

life pattern which involves repeated experiences of alienation and distance that help to produce self-awareness. Memories of semi-isolation in a hospital ward, a childhood act of necessary brutality, loneliness in an unfamiliar city, the violent death of an adolescent boy and many other events work to change her understandings of her self and her relationships. This process often

feels self-indulgent and precious, but it is nonetheless in keeping with a wider sense of Alice as a flawed and self-centred though still compelling character.

*Dreams of Speaking* is the most elaborately crafted of the books I've looked at here, transforming everyday experience into a tense, unashamedly literary world, in order to scrutinise it at a distance but also, perhaps,

to invest the ordinariness of the present with its own sense of 'novel amazement'. It shows that novels exploring the present can have just as much resonance as those exploring the past.

Rachael Weaver is a Research Fellow in Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne.

## Uncertain Magic

IAN SYSON

Phew! I'm glad I finished *Carpentaria*: a remarkable and huge dreamscape novel that begs and mostly deserves all the high praise and literary prizes thrown its way. The range and diversity of form, content and influences crammed into its bulky frame is astounding. Nonetheless, I am left uncertain as to what to think of *Carpentaria*. Is it a rambling showing-off of Wright's undoubted literary skills? Is it a mere pastiche of good ideas? Is it a book that, despite what can be taken for flaws and impasses, ends up a pleasing and important document of our time? I just don't know. The fact that when reading I kept drawing comparisons with Patrick White's *Tree of Man* – especially in relation to the sense of satisfaction in having finished what felt like an Australian epic – leads me to believe the latter . . . perhaps.

Set in Desperance, an imaginary town inland from the southern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria, the novel tells the

Alexis Wright:  
*Carpentaria*  
(Giramondo,  
\$29.95, ISBN  
1920882170)



story of a community of Aboriginal and white characters, many of whom are drawn larger and deeper than life and reason. They include preserver of fish, Normal Phantom (whose name suggests that Desperance is based upon the Gulf town of Normanton), and his estranged son Will (a character seemingly based on Murrandoo Yanner), Norm's wife Angel Day, Mozzie Fishman, Mayor Bruiser, the town cop Truthful E'Strange and a number of others. In the very naming of places and characters some will rightfully hear echoes of Dickens' grotesqueries; others will detect the culturally closer influences of Xavier Herbert and Frank Hardy. And there is something distinctly Joycean about the lilting rhythm of the section focused on the bohemian Catholic priest – even while Beckett supplies the causal logic.

In the book's method some will observe the presence of magic realism and see *Carpentaria* as a major Australian landmark in that genre. Writers like Peter Carey and Richard Flanagan (who wrote the other book of fish) made the early going but Wright might well have perfected the art for Australia – giving the magic more indigenous *and* Indigenous sources. The novel has a plot; one is there lurking, unfolding its intricacies, but at a secondary level. Wright seems more concerned with the pyrotechnics that explode out of her storyline; more concerned to weave dreamscapes out of conflict and love and desire than to generate a plot.

There is nonetheless a strong plot: generations-old small-town racism; police brutality towards Aboriginal people; the impact all this has on one Aboriginal family that splits into spiritual/activist factions; the nearby mining settlement that has a disturbing and corrupting economic and spiritual influence on the whole region; a climax during which Aboriginal activists destroy the mine in a violent act of political vengeance; and an ending which

gestures towards social and familial forgiveness and reconciliation. Indeed, these are the bones of a contemporary realist political novel – like Steven Lang’s *Accidental Terrorist* – but they are bones that do not get fleshed out. Wright has other, more magical, skeletons to present.

It seems clear that Wright is not interested in writing a realist novel. The narrative is sometimes blatantly anti-realist, as in the following sarcastic comment: “Desperance being what it was, a modest place, humble people believed in real facts. Only real facts created perfection. So it was. People were not fools.” Yet there are points in this book where, tell-

ingly, Wright drops all ornament and tells it straight. In a four-page section dealing with the bashing of three Aboriginal boys in a police cell, Wright’s rage is almost palpable through the absence of symbol and dream and metaphor. The bashing complete, the book returns to its more ornamental, magic-enabling mode.

While Wright will write in whatever mode she chooses, does she have a sense of audience? Who will read *Carpentaria*? Does she expect it to sell well in Cloncurry, her home town? I don’t think so, because it is frankly just too difficult to be read by non-professional or non-literary readers.

I mostly enjoyed reading *Car-*

*pentaria* but have to admit to sometimes soldiering on for ‘professional’ reasons. Another of the things that kept me soldiering was my recognition of the truths at this book’s heart. It is set in a real part of the world and deals with very real contemporary political issues. Having grown up in the region, I felt connected to the geographical and political truth that Wright articulates. I felt the power of the submerged layer of realism that will not be available to the many who don’t read this extraordinary book.

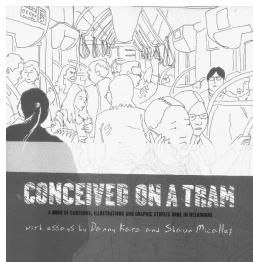
Ian Syson grew up in Mount Isa, “the mother of all mining towns” in *Carpentaria*.

## Comic Relief

ELISSA GOLDSTEIN

My primary school library teacher perpetrated many crimes in the name of reading. One was the fat, black L she drew on your hand in permanent marker if you were late to class. Another was banning comics. We were reading too much *Tintin* and *Asterix*, she said, and not enough fiction and non-fiction. As an avid reader of all three genres, I felt the injustice keenly, and fantasised about sneaking into the library during playtime and scribbling pro-comic graffiti on the whiteboard in her permanent marker.

The marginalisation of comic art has, thankfully, become a thing of childhood anecdotes. Three local anthologies – all featuring work by Australian artists



Paul Oslo Davis (ed.): *Conceived on a Tram: A Book of Cartoons, Illustrations and Graphic Stories Done in Melbourne* (Sleepers Publishing, \$19.95, ISBN 9780975699140)

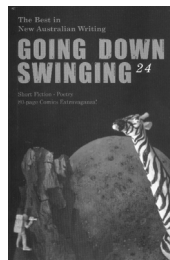
and writers – reflect the flourishing relationship between prose writers, illustrators and graphic novelists.

*Conceived on a Tram* is the latest offering from Sleepers Publishing. Funded by the City of Melbourne and edited by Paul Oslo Davis, it contains the work of sixteen Melbourne artists,

Zoe Dattner and Louise Swinn (eds): *The Sleepers Almanac 2007: The Family Affair* (Sleepers Publishing, \$29.95, ISBN 9781740665049)



Lisa Greenaway and Steve Grimwade (eds): *Going Down Swinging 24* (Going Down Swinging Inc., \$19.95, ISBN 0958194149)



along with essays by Danny Katz and Shaun Micallef. The book is as much an exploration of how and why comic writers work as it is a showcase of artistic talent.

Luxuriously printed on thick, 21cm by 21cm recycled paper, *Conceived on a Tram* is both a pleasure to hold and behold. Each entry contains two or three pages