

Here it should be stressed that the aim of Live Poets has been to get people to write and read poetry and to meet others. Poets range from "names" such as Les Murray and Robert Gray, to suburbanites. Overall I detected the influence of Judith Wright and Michael Dransfield. Many poems allude to the Australian countryside and many focus on domestic situations (love, parents etc.) while quite a few deal with international issues such as the war in Iraq. Very few, though, rise to great heights, a problem which has been lamented by critics of much recent poetry where competence wins out and facility is the order of the day (this point was raised by several speakers at the September 5-6 Sydney Poets' Union Conference: *State of Play*; see also James Scully, *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice* (1988)). I would have liked to have seen evidence in the poetry of wider reading; hardly any of the poems gives evidence of an acquaintance with Charles Olson and he wrote fifty years ago; however the poems in *Light on Don Bank* are mainly poems for the ear and not for the page.

Because Live Poets aim to get all to participate I am reluctant to single out poems, but Judith Beveridge contributes an outstanding one with "The Knot" which is about psychological issues, recalling RD Laing's famous book *Knots*. This poem, showing evidence of great craft, suggests that there are many things in life which are intractable problems because we cannot get

beyond the problem itself; it brings to mind the poetry of JR Prynne.

In about two thirds of the cases, the poems are followed by a statement about what triggered them (Trigger). This anthology is one of the very few with this feature. I was at times surprised that what triggered the poem was frequently not apparent in the actual text, or disappointed that in many cases the trigger over-explained the poem. However, most often, I found the addition of a trigger to be fascinating. More anthologies would benefit from including them. Overall this anthology gives an excellent overview of contemporary Australian poetry and is a tribute to the devotion to poetry over 15 years by Sue Hicks and Danny Gardner. *Light on Don Bank* is a real achievement.

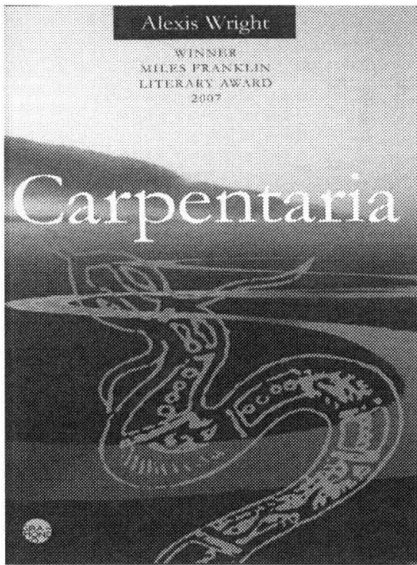


*Stephen Torre*

## SINGING THE COUNTRY AFRESH

Wright, Alexis. *Carpenteria*. Artarmon (NSW): Giramondo. 2006. ISBN 920882170. RRP: AUD 29.95.

On the cover of Alexis Wright's 2007 Miles Franklin Award-winning novel is a photograph of the Leichhardt River flowing to the coast through several s-shaped



curves. Superimposed on this is a tattoo of the Rainbow Serpent also curved in sympathy with the river. It's an appropriate image because this novel, more than any other I have read about Indigenous life in Australia, foregrounds a mythic and spiritual understanding of the land, its origins, and the place of humans in relation to it. It's not simply that *Carpentaria* presents the mythic "behind" or "within" the land, whose immanence is subtly sensed in moments of enhanced mystic awareness; in Wright's account the dreaming is primary and has a powerful omnipresence, the physical environment is a derivative of it. In opening her book and stepping into this landscape we encounter a world unfamiliar to Western readers.

Presentations of human relations to environment in European

literature have followed several well-established patterns: cornucopia, pastoral, wilderness, and apocalypse. The cornucopian position is based on the assumption that nature is overflowing with all manner of self-replenishing bounty, always ready for human beings to take without care or restraint. Contemporary environmental philosophy and ecocriticism have put paid to this fantasy. Similarly, *Carpentaria* does not evoke a landscape of cornucopia — if anything, there are glimpses of the devastation caused by mining, industry, and land exploitation which consume natural resources with no consideration of the consequences. Another, more pervasive attitude, also originating in the classical period, is the pastoral tradition. Here humans retreat from a degraded, materialistic, alienated life in cities, to a bucolic community life in the country, associated with past idyllic ages. In *Carpentaria*, all of the environment is sacred, whether or not it has been scarred by city, suburb, slum, dump, mine, or pollution, all of which appear in the novel. Contemporary forms of pastoral are especially redundant inasmuch as they have "fabricated a landscape which has transformed both natural environments and productive spaces into areas which conform to the idealization of the countryside as a place of leisure, refuge and alternative living" (Bunce 110). Wilderness is perhaps somewhat closer to the position in *Carpentaria* in that it incorporates suggestions of sublimity and sacredness, and privileges the

preservation of the wild untouched by human beings. But whereas wilderness tends to see culture and civilisation as antipathetic and destructive, *Carpentaria* shows that though civilisation may be so, it need not be; nature may well be autotelic and self-governing, but it may also be suffused with human nature and culture. Nor does the prospect of apocalypse completely describe the world of the novel, where flood and fire renew rather than exterminate or terminate.

