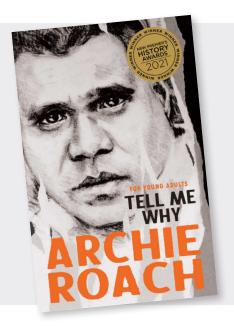


VATE member book reviews

December 2021





Tell Me Why for Young Adults

Reviewed by Michael E Daniel, Camberwell Grammar School

WRITER: Archie Roach AM | **PUBLISHER:** Simon & Schuster Australia, 2021 384 pages | **RRP:** \$19.99

As Australians, we have much to celebrate and be proud of. However, perhaps one of the greatest disgraces in our history and society is the way in which Indigenous people were treated in the past, and continue to suffer higher rates of homelessness, substance abuse and imprisonment, and lower life spans relative to the rest of the Australian population.

The suffering endured by Indigenous Australians has been explored in literature and song by Indigenous writers and artists, one of the most well-known being Archie Roach. As the title suggests, this is an edited edition of his popular autobiography, originally released in 2019, which has now been modified for young adult readers.

The narrative begins in 1970 when Roach was a teenager in secondary school. A basically content young man, Archie Cox (as he was then known) lived happily with his foster parents, Dulcie and Alex Cox. His world is thrown upside down one day when summoned to the school's office, he is handed a letter addressed to Archie Roach. Discovering it was from his biological sister Myrtle, Archie learnt that his mother had just died. Like so many

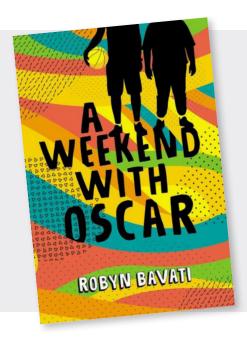
Indigenous people of his generation, Archie had been forcibly removed from his family as a small child, and placed in a children's home before being fostered out. Mistreated in his first foster home, he ended up in the kind care of the Coxes, whom Roach remembers with fondness. However, although he was in a supportive foster home, was essentially happy at school, and was an active member of a local church, receiving the letter ignited a sense of emptiness and questioning in him. After leaving school and obtaining a job, Roach left the Coxes, and eventually went in search of his family, travelling to Sydney, where he was reunited with family members before returning to Melbourne. By the time he is twenty, the age at which many of our former students are still undertaking tertiary studies. Roach had been imprisoned and was homeless. He was also an alcoholic. Roach describes candidly how he slid into substance abuse and fought to free himself from it.

Tell Me Why, however, is ultimately a story of hope. Whilst homeless, Roach met his partner Ruby in South Australia. After they reunited in Melbourne, and whilst Roach was still drinking heavily, she gave birth to their first child. Unable to tolerate Roach's behaviour stemming from his drinking, she left him. Roach

ultimately was successful in abstaining from alcohol, obtained work with an organisation established to assist Indigenous people overcome addictions, and was reunited with his partner. Having written songs, his musical career developed. Roach recorded his first record in 1990, Charcoal Lane, with Mushroom Records, receiving ARIA Awards for Best Indigenous Release and Best New Artist.

Tell Me Why for Young Adults is a highly recommended work for secondary students, particularly those in Years 10 and 11, to introduce issues relating to Indigenous people. There are a range of resources available for teaching this book, including various YouTube videos, as well as a study guide. One of the chief strengths of this work is that it deals frankly with issues such as Stolen Generations, substance abuse, and homelessness as well as the associated trauma. However, given some of the content – in particular, the frank discussions of substance abuse, and separation from family - teacher judgement and discretion are required to determine whether this book would be suitable for students within their cohort, for example, those living in out-of-family care arrangements and/or those who have witnessed substance abuse by significant adults





A Weekend with Oscar

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Robyn Bavati | **PUBLISHER:** Walker Books Australia, 2021 238 pages | **RRP:** \$16.99

This is Robyn Bavati's fourth young adult novel and what a captivating read it is.

Bavati invites readers into the world of Jamie, and his younger brother, Oscar. Sixteen year old Jamie is still grieving the death of his father, while trying to navigate high school, good grades and the interesting new girl who just started in his accelerated learning class.

