

Alexis Wright. *Carpentaria*. Giramondo Publishing, 2006, 520 pp., A\$ 29.95.
ISBN 1 920882 17 0.

Reviewed by **Nadja Lüdemann, Hamburg.**

In 2007, the Aboriginal author Alexis Wright, a member of the Waanji people from the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, won the Miles Franklin Award for her monumental novel *Carpentaria*. It was the first time that the country's most prestigious literary prize was awarded to just one Aboriginal author: In 2000, Kim Scott's *Benang* shared the prize with Thea Astley's novel *Drylands*. Interestingly, it took a while until Australian readers warmed to this novel which spreads over more than 500 pages. Published by the small literary house Giramondo *Carpentaria* has now become a literary sensation – it is in its sixth printing. All major Australian publishing houses had rejected it.

The novel is centred on the precariously settled coastal town of Desperance, a township in the Gulf country of north western Queensland. It tells the story of the powerful Phantom family, lead by Norm Phantom, and their battles with the white officials of Uptown and old Joseph Midnight's Eastend mob. One of the major themes of *Carpentaria* is the dispossession of Aboriginal lands by white newcomers, like by an international mining company.

Another topic is the power of stories. The official version of the region's history doesn't mention the Phantoms or the Great War of the Dump that divided the Pricklebush people and set Eastsider against Westsider. Also, lost ancestral stories

as well as tribal tensions are a silence in the narrative. For the Pricklebush people, it is an important business to travel their country in order to find the old people, collecting stories of their past. Meanwhile, the white officials and the neighbouring Gurfurrit mine debate about whether to erect “a giant something or other” in the middle of the town.

Besides Norm Phantom, there are many other characters who enrich this powerful novel: There is Angel Day, Norm’s wife, the queen of the rubbish dump; the visionary Mozzie Fishman roaming the country in battered Holdens and Fords in search of ancestral resting places. There is Elias Smith, a white man who walked into Desperance from the sea with no memory and no name; there is a town mayor called Bruiser; and a local policeman who goes by the name of Truthful.

The story of old conflicts over land and belonging includes violence and murder – for example, when little Aboriginal boys are flogged by the town mayor and then, in shame and despair, hang themselves in their cells. But it is also a story of hope. It is sad and at the same time it is funny. Many of the characters are mythical figures battling not only each other and the white residents of Desperance but also spirits and devils of the sea and the land.

There are rumours and Dreamtime legends, ancestral tales and biblical stories of epic proportions. There are folktales, superstition and magic. By including all these different genres, Wright gives voice to the silenced and marginalised, and makes their stories heard. At the same time, these stories relate them to their land and their past, their laws and their culture.

With her novel, Alexis Wright underlines the importance of the oral tradition of story telling that challenges the dominance of European written history and its version of the past. For her, storytelling has been a central impulse for creating the novel. In an interview, Alexis Wright talks about this process: “The book needed the right voice and rhythm. I wanted the reader to believe in the energy of the Gulf country, to stay with the story as a welcomed stranger, as if the land was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories to the land.” She found the voice for her story one day in Alice Springs in Central Australia. “I was walking over a footbridge behind two elderly gentlemen and hearing them talk and that's when I thought 'That's the way I have to write this novel'. It reminded me of the way people talk up in the Gulf. Kind of musical” (O’Sullivan 2006).

Music played an important part during the writing process of *Carpentaria*. Alexis Wright wrote most of the novel while listening to music: “One of my intentions was to write the novel as though it was a very long melody made of different

forms of music, mixed somehow with the voices of the Gulf.” It is a voice which is closely related to the region Alexis Wright has set her novel in: “The musical tone in the narration really belongs to the diction of the tribal nations of the Gulf. It is a certain type of voice that is unique to the Gulf region.” (When reading the novel, one can imagine the sound of music which inspired Alexis Wright to create a book by writing in a “storytelling way”. Reading the book is like listening to someone speaking, telling a story. She breaks all the rules of grammar and syntax to take us along on a great torrent of language.

It took Alexis Wright five years to complete *Carpentaria*. The result is a vast story which picks out storytelling as one central theme. After her first two books – the non-fiction *Grog Wars*, a study of alcohol abuse at Tennant Creek, and her first novel, *Plains of Promise*, – *Carpentaria* is another essential part of voicing unheard stories and challenging Western versions of ‘reality’ and history.

Bibliography

O’Sullivan, Jane: "From here to Carpentaria". Interview with Alexis Wright, *The Age*, 9 September 2006.