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On the Brink of Possibility: Alexis Wright's Tragicomic Novel

Richard Carr

1 Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* stands out among novels focused on Aboriginal Australia. Centered on an isolated town and region in the Far North, *Carpentaria* in its length and scope is an epic novel, perhaps *the* indigenous epic. In her essay "On Writing *Carpentaria*," Wright states: "The contemporary Indigenous story world is epic," and notes her great challenge: "how to understand the idea of Indigenous people living with the stories of all the times of this country, and [...] how to write from this perspective" (2010, 3). The novel presents readers with an Aboriginal world in conflict with a largely separate white world, the latter claiming superior status over the former, an unsurprising starting point. Yet amid the examination of Desperance, the isolated town, and its Aboriginal inhabitants, Wright created something fresh and unexpected on its publication in 2006 – an ultimately comic fiction of the Indigenous Australian experience.

2 For fiction bringing focus to Aboriginal Australia generally portrays a world in conflict with or living uneasily in a White Australia that wields overwhelming power over their life. Indigenous authors, for instance, have reimagined historical encounters between Black and White. Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* follows Bobby Walanginy from his childhood at the arrival of the white invaders in Western Australia through his adulthood and into his dotage. At first the adults of Bobby's tribe meet the whites as equals, as Bobby recalls poignantly their misunderstanding underlying those first encounters, suggesting what might have been in the relations between the two groups: "We thought making friends was the best thing [...] We learned your words and songs and stories and never knew you didn't want to hear ours" (2010, 106). As the settlers turn the open fields into fenced-in paddocks for their sheep, Bobby and his mates must turn to sheep stealing to stay alive and then suffer the indignity of arrest and jail. An elder Bobby, of whom we have but a glimpse, has become a kind of performing clown for local tourists, a pitiful remnant of a once-proud group. In an interview with Anne Brewster, Kim Scott commented that his original vision was "to end the novel on the

upbeat," but he decided that "ambivalence" at the close could lead to deeper reflection on his theme of "possibility and loss" (Scott 2015, 20). The end of the novel finds the old Bobby on trial for theft, and at his court hearing, he performs a song and dance encapsulating the history of his community since settler arrival and wanting, by reaching his audience, to call back the hope of a different, better path in settler-Indigenous relations. His hopes, however, are dashed: "Suddenly, he felt not fear, but a terrible anxiety. Faces [...] had turned away from him" (2010, 395).

3 Tony Birch's *The White Girl* (2019) takes readers to small-town Australia of the early 1960s, just a few years ahead of the 1967 Referendum that made Aboriginal Australians citizens of their country and evoking a world in which Black Australians are subject to restrictions, prohibitions, or threats of violence at every turn. Speaking to an interviewer from *The Guardian*, Birch recalled his determination "to write a really strong, central female character [...] to celebrate the heroics of Aboriginal women" (Birch 2019b). Odette Brown is that woman: resident on a mission, Odette can, for instance, shop in Deane, the nearby town, but only on Saturday mornings between eight and twelve; appearance there otherwise could lead to her arrest. She stashes earnings from her hand-painted greeting cards in jam jars at home, for "[w]ithout citizenship Odette could not open an independent bank account" (Birch 2019a, 38–39). Her granddaughter Cecily (Sissy) having reached adolescence, Odette recognizes the waiting danger. A light-skinned girl, Sissy has caught the attention of authorities; Odette could lose custody of her under laws that allow the removal of Indigenous children from their families. Odette's solution is to take her granddaughter to the city, where she can pass for white. As a white girl, she can also escape another looming fate, specifically, serving as a sexual object to be used, then discarded by local white men. Odette has already lost her daughter Lila, Cecily's mother, to rape and its aftermath; she does not want to lose Sissy as well. A key obstacle to her plan emerges with another restriction: Aborigines can only travel with an official permit, and the current governing authority will not issue her one. Though Odette and Cecily escape their bounds, the narrative unravels in a life-or-death urgency. In these fictions the world is – or becomes – an oppressive place for Indigenous Australians, the obstacles great, and the tone – serious – fits the dramatic situation.

