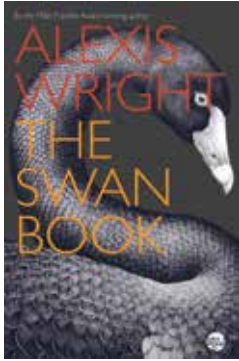


# Notes on *The Swan Book*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2014 STELLA PRIZE



*There is a really big story of that ghost place: a really deadly love story about a girl who has a virus lover living in her brain – that made the world seem too large and jittery for her, and it stuffed up her relationships with her own people, and made her unsociable, but they say that she loved swans all the same.*

Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*

## SYNOPSIS

In this rich and poetic novel, Oblivion Ethylene is captive in her own brain, struggling to regain sovereignty over her mind. She hasn't spoken since, years earlier, she was raped by a gang of petrol-sniffing youths. Oblivia retreated 'into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree' where, locked in sleep, she wrote 'stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch'. Long after her family and community have given up looking for her, an old refugee woman, Bella Donna of the Champions, finds her. Bella Donna rescues the girl and, seeing that no one will claim her, takes her aboard her rusted-out ship hull resting in the swamp, the centre of the Army-run Aboriginal detention camp that Oblivia comes from.

The camp is indicative of the future landscape that is the backdrop of the novel; once a home to its people, it has been ravaged by war, industry and 'closing the gap'. The people left, but have now returned and made their lives around the swamp, looking to their healer and elder the Harbour Master for a solution. He provides none. The Harbour Master is mad with his own desires, and his own sense of failing to live up to the expectations of his people. He is unable to move the ever-growing mountain of sand on the edge of the swamp and is obsessed with Bella Donna, visiting her daily to wage a war of words and stories, each competing to outdo the other. Oblivia stays silent, listening to their songs, saying in her mind all the words that she cannot say aloud.

Bella Donna is fixated on swans. She tells stories of them to Oblivia. She tells a story of the swan that led

the people of her land towards the sea, urging them forward onto the waves and away from the wars in their own country. She carries a small collection of personal relics, including a swan-bone flute, which she uses to sing her swan song.

When the swans arrive at the swamp, they single out Oblivia, raising the suspicions of the community again. But they are beautiful, perhaps lucky. The swamp is renamed 'Swan Lake' by the locals. They surround the hull where Oblivia and Bella Donna live, and each night Bella Donna sails her raft among them, feeding them and singing to them with her flute. When Bella Donna dies, Oblivia tries to take her place, but the swans have given up. When they are attacked by the swamp people's dogs, they refuse to save themselves and die 'still sitting on the ground, heads tucked under their wings'.

It seems as though Oblivia, too, will give up, that there is nothing to stop her from burying her head beneath her wing and refusing to acknowledge the dangers surrounding her. Instead, a promise made years earlier on the other side of the swamp intervenes.

Educated and fluent in many languages, Warren Finch has been raised as the saviour of the Aboriginal people. He is the deputy prime minister of Australia, but everyone knows he will soon become the prime minister. Years ago, before he left his country, Warren read in the newspaper the story of a young local girl who had been raped and had gone missing. This girl, Oblivia, is his promised bride. And so,

years later, when Oblivia is mourning the death of her swans and of Bella Donna of the Champions, and the swamp people have once again forgotten her, Warren comes back to claim her.

Oblivia has no choice but to follow Warren and his three genies, Dr Bones Doom, Dr Edgar Mail and Dr Snip Hart. The five of them leave the swamp behind and walk into another part of country, one the genies call home, and as Oblivia spits, punches and tries to run, in her heart she knows that there is no escape, that she has once again been claimed by another. Warren spends his days on his mobile phone, ignoring the increasing threats to his life, concerned that his promised bride will not be able to withstand the pressures of the city. Oblivia still doesn't speak, but she is haunted by the presence and the ceaseless chatter of the Harbour Master, who is her reluctant, argumentative companion for the remainder of the book.

