerry O'Brien, acknowledges the depth and challenge of Wright's status as a powerful artist of indigenous descent. (Interview ABC radio July 5 2007). At the same time you may feel yourself not quite knowing- perhaps - how to get your teeth into this elusively spun yarn. This slow grown yam. This true story about a part of the world that is indeed 'very far away from everything else'.

It was in those precise moments when Elias Smith was fighting hopelessly to save his identity, when his loss became absolute, that another unusual thing happened in this part of the world that was far away from everything else... Carpentaria p 43.

4. Swan songs for an endlessly un-landed dove.

Every time you go into that town, close your ears to those white people who might not even be human, who may be maybe not... (Carpentaria p321)

They found they could not communicate anything of how they felt after a few words, so they sat there in silence, pondering who did this to him. P 347

I confess to you that I am a psychoanalyst. This is my profession. I am sometimes introduced as an anthropologist. Today I write this section while pausing in the preparation of a seminar, for remote area mental health practitioners, based on the English paediatrician D.W. Winnicott's ideas on the management of chaos and the 'development of the capacity for concern' - with reference to Australian Aboriginal circumstances and the Pitjatjanjara/Pintubi concept of *Kanyini*... 'care for others'.⁴ You may recognise the concept. You will know perhaps that there is a crisis of care/*kanyinjaku* within (indigenous) Australia. On June 20, 2007 the Federal Government dramatically declared an emergency intervention into the Northern Territory, the Prime Minister personally affirming that serious money and effort would be put in place to manage the interpersonal chaos. The relevant ministers have affirmed government intent to break the grip of alcoholic violence, child sexual abuse, welfare dependency, indigenous care-less-ness. This is my field; petrol sniffing,

⁴ Also in Melanie Hogan/ Bob Randall's 2007 award winning film *Kanyini* (www.kanyini.com)

youth suicide, annihilation of the self. For more than ten years I have been among those who have cajoled the Federal government to apply mind and resourcefulness to this local apocalypse. (As has Alexis Wright) The emergency response has been a long time in the coming and it came in a wave. This is why reading Alexis Wright during this period gives me such joy, such delight, such 'shock of recognition'. Steadily, page by page, she holds my attention in the position where the appalling condition of the black health and the bewildering condition of white mind and the agitated relationship between black and white can be felt, and thought, again and again. It helps to have a long long rhythmic story to hold ones' wavering attention, while the surge of stunned or numbed feelings and catastrophic or numbed thoughts can swim out of the ennui and disorder. This is a book for those who have suffered Australian Aboriginal post traumatic stress syndrome. AAPTSD. This is a condition which is formally undiagnosed but exists; although for the life of me I can't figure out where the 'post' is. The peculiar dreamlike trauma is constant and present. The war is not over. I do not know how this novel would be understood by persons who have not experienced the psychic pain and mingled humour of a country such as this. Perhaps because the narrator's voice is so beguilingly hypnotic one would simply love it and follow. The voice which speaks in *Carpentaria* slides right to the liver of things, right through kidney to amygdala. It brings you to elementary limbic system experiences of what it is to dwell in a country such as this - a numinous, sundrowned, exhausted chagrin of a country.

My friend says that reading *Carpentaria* it is like breathing. 'You breathe it'. She says 'that's why I read only a little at a time. Breathe too much of it and I might drown.'

She can say this because it is so familiar to her, so close, and, like drowning, reading brings back a life passing before her - a life lived in Aboriginal company.

4. Normal feelings. Grief, and suchlike.

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 die, and discarded materials pinched from the rubbish dump across the road.