4 *Carpentaria* contends with aspects of the race-infused struggles of the Indigenous Australian population from first contact through the beginnings of the twenty-first century and the vexed history of relations between Black and White Australians. Wright, however, does not take her exploration of the town, the region, or the people in expected directions, as many scholars have noted. Speaking directly of Aboriginal drama, Adam Shoemaker, in *Black Words, White Page,* finds a distinctive quality: "In spite of all that has been endured by Aborigines, they have managed to retain a distinctive sense of humour which acts to combat depression and to promote [...] cohesion" (1989, 233). Labeling the novel "carnivalesque" (2012, 1), Diane Molloy cites the author in her description of Wright's achievement: "The novel creates a space that is not 'within the imagined borders that have been forced on Aboriginal people' (Wright, 'On Writing *Carpentaria*' 82) by resisting being framed by the history of dispossession and marginalization that so often defines Aboriginal people as silent and passive victims" (2012, 1). Xu Daozhi lauds Wright's approach to her material in her first novel *Plains of Promise*, but Xu Daozhi's comments apply to *Carpentaria* as well: "Humour as a strategy

of survival epitomises the paradoxical connection between humour and tragedy in the life of Aboriginal people who were, and [...] remain, socially disadvantaged" (2019, 2).

5 The role of humor in Aboriginal life is a neglected area of study, even though, in the words of playwright Jack Davis, "historically Aborigines 'learnt to keep themselves alive by laughing'" (quoted in Shoemaker 1989, 233). Jeanine Leane, in an interview with Anne Brewster, spoke of the primacy of humor in Indigenous life: "I know the Aboriginal community is diverse but one of our commonalities is humour" (Leane 2015, 87); "humour was about learning to survive" (91). Iva Polak[1] identifies theater as the "first literary form in which Aboriginal contemporary production incorporated laughter" (2013, 2). Polak highlights Davis's role in making humor integral to drama centered on the lives of indigenous Australians (his first play, *Kullark*, was produced in 1979) and notes the contribution of film (e.g. *Bran Nue Dae* [2010], *The Sapphires* [2012]) and television (e.g. *Redfern Now*)[2] to enriching portrayals and providing focal points for studies of Aboriginal humor. Polak further laments the lack of research into laughter and humor in Aboriginal fiction, echoing other critics (Susanne Reichl and Mark Stein, Heinz Antor) who find a generally "low-key" level of research into the subject throughout postcolonial literatures (3).[3] She identifies the distinction often indirectly made by critics between writers who produce "explicitly humorous" fiction and others – Alexis Wright among them – whose works "are not necessarily promoted as humorous" – meriting academic study (3). Estelle Castro-Koshy notes that humor "is often used as a device to invite readers to rehumanize situations and see them anew" (2018, 119). That is my purpose here: to explore the humor in *Carpentaria*, to examine it as a comic fiction.

6 Humor abounds in *Carpentaria*. It emerges through the narrator, through the naming of people and places, through the social milieu – Wright's chorus – and through the traits ascribed to the novel's chief characters. Wright cues readers into her darkly comic approach in several ways, foremost of which lies in the narration. Hoping to reach Indigenous audiences across Australia, Wright wanted Carpentaria to "appear reminiscent of the style of oral storytelling that a lot of Indigenous people would find familiar" (2010, 2). Geoff Rodoreda assesses the unique nature of the narration, envisioning the novel as a story or stories related by an Indigenous narrator, most likely an Elder or Ancestor, directly to a group of Aboriginal listeners (2016, 8–9), while beyond that a non-Indigenous audience is invited to "listen to the voice that Australians have never listened to" (Wright quoted in Rodoreda 9). The narrator is by turns acerbic, ironic, expansive, and colloquial, and brings his-her-their[4] wit to bear on regional history as well as contemporary events and people. Early settlers got their supplies from the camel train, but when the drivers absconded, the town was left with camels needing to be rounded up that "just wandered around at their own will [....]. The screaming animals didn't comprehend English, or barbarism either" (Wright 2006, 5). The end of that episode appears officially in the Town's Municipal Council records: "Camels removed" (6), barbarity covered up. The 100-year anniversary of the port (because the river course changes, the town no longer abuts water) and the impending arrival of the Gurfurritt mine and its official promise of wealth for all lead Aboriginal residents to accept invitations to "[m]eaningful coexistence" (8): "those Aboriginal people who took the plunge to be councilors wisely used their time in public office to pursue scraps of personal gain for their own families amidst the muck of third-world poverty" (8). Concerned about the separation of Indigenous residents into an East and a West settlement, the Town Council invites interested parties – White and Black – to a

series of meetings to discuss the change, and the narrator asserts, "It was like living in a democracy" (33). Borrowing the title of Jana Scigulinska's essay, I contend that the narrator in these examples points to the "tears behind the laughter" (2017, 3).

