



The Swan Book

Alexis Wright

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An inventive, cacophonous novel about an Aboriginal girl living in a future world turned upside down—where ancient myths exist side-by-side with present-day realities.

Oblivia Ethelyne was given her name by an old woman who found her deep in the bowels of a gum tree, tattered and fragile, the victim of a brutal assault by wayward local youths. These are the years leading up to Australia's third centenary, and the woman who finds her, Bella Donna of the Champions, is a refugee from climate change wars that devastated her country in the northern hemisphere. Bella Donna takes Oblivia to live with her on an old warship in a polluted dry swamp and there she fills Oblivia's head with story upon story of swans. Fenced off from the rest of Australia by the Army, its traditional custodians left destitute, the swamp has become "the world's most unknown detention camp" for Indigenous Australians. When Warren Finch, the first Aboriginal president of Australia invades the swamp with his charismatic persona and the promise of salvation, Oblivia agrees to marry him, becoming First Lady, a role that has her confined to a tower in a flooded and lawless southern city.

In this multilayered novel, winner of the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal, Wright toys with the edges of the world we live in to offer us an intimate portrait of the realities facing Aboriginal people. We meet talking monkeys, genies with doctorates, spirit-guiding swans, and a whole cast of characters drawn from myth and legend and fairy tales. Through symbolism and a dazzling linguistic dexterity—the blending of words and phrases from high and low culture, from English, Aboriginal languages, French, and Latin—Wright beautifully demonstrates how the power of the human imagination can set us free.

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