This was Number One house. Normal Phantom's house was the first blackfella place built on the edge of Desperance... The house was a hornet's nest, like Angel Day... Carpentaria p 12

'Normal Phantom' I know. I have inhabited corrugated tin sheds with a 'Norm Phantom'. The hornets nest and the rubbish dump and I have witnessed the meticulous detailed attention to small beauties. My Phantom did not paint fish; he managed bonsai trees as his other occupation when he wasn't driving trucks, taking care of drunks and dodging insults. Imagine that; diminutive Japanese bonsai trees nurtured in a shade shelter in 40 degree heat in arid Australia. Meticulous loving water sprayed care, oh and yes, there were the fish, now I remember, the gold fish he kept in a tank pressed up near the air conditioner to hold the water cool in summer. Iridescent cantankerous old men wedded to reverent irreverent Mrs. Angel Days who rule. Mrs. Angel Day I know, that utterly narcissistic remnant of a once noble family, regal cankered Missus Days demanding their pound of male flesh. When an Angel Day Woman is in front of you with a hardwood hunting stick poised, you too would politely stoop to tie your shoe laces. And then an hour later lovingly bring her a mug of tea and toomuch sugar as though nothing untoward had happened. And that night she and other women patrol the settlement streets sorting out petrol sniffers, drunks and family violence. And the Fishman's caravan of single men ?

The characters in *Carpentaria* are real enough, they are not stereotypes, not mere figurines. They are ordinary enough Australians going about their native business. Even Bruiser the mayor of Desperance and Truthful the police man have recognisable archetypal authenticity. Though I guess its true that they resemble larger than life characters in opera. Alexis, knowing such country people from the inside, does not squeeze them into vegemite jars as Conventional Consumable Australian National Products. *Carpentaria* is one more nail in the coffin of the fantasy about the mental life of Australia's indigenous people. This idea deserves a seminar on its own and all I can suggest here is that the indigenous sector of the brain of this writer is releasing forms for feelings which you may never know she/ we had. She is a most incisive cultural analyst, perhaps the most authentic psycho analytic practitioner which Australia has right now. She is also very funny. The recognisable wry Aboriginal humour is flickering throughout the pages and in this way she is an

incisive humourist, but that's another story. By 'psycho - analyst' I mean not only doctor/therapist as profession; I mean someone who astutely and in a disciplined manner takes the trouble to find and name feelings and feeling images and make unconscious processes connect with conscious realisation; 'to penetrate into the essence of being and significance and release the fragrance of that inner attainment for the guidance and benefit of others'.

I could also say that the text of *Carpentaria* is Australian anthropology. Strehlow in *Songs of Central Australia* collected the sung onto poetic verses of central Australia in such a way that the gravity of indigenous mind could be felt, heard and seen in the texts. Stanner, in his eloquently humble *White Man Got No Dreaming* asked for the justice of recognition of the reality and romance of the Tjukurrpa, - the dreaming state of native country. The Aboriginal kinaesthetic mind and intelligent body apprehends the power; 'the push'; the force of the creation. And the poetic structures of the Tjukurrpa probably follow and evoke the implicit order of our local 'poetic structure of being'.⁵ Perhaps slowly more and more Australians allow themselves to be kinaesthetically, intelligently moved by the graciousness of these creatures larger than storm clouds who move the country mind? Consider then, the interpreter poets of Australiana, among them Strehlow, Stanner and shyly Alexis. Each in their time, each with a tune, 'deeply schooled in the lore of the past'. You could not go wrong to give that schooling to your children for a Christmas present.

- *A creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously... Carpentaria p1.*

5. The Fisherman's Hotel

*It was unfortunate for them that they were incoherently high on petrol, glue, metho or whatever cocktail had been their last meal, when Truthful and Bruiser found them.
Carpentaria p 333*

The bodies again, the bodies keep coming back like Shakespeare's ghosts, the foul doings of Macbeth, and the ancient archetypal horrors of northern countries, the rhythmic nightfire tales of Anglo Saxon Beowulf, Grendel's dismemberment and Grendel's mother, rampant in revenge. I recall Beowulf's heroic descent into watery caverns. Will Phantom and the flood, Norm Phantom and the gropers, underground undersea, Elias and the severed helicopter, claw and arm of Grendel. Revenge, payback, cycles of time. Witches. Sycorax, Ariel, The Tempest and the Mediterranean *Metamorphosis* - Ovid, Apuleius- the imaginative convention of transformations of humans, animals, plant so appreciated by the European sensibility which knows how to slide from shape to shape, nightmare to nightmare; Myrrha plotting sex in the dark with her unsuspecting father, Orpheus dismembered in manic female jealousy, bodies flung from cliff tops, insane emperors, poets crucified, story woven into story, endless reams of unbroken threads from the beginning of time right down to the present. Tell me why, while reading *Carpentaria* I keep slipping into Milk Wood moods, into Finnegans Wake, Ulysses - in Irish and Greek pigment; intricate flowing magical cadence and the beginning times of all our tales?