7 The narrator exercises figurative powers in describing Pricklebush residents. Norm Phantom has a troubled union: "His marriage to Angel Day had climbed the crest of a mountain of misgiving"; only later does he grasp "that the woman had always been a hornet's nest waiting to be disturbed" (Wright 2006, 13). As for Angel Day, listeners learn about her roving eye while still married to Norm: "Old Mona Lisa would have looked like a sour lemon beside Angel Day [...], laughing with her friends when some new man was in town" (137). Homely comparatives pepper the text: Angel is heard "letting her foul mouth go forth like Cape Canaveral" (143), people fearing contact with Mozzie Fishman's religious convoy "sat quiet as a marsupial mouse" (125); Father Danny, the local priest, received a call from the Lord to come to the Gulf, so he "just dropped Ireland like a hot potato" (188). And the narrator punctuates the stories with a well-timed set of interjections and exclamations: "Well" (58), "alas" (61), "What a day" (69), "Really!" (82), "Never mind" (97). These last elements "become invocations of an oral, conversational storytelling voice" (Rodoreda 2016, 10), underscoring Wright's great achievement – a lively, witty, engaged Aboriginal narrator sets a tone and draws an Aboriginal audience and non-Indigenous readers into a set of stories, "just such a story as we might tell in our story place" (Wright 2010, 6).

8 Humorous, too, are the names – of the town, of institutions, of characters. This isolated outpost is Desperance, combining the Latin "spero" (hope) with the prefix "des," i.e. "lack of," a fitting name at least for the white population living uselessly here in this land of excruciating heat, high humidity, and seasons of monsoon and cyclones located in the Gulf of Carpentaria. A white population arrived in earlier generations drawn to working in a town set to become a shipping port, but when the river changed course and left the town water-free, residents had to find other reasons for staying. At first they were to guard against invasion from the north by the "Yellow Peril" (Wright 2006, 3). When the Chinese failed to show up, citizens of Desperance found a new purpose: "to comment on the state of their blacks" for the good of the country (4). Colonial and Federation-era settlers sought to blot out the convict stain that bedeviled their family heritage. These "pioneers" have a related aim: to suppress their checkered histories with a stark change of locale and a banal name change – many pioneers use the surname "Smith." Desperance boasts the trappings of a modern settlement: a museum (of "scarce memorabilia" [8]), a library (housing the Book of Books, the town history), a Shire Council overseeing the law, and a mining company, Gurfurritt (spoken aloud, it sounds like "go for it"), which promises to bring affluence to all amid the likelihood that it will ravage the land in the process. For the white population, proximity to water holds no value: "You could have counted on one hand who amongst Uptown had even been on the sea" (48). "Uptown" is the name given to the white section of town by the Indigenous population, though it is impossible to imagine a town of 300 located far from the Southern metropolises meriting a name associated with the urban. Aboriginal residents dwell in Pricklebush, a world of "trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump" (4) piled among an invasive species – pricklebush – which is fitting as, from an Uptown perspective, "*the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all*" (4). Whatever the private histories of Uptowners, however sordid or

unexceptional, they are white, and no taint will diminish their asserted superiority in relation to the Aboriginal population.

9 Wright's playful naming extends to her characters, and her choices connect to an enduring comic tradition in literature in English. Such Restoration playwrights as William Congreve (*The Way of the World*), with the love-starved dowager Lady Wishfort, or Richard Sheridan (*School for Scandal*), with the scheming Lady Sneerwell and her minion Mr Snake, alert us to their personalities and possible trajectories. Charles Dickens filled his novels with characters whose silly-sounding names pointed to likely outcomes of their efforts. Take two examples from *Bleak House*: Mrs Jellyby, the woman devoted to international charitable efforts while ignoring her family, or Mrs Pardiggle, the social worker barging into homes of the poor with militaristic force. Wright's protagonist is Normal – Norm – Phantom, a word that refers to a "representation of everyday life" (Baldick 2001, 45), master of the waters and muddler at so much else. On the one hand, Norm has earned respect as a local fisherman and as a man who generally knows the water. Uptowners have given him the moniker "leader of the Aboriginal people" (37) and "someone of no consequence" (8) has even spurred the name change of the local river to Normal's River. Yet Norm is withdrawn, rejecting any spotlight, "a mild man [...] who only wanted to work on a prawn" (42). When Angel refuses to move back to the river country, Norm becomes a literal phantom, leaving first for a few weeks, then abandoning house and family for five years. The Phantom quality extends through the family. Will Phantom, Norm's son, takes on the Gurfurritt mine, leading protests and plotting its destruction, but investigators from the South – "white city people" (159) – find themselves flummoxed in their efforts to find him: "A big troublemaker but nobody had a photo of him" (159). "Phantom" might be projected from the Uptown world on to their Indigenous neighbors. They are not regarded as people, certainly not as individuals. Invited in a rare moment to attend a Town Council meeting, the Aboriginal attendees are forced to listen to Uptowners arguing about how best to get rid of them; they "listened, stunned again by how they had been rendered invisible" (36). To Uptowners, residents of Pricklebush in general have the substance of phantoms.