Leaving behind the country, where the genies have either died or ceased to exist, Oblivia and Warren arrive in the city, and are folded into the welcoming, commanding arms of Big Red. She dresses Oblivia 'properly' and instructs her on how lucky she is to become the wife of the great Warren Finch. They are married, and Warren parades Oblivia around before returning her to the People's Palace, where he will not visit her again until after his death. Oblivia's time in the palace is murky and claustrophobic. She is again joined by the Harbour Master, who brings with him the talking monkey, Rigoletto. They watch as the swans fill the lanes beyond the palace, and Oblivia becomes obsessed with saving them and setting them free.

Oblivia leaves the palace, only to return when Warren Finch is assassinated. She is unsure whether she is to blame for his death. Warren's body is cause for disturbance between the swamp people and the government, and so, as a way of postponing any decisions about what to do with it, the dead Warren Finch and his barely alive widow are put in a truck that will lap Australia indefinitely so that people can say goodbye. We say goodbye to Oblivia alone. Warren Finch is dead, as is Bella Donna. The Harbour Master has long left Oblivia behind. She has become a legend, seen by those visiting the Swan Country.

They say that she is still a teenage girl, screaming as the voice of this long broken place.

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND

ALEXIS WRIGHT is a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria. Her books include *Grog War*, a study of alcohol abuse in Tennant Creek, and the novels *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*, which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award, the Victorian and Queensland premiers' awards, and the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal, and was published in the United States, United Kingdom, China, Italy, France, Spain and Poland. Alexis is a Distinguished Fellow in the University of Western Sydney's Writing and Society Research Centre.



[www.thestellaprize.com.au/2014/04/the-stella-interview-alexis-wright/](http://www.thestellaprize.com.au/2014/04/the-stella-interview-alexis-wright/)

## THEMES

Place  
Language  
Displacement  
Identity  
Climate change  
Aboriginal rights  
Land  
Storytelling  
Belonging  
Imagination  
Power

## LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

There are links to many of the general capabilities of the Australian Curriculum in this text, including **ethical understanding, critical thinking, personal and social capabilities, and intercultural understanding**, and it is also aligned with several of the cross-curriculum priorities.

Alexis Wright is an Indigenous author, and her work explores the boundaries of Australian identity, the displacement and treatment of the Aboriginal people,

and the outcomes of government intervention in Indigenous communities. The authorship, themes and characters of this novel all fit strongly with the priority of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander** stories.

In addition to this, the book is set in the future, and imagines not only the political future of Australia, but the potential consequences of climate change. It is therefore also relevant to areas within **sustainability**, which looks to address ‘the ongoing capacity of Earth to maintain all life’.<sup>1</sup>

## READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ Language is a central theme in the book. Give examples of the following ways that it is used.
  - To communicate
  - As a barrier
  - To outclass or exclude
  - To name
  - To identify
  - To overpower
  - As a metaphor
- ◆ In what ways is language about more than just words?
- ◆ The phrase ‘architecture of the mind’ is used in one review (*Sydney Review of Books*).
  - In what ways does the author construct the mind as a place?
  - Who inhabits it?
  - Who controls it?
  - How does it change?
  - What power does it have?
- ◆ What is a motif? How are swans used as a motif in the book?
- ◆ What power relationships can you see in the book?
  - Who has the power?
  - How do they use it?
  - How do those with less power respond?
- What would be needed to change that power balance?
- ◆ How has Warren Finch forgotten his own history? How does this influence his decisions?
- ◆ In what ways does the author experiment with language and narrative? What impact does this have on the story and your reading of it?
- ◆ Many moments in the book are enhanced by the appearance of birds, either in abundance or scarcity – grass owls, brolgas, swans.
  - What do the birds represent?
  - How do they mirror parts of the book or relationships within it?
  - When are they real?
- ◆ Discuss the difference between reality, spirit, madness and metaphor.
  - How do each of these appear in the text?
  - What are the swans?
  - How do each of the characters cross into different states at varying times throughout the book?
  - Is Oblivia mad?
- ◆ Keep a list of the references to climate change.
  - How does the book show us the future?
  - What has happened?
  - How have the Earth and its inhabitants suffered?
- ◆ How are refugees and the swamp people linked?
  - How are they similar?
  - How are they different?
  - How do they feel about each other?
  - What do the following characters fear?
    - The Harbour Master
    - Oblivia
    - Bella Donna
    - Warren Finch
- ◆ Who are the following characters? Are they real? What importance do they have to Oblivia and Warren?
  - Big Red
  - The genies
  - Machine

