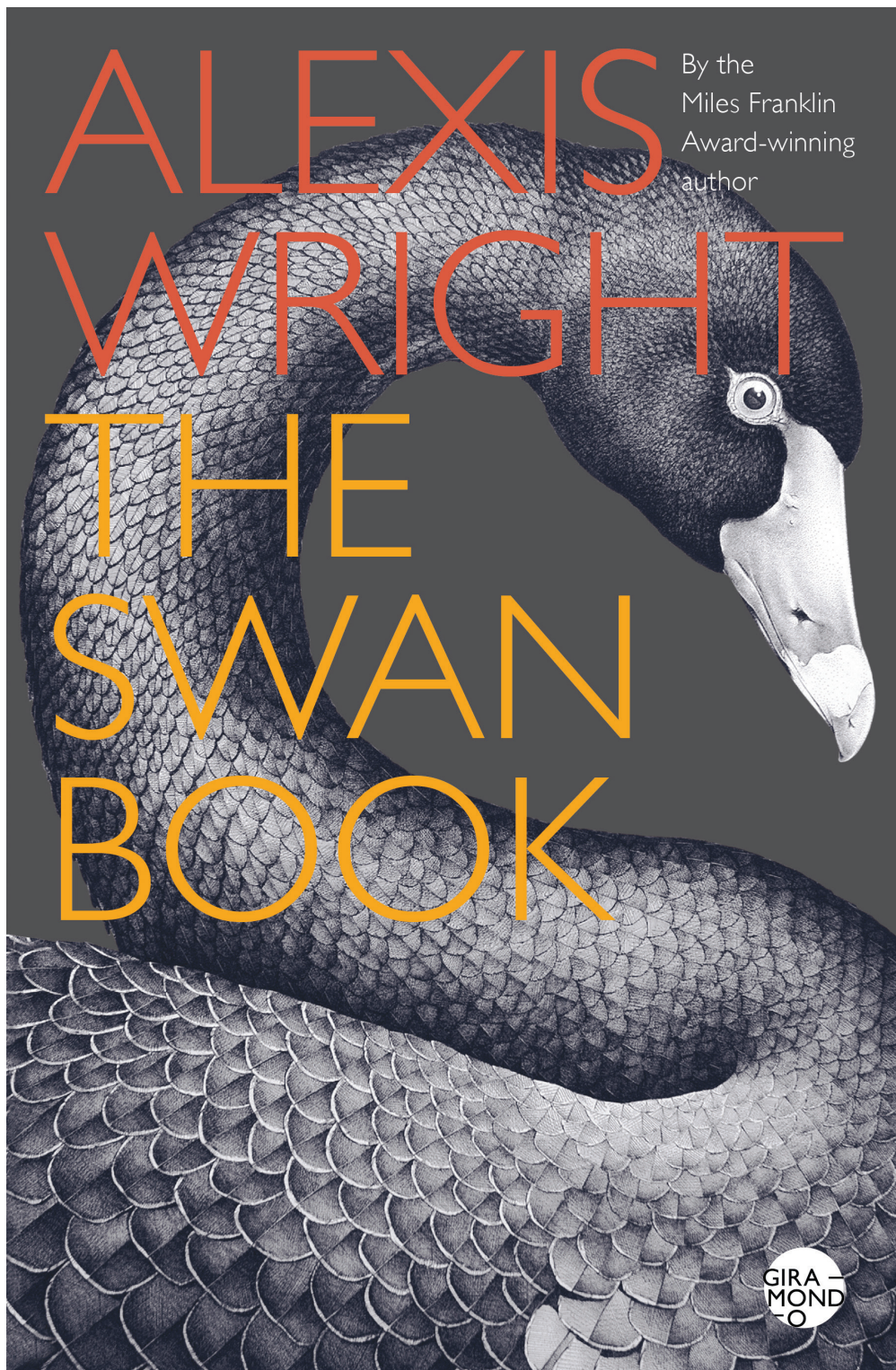


Reading Group Notes

The Swan Book

Alexis Wright



Reading Group Notes

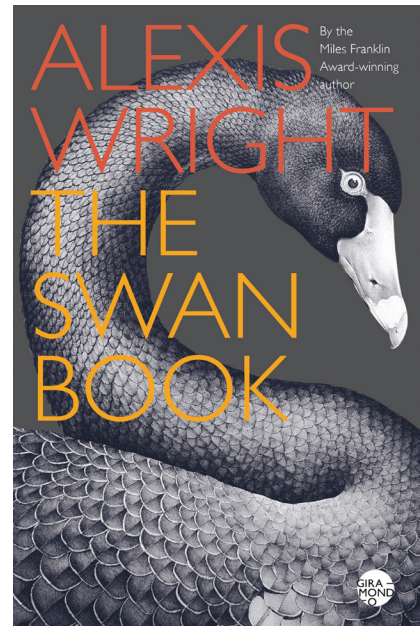
The Swan Book, Alexis Wright

About the Book

The Swan Book is set in the future, around the time of Australia's third centenary, with Aboriginals still living under the Intervention in the north, in a country fundamentally altered by climate change. It follows the life of a mute young woman called Oblivia, the victim of gang-rape by petrol-sniffing youths, from the displaced community where she lives in a hulk, in a swamp filled with rusting boats, and thousands of black swans, to her marriage to Warren Finch, the first Aboriginal president of Australia, and her elevation to the position of First Lady, confined to a tower in a flooded and lawless southern city. *The Swan Book* has all the qualities which made Wright's previous novel, *Carpentaria*, a prize-winning best-seller. It offers an intimate awareness of the realities facing Aboriginal people; the energy and humour in her writing finds hope in the bleakest situations; and the remarkable combination of storytelling elements, drawn from myth and legend and fairy tale, has Oblivia Ethylene in the company of amazing characters like Auntie Bella Donna of the Champions, the Harbour Master, Big Red and Mechanic, a talking monkey called Rigoletto, three genies with doctorates, and throughout, the guiding presence of swans.

About the Author

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 ALS Gold Medal, and has been published in the US, UK, China, Italy, France, Spain and Poland. She is a Distinguished Fellow in the University of Western Sydney's Writing and Society Research Centre.





Reading Group Notes *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright

Alexis Wright on writing The Swan Book

What is *The Swan Book*? Perhaps a literary work of fiction that traveled in the dust of *Carpentaria* and picked up the bits that fell off the back of the truck – all those whimsical notions about values and understanding one another, and remembering all of the bumps in the road along the way, then sitting down to work with what was left at the end of the day. And what was left? The future.

What do you do with the future? For instance, what can we do about severe weather events and an altered climate edging us towards major and possibly catastrophic change in the world? Where are the reference points being built for future times? How will the most needy cope? What scenarios can be developed from a world more conditioned to accepting the status quo than exploring the possibilities for change?

The Swan Book portrays the world of an Aboriginal girl, and those around her, in the years leading up to 2088, Australia's third centennial, by weighing the possibilities, and projecting what conditions might be like for ideas little understood in today's world, for the community, the nation, and the relations people have to the larger realities beyond them.