10 The names continue. Norm's *bête noire* Joseph Midnight takes his followers to the other side of Uptown and to the dark side, as he embraces the mining company Gurfurritt when it arrives throwing money about as it promises to transform bleak Desperance into a thriving, affluent settlement. Mozzie Fishman has links to the spiritual, as he guides interested people – the sick, the needy – on a pilgrimage following the paths of the songlines through the region, a Moses of the Australian desert, his surname an echo of Christ's invitation to his disciples, "Come, and I will make you fishers of men." His first name, "Mozzie" grows apparently from his serving as a target for mosquitoes from childhood on, the name giving a homely touch to his quest. Angel Day is Norm's troublesome wife, a woman more Queen than Angel, whose whims and claims wreak havoc in Pricklebush, as she claims the rubbish heap as her private treasure or pursues her erotic impulses. One of her neighbors labels her "Mrs High and Bloody Mighty" (Wright 2006, 25) while the narrator can slip into a simple honorific spoken with a sarcastic edge – "Mrs Angel Day" (210). Mayor Stan Bruiser is true to his name, an out-and-out sadist who does not mask his glee as he rides roughshod over black residents or as he boasts "about how he had chased every Aboriginal woman in town at various times, until he [...] raped them" (41). And there is Truthful, the weak local sheriff

disconnected from truth and who is under Bruiser's thumb and a predator targeting Girlie Phantom, whose hold over him is both sexual and culinary.

11 Running through the novel and integral to the comic aspect is the chorus, a term associated generally with tragic drama, a group that comments on action or character to memorable effect. Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* features a chorus of voices remarking on the historic events unfolding before them, the now-stalled Greek warriors awaiting wind to send them to Troy, where they will retrieve Helen, wife of Menelaus, whose abduction by Paris has set the war in motion. The Chorus gazes with admiration on the warriors and their mighty ships and exults:

> I have seen the whole fleet
> and when it is famous and they
> tell of it where I live
> I will remember. (1978, l. 320–24, 34)

Wright's chorus generally lacks the portent of Euripides' group, serving instead as the voice of the social context. These can be the voices of Pricklebush or Uptown or a mixture. The mythic entrance of Elias, naked and apparently walking on water, sparks a loud buzz among the entranced observers. From the women admiring his thighs come cries of "Oh! Oh! Look at that!" (Wright 2006, 63). When he is lying on the beach, Uptowners whisper aloud their consternation: "*What if he is a maniac and a menace? What if he is a spy collecting data on our confidential capabilities to defend ourselves? What if he is an alien?*" (73). Hailing him first as prophet and savior, Uptown later turns sour: "Elias' story just grew old" (82). As residents gather at the pub to give Elias his orders to leave, he surprises them by lambasting them for tying their destiny to him. A voice or voices emerge from the Uptown crowd: "Quiet, quiet at the back. Listen. You are not going to believe this but good old Elias was telling them straight [...]. Don't say? Never heard him talk like that before" (87). The social chorus traces the rise and fall of Elias in Desperance, trumpeted and scorned for no reason. Or there is the collective cry of Pricklebush elders who have demanded that their children find in schoolbooks an explanation for the "secrets" accounting for "whitefellas'" status. The children's discovery leaves Pricklebush residents bewildered: "*They got no sanctified ground?* They got no sanctified ground" (58). With her chorus of local voices Wright can capture a range of public sentiments – the fickle nature of the public, collective queries regarding the social order, social boredom and frustration in search of an energizing outlet.