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/crosscurriculumpriorities/sustainability>

- ◆ At its core, *The Swan Book* is a love story.
  - Whose love story is it?
  - How does it unfold?
  - Does it have a happy ending?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Reading well-considered critical reviews of a book can help us understand it further, and can help us find meanings that we may have missed. From the list of references at the end of these notes, read one review of *The Swan Book*. In groups, discuss how the review has enhanced your understanding of the book. Share things that you discovered in the review that you missed in your own reading. Discuss the points in the review that you agreed with and the points that you disagreed with, and why.

As a further online activity, write a review for a school blog, or start your own blog. Aim to write about 500–1000 words. First up, discuss the elements of a good review and decide whether yours will be formal (like in most review publications) or more informal (like personal blogs, e.g. ‘I liked it because ...’). Publish all the reviews together.

2. This is a book that demands a lot from readers and repays close reading. In groups, take a chapter or portion of the book and read it aloud. Remaining in groups, discuss the language and syntax, imagery and metaphor in your chosen portion. What have you noticed on close reading and discussion that you didn’t initially? Share your thoughts with the other groups.

3. Look up the meaning of sovereignty. Discuss what you think it means to have sovereignty of your own mind. How is it different to sovereignty of land or a country? Do you think people can have one without the other? What does *The Swan Book* suggest?

## REFERENCES

### Reviews

#### *The Australian*

[www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/alexis-wright-stages-a-counter-intervention-with-the-swan-book/story-fn9n8gph-1226692942929](http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/alexis-wright-stages-a-counter-intervention-with-the-swan-book/story-fn9n8gph-1226692942929)

#### *Mascara Literary Review*

[www.mascarareview.com/michelle-cahill-reviews-the-swan-book-by-alexis-wright/](http://www.mascarareview.com/michelle-cahill-reviews-the-swan-book-by-alexis-wright/)

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#### Readings

[www.readings.com.au/review/the-swan-book-by-alexis-wright](http://www.readings.com.au/review/the-swan-book-by-alexis-wright)

#### *The Sydney Morning Herald*

[www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/after-the-apocalypse-despair-hope-and-all-things-between-20131003-2utda.html](http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/after-the-apocalypse-despair-hope-and-all-things-between-20131003-2utda.html)

#### *Sydney Review of Books*

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### Interviews

#### *Overland*

[www.overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-213/feature-alexis-wright-and-arnold-zable/](http://www.overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-213/feature-alexis-wright-and-arnold-zable/)

#### *Radio National Books and Arts Daily*

[www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandartsdaily/alexis-wright27s-the-swan-book/4882782](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandartsdaily/alexis-wright27s-the-swan-book/4882782)

### Other

#### The law of storytelling: the hermeneutics of relationality in Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*

[www.academia.edu/7440850/The\\_Law\\_of\\_Storytelling\\_The\\_Hermeneutics\\_of\\_Relationality\\_in\\_Alexis\\_Wrights\\_The\\_Swan\\_Book](http://www.academia.edu/7440850/The_Law_of_Storytelling_The_Hermeneutics_of_Relationality_in_Alexis_Wrights_The_Swan_Book)

#### Talking about an Indigenous tomorrow: an open letter by Alexis Wright

[www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-30/talkingaboutanindigenoustomorrow/45734](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-03-30/talkingaboutanindigenoustomorrow/45734)

#### Writing a critical review

[www.student.unsw.edu.au/writing-critical-review](http://www.student.unsw.edu.au/writing-critical-review)