Oblivia's world unfolds in the presence of swans, and stories of how these birds have lived in our imagination from ancient and epic stories to poetry of the present time. *The Swan Book* is about a world turned upside-down, where the unbelievable has become real, where local Aboriginal governments exist side by side with high-ranking Aboriginal politicians operating on the national stage, of sand mountains and drowning cities, and the mass-movement of refugees, created by the extremes of environmental change. A multi-layered story imagining the meaning of becoming homeless, centred on a swamp filled with abandoned ships, and presided over by the Harbour Master, a traditional law elder of Aboriginal and Asian descent, and an old gypsy woman from eastern Europe, Bella Donna of the Champions.

The Swan Book is fiction that is informed by continuing beliefs in the Aboriginal world where all times are one and important, from the ancient past to the distant future, and lived in a world that is just dancing in the dark.



Reading Group Notes

The Swan Book, Alexis Wright

Discussion Questions

1. Alexis Wright's new novel is called *The Swan Book*, and clearly swans – black swans mainly, but white swans also – play an important role in it. What is their significance?
2. There are other animals featured in the novel, including brolgas, owls, miner birds, rats, dogs and even a monkey, called Rigoletto – what use does Wright make of these and other animals?
3. Wright has taken a young woman recovering from trauma, who is unable or unwilling to speak, as the hero of her novel. How crucial is the sense of injury and helplessness to your understanding of the book?
4. The issue of Aboriginal sovereignty is central to *The Swan Book* – in what ways is it developed, and to what conclusions?
5. How important is the theme of climate change in the novel, and what are some of its social implications? What other issues arise from Wright's setting the novel in the future?
6. Wright's novels always have colourful characters – here they include Lady Bella Donna of the Champions, the Harbour Master, Big Red, Mechanic and the three Genies. What do you make of these characters, and particularly Warren Finch, the first Aboriginal President of Australia?
7. Critics have often commented on the richness and energy of Wright's style of writing, its orchestration of voices, and its expressive power, to the point of bending grammar and syntax. How do you respond to this style, as a reader?
8. What role do fairy-tales play in *The Swan Book* and how does the incorporation of these different literary traditions effect the scope of the novel?
9. How would you compare *The Swan Book* with *Carpentaria* – are they different in tone, subject matter, scale? What do they have in common?