

Everywhen in everything: Reading *Carpentaria* like an Aboriginal writer



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The best books are those you revisit over the years and build a relationship with – with each visit you learn new things about yourself and about the story, deepening your understanding of both each time. Alexis Wright’s Miles Franklin award-winning epic *Carpentaria* has been my favourite book since I first read it in 2008. I have admired and puzzled over it during every reading since, and I’ve learnt so much from this fantastic story as a reader and as a writer.

I began writing fiction and poetry in 2017 as part of my Doctor of Arts degree. In the same year, I learned about reading like a writer – how to do it, and how important it is when learning to write.¹ I like to begin with my gut: identifying what I love and hate about a story, then figuring out what the writer did to produce this effect. In this way I’ve learnt how to break stories down into their constituent parts to see what they are and how they work together.

The first time I read *Carpentaria* I was not yet a writer and had no idea about craft or any of the things I’ll discuss in this essay. I just knew that I loved the story. When I started writing creatively, I re-read *Carpentaria* to see if I could demystify some of its magic and learn from it. The first time I read this novel like a writer, what stood out to me were the cultural aspects of the craft techniques, and it got me thinking about how I might use these in my own work.

Carpentaria is a wonderful example of a text that centres our ways of what Indigenous knowledge systems scholar Veronica Arbon describes as ‘being-knowing-doing’ (2009) – not least the way it renders time, and the way this speaks back to the time it was written in. I am interested in writing about intergenerational memory and sovereignty, so I am enamoured of how Wright incorporates ‘all times’ into her story.

Wright observes of the way Aboriginal people tell stories: ‘they will bring all the stories of the past, from ancient times and to the stories of the last 200 years (that have also created enormous stories for Indigenous people), and also stories happening now. It is hard to understand, but *all times are important*’ (quoted in O’Brien, 2007). This speaks to my own worldview and my goals in writing.

At 500 pages, there is a lot to unpack in this novel. In the years since it was first published in 2006, scholars and critics have dedicated countless words to its content and context. Instead of going over old ground, I want to introduce the concept of *everywhen*, or all-times, as the deep structure of this novel. Various craft techniques are deployed to condense *everywhen* and weave all times into *Carpentaria*’s narrative present. I’ll focus on *Carpentaria*’s structural and linguistic organisation, and Wright’s interrogation and interweaving of Aboriginal and Western time and cultures. Then we’ll look at imagery of time and how this is used in characterisation.

Let's first discuss *everywhen* in its cultural context, and the differences between Aboriginal and Western conceptions of time so we can elaborate on the deep implications these differences have for the narration and relationships within the novel.



So, a brief note about the novel's context and when it was written. *Carpentaria* was conceived of and written throughout the Howard years. The Howard government repealed many of the legal rights and self-determination advancements that grassroots community had won in the 1990s (and had fought for long before that). Howard refused to apologise to the Stolen Generations on behalf of the government for past wrongdoing, and he oversaw the disbanding of ATSIC, which was the closest we've come to meaningful Aboriginal governance since before we were invaded.

Along with John Howard, the One Nation politician Pauline Hanson also pushed back against any acknowledgment, let alone celebration, of Australia's black history. Through her political party One Nation, Hanson pushed an agenda of a 'united' Australia, yet in the same breath would single out and demonise Aboriginal people (and Asian-Australians).

Both Howard and Hanson were ostensibly assimilationist in that they wanted to mainstream blackfellas into all aspects of Australian life – but they were spectacularly hypocritical about it. On one hand they denied our unique status in this country as First Peoples, and they minimised our very real differences to non-Indigenous Australians, and so professed to deny us any 'special treatment'. Yet on the other hand they singled us out repeatedly, most famously in 2003's Northern Territory intervention, where whole communities were stripped of their basic human and legal rights under accusations of paedophilia and alcoholism. And so in this way a whole group of people were pathologised and criminalised.



The way Australia classifies its own time as precolonial, colonial and postcolonial serves to divide a continuum of time into dissimilar units relative to non-Indigenous occupation. Of course, many Aboriginal people will say that we are not yet postcolonial.

