

**Alexis Wright. *Praiseworthy*. Giramondo, 2023. 736 pages.
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To say that Alexis Wright's fourth novel, *Praiseworthy*, represents a continuation of her previous work might seem redundant, given that authors tend to possess an inescapable style and reveal a certain obsessiveness regarding themes, but one might argue that Wright's fiction is distinctively characterised or even defined by a reiterative quality. This is something I'd like to briefly explore in this review.

The reiterative nature of Wright's *Praiseworthy* can be expediently conceptualised at two levels: the aesthetic and the thematic. Beginning with the aesthetic and focusing on genre as an element of that aesthetic, this latest novel reiterates the allegorical and satirical techniques of at least two of her earlier novels, *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013). In *Praiseworthy*, the genre of allegory is signalled in various ways: through the larger-than-life location of the town of Praiseworthy, which is at the heart of this novel, just as the similar outback town of Desperance provides the setting for *Carpentaria*; via the conspicuously named characters, such as Aboriginal Sovereignty, which parallel the improbable names that are also a prominent feature of *The Swan Book*; and in eccentric events of obvious metaphorical potential, such as the grey dust cloud that hovers over the remote town of Praiseworthy, a meteorological phenomenon that calls to mind the floating island of rubbish in *Carpentaria*.

There is also the reiterative excess—the dynamic, almost baroque, circuitousness and accretion—of Wright's storytelling method, which gives her novels their epic length. It is a technique that constantly retraces its own steps, going over and over a particular character or image or episode until it becomes saturated, almost overloaded, with meaning. Such an approach, of course, complicates the allegorical hermeneutic, rendering it far from straightforward. We see this complexity, arising from that reiterative and accretive process, in the characterisation of Aboriginal Sovereignty's father, who is variously known as Planet, Widespread and Cause Man Steel. Obsessed with the impacts of climate change, Planet is also known as a “doom dreamer” (5) by the rambunctious chorus-like townspeople of Praiseworthy who are as intolerant of his catastrophising as of his plan to save the world—and get rich—by replacing fossil fuel vehicles with donkeys. Is he a would-be saviour? The narrator considers it, though warns: “Nobody loves a saviour in today's reality. They war against it. They would rather become extinct” (65). Or is he narcissistic and delusional? This is also possible, particularly given how Planet's plan grows into a fixation with grey donkeys and even with the perfectly shaded grey donkey, variously described as a “Jesus donkey” (47), “jaguar-grey donkey” (48), “Zeus donkey” (129), “air-force grey, naval-ship grey” donkey (127), “platinum donkey” (130), “million-dollar-making donkey” (140), and “billboard donkey” (143)—this list is by no means comprehensive. Such repetition demands consideration of the metaphorical potential of the colour grey, which features strongly in this novel, given that it is also the colour of the dust cloud mysteriously hovering above Praiseworthy. Grey, as popular wisdom teaches us, is the colour of ambiguity, nuance, compromise; it exists somewhere between the more dramatic and polarised colours of black and white; it is the much-mourned middle ground seemingly lost in the “cancel culture” that Wright explicitly references and parodies from time to time in this novel. As the narrator explains: “Of all colours, the shades of greyness were perhaps the most mysterious and indeterminate” (60–61). Nevertheless, to idealise the colour grey, as Planet does, epitomises foolishness. Fence-sitting, which might be metaphorically evoked by the cloud that sits above the town—though this image is characteristically manifold—is its own kind of problem; it can be akin to stagnation. Certainly, it is not a solution

to the profound problems that confront the townspeople of Praiseworthy or, indeed, First Peoples in real life.

Exploring these problems leads us to the thematic concerns of Wright's novel, which also find iteration in her previous work. One of these, as already suggested, is climate change, an existential threat for the entire planet but also, at a local level, to First Peoples given how it impacts their ability to live on Country. A concern with climate change is already apparent in *Carpentaria*, in which the small Gulf-Country town of that novel is swamped by an epic cyclone, but it is even more explicitly thematised in *The Swan Book*, which is set in a disorienting, climate-changed future. *Praiseworthy* is set at a liminal time in the Anthropocene, between business-as-usual and impending catastrophe, which is to say that it is set in a time very much like our own. The people of Praiseworthy are described as the "world's greatest human survivors" (2), who have learned survival "from the biggest library in the world—country" (2). Their resilience will be tested yet again with rumours of "planetary catastrophes" that cause even "the night-time hopping mouse . . . an anxiety attack" (3).