12 Comic as well is Wright's depiction of her major characters, for they are not ideological points but multifaceted individuals struggling to find their way in issues great and small, public and personal. And as the audience follows their individual stories, the "tears behind the laughter" emerge. Norm is a curmudgeon, and humor grows from his misanthropy. Asked to deliver a speech of gratitude at the ceremony announcing the newly-named Normal's River, he delivers his talk in his own language: "[T]hose who knew a fruit salad full of abuse in the local languages knew he was not saying *Thank you! Thank you!*" (10). To an Uptown delegation soliciting his help in getting Westside people to "start living like white people," Norm's reply is "Couldn't give a stuff about them" (10). Viewed from one angle, Norm Phantom has a good life: husband, father, master fisherman, reader of the stars, gifted taxidermist. A gifted storyteller with a "hypnotic voice" (102), Norm can bring to life the "stories of trouble" defining settler-Indigenous relations of earlier generations (102). As he withdraws from the world, however, his usual audience becomes his cockatoo Pirate, a "greasy-feathered bird" whose range of responses might include "*yes*, *no*, or *perhaps*" or crowd-drawing exclamations like "Stop

it! Stop it, Norm!" (103). As Norm emerges as a fuller figure, his comic foibles, his crusty manner, assume a more melancholic aspect. He is a disappointed man, disappointed in his marriage and family, angry at his son Will, who has married the granddaughter of his arch-rival Joseph Midnight and is leading the protest against Gurfurritt, the corporation blessed by the government and destined to transform the region. The marriage sparks recurring bursts of outrage, the protest runs counter to Norm's experience – those in power will maintain their advantage through any fight. Norm's approach to life, a mix of withdrawal, resignation, and rage leads him to an impasse: "[T]here was only one fundamental principle for longevity and this was never to depend on others [...] [;] 'who could you trust, eh? No one really?'" (199).

13 The comic nature of Angel Day draws on different mechanisms: it grows from her name – she is anything but angelic – or names ascribed to her – "Queen of Sheba" (Wright 2006, 137), "Queen Bee" (209). As a queen, she lays claim to the dump next to her house: "all she had to do was to walk across the road [...] and there she could get anything her heart desired – *for free*" (14). Amid the refuse she finds two valuable items: a clock, which will ensure that her children go to bed and arrive at school on time, and a cracked statue of the Virgin Mary, "a sign that she, Mrs Angel Day, owned the luck of the white people" (23). Although Angel views herself as progressive and modern, Scigulinska observes that "she misinterprets ideas about white people" (2017, 185), cherishing their cast-off junk. Angel also has the ability to turn any molehill into a mountain. Sitting outside her house, she can turn "the loud chirping noises of the crickets" (Wright 2006, 210) into potential grounds for divorce. When she discovers that others also claim the dump and its treasures, she erupts: "What are you people doing here? [...] Just taking what you want, hey? What about the traditional owner then?" (24). And she is always ready to provoke others. Her shouted questions touch off a war of words, then a pitched battle with instruments at hand, and the departure for the opposite side of Desperance for Joseph and his followers. The narrator puts the events into an ordinary, humorous perspective: "Angel Day started it up [...] over an old clock and statue. Probably all wars start off by a bit of taunting like this" (25).

14 Joseph Midnight, Norm's nemesis, is not in himself a comic figure, except as one of the "stubborn old mules" (Norm and Mozzie are the others) "anchor[ing] their respective clans in the sordid history of who really owned different parcels of the local land" (Wright 2006, 423). Joseph is Norm's rival/nemesis/foe/foil. The free-for-all sparked by Angel Day rekindles a land dispute reaching back centuries and gives Joseph the opening for renewed sallies against Norm – the new settlement, East Pricklebush; his new tribe, the Wanganbiya with a history reaching back earlier than "the tribe of the *Johnny-come-latelys*" i.e. the Phantoms (52); and a hoped-for rise in status. Joseph gives us a glimpse of a Pricklebush social climber – ingratiating himself with the government, giving support for the mine, receiving money and extras for that support, including a brand-new Uptown-style house. Part of the deal with Uptown was that Joseph would rid the area of all pigs: "He was supposed to exterminate them from the Gulf of Carpentaria once and for all" (53). He does not; Uptown's loss is his family members' gain as Joseph "let [them] take all the little baby piglets home for pets and they bred up ten piglets each" (53). The reverberations of Joseph's actions also have their humorous consequences, as opportunists globally appear in Desperance claiming to be "Lost Wanganbiya" and Uptown finds itself surrounded uncomfortably by East and West Pricklebush.