Jamie's world is just starting to feel like it is moving forward again after the unexpected death of his father. He meets Zara who, for the first time in a long time, is somebody he can talk to and connect with. Zara has a sister with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and has also experienced the challenges that life can have when living with a sibling who has a disability. The two begin to bond over family, school and Zara's art. Then one weekend Jamie's mother must go away. Jamie volunteers to take care of his younger brother while she is gone. What seems like a simple enough task, soon becomes the biggest challenge lamie has ever had to face

Oscar's world revolves around structure and order. As a young person with Down Syndrome, he needs support for most things he does. Jamie is used to the looks, sniggers and whispered comments from people that don't understand Oscar. But Jamie must also deal with everything else needed to help Oscar navigate his own world. The respect and admiration Jamie has for his mother, who now has to do these things without their dad, quickly grows. Bavati allows Oscar's quirks and personality to shine through with just the right level of love, frustration and understanding from Jamie. The bond between the brothers is beautifully written.

When Jamie's mother doesn't return after the weekend and he can't get in touch with her, he realises that it is up to him to keep both his and Oscar's worlds together. Jamie refuses to acknowledge the seriousness of his mother's disappearance, nor will he consider giving up on his brother. Jamie must draw on all his own resources and strength, as well as support from people around him, to get through the long days ahead. He must also begin to really face the grief he is still feeling from the death of his dad. Eventually, Jamie must make a difficult decision, but he has no idea the truth that will be uncovered about what happened to his mother.

Readers will connect with the well-rounded characters woven into this story. Bavati creates a completely relatable and believable world; from struggles at school and weekly team sport commitments to first romance and coping with the class bully. All these areas play an important role in Jamie's life, until his focus shifts to the care and wellbeing of Oscar.

The writing style in this novel makes it easy to access for different reading abilities. The language is suitable for a wide age group. It is an introduction to conversations around relationships, living in an inclusive world and the acceptance of others. Of particular importance is the subtle themes within the storyline around asking for help. It reminds the reader that it is okay to reach out and get support if they need it. That it's okay to not be okay.

A Weekend with Oscar is suitable for the 12+ age group. It is particularly suitable for the Year 7-9 curriculum with a focus on discussions around responsibilities and inclusivity.







The Other Side of Perfect

Reviewed by Belinda Engelman, Geelong Lutheran College

WRITER: Mariko Turk | PUBLISHER: Allen and Unwin, 2021, 336 pages | RRP: \$19.99

When humans strive for perfection within a competitive environment, they can become so focused on success that the rest of the world fades into the background and feels irrelevant.

Such is the case with young protagonist, Alina Keeler, who was striving for a career in ballet, only for it to be cut short by the shattering of her leg and along with it, her aspirations to become a professional ballerina.

The sudden loss of her dream leaves her understandably questioning her identity and scrambling to find a new sense of purpose as she is forced to deal with the reality of life without being a member of the elite Kira Dobrow Ballet School. It is in the 'letting go' that Alina discovers a new direction for her future and begins to reimagine herself as a dancer in her high school musical production.

The exploration of identity and belonging as well as the examination of racial stereotyping within ballet, specifically the production of The Nutcracker, presents an ideal opportunity to open class discussion on casting people of colour into roles that may be interpreted as biased and demeaning. This contemporary issue is investigated within the novel through the exploration of two dance

companies casting ballerinas in The Nutcracker in vastly different ways. The progressive 'Variations' dance studio, which is attended by Alina's sister Josie, along with her head teacher Yuna Lee, orchestrate the revitalised dance sequence for 'Chinese Tea' to alleviate old stereotyping and 'narrow racist views' that persist each time it is danced. In juxtaposition, Alina's ballet schoolteacher Kira had always cast Alina (who is Asian/American) into the role and it is only now that Alina has begun to question the fairness of this role always being delegated to her, thus preventing her from exploring other roles outside the one that she had been typecast in each year.