Reading this book I gather and weigh in my hand clusters of words, words of knowledge, words of hate, words of love. The words are so well cohered that I can cast them as a bait is cast, like handfuls of earth, scattering as earth scatters on a wooden coffin. Friends, boys, countrymen who have died wrapped in Australian sand. Boys who forgot their weight, lost gravity, forgot their geometry.

Reading this book at a slow pace I can gather parables and memory and know that someone is writing about the movement in remote places which I know. An inner country which nevertheless appears on the surface. I am not locked out of this country and here are words from a dark person who refuses to be locked out. I can read all this and seep in it and spit out anything I want.

⁵ See Freya Mathews eco philosopher, *An Invitation to Ontopoetics; The Poetic Structure of Being*. Australian Humanities Review 43. 2007

I do not treat this book like a work of literature. I do not read it as thriller. I do not bother to finish it even. It neither begins nor ends anyway. The Phantom Fishman *saga* rolls like Dreaming rolls from place to place, event to event. Follow a bit now and then, visit it like visiting favoured country. Take it camping on the coast for a month and put it under your pillow. Sit in a hotel bar for a week in a town like Derby, Western Australia or Normanton QLD. A week should do. Leave the book by your left elbow and read a paragraph and watch what happens around you. Don't bother to open it even. But - lest you forget - this is one of the most eloquently written and most kindly books ever produced from the antipodes.

6. Hope and Concern.

Gulf people have something to say about fish; their Norm Phantom was the big man of the sea. Regardless of the isolation of country people, because talk reaches out and grabs peoples attention everywhere, all nature of people strolled into the Fisherman's Hotel just to clap eyes on the sea man of Carpentaria. In sea men's circles, yarns of Norm Phantom of Desperance were imagined far more than the truth... Carpentaria p 95

Why did I bother to introduce psychoanalysis, a traditional craft now on the rim of exile? Well, because this activity is concerned with the urge to consciousness, with criminality, with the roots of aggression, the role of 'destruction as a cause of coming into being'. The craft is concerned with the cultivation of imagination as a source of human creativity. It is an occupation which allows feeling and thought to marry across the brain. The secret of the conjunction is image. It is possible to relieve suffering and desolation. The secret taught is the secret Fishman follows, Phantom follows and later Hope follows- which is to hold with dedication to an order, a thread - a line deeply set. The profession of fisherman and hunter and analyst is a profession which listens out- as Will Phantom listens out. Will Phantom becomes a man of 'constant vigil'. Each of our skin cultures, the white, the yellow the red and the black, have a profession which is concerned with the development of the capacity for concern and the holding of the line. In each of these cultures now, in the age of political expediency, much is done to harry and harass bearers of this responsibility. Bearers of long memory. Much is done to obliterate. In *Carpentaria*, Will Phantom's wife, Hope, is jettisoned from a helicopter. Hope falls into the sea.

Once a year, with Dr. Anne Noonan, who also works in indigenous affairs, I present a seminar for the local Institute of Psychiatry on working in Aboriginal settings. This year the seminar comes round while I am reading the chapter on the fate of Hope. And her son, Bala. It will be on this theme of falling hope and the development of the capacity for concern for others in a time of devastation. *Carpentaria* is the recommended text mainly because it is a direct counterpoint to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* which draws extensively upon Australian Aboriginal material. No, I am not going to criticise Freud's 19TH Century understanding of the Australian 'primitive' mind, nor will I argue with his use of Baldwin and Spencer to support his Oedipus Law and Primal Father/ Horde theorem. No, I will mention it because at certain hours of his late nights Freud (whose name means 'Joy') set down great stories from the fantasy and pain of his own particular horde. Freud took seriously the inner world of humans, the content of minds, and he spoke out about the broken children of Vienna. *Carpentaria* is a psychiatric cultural text. In Oceania there are many lost thoughts wandering like spirits looking for a thinker. I will say this to the psychiatrists. I will say, Alexis is your model. One day in the future Wright will be recognised as a profound receiver of thoughts about her times.. By then she will be an old women in a woollen beanie, deafly wondering if any one remembers her story, her Will, her Gulf.