15 Mozzie Fishman is a larger-than-life figure, a physically comic being. He has a "Clint Eastwood face" (Wright 2006, 139), sports Roy Orbison sunglasses, sings country-western songs loudly with only intermittently correct lyrics, enjoys tossing about his supplementary glass eye, and leads a convoy of dust-covered, decrepit 1980s cars through the desert, all "holy Pilgrims of the Aboriginal world" (119). On the serious side, Mozzie Fishman is a spiritual man invested in reclaiming the ancient Law, a man with definite leadership skills: "he could have been a great President or Prime Minister in another life – if he had not been born in the Pricklebush" (133–34). Inspired and charismatic, Mozzie and his disciples follow the "spiritual traveling road of the great ancestor" (119). Despite his extroversion and earnestness, Mozzie *et al.* incite, at best, conflicting reactions as acerbic voices register dismay at his arrival and relief at his exit. "*We hopes he never comes back*," says the Pricklebush chorus (132) as he leaves, while other towns along the road "hated the sight of Fishman's convoy in the main street" (130). The contrasts between Mozzie's spiritual vision and the sad reality of the convoy, the sharp distinction between Mozzie's assertion, "I seduce Uptown. I get them to eat out of my hand" (133), and the collective "*We wish he would just piss off*" (137) amuse in their incongruity even as they undermine Mozzie's dream of restoring the Law. His commitment to "keeping the one Law strong" (124) sparks varied, ambivalent reactions – among them fear, resistance, desires to be left alone.

16 The above discussion is hardly exhaustive in its exploration of humor in *Carpentaria*. Satire, incongruity, hyperbole, situational humor, parody, puns – several of these aspects have been implicit throughout; the novel brims with the comic in its treatment of incident, character, setting. Let me return briefly to the narrator, who has set the story or stories in motion through tone, diction, and style, and has kept the narrative alive and engaging throughout the telling. As part of that distant audience situated away from the narrator and the intended listeners (or narratees), I have confidence that the narrator will guide the audience, including me, through the various changes in content and mood. I am thus prepared as he/she/they lead the audience through the darker aspects of the novel. *Carpentaria* encompasses the tragic or potentially tragic as well as the comic. The division of Desperance into two unequal entities can lead to horrifying ends for those on the less powerful side. In such segments Wright's narrative moves into a more recognizable territory of Aboriginal fiction. The killing of Gordie, the neighborhood watch, provokes a call for arrest and punishment, and Mayor Bruiser is quick to locate scapegoats: Tristrum Fishman, Junior Fishman Luke, and Aaron Ho Kum. Dismissed by Uptown voices as "petrol sniffers" (Wright 2006, 308), the three pre-adolescent boys are swept up, thrown into jail, and horrifically beaten up. The Fishmans are Mozzie's sons, but Mozzie is off on his pilgrimage. Aaron Ho Kim is son of the local white bartender, who asserts that he has severed any connection to the boy or his Aboriginal mother. As for the arrests, Bruiser elaborates on his process, "I've got no time on my hands, I can tell you, to sit around pondering who bloody did it" (325). The sad situation of the three boys languishing in jail is soon overshadowed by the brutal attack on Kevin Phantom, Norm's youngest, who has been permanently damaged by a mine explosion. Dragged behind a car as another scapegoat for the murdered watchman, Kevin is airlifted to a hospital, where he struggles to live. In the meantime, forgotten in jail, the three boys commit suicide, hang themselves in their cell. And also in the meantime the adults – fathers, mothers, family members – are absent. In discussing her novel, the author speaks of "islands": "All the main characters [...] are like islands of self-sufficiency that act alone. [...] The book asks what becomes of the

islands we have created, of communities, our places and ourselves" (Wright 2010, 16). The social chorus complements the situation, all humor absent from the observation: "So, things went on as they do [...] with everyone talking about it like they knew everything [...]. No one owned up to anything in an official capacity. Didn't see it" (Wright 2006, 3).