However, the central theme—and the source of the rage that drives the satirical allegory of this novel—is the ongoing erosion of Aboriginal sovereignty, which Wright associates with the Northern Territory National Emergency Response or The Intervention as it is more colloquially known. John Howard's LNP government declared a national emergency in relation to alleged child sex abuse in 2007, grounded in the *Little Children Are Sacred* report—which is evoked by name in *Praiseworthy*—and infamously sent in armed forces to take control of seventy-three First Peoples communities. That event is fundamental to *The Swan Book*, in which a white character, given the poisonous name of Bella Donna, attempts to rescue an Aboriginal survivor of sexual assault. Rescue, Wright's allegory suggests, is a colonial byword for assimilation. Wright returns to the topic of the Intervention here to show how its ideology continues to poison Aboriginal identity, breeding a kind of self-hatred that inevitably becomes self-destructive. This is epitomised in the eight-year-old character of Tommyhawk, Aboriginal Sovereignty's younger brother, who lives immersed in social media, fears the "paedophiles that the government said were an infestation in his community" (72), and dreams of being adopted by the "golden-haired Minister for Aboriginal Affairs" (80)—also known as "The Golden Mother" (211)—and taken to live in Canberra. While Wright's novel mostly embraces hybridity—and, indeed, epitomises it—it nevertheless expresses enmity towards those Aboriginal characters tempted by the evil of "assimilation," the dirtiest of words. Tommyhawk, who has embraced Apple technology along with schooling, and who dreams of a better life associated with urban centres of white populations, is described as a "fascist" (172) and a "mangy dog" (458). There are also other insulting epithets. It's a tough portrait of a child character, who is also a victim of colonialism, and it's potentially a controversial one, given the ways in which this child character is also used to discredit reports of sexual violence. Indeed, Wright's wholesale mockery of a boy who claims to have suffered sexual abuse can be discomfiting. It has the potential to be triggering, though this novel was hardly written for actual victims, much less those who have hit rock-bottom. No novel ever is—though it doesn't mean such people don't exist. There might be an argument for leaving such people out of our middle-class games with language and politics. Nevertheless, in the logic of Wright's novel, Tommyhawk is designated as the villain, when he—Cain-like—turns against his 17-year-old brother, Aboriginal Sovereignty, reporting him to the police for having sex with a 15-year-old girl. In the aftermath of his arrest, Aboriginal Sovereignty "quit the scene" (167), disappearing into the sea. While there is talk of suicide, the people of Praiseworthy, who have fragmented into competing cults, continue to look for his body, so that despair and hope—not to mention chaos and absurdity—coexist in the fight to bring back Aboriginal Sovereignty. The allegorical meaning here is, uncommonly, quite clear.

It is ironic that Wright begins *Praiseworthy* with a quote by Jorge Luis Borges, that Latin American master of minimalism, when her aesthetic has much more in common with the maximalism of Latin American “Boom” writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Guillermo Cabrera Infante or even post-“Boom” Latin American writers such as Reinaldo Arenas and Junot Díaz. However, Wright’s style is also very much her own, developed reiteratively over the course of four novels—beginning with *Plains of Promise* (1997)—that demonstrate an increasing desire to overthrow the tragic narrative of colonialism through the carnivalesque joie de vivre and revelrous enactment of cultural resilience. That resilience is exemplified in the riffing practice of Wright’s storytelling, in the dynamic allegories and spiky satires of her fictional scenarios, in Aboriginal characters that live out their dreams and strife in Tower-of-Babel towns of lively conflict, in images and happenings that are prolific and sometimes exhausting in meaning, in worlds where the only solid ground can be found in the authority of a culture that has been around, as Wright repeatedly insists in *Praiseworthy*, for “eternity” (13), for “infinity” (37), “since time began” (43).

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