Carpentaria is of course a major artistic text. It has potential energy. Remember how the Joyce texts puzzled then inspired. I don't know why those texts worked at that time. But one can learn from their example in finding a satisfying orientation to Alexis' potential energy. The point is that *Carpentaria* is a dreaming text, let it seep in sleep as water seeps in a leaky boat. Let it suck as fertile mud sucks at the roots of mangrove. Recall how Joyce handles his Dublin in the mind. Recall how Seamus Heaney cracks open the granite language of ancient Anglo Saxon, and remember that

Alexis' narrator' mind lives in tidal mud flats, sinuous rivers and long storm troubled sea horizons; recall the seamless dreaming of Milkwood village and the Welsh voice and recall that Alexis' ear is attuned to language based on the rhythms of onomatopoeic song lines. Why not rest on oars and listen in much the same way as you might with Ulysses or the Wake. You can dream into it again and again, as we happily do with Shakespeare, even though we know how every drama ends.

7. The inherent skeleton of the dreaming.

'Dreams come and go, or come to a halt, as had the crickets, as though a certain shocking vibration had simultaneously struck their antennae. Norm looked around him, convinced something terrible had happened, and knew in an instant that there was someone in the room looking at him This was when he saw Elia, recognising him straightaway, profoundly ghostly, enveloping them both in death, then disconnecting, as his heart cried out loudly with the pain of being torn apart .His friend sat slumped against the wall. Norm cried from the pit of his stomach, like a lost creature of the earth, until the end of all things roared from his mouth'. Carpentaria p 215.

Alexis' cadence is bedded in the conversations of dark men on long car journeys and fishing trips. It is the cadence of stories told by granny women, perhaps playing cards. It is a brusque kind of running language that tracks alongside the repetitive rhythms of the violently cathected dreaming lore stories. (*Tjukurrpa, Altjere* or maybe *Wanggala* in Alexis Wright's mothers' family region - these are only three among many names for the forms of poetic lore.)

I assume that most readers will have no trouble appreciating the value and the way in which European mythopoetic lore is put together or the Ramayana or any of the foundation mythologies of world cultures. You will appreciate the formative influence of middle Eastern prophetic texts, Isaiah, Ezekial, Lamentations, Revelations and the influence of the simple Nazarene gospels as navigational constellations, fostering love and directed compassion in the midst of conditions of turmoil and destruction. With this appreciation it will not be difficult to contemplate the likely sources which form the symbolisation repertoire of an Alexis Wright, consciously or unconsciously. So that said, I think that the felt structure and the known structure of the Dreaming matrix is what gives *Carpentaria* its secret seamless inner skeleton. The story told flows with subtlety from the deep structure patterns of the sung poetry of Oceania and Australasia. The Dreaming patterns influence Alexis's poetic mind, I think.

I am not saying that she is using traditional stories and characters in the way that traditional Homeric and Olympian myth permeated the content of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Euripides. That mob had something to fall back upon. They did versions of great themes and they put their plays together knowing the audience could surf the associations. I do not say that Alexis recalls a specific ceremony and updates it, she is far more subtle and careful than that, knowing her place perhaps. However, when I read *Carpentaria* the skeleton appears, it kind of leads my mind because, I confess, that I do appreciate something about how the sung poetic of Australia is put together, and this is why I suggest here that Alexis' poetic genius, as revealed in *Carpentaria*, is in truth a contemporary incarnation of a very ancient thing. The structure of the Dreaming (*Tjukurrpa/Altjere/Wanggala*, is what gives the flotation and buoyancy to her story.