17 Will Phantom centers a story that is largely outside of the comic. An activist, young and full of energy, Will Phantom stands out: he is a rebel, vocal in opposition to Gurfurritt. Will is wrestling with big questions directly: what is the future for Desperance? What will that future hold for Pricklebush residents, especially if their land is destroyed? Will the firebrand thus makes himself obnoxious to the mine owners through the protests and the series of bombs that cripple the operation and shut down production. There is humor in the aftermath as investigations start: "the white city people [...] were asking too many questions, millions maybe" (Wright 2006, 159), but "nobody had a photo" (159) and nobody could (in Uptown) or would (in Pricklebush) describe Will, Desperance's Enemy Number One. Joseph Midnight assesses his grandson-in-law: "Will has a good way with nature, all of the natural things, except he is not too good with human nature. That boy was in one hell of a rush to throw fuel on man-made adversaries" (161). While his actions may earn the approval of a Mozzie Fishman, they earn him enmity across Desperance/Uptown/Pricklebush: the town has embraced the mine for its material benefits; even Will's two older brothers relish the new life with a regular wage and plenty of good food. He disrupts the grand vision of the future held by many.

18 Will disrupts the humor of the novel as well. *Carpentaria* presents, in its focus on a small settlement isolated in the Far North of the Australian continent, a complex vision, one embracing the comic and tragic in portraying the life of town residents. I have noted above the tragic dimensions of Wright's narrative – the specious arrests and suicide of the trio of young boys, the brutal attack on Kevin Phantom – and I will add another apparent one. Intent on destroying the mine property and escaping Desperance to avoid likely revenge from Gurfurritt or local residents invested in the mine's possibilities, Will realizes too late the danger faced by his family, his wife and son Bala: the authorities "were still looking for blood, anyone's. That was the reason they were coming for Hope" (Wright 2006, 374). Finding himself pinned down inside a helicopter, Will is unwilling witness to the most horrific of incidents, his wife Hope being ejected into the sea while his captors hold him back: "Hope fell [...]. Hope falls with her silent blue dress into everything blue" (386). Inattention to essentials has led to a tragedy. Or has it? Something draws Will back to Desperance, and he follows the long road "convinced that [Hope] was urging him on to the place where they would finally be reunited [...] convinced she and he would be alive in this place" (463). Later, while Desperance is engulfed in the cyclone that will crush it, Will sees in his mind Hope on the island (with Norm and Bala), "alive and dressed in the same black singlet and shorts [...]" (479). Has the novel shifted away from the tragic?

19 M.H. Abrams, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, defines comedy as

> A fictional work in which materials are selected [...] primarily to amuse us: the character and their discomfitures engage our pleasurable attention rather than our profound concern, we are made to feel that no great disaster will occur, and usually the action turns out happily for the chief characters. (1999, 38)

Carpentaria fits Abrams' definition uncomfortably, for the plights of Pricklebush residents can both amuse *and* alarm, so I will add further defining remarks from the

Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms: "A comedy will normally be closer to the representation of everyday life than a tragedy and will explore common human failings rather than tragedy's disastrous crimes" (Baldick 2001, 45). These and other definitions convey expected characteristics of the genre, but I would like to add another. Earlier I identified *Carpentaria* as a "comic fiction" and spoke as well about the essential role of humor in Aboriginal life. I would like to distinguish the two. Although humor is a staple of comedy, I see comedy as a structural concept. Character and event in comedy often lack the *gravitas* of tragedy; focusing on the everyday, a comic work may be filled with amusing events and characters that make us laugh through their names or foibles or personality-driven impulses. Even as the narrative might lead them through dark or critical situations, however, the audience expects that the comic novel will lead us to a finale in which our main characters will at least have survived, through compromise, ingenuity, or good fortune, and they might have achieved even more: marriage, reunion, hope for the future.

20 Despite events in the novel suggesting a tragic dimension, I contend that Wright has provided readers with ample humor and a comic rather than a tragic structure, a finale centered on survival and a move forward rather than death or exile. Both Uptown and Pricklebush suffer "in this era of modern domesticity, where personal interest smothers the hope and joy of all mankind" (Wright 2006, 309). Pricklebush is the site of "islands" in conflict or some form of alienation (Wright 2010,16); there is the feud that gives birth to an East Pricklebush, the dysfunction defining the Phantom family, the "stubborn old mules" (2006, 423) who opt to withdraw from the world of others (Norm) or who opt for a spurious leadership backed by corporate interests (Joseph) or whose leadership results in abandoning those who need them most (Mozzie). Wright creates individuals with strong personalities whose personal bent can hinder useful or fruitful collective action. As a crowd comes together to watch the fire enveloping the vestiges of the mine, Mozzie proclaims, "I say [...] We mobs got to start acting locally. Show whose [*sic*] got the Dreaming. The Laaaw" (405). Scigulinska believes that Mozzie's call to community is undermined by his personal failures: "[Mozzie's] powers and reputation as a leader and father figure are more than undermined as he fails in bringing up his children" (2017, 190). That said, I would like to counter with Justine Saunders' remarks from the "Introduction" to *Plays from Black Australia*: "We know what it is like living in white Australia. We are [...] much more forgiving to our people as characters" (1989, IX). Wright's characters have made mistakes; they are also human.