The world of *Carpentaria* is one in which the mythic and the mundane, the spiritual and the physical, are overlapped. While Wright has clearly appropriated all the sophistications of contemporary narrative and its tropes, it is clearly inadequate to refer to passages such as the following as "personification" or anthropomorphism:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars laden with its own creative enormity.... Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into — scouring down through — the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. The sea water following in the serpent's wake, swarming in a frenzy of tidal waves ... filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty bending rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country.... This is where the serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of

limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin. (Wright 1-2)

The breathing of the serpent, continues Wright, is what causes the in-flowing and out-flowing tides. This river cares little for the concerns of humans, but humans must be attentive to its being:

It takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood. It is about there being no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood. A river that spurns human endeavour in one dramatic gesture.... In one moment, during a Wet season early in the last century, the town lost its harbour waters when the river simply decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometers. Just like that. (Wright 3)

In the Gulf town of Desperance there are two sorts of people: those who have no understanding of the land, and who seek to exploit it for material gain (largely the white settlers in their Uptown suburbs and the international company miners tearing holes in the belly of the serpent), and those who dwell in awareness of things "invisible to the naked eye" (Wright 433). Names set apart the former from the latter. The town mayor is Stan Bruiser, who looks after a generation of "Smiths" and tries to stymie the efforts of his cop Truthful E'Strange to conciliate between blacks and whites.

The multinational mining company is Gurfurrit, and stops at nothing, not even murder, to pursue its aims. On the other hand we have the Indigenous people of Carpentaria, whose hero, Norm Phantom, is a fish-embalmer and “king of time” with a spiritual affinity for the sea which enables him to survive epic journeys through cyclonic conditions. As a “phantom” Norm is well-aware of the “phantom” life about him — and this is the “normal” or desirable mode of being. Norm prefers a mystical artistic life pursuing his skills of taxidermy (blurring the separation of animate and inanimate). His prodigal son, Will Phantom, must exercise his will to overcome and eventually destroy Gurfurrit. The matriarch is Angel Day, with whom Norm has an uneasy relationship; one of Mayor Bruiser’s many rape victims, she ends up dying in Redfern as a result of prostitution and alcoholism. But like Mozzie Fishman, the black messiah (who like Jesus Christ, is a “Fishman”), Angel Day’s name points to spiritual connections.

The importance of spirituality is established in a memorable scene early in the novel when Angel Day, scavenging at the Desperance dump for materials to add to her labyrinthine shanty constructed entirely out of white men’s rubbish, finds a discarded statue of the Virgin Mary. Angel figures that since the Christian religion has brought prosperity to the whites, this totem of their Gods might also bring her

luck. The irony is obvious: while the white people of Desperance have thrown away their spiritual heritage to pursue material gains, the Indigenous people, intimately aware of the spiritual world they inhabit, can easily absorb elements of religious cultures other than their own. Perhaps Wright’s most dramatic image of appropriating the discarded spirituality of the coloniser into the vaster more cosmic spirituality of the indigenous world is in the climactic scene which ends the novel, where a cyclone devastates the corrupt Desperance, washing it and its people away in a cleansing biblical flood. Norm Phantom, returning home from a long journey across the seas to rescue his lost grandson provides a vision of renewal:

All dreams come true somehow, Norm murmured, sizing up the flattened landscape, already planning the home he would rebuild on the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the sprits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept beneath.... It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh, as they walked hand in hand out of the town, down the road, Westside, to home. (Wright 519)

*Carpentaria* is a complex novel with much to say about the history, politics, and culture of Indigenous people, especially in relation to white settlers, as well as about society, community, family, belief, and work. In presenting the world of

Carpentaria, Wright has determined (in the words of Seamus Heaney, quoted in the epigraph) to “Let everything flow / Up to the four elements, / Up to water and earth and fire and air.” Negotiating this country will be a deep challenge to the reader, but its reward will be a profound transformation in understanding the indigenous world view.

### **Works Cited**

- Bunce, Michael. *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape*. London: Routledge, 1994).
- Wright, Alexis. *Carpentaria*. Sydney: Giramondo, 2006.