(It might be worth noting in passing that, on the one hand some people insist that the traditional stories and ceremonial events be recalled, consolidated and repeated as an antidote to despair and as a medicine of hope. Others say the old ways are better let go. Some add that the 'old ways' (and the stories which uphold those practices) are too cruel and hard anyway. In any case, the argument goes, survival depends on carefully strategic adaptation to new conditions. Old time cultural myths, if they are going to be repeated at all, must hold or emphasise ideas which carry purpose without sentimental nostalgic illusion. Active survival not passive fantasy. An old dreaming story is only useful if it tells you where the fish are biting. Others say that after you've caught the fish you still need something for your mind to bite upon. The argument is circular. Why not have everything. You

hear all this in *Carpentaria*.⁶)

So, having made the point that *Carpentaria* floats on deeper waters, one can therefore enjoy it thus and float rather than worrying about getting to a spell binding ending, revelatory conclusion - or not. One can simply visit sites in this chapter and that - and hum this fragment of feeling and image or that, for this is how the song lines or Tjukurrpa tracks are constructed. Both in lines and in recurring circulations. There is a linear pattern which follows the precise line across specific country, water or sky constellation of this creation being, or that. So, yes the linear travelling structure is there, as one needs in any novel or film. A Progression. And at the same time, those who know the whole epic song can pick up a fragment, a verse and let it flow out from this remembered site and this recalled creation being in action. Here is the place where Elias came ashore. Here is the place where Fishman dismembered the 'Go-for -it' mine. Here is the place where Norm met the Gropers. Here is where Angel Day disappeared. Here is the lagoon where Elias rested. Here is where Hope fell. And here where Bala found his grandfather. Each is a verse. Many such places are generative and many are destructive; involving the rip and tear and fearsome paranoia of a hunting life lived in awesome conditions. Once one knows the whole cycle the sections can mix and match. An entire ceremony or song line can flow like a grand tide, or it can splash up like little fish now and then. There is nothing unusual about this non linear circulation through a set text. Expert actors of Shakespeare can mix and match, combine and evoke in brilliant combinations differing elements of the dramatic repertoire. So no, such a procedure is not unusual, but I do feel like mentioning it as possible clue to how to read *Carpentaria* and go back again with pleasure. The fact that you can do this with this story is an indication of its richness and internal integrity.

I think this is where I begin to leave you because the purpose of this article is only to reassure that it is worth owning the book. It will surely grow in stature, in cultural value. It is worth possessing (not borrowing) so that every now and then you can surprise yourself holding a page, waiting until the tale gives itself up to you, in the tradition of traditional men and women, stroking a sacred object a little tenderly. This object, put together by the Waanyi girl/woman/grandmother composing inside the maturely experienced contemporary Alexis Wright might really be a 'sacred object' and sometimes, as with sacred objects, you go and visit them sometimes. You sit with that Waanyi girl cradling such an object, as I have seen desert men do, singing to those old bits of carved rock and carved wood, maybe one I saw was 1000 years old or older, encarved with an indecipherable story. The men sat and wept, smoke seemed to fill the cavernous air, stories came alive and were talked lovingly, with a tenderness in eyes which most white people never ever see.

8. The Mystery of Carpentaria

"No police no one, hear me, go calling the fucking police up here. Don't talk about this to anyone. Fucking media can piss off. Remember we are mining men and mining men look after their own and mining men keep their bloody mouths shut. We are going to catch those bastards ourselves... he said this word for word, after the orders had come all the way from New York, from the very top of a skyscraper, to Graham standing in a muddy lagoon surrounded by a cloud of flies. The mobile phone screamed instructions into Graham's ear and his face whitened. Strange how a skyscraper in New York could cast spells like magic..." Carpentaria p.444

New York based African American Michael Meyer, at a congress in Cape York sponsored by The Australian newspaper and Noel Pearson's group... quote- *Mr Meyers, president and executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition said indigenous cultures were an antiquated concept in the 21st Century. " People have to move out of their ghettoised attitudes, get away from the idea that people belong in certain lands."* (Australian, front page, June 26 2007.

⁶ The political, cultural historical significance of the Dreaming and the current reformations in indigenous affairs advocated by Noel Pearson et al is succinctly addressed by Robert Manne in his excellent article in the August 2007 edition of the Australian cultural journal, *The Monthly*.