Alongside the exploration of race, the novel also examines the repercussions of ambition and how those who pursue perfection may be misunderstood and viewed as outcasts by others in their peer group. Alina, who can no longer dance on pointe, begins to unravel what it has cost her to be so dedicated to one pursuit. Simultaneously, she uncovers the judgement others have towards Diya who is portrayed as an ambitious singer and dancer in the school's rendition of Singin' in the Rain. Fellow students have labelled her as 'robotic' as she appears to pursue success without considering those around her and devotes most

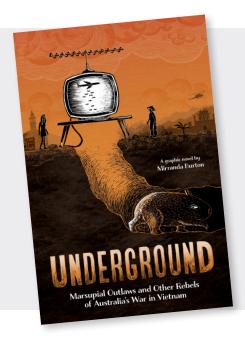
of her time to being exceptional. Alina comes to recognise herself in this character and convinces her newfound friends to stop calling Diya names and accept her ambitious nature as not a slight against them, but just what she has decided to dedicate her time and energy to – the best version of herself.

The production of Singin' in the Rain provides the platform for Alina to acquire new friends and a love interest in her neighbour and peer, Jude, who offers another source of tension in the story, with the will they? won't they? narrative played out until the final scene. Correspondingly, Alina's former ballet friend, Colleen, also dominates the storyline as Alina has not responded to her since she was unable to dance ballet – this dynamic also adds some tension to the novel as the reader waits to see if the friends will reconcile.

Overall, the text would be most suited to middle school students with an interest in ballet and who enjoy reading about musicals and high school relationships. The text does include profanity; thus, a warning of language should be given to junior students. Allen and Unwin have produced a Teacher tips resource that provides valuable classroom discussion points. The text's main message of resilience, particularly in response to a tragic event, makes it a worthwhile read.







Underground: Marsupial Outlaws and Other Rebels of Australia's War in Vietnam

Reviewed by Narelle Marson, Sacred Heart Girls' College

WRITER: Mirranda Burton | PUBLISHER: Allen and Unwin, 2021, 272 pages | RRP: \$29.99

What happens when the Australian Government signs up to a war many believe they should never have been a part of?

Mirranda Burton's Underground is an historical narrative, exploring Australia's response on both the home front and front line to America's involvement in the Vietnam War. Beginning with the important qualities of wombats – their 'excellent' digging skills, ability to keep a 'low profile' and forming 'a resistance' to settlers and their introduced species, Burton subtly introduces the cycle that some nations find themselves in, keeping a 'low profile', wanting to govern themselves until they are invaded and are forced to defend their land and country against others who think they know better. The novel covers the fifty years since the beginning of the Vietnam war - the introduction of conscription, the conflict at home with the Save Our Sons (SOS) movement and the 'fill in a falsie' campaign that saw a wombat conscripted for military service. Burton also interweaves the current reflections of some of her characters to demonstrate the ongoing issues that still persist fifty years after the war.

Underground is a graphic novel which explores: the ties that link people together due to one event; the strength of people who fight against the injustice they see around them; and questions that arise from participating in a war that wasn't ours to begin with. These are universal themes that still shape our lives even now. Burton highlights for the reader the importance of persevering, even when there is no hope.

Burton's characters are varied in background, location, purpose and gender, and yet they are all able to demonstrate the importance of resilience, compassion, understanding and strength when impacted by the same war. They include the Pughs from Dunmoochin; Jean McLean, the convener of Victoria's Save Our Sons movement; Bill Cantwell, a young man who joined Australia's war in Vietnam before the government could conscript him via the lottery; Mai Ho, a Vietnamese girl who later fled her home country as a refugee to Australia; and, of course, (W) Hopper Algernon Pugh, the wombat conscripted to the Vietnam War. Burton uses their stories as vehicles to explore the strength of those who fight against adversity, while at the same time questioning the purpose of war.

Burton's coverage of Australia's participation in the Vietnam War is presented in a succinct manner. She covers Vietnam's previous imperialist rule, the rise of Communism after the end of World War Two and how this

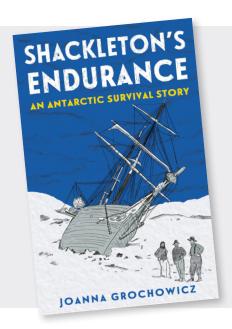
was perceived as a threat by America, and consequently, also by Australia. Particular words associated with the war may need to be defined and discussed with students in order to develop a holistic understanding of the world depicted in the novel.