This way of divvying up time in relation to Australian occupation speaks to Western obsessions with naming and defining eras in order to distance contemporary life from the past and privilege new, improved versions of civilisation. We see this with the classification of society into movements: for example, pre-literate, New Age, postmodernist, New World Order. Defining eras also creates psychic, not actual, distance from the past and declares 'more advanced' versions of humanity and intellect.

Western 'rationalism' attempts to divorce its contemporary knowledge from ancestral memory; contemporary knowledge is always presented as the most up-to-date and most correct, yet it refuses the wisdom of all knowledges from all times. In Western culture, there are statutes of limitations in law, and scientific knowledge often becomes outdated and inaccurate as time goes by. In contrast, Aboriginal Law remains the same throughout all times.

Indigenous Law is a living, integrated body of knowledge that environmental activist David Suzuki says 'has built up over millennia and that will never be duplicated by [Western] science because it is acquired from a profoundly different basis'. If we think about time in a Western, linear sense, then non-Indigenous occupations of our lands might be figured as a 2.5-centimetre length of string in comparison to a 1-metre length of string representing Indigenous occupation; imagine a tiny inchworm dwarfed by a massive eastern brown snake. Even in a linear reckoning of time like this, our ancestral memory is far longer than any other on earth. Still, the enormity of *everywhen* must be understood beyond the sense of eras or epochs.

Let's unpack the concept of *everywhen*, which is an analogy of an Aboriginal conceptualisation of time, first put forth by WEH Stanner in his seminal translations of Aboriginal culture for the Western world.

Time is understood differently across cultures, and in the Aboriginal mode of temporality, all

things that have happened are still happening now. It is difficult to render this idea precisely in English. However, one way we already do talk about this is by using the verb *Dreaming* rather than the noun *Dreamtime*. *Dreamtime* denotes a discrete event with a beginning and an end, located in the past; by contrast, *Dreaming* is ever-imminent and emergent.

In 1953 Stanner said: 'I have never been able to discover any Aboriginal word for "time" as an abstract concept. And the sense of "history" is wholly alien here' (23). He translated Aboriginal dimensional spirituality – commonly known as Dreaming – for a non-Indigenous audience: 'it was, and is, *everywhen*' (24).

Everywhen embodies the laws and patternings of culture that are formulated from the creation of Country in the Dreaming. These laws do not change, and they are the framework for all possible events to unfold within. In the *everywhen* framework, all times are compressed, and nested inside Country, and all times are known through our unbroken ancestral memory. The past is not just 'events that happened before now', because this implies a linear continuum of time. In the *everywhen* paradigm, the past is still alive in the eternal present, and it is the framework within which all potential and possible events can unfold at any time.

In a cultural sense, Aboriginal songs and stories all demonstrate this, as they all come from the land and they all contain information from the past while remaining relevant for us today and onward. The only way we can make sense of ourselves is in the context of our kinship and histories. The past is also stacked inside us; we are all embodiments of family through DNA, through epigenetics, and we are embodiments of our communities through culture and through our transgenerational traumas and strengths.

The deep structure of *Carpentaria* is patterned on *everywhen*. This is an apt frame of reference for the way the novel has the ancient, land-based, Aboriginal mode of time engulf the shallow scratchings of colonial time, as seen in Wright's masterful patterning of *everywhen* in structure, voice and imagery.

In the novel, all times – including the Dreaming, BC times (before Cook) and colonial history – all bleed into *Carpentaria*'s narrative present. The narrative present is concerned with the sagas of the Pricklebush mob in relation to each other, to Uptown, and to the mine. Wright uses historical events to pattern contemporary social relations inside and across communities. Country is also conscious, in accordance with Aboriginal beliefs and, as it has always been, Country is affected by Aboriginal relationships with it and by the colonial relationship with it and with us. In the novel, there is a deep excavation of Country and community, of ecosystems and ghosts, their relationships and their hauntings.