You get a lot of this idea in Wright's mine conflict saga

In her way, Wright reflects the truth of murder and her telling way with it has the kind of matter of fact poignancy which one finds among those who live with neglect and depredation as an every day reality, as many indigenous Australians do. '*Carpentaria* is full of suggestively suppressed violence and a tenderness beyond compare which also allows one to glimpse a certain familiar brand of Australian madness or, as she puts it '*Will Phantom ... glimpsed the town's psychosis twinkling in the sunshine...*' p 461

Psychoanalysts, indeed any persons who work with the pain of Australia might read *Carpentaria* profitably, as dream thoughts are read, for indication of the psychic reality of this strange and contrary land, hung on the line of Capricorn - concrete thinking, magical thinking, cargo cults, sorcery; all twinkling in the sunshine - in any fringe camp, in any Desperance; in any country bar, in any displaced hotel.

Attuned intelligent persons who inhabit a northern hemisphere could also with profit, read *Carpentaria* as a dream of the Antipodes; a Gondwanaland *Tempest*. A tale of what might have happened on an island a long time ago, long before Prospero's arrival in a rotting barge filled with a few books and the rubbish of a civilized life.

9. The end.

'I reckon we will go home then' he said. So they walked in mud away from the town left to the dogs... neither spoke because neither could have heard the other. It was much better to listen to the mass choir of frogs- green ,grey speckled, striped big and small, dozens of species all assembled around the two sea farers as they walked... Carpentaria p 519.

Which brings me back to Beowulf, that other saga of sea faring men and female creatures who wait in deep waters. I placed Alexis in the company of a 'kings household... a traditional singer deeply schooled in the lore of the past' and I have suggested that she has linked a new theme to an old and strict metre, or perhaps found a new measure for an old and strict theme. But a theme of what? What is the metre and measure of Alexis Wright? Well today I have come upon this Had I not spent succinct time in the company of certain distinguished aboriginal men, in particular Paddy Sims, Paddy Stewart, Larry Jungarai and Darby Ross I would have nought to say, but having taken the trouble to do this, to listen with attention to some authentic ordinary thanes of the desert country I can recognise what this gulf girl is up to. And thank god someone has worked thoroughly enough at it to set something down in print.

The intent of this novel is to create and sustain an experience of 're -singing the country'. An indigenous Australian sensibility requires of humans persistent recall of country into mind. A circulation is created and preserved. The effect of the circulation of singing country and being sung in return is Self placement. Social and emotional well being. Maybe.

Without the re -call. To singing the country - keep the line of being, hold the tune - *Carpentaria* is a tragedy, a saga of carrying bodies about the place, wondering where to dispose of the dead, settle spirits and distribute blame. Yet another revenge cycle - raging against the dying of the light.

Listening to Alexis' narrator I discover my self asked to seek out the true significance of the 'singing of the country'. Exactly why 'singing the country' might be a necessity and not a useless desire might be taken up in another article. What exactly 'singing country' means can be analysed. There are questions. Where in the brain is animal/ human geographic facility located, processed and linked with what? Why do fishermen sit for hours with a line in their hands? The manner of speaking about this is probably best left to certain sober indigenous people and Taoist philosophers. Those old yellow people have ways of describing the fluency of natural force and are mindful of the mind of the world moving in humans. They do it in their way and I am coming upon it here in Alexis' way - in her mood, measure, metre, and mode. In her way, which may be a mother's way in empathy marvelling at her child's intricate and stubborn being and becoming. Poetry and lullaby is composed between people, feeling for and feeling with each other. There is a poetic structure to the country and a poetic structure to the 'singing' of it which is felt and developed while in the factual

actual relationship. Fishermen do it. There is no such thing as country without a human and no such thing as a human if he/ she cannot articulate and mesmerise the country. Our orders are to keep the line of being.

Somehow or other Alexis does it, she has worked at it, she has brought some change of mind about, turned something round in her head probably.

It is long book, 519 pages double spaced. You need that length and space for the fact of the matter to sink in. You need the time. The measure of time which she uses is the long singing of the country which has been practiced for a long, long time. She doesn't talk about it much - its not a book about indigenous poetics. It is the thing itself. Simple, matter of fact, down to earthly magic and throwaway humour. Slowly the sense of this accomplishment settles in a knot, in a ball, in a hum and I thank god that I was born to live in this country in a time before it was too late, while there is still 'so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh'.

End

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Note I can recommend Alexis Wright's article in Heat 2007, 'Writing Carpentaria'.

I did not read her article until after completing 'Reading Carpentaria'.

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