Underground covers a range of consequences resulting from the Vietnam war, including post-traumatic stress disorder, the physical injuries due to the conflict, the ongoing consequences of the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, and the refugee crisis that occurred after the end of the war. Burton explores these issues through her characters' stories and also with her illustrations which will further enhance students' understanding of the dire effects of war. The black and white graphics add another layer of meaning and significance to the novel, and will help support the understanding of students in your class who may have lower literacy levels.

Whilst Underground might not cover a range of literary techniques, the graphic narrative, along with the themes the text presents, makes it best suited for Years 7 and 8 as a wider reading text or as part of a thematic creative writing unit where multiple texts on conflict are explored or as a unit looking at varied Australian voices in response to conflict.







Shackleton's Endurance: An Antarctic Survival Story

Reviewed by Michael E Daniel, Camberwell Grammar School

WRITER: Joanna Grochowicz | PUBLISHER: Allen & Unwin, 2021, 304 pages | RRP: \$16.99

Author Joanna Grochowicz has written another novel about Antarctic explorers from the first two decades of the twentieth century, and has once again not failed to disappoint her readers.

Having written about Amundsen – the first explorer to reach the South Pole successfully – in her novel Amundsen's Way (previously reviewed by this reviewer), and Robert Scott in Into the White, Grochowicz's latest work recounts the extraordinary voyage of Anglo-Irish explorer Ernest Shackleton.

In the wake of Amundsen's success in reaching the South Pole, Shackleton's intention was to transverse Antarctica. Leaving England, just as World War One commenced, in the Endurance, his party reached the whaling station at South Georgia Island before journeying onto Antarctica to commence the mission. Meanwhile, on the other side of the continent, another party was creating supply dumps of food and other equipment so that Shackleton and the party of explorers who crossed Antarctica would not have to carry all their food and supplies, thus making their mission feasible.

However, as the party was close to reaching Antarctica, the mission began to unravel, as the Endurance soon found itself trapped in an ice floe. Initially the party hoped that they would be able to live on the ship during the winter and try to cross the continent the following spring; however, it eventually became apparent that the expanding ice was damaging the hull of the ship. Shackleton and his men realised that they had to abandon ship before it sank. Retrieving essential items for their survival, including small boats, Shackleton's plan was for them to journey as far as possible on an ice floe. They slowly journeyed on the ice until this was no longer safe. Embarking on the boats, the party undertook a hazardous journey lasting some five days before reaching Elephant Island. Whilst the island afforded them relative safety, Shackleton knew that it was highly unlikely they would be rescued from here as few ships came near there. Shackleton therefore made the decision to undertake a voyage in an open boat with five men to South Georgia Island, some 720 nautical miles away, taking supplies for four weeks. The carpenter McNish made improvements to the James Caird before Shackleton departed

on 24 April 1916. On 8 May, South Georgia Island was sighted, however due to a gale, they were unable to land. Fearing that they were unable to bring the vessel round to the whaling station, they landed on the other side of the island, with Shackleton and two others walking across the island, which proved to be a hazardous crossing. Stunned to see Shackleton, the whalers set out with him after he had rested briefly to rescue the other crew members on the other side of South Georgia Island. A rescue mission to Elephant Island was then undertaken.

Although the mission itself was a failure the extraordinary tale of survival against all odds makes the story of Shackleton one of enduring value. Grochowicz highlights Shackleton's leadership qualities, particularly his abilities in being able to lead by example, maintain the morale of the expedition members, resolve disputes, and encourage the expedition members to work as a team. Perhaps the greatest sign of his leadership abilities was that all crew members survived the voyage.

Grochowicz successfully maintains the reader's interest and a sense of suspense – even for readers such as



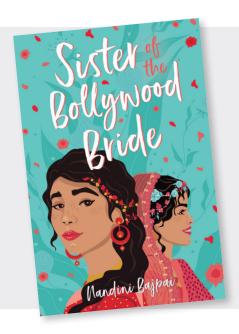


this reviewer who are familiar with Shackleton's story. This is apparent, for example, in her recount of the rescue of the expedition members left behind at Elephant Island.

