

Prize Prose

An Aboriginal authoress takes out Australia's biggest literary prize.

A boriginal author and Land Rights activist Alexis Wright has won Australia's most prestigious literary prize – the Miles Franklin Literary Award – for her epic novel, *Carpentaria*.

This fascinating and challenging novel that judges called “powerful, richly imagined and stylistically ambitious” is a true Australian masterpiece.

Carpentaria is based on Alexis' dealings with native title negotiations with the Century mine in north-west Queensland and took her more than six years to write. Alexis even threw away entire drafts of the books as she struggled with how best to present such an important and powerful story.

“I was constantly arguing with myself about how it should be written,” Alexis admits. “I tried to write in the conventional form of Australian fiction, but it just did not suit the story.”

“The book required a certain voice and rhythm that contained the energy of the Gulf country, but I was concerned with how this would be received by the general reading public.”

This voice and rhythm involved creating a specific narrative structure and tone for the novel. Alexis tells the story in the voice of a native Gulf elder, a decision she saw as a big risk, as she feels it could have damaged the novel's chance at success. The result is an inspiring book that ignores traditional linear structure, grammar and syntax in favour of producing an authentic Aboriginal voice and interpretation of The Dreaming.

Alexis says the world that she created in *Carpentaria* is so far removed from the realm of experience of non-Indigenous Australians that it can seem strange and almost unbelievable.



“The story is imagined, but it comes from knowing what actually happens within Aboriginal communities,” she says.

“The response to this novel has made me realise how disconnected people are with Indigenous culture.”

For inspiration, Alexis looked toward Indigenous writers working in other countries such as India, South America and the Caribbean. This was because she found there to be no foundation of novels written in native dialect in Australia.

On one hand, *Carpentaria* is about a deadly fight for land rights, but on the other it is what the Miles Franklin judges called “a stunning evocation of a sublime and often overwhelming tropical world that is still inhabited by traditional spirits”.

Alexis feared that *Carpentaria* would be flatly rejected by Australian publishers. However, the style of the novel turned out to be a perfect fit with Giramondo Publishing Company, the publishing arm of the University of Western Sydney (UWS) Writing and Society Research Group, which supports outstanding Australian authors whose works are of high literary quality but limited commercial appeal.

Professor Ivor Indyk, the Whitlam Chair in the Writing and Society Research Group at UWS, says the popular and now critical success of *Carpentaria* marks a turning point in Australian literature.

“The success of *Carpentaria* shows that there is room in Australia for Indigenous literature,” he says. “Readers are ready to embrace books from other cultures and the literary community is finally valuing its unique qualities.”

Alexis' win sees her follow in the footsteps of some other great Australian writers, including Thea Astley, Peter Carey, Thomas Keneally, Elizabeth Jolley and Tim Winton.





PREPARATION BEFORE READING

Writer Alexis Wright has just won Australia's highest prize for writing, the prestigious Miles Franklin Award. Her novel *Carpentaria* is set in northern Queensland and told from the viewpoint of an Elder in the Gulf country.

While tackling the issue of land rights and mining companies, Alexis has created an inspiring text that produces an authentic Aboriginal voice and interpretation of *The Dreaming*.

ACTIVITY 1: READ PRIZE PROSE ON PAGES 4&5

1. Which award did Alexis Wright win?

2. What does it mean to describe this as "Australia's most prestigious literary prize"?

3. Briefly summarise what *Carpentaria* is about.

4. Why was it such a risk to tell the story the way she has?

5. Why did Alexis look toward Indigenous authors in other countries for inspiration?

6. Explain Professor Indyk's comment that "the success of *Carpentaria* shows that there is room in Australian for Indigenous literature".



ACTIVITY 2: RESPONSE TEXT

Read the review of *Carpentaria* below.

Notes have been included to explain how the review has been structured.

positive judgement	Alexis Wright's second novel is a vast, sprawling affair that extends magically beyond its hefty 500 pages. It takes you outside the expected scope of narrative time to a place that is simultaneously familiar and astoundingly new.
plot and character description	Set in Desperance in the Gulf country, a township shaped by cyclones and monsoonal floods, it tells the story of the powerful Phantom family. Led by Norm Phantom, the great fish-embalming king of time, legendary storyteller, suspected murderer and leader of the Pricklebush people, the Phantoms battle to retain control over a country where "legends and ghosts live side by side".
positive judgement	While the petty, white officials of Uptown and the neighbouring Gurfurrit mine quibble over whether to build "a giant something or other" in the middle of the town, the Pricklebush people go about the serious business of travelling their country, seeking out the old people and gathering stories of the past.
quote from literary judges	<p>And what marvellous stories they are: Elias Smith, the white-haired man coughed up from the sea, neither alive nor dead, his memory lost somewhere in the Dreamtime and the visionary Mozzie Fishman in search of ancestral resting places. They are real stories that tie people to their past and give voice to the laws and protocols of the land.</p> <p>The award judges described her work as "powerful, richly imagined and stylistically ambitious".</p> <p>www.smh.com.au/news/bookreviews/carpentaria/2006/09/18/1158431619821.html</p>

Using this review as a guide, write your own review of a novel you have studied in class or one you have enjoyed yourself.

Follow the same pattern as the review above.



ACTIVITY 3: EXCERPT FROM CARPENTARIA

Below is an excerpt from the first pages of Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria*.

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground. Looking down at the serpent's wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

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, soon changed colour from ocean blue to the yellow of mud. The water filled the swirling tracks to form the mighty rivers spread across the vast plains of the Gulf country. The serpent travelled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the sand dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland...

1. Think of the natural landscape near where you live. In the style of Alexis Wright, explain how the land's natural features were created by an ancestral serpent.

Use expressive adjectives and verbs to describe how the landscape was created.