There is no quick reading of this story, and this is intentional. On page 2, we read 'To catch this breath in the river you need the patience of one who can spend days doing nothing'. I think a similar patience is required to tap into the rhythm of this novel. The densely packed and often convoluted sentences are rhythmic and hypnotic, and long sentences need absorbing, slowing the reading pace. Even the lack of white space on the page helps create this effect. Poetry, for example, often with sparing use of words and lots of white space on the page, allows the reader to enter the page with their own thoughts. In *Carpentaria*'s dense walls of text, the reader's mind is caught and absorbed into the page.



Now let's discuss the narrator, then examine the serpentine shape of the story through its beginning and ending: how the narrative voice swims in and out of time to give this structure temporal dimension – and a cyclonic shape.

Carpentaria's 'intrusive narrator' is a Dorry: someone who is overly concerned with other people's business. The narrator is intimate with Pricklebush ways and is concerned with the wellbeing of Country and community while practising a detached curiosity with Uptown. And as the voice mostly centres the Aboriginal characters and explores cross-cultural social relations through their worldviews, the narrator is an explicitly Aboriginal consciousness who is talking to a decidedly Aboriginal audience (but allowing a white audience to listen in).

The narrative voice reproduces Aboriginal orality; it has the same inflections, interjections and cultural dialect as Aboriginal storytellers – it is suited to be spoken. The narrator’s generous voice provides near and far historical context for everything. Using long, rambling sentences that move through time, the narrator puzzles, delights, educates and entertains. This is modelled on the techniques of Dreaming stories, which are also texts of entertainment and education, of religion and law, seasonal calendars, moral compasses, histories, genealogies, and models of kinship patterning.

Most Aboriginal people have got at least one old aunty or uncle, god love ’em, who yarns like this. The meandering way they’ll tell a story is by providing detailed context and background information on everyone and how they’re all related. I grew up listening to old people and working-poor people telling wild stories that were never confined to one time or place. They were long stories with long journeys and broad contexts. Because to tell a story about a person properly, you need to tell the story about where they’re from, who they belong to, and then locate all of this in the context of their family and other relationships in community – and then to locate a community, you need to locate it in the context of all history. Much like the way blackfellas introduce ourselves by who and where we belong to, to establish our connections in order to figure out how best to relate to each other, *Carpentaria*’s narrator does this with characters in the novel too.

The narrator takes interest in a few characters and these characters function as anchors to the narrative present. The narration cycles in and out of characters’ heads and the town itself, to offer broad historical contexts as well as social-relational contexts to the story at hand. The narrator will hover and give a wide view of a scene, then dart into a character’s head and speak through ventriloquy, and swim around different spheres of consciousness to show events from different perspectives. Sometimes they penetrate deeply into a character’s psyche. Layers of consciousness are woven around characters, using imagery and exposition to provide historical context for social conflict. This vocal plenitude is intoxicating and seductive.

The narrator mostly uses a third-person point of view – except for a brief section of [chapter 11](#), ‘The mine’. Here, the narrator briefly becomes a ‘we’, seemingly spoken by some of the fellas from Fishman’s convoy who destroy the mine and rescue Will. Apart from this section, the narrator is divested of any self-reference and doesn’t explicitly acknowledge themselves as a consciousness with a stake in the story, so they are a consciousness without being a character that other characters interact with.

In this style, third-person narrators often attempt to make their voice invisible, so that the reader’s mind can seamlessly merge with the story. Not this narrator! They have an opinion on everything and everyone. They’re aware of when tales become too tall, they feel sympathy and outrage, and they don’t shy away from brutal situations, but also don’t bash readers over the head with how we are supposed to feel.

The voice belongs to the Gulf. It circles around Desperance, sometimes visiting other parts of the continent, but only in relation to a journey from a character. As the assumed voice of Country and community, the narrator has all the authority of a knowledgeable local. This is not an ancient archaic voice from long ago, with some romanticised precolonial utopian mindset, but an up-to-date voice who encompasses all times, even the hard ones. And as *Carpentaria*’s narrator is both ancestral and contemporary, we should consider it the *everywhen* voice of Country, because for Aboriginal people, Country is a consciousness.