21 Australian Indigenous literature commonly explores the role of Aboriginal Australians in a culture in which they have most often been relegated to a secondary status at best. Much of the darkness of the novel emanates from characters isolating themselves from others and living in a small sphere defined by narrow goals, petty sentiments, and a lack of belief in themselves. "The Pricklebush wore the total darkness of cloud cover," the narrator tells us (Wright 2006, 30), on the eve of Joseph Midnight and company deserting the neighborhood to inhabit East Pricklebush. At the close Desperance has been destroyed by the cyclone, and nearly everyone has fled. The mine has been destroyed as have concrete signs of the town: homes, office buildings, the library, the museum, books. A core cast – Norm, Bala, Hope, Will – have survived, and those remaining have an opportunity. The comic structure of the work, which finds the villains gone and survivors looking around them, suggests that the status quo need not

be a given. Now there is neither Pricklebush nor Uptown. Humpies and mansions alike have been flattened. The sky has cleared. What next?

22 A lifelong social activist, Wright wrote in 2007 of her "guilt for taking pause to write a novel" while there were still "more battles to fight over the high levels of ignorance [...] about Aboriginal rights in this country" (quoted in Atkinson 2022, 3–4). Focused on an isolated settlement in the far North, Wright presents a novel infused with history and culture as she guides her characters through their myriad struggles in distinctive manner. *Carpentaria* closes with a novel situation. The White Australians have fled and taken with them their contemporary trappings and modern economy. The survivors, all Indigenous Australians, have the country to themselves; can they – will they – create something fresh and new? If Will, Hope, and Bala join and invite Norm into their lives, will they create a fulfilled existence? Is commitment to the area, the Carpentaria region, to building something amid the ruins of Desperance, the key to all next steps? Molloy intimates that the new order may be short-lived, "that the novel rehearses merely a temporary suspension from the dominant framework" (2012, 7). *Carpentaria* at the last looks to something greater than individual epiphany as a guide; communal action is essential. I imagine the challenge as this – will these survivors grasp the chance held out to them? The narrator has led narratees close and distant through the stories – through smiles, laughter, tears, and calm – to an end with survivors looking forward. The finale shows Norm with his grandson Bala "already planning the home he would rebuild on the same piece of land [...] among the spirits" (Wright 2006, 515) while the social chorus of Desperance residents commenting on the day-to-day has been supplanted by a chorus of frogs, "green, grey, speckled, striped, big and small" in loud benediction, a comic celebration of renewal, one worthy of Euripides (516). And Hope, not dead after all, has gone in search of Will. Can they all move forward in the creation of something new, a genuine community in their country – with Hope joined to Will as foundation? Alexis Wright invites her readers to imagine the possibility.

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NOTES

1. With thanks to Iva Polak for sharing her unpublished paper presented at the EASA Conference in Bordeaux, France in 2013.

2. Black humor has emerged in Australian media and arts over the past two decades: *Deadly Funny*, Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander comedy competition, began at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival in 2007; ABC broadcast the sketch show *Black Comedy* (four seasons, 2014–2020) and the series *8MMM Aboriginal Radio* (one season, 2015).

3. One noteworthy entry is by Carty and Musharbash (2008).

4. Rodoreda identifies the narrator as an Elder or Ancestor and suggests that we may have several narrators throughout the novel.

ABSTRACTS

Although many critics have emphasized the tragic and political dimension of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), this article focuses on the novel's use of humor and a comic structure in exploring Desperance, an isolated town in the North of Australia. An Indigenous narrator sets the humorous tone, conveying stories light and dark centered on the residents of Pricklebush, the Indigenous settlement on the fringe: their conflicts with each other; their vexed relations with Uptown, the white section; and their relationship with the powerful Gurfurritt mine. Despite the novel's dark episodes, its comic dimension fulfills the promise of a finale defined by hope.

INDEX

Keywords: Alexis Wright, Carpentaria, humor, comic/comedy, tragic/tragedy

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