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Alexis Wright. *Carpentaria*. Giramondo, 2006.

Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 17 November 2006.

Alexis Wright's second novel, *Carpentaria*, is a big, blowsy book set in a small town on the coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, where the indigenous fringe dwellers of the Pricklebush to the west of the town nurse a deeper enmity for their rivals on the east than for the white folk in between. This is a world of spirits and bush mechanics, petrol-sniffing innocents and wise sea creatures. But despite all the colourful characters and quaint magic realism it's not a book that draws the reader in at first.

Wright explains her technique as portraying 'the resilience of ancient beliefs overlaying the inherited colonial experience, while the almost "fugitive" future is being forged as imagination in what might be called the last frontier – the province of the mind... *Carpentaria* imagines this cultural mind as sovereign and in control, freely navigating through the known country of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds. It does so through the diction and the vernacular of the region, and a spinning multistranded helix of stories. This form of indigenous storytelling is the consequence of our racial diaspora in Australia.'

This all sounds a little over-theorised, and I think *Carpentaria*, for all its strengths, often struggles under the weight of its intellectual baggage. It was some time before I began to understand what Wright was trying to achieve, and it wasn't until I was nearly one-third of the way through the book that I started to feel engaged with it – and this is a long book, more than 500 pages.

The main problem is the unevenness of the voice. It's at its most dazzling and effective when it's at its simplest, and when it feels as though it's echoing a living vernacular language, not only in the dialogue but in the narrative itself, which often

mimics a conversational, argumentative voice, with a point of view moving easily between different characters and even whole communities. Sometimes, however, the deliberately awkward colloquial sentences are studded with pretentious multisyllable words which seem out of place.

Another problem with the early part of the novel is the cynical tone. It's hard to find a really sympathetic character: the white people are simply contemptible, but the blacks are not a great deal better. Things improve when Will Phantom, the prodigal son of the Pricklebush patriarch Normal Phantom, first appears. Norm himself is an interesting character but somehow fails to catch the imagination in the way his son does, with his heroic fight against the unscrupulous mining company which is bringing prosperity and devastation to the land.

Quite deliberately I presume, Wright has to some extent cut her story adrift from a firm sense of chronology. At the same time, the sense of place is extremely vivid. The town of Desperance (named, cheekily, after 'Matthew Desperance Flinders'), separated from the sea during the dry season by 25 kilometres of mudflats, the salt lagoon a few miles out of town, the Gulf waters themselves, are all evoked with great immediacy and familiarity.

*Carpentaria* is undoubtedly a huge achievement and Alexis Wright is a writer to watch. Ultimately it is a moving and involving book and amply rewards the reader's persistence, but, although the long and circuitous scene-setting at the beginning of the book might very well be a feature of the indigenous storytelling that Wright is trying to imitate, I think that to gain the readership she deserves, she may have to tailor her technique to the tastes of a more impatient audience.