The first chapter of *Carpentaria*, ‘From time immemorial’, contains a narrative frame that sits outside the embedded story. This opening frame begins with church bells pealing – the embodiment of Uptown time – loud, precise and demanding. These few sentences are the only part of the novel to use the present tense. As *Carpentaria* is a novel encompassing all times it needs to begin from the most current, most present vantage point possible. This opening paragraph then declares that ‘Armageddon begins here’ (1), and so, paradoxically, the novel proper begins after the

announcement of its own destruction. By beginning the story from time immemorial, the narrator announces themselves as an authority of deep history. And after the opening frame, the narrator condenses all prior times together by talking about everything in the past tense.

To begin the story, we abruptly cut to the serpent scoring rivers into the mudflats with its enormous body and creativity, embodying the fluidity of Aboriginal time and cultural memory. Here, we are launched back to where the real story begins, which is the furthest point in time possible – the beginning of time itself, according to the Aboriginal worldview. In an awe-inspiring and very beautiful introduction to the primordial Rainbow Serpent, the river of today is embodied, it is storied, and it is related to the people. We have not yet been introduced to any human characters besides Cry-Baby Sally and her mission-breed tormentors (2). The serpent is still here; thus, a moment of time that happened billions of years ago still exists, and Dreaming and BC history bleed into the narrative present (20).

The first half of the novel is epic in scope, and is really about setting the scene: it locates the town of Desperance in space and time; it nests the Pricklebush mob and other main characters within this world; and it maps them all in relation to each other, to Uptown, and to history. At the sentence level, several layers of time are flattened and woven together. Let's consider how often the following passage changes tense while the voice comments on the interconnectedness of the events from a place of temporal omniscience:

There was **nobody alive** who could claim to have seen this strange thing happen before, but **history was repeating itself**, because **this was the ancient story** of the prodigal coppiced tree standing there, in the middle of town. A tremendous thunderclap exploded above the tree. It came from deep inside the world of those **black serpent clouds** and even from far away, people said later on, as word filtered back, that they too had listened to the haunting echo of the thunder rolling back to the sea. Finally, when the thunder had faded away, a wind full of sand whistled over the coast from the sea bringing with it **the hardest rain ever imagined** and afterwards, **all time stopped**. (44)

We are first given chapters and chapters of historical context, both recent and far in the past, to prime the reader for the magnitude of the events in the second half of the novel, which are concerned with Norm and Will's journeys, the sagas of the mine and the cyclone. Structurally, the shape of the novel can be seen as a widely meandering river with the novel taking a long time to get to these 'main' events in the narrative present.

Wright's story design is what Kate Grenville names 'Focus' (173). The focus is Waanyi country, which contains the town of Desperance and the characters who live there – particularly the Aboriginal characters who are river people. The novel is about the people and the river, which is also the serpent, who lives in the sky and also beneath the mudflats, both now and in the past, who is continually carving songlines, which tell the history of the place. So, to tell a story about the town, Wright needed to tell the story of the river and what it is through all time.

Unlike plot-driven stories, where the shape of the novel is determined by the order of events, this story is shaped by *Carpentaria's* narrator. Like the serpent-river scoring through the mud, the narrator's widely meandering voice carves the shape of the narrative. The narrator, like the serpent-river, winds around and around Country, deep into the earth of history and into the sky of cosmology, changing temporal zones frequently and suddenly. The narrator journeys the reader from time immemorial to the narrative present, and through all times in between. This non-linear narrative is breathtaking and dizzying, full of movement around time and place. The 'carnavalesque' narrative structure is patterned on Dreaming processes and the movement of the serpent-river, and these levels of patterning are cyclical, like Aboriginal seasonal calendars. The narrator then is serpentine *and* multidimensional in form, which to my mind describes the shape of a cyclone. This cyclonic voice sweeps and dips, swimming backward and forward through time to give this shape temporal dimension, embodying *everywhen*.

It takes a very long time to arrive at, and stay with, the events in the narrative present – this really only properly happens in [chapter 6](#), 'Knowing fish'. This is the first chapter that is one

extended scene in the narrative present, and in it we follow Will Phantom and his interactions with Mozzie and Elias, which kick off the events in the following chapters, with the story developing in a more-or-less chronological way from this point on.

The last few pages of the novel follow Norm, Hope and Bala coming onto shore from their long time at sea (516–19). (Earlier, they had lost Hope; now, Will abandons them to find Hope.) But the town of Desperance is no longer there and the landscape is unfamiliar, confusing Norm because he had tracked the place correctly. We are as close to the narrative present as we'll ever be; the story has homed in on Norm and Bala, and their trans-generational connection:

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 town, down the road, Westside, to home. (519)

These final lines return us to the beginning of the novel, and the serpent-river's song of creation humming off the land. In the long view of history, not much time has passed and the cyclone has blown the recent past away to resemble the primordial, or precolonial Country. These lines quietly answer the beginning of the novel that happens long before 'a nation chants', and 'church bells peal' (1).



Another important way *Carpentaria* performs *everywhen* is by representing two different temporal modes – Aboriginal and colonial – which Wright then plays against each other. We'll now look at how the novel presents different cultural imagery of time, and then we'll look at some of the main characters, and the specific cultural symbols of time that they are associated with, and how these are used to situate the characters within their distinct modes of temporality and relationships to time.

Critic Diane Molloy says that 'there is an underlying tension between the Western and Aboriginal view of time throughout the novel. The history of the Pricklebush people is from time immemorial, while the history of the Uptown people "is only as old as the cemetery"' (3). Uptown's cultural memory is only as long as their colonial heyday.

Wright deploys cultural symbols to situate Uptown time within the fluid vastness of *everywhen*. Recurrent imagery is used to give readers clues to understand this tension. This layering and repetition of symbols creates an emblematic resonance and reveals the deep structure of *everywhen* in the novel.

The novel uses the following Western time-keeping symbols: clocks, Gregorian calendars, town records, minutes from meetings, deadlines, writing in general, and Armageddon. The narrator figures Aboriginal ancestral memory as a massive primordial snake that runs circles around the short and recent presence of colonial history. By contrasting these lengths of time, the narrator destabilises the footholds of colonial 'scientific' and undermines their authority (123). Ancestral time, in the omnipresence of the serpent, first ridicules Australia, then also promises that it will see its own Armageddon:

The serpent's covenant permeates everything, even the little black girls with hair combed back off their faces and bobby-pinned neatly for church, listening quietly to the nation that claims to know everything except the exact date its world will end. (11)

Dying clocks contrast Uptown's short history with Pricklebush's ancestral memory:

The clocks, tick-a-ty tock, looked as though they might run out of time. Luckily, the ghosts in the memories of the old folk were listening, and said anyone can find hope in the stories: the big stories and the little ones in between. So ... (12)

The serpent-river interferes with Uptown time:

Time stopped tick-tocking, because there was too much moisture in the air and it had interfered with

the mechanical workings of dozens of watches and clocks that ended up jiggered, and afterwards, were only fit to be thrown down on the rubbish dump. (44)



Country is the keeper of time through seasons, and blackfellas are observers of time while whitefellas attempt to measure and control time. We see this in the first few sentences with the church bells, which are traditionally used to tell the time, and specifically to remind townsfolk when they are required to attend ceremonies at the church.

Blackfella collective, communal memory locates Indigenous people in Country in all-times. Collective, communal history is embodied in *Carpentaria*'s Lawmen, who are simultaneously libraries and librarians, as well as historians, genealogists, song keepers, and family commentators. They understand the relationships between seasonal calendars, astronomy, tides and the moon; these are coded in stories and songs as Aboriginal memory symbols. Mozzie Fishman and Norm Phantom both read the changing land and the star maps respectively, to locate themselves in space-time. Star maps are constantly moving, as are the moon and tides, so this is a fluid type of time.

The oral transmission of education is preferenced in Aboriginal cultures, but despite assumptions that Aboriginal cultures are purely oral and non-literate, illiterate, or pre-literate, a variety of materials are inscribed with symbols and patterns, including rocks, caves, trees, skin and clothing. This way of communicating information semiotically should also be considered a written language in that it requires a specific literacy to read and to write this way. In *Carpentaria*, information is inscribed semiotically; the origin story of contemporary Pricklebush feuding was first recorded in the land: 'The old people wrote about the history of these wars on rock' (26).

If genetics link families biologically, then similarly, members of a community are culturally linked through memetics.² In both cases, these links evolve unbroken through time. Connections between self and ancestors are maintained through long and ancestral memories: world-views, traditions, intergenerational traumas and strength, ghosts, hauntings, stories, songlines, are all cultural information from the past. This long view of history gives context to *Carpentaria*'s characters, and to their demons. Pricklebush feuds and cohesion are transgenerational, and attest to the passage of culture through time; *everywhen* is stacked inside them.



Carpentaria is very much an Aboriginal story because it features a community of characters, rather than lone or token blackfellas. The characters are drawn larger than life within the novel, befitting the way they occupy mythical proportions in their families and community. Let's look at some of the main characters and their associated symbols, and how these illustrate the characters' different relationships to time.

First, the main players from the Phantom family. Angel Day is queen of the rubbish dump. Uptown's trash is Angel Day's treasure; she is very clever and resourceful, creating a whole home for her family from scavenging perfectly good rubbish from the tip.

Angel Day's determination to possess the dump clock in [chapter 2](#) clues us into her desire to be able to engage with Uptown and be associated with white ways. It's worth mentioning that in this context, the word 'Uptown' probably references a certain sniping slur that Aboriginal people sometimes use against other blackfellas who are perceived to be above their station, or who think they're better than other mob. Sometimes it's just used against people who have transcended our generally poor socio-economic situation into middle-or upper-class comfort.

Angel Day invests time-telling with authority: she intends to use the clocks to get her kids to school on time to appear respectable to Uptown (22–3). But she also wants to tell Pricklebush mob 'what time it is'. This is another slang reference: to tell someone 'what time it is' is to have authority

over a situation. Angel Day wants to tell white time to black people: she wants to be a timekeeper, someone who can judge and make decisions, who demands respect and authority. Someone like this is also known as a ‘mission manager’.

Rightfully so, Angel Day is rendered as a troublemaker for her desire to tell white time to the Pricklebush mob, who have their own time. This whole situation triggers a war at the dump, and ancient grievances erupt from people’s memories (24–8). This fight over traditional ownership is linked to memories, because custodial memory is linked to stake in place – a reference to how in native title claims in some communities divisions are drawn down these same lines.

It is said that Normal Phantom, Angel’s husband, ‘knew as much about the sky as he did about water’, which is much more than most people (6). In this way, Norm is seen as a Magical Koori by Uptown, as to them, his knowledge of the river and ocean and stars *seems* quite mystical, but we know that this information is really very mathematical and scientific. His name – Normal – alongside his mystical, mythical reputation is a way to play with this trope.

Norm has mastery of *everywhen*. When he kills crocodiles, it’s said that he ‘ended hundreds of lives of prehistoric living fossils’ (7). He has a close relationship to the goppers, too, who are just as ancient and majestic (249–50). Similarly, the Pricklebush mob say:

... that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father’s fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began. Normal was like ebbing water, he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to the sea. (6)

The mysterious Elias Smith shows up one day walking in from the sea, completely amnesiac. In this way he could be seen as an ideal ‘New Australian’, as he is white, and has lost his memory and therefore his links to other places and any claims to other traditions. Try as he might he can’t remember anything, so he can’t locate himself or identify himself relationally.

Elias becomes good friends with Norm, and an Uncle figure to Will, as they all bond over their love of fishing. I think Elias’ amnesia allows a true friendship with Norm. They see each other as equals; Elias’ lack of memory equates to lack of experience, which means he is not culpable in colonisation or historical racism. Through his amnesia he is rendered harmless. So as a blank slate, devoid of Uptown’s colonial mindset, he is able to engage in non-hierarchical friendship with Norm. I think that if Elias had a backstory, it would have to inform his relations with Norm, and probably interfere in their friendship.

In the Phantom family, it’s not just Norm who is especially cognisant of tidal ebbs and flows, and the rhythms of the moon. Norm and Angel’s son Will Phantom experiences time as ‘a fleeting whisper’ (164). The narrator says:

Will knew how the tides worked simply by looking at the movement of a tree, or where the moon crossed the sky, the light of day, or the appearance of the sea. He carried the tide in his body. Even way out in the desert, when he was on the Fishman’s convoy, a thousand miles away from the sea, he felt its rhythms. (401)

Bala, child of Hope and Will Phantom, has a whole chapter named after him. Bala is the only blackfella with a cultural name in this book, and if we consider that the Waanyi language was classified as functionally extinct at the time of writing, and that Bala’s parents and grandparents have white names, we should read this child as signifying a return to cultural traditions in more ways than one. Consider the last few pages of the book, and the transgenerational connection between Bala and his granddad Norm. Literary scholar Cornelis Martin Renes says that ‘Bala’s perception of the location [of Desperance] as a “big yellow snake” places the destruction wrought by the cyclone in the mythical realm of the Great Creation Being’ (62).



It took me a few years to start, but reading *Carpentaria* was a big part of me wanting to write fiction.

I'd always had the inkling that maybe I could write stories one day, but working to pay the bills came before the luxury of writing for pleasure. On reflection, I think what kept me away for so long is that I'd internalised that literature was for middle-class and white people, and for serious people with mortgages and stable jobs whose biggest stories are about the minutiae of their own lives. I rarely came across any stories about characters who thought and related the way I do, who spoke the way my family and community speak – with a sense of humour and a sense of the absurd, the way of all blackfellas living on the breadline.

I was introduced to *Carpentaria* in 2008 during my BEd undergrad; I took a unit on Aboriginal Literatures with Dr Peter Minter, who set [chapter 1](#) for a reading. I fell in love with the characters, the voice, and the place – all both familiar and fantastic. The language was meaty, chewy, magical and delicious. I didn't know writing could be like this, let alone black writing – *our* writing. *Carpentaria* showed me that a chatty, informal, blackfella voice absolutely belongs in fiction, and that stories don't have to be straightforward, linear, or realistic, because life is rarely any of these things.

This book cemented my love affair with maximalist writing, intoxicating writing, too-much-information writing, with surreal and magically real ways of telling. *Carpentaria* showed me that stories don't have to be written for the white gaze, nor to teach white Australia a lesson about itself, but are better when they are by us, for us, and about us.

In this novel, Wright has performed a deep excavation of Aboriginal Country and community. Through my own writing I explore the tensions between Aboriginal sovereignty and colonial-capitalism in human relationships, and other relationships of power, so I'm inspired by the way *Carpentaria* asserts its own sovereignty by embodying ancient, intergenerational memories of people and place.

On a deep level, this speaks back against the amnesiac assimilationist rhetoric of 'one nation' that has dominated mainstream political discourse from the time of the novel's conception through to its publication (and even up until the present day). Wright pits vast and deep Aboriginal knowledge against the short memories of Howard and Hanson and their refusal to acknowledge our old peoples' losses, which are our losses too. In this sense, *Carpentaria* weaponises our ancestral consciousness against the capitalist, colonial corporatocracy that continues to subjugate Aboriginal sovereignty today.

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- 1 Two of my teachers, Fiona and Beth – who I am stoked to be in this book with – both taught me something about reading like a writer.
 - 2 Not to be confused with the internet info-artefacts, memes here are a metaphor analogous to genes. Just as genes pass down biological information, memes propagate cultural information; both units can evolve and mutate through reproduction. This concept was popularised by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, but I first learnt about this framework from Susan Blackmore in her 1999 book *The Meme Machine*.