As with Grochowicz's other novels, this would be suitable both for close study and wider reading, particularly for Years 9 and 10 students. The language in the text also makes it accessible for upper-intermediate to advanced second language learners.







Sister of the Bollywood Bride

Reviewed by Belinda Engelman, Geelong Lutheran College

WRITER: Nandini Bajpai | PUBLISHER: Allen and Unwin , 2021, 304 pages | RRP: \$19.99

This is a fun, light-hearted, yet also serious teen novel that revolves around the upcoming desi wedding of Mini Kapoor's sister, Vinnie.

Being a young doctor in early residency, Vinnie doesn't have time to organise her own ceremony, so the task falls to her little sister. The Kapoor girls sadly lost their mother seven years ago to cancer and the story's heart lies in the main character's quest to honour her mother's memory by ensuring that the wedding is 'first class'.

The text was originally published in India as Red Turban White Horse and as the author Nandini Bajpai states, 'sometimes books can get second chances' and readers should be grateful that this one did. The strong female lead character is extraordinary in her ability to multi-task as she simultaneously organises her sister's wedding, tutors young students in mathematics, runs an Etsy store and alters second-hand clothes at a consignment store as a side hustle. Her 'can do' attitude is infectious and the glimpses into Indian traditions and ceremony is enthralling and will do much to bring diverse voices to our classrooms.

The glimpse into life in India is explored with the introduction of the sassy character Masi, a flamboyant auntie who resides in India, but as a renowned fashion designer is called upon to dress the bride and bridal party in traditional wedding attire. The description of India and the exotic clothing is almost cinematic in its imagery.

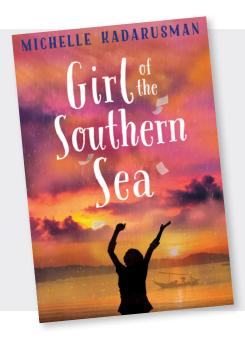
The themes of grief, family, heritage and teenage love are strewn across this book. The excitement of blossoming love between the main character Mini and the mysterious Vir, coupled with the anticipation of the wedding, enables the author to delve back into the memories of Mini's mother with sensitivity and sentimentality. Her loving dog, Yogi, was a gift to her from her mother before she died and offers comfort to the main character. The bequest of jewellery to her daughters for their wedding day symbolises the memory of their loving mother, whose spirit inspires Mini to create a spectacular wedding for her sister, one that her mother could be proud of.

This novel could open discussion in the classroom around grief and relationships as well as Indian culture. Additionally, stereotyping and discrimination within the Indian community could be explored as there are instances of prejudice within the text. The protagonist is positive in her outlook and how she rises to challenges, which could make for an interesting discussion on the value of perseverance.

This is a fast-paced and action-packed novel that is easy to read and could be described as a romantic page turner. This text would certainly be suitable as part of a wider reading collection in the middle years or could also be used as a Year 8 class text with consideration of sensitivity around the loss of the main character's mother. I would recommend this text for readers aged 13-18 years. A solid YA novel that offers humour as well as exploring the difficult universal themes of grief and loss.







Girl of the Southern Sea

Reviewed by Melissa Wray, Newcomb Secondary College

WRITER: Michelle Kadarusman | **PUBLISHER:** University Queensland Press, 2021 216 pages | **RRP:** \$16.99

Michelle Kadarusman's latest novel takes the reader to Indonesia where gifted student, Nia, longs to attend high school and get an education. Instead, she spends her days helping her father run a food cart and raising her younger brother.

Nia graduated frommiddle school and had big dreams to be a writer one day. However, her family is poor and cannot afford the school fees for high school. Nia's writing dreams are dashed as she is faced with the reality that she must care for her younger brother and help earn money through the family's food cart. An unexpected change of fortune sets Nia on a path to a different future, but she has to decide if it is the future she really wants.

Nia and her family live in the slums of Jakarta, Indonesia. Nia's mother died during the birth of Nia's younger brother. Her father drinks too much, including the profits from their daily takings, and stays out late at night. Therefore, it is up to Nia to get her brother to school and make sure the food cart is ready for daily sales. Faced with all these adult responsibilities, there is no time or opportunity for Nia to continue with her education. However, when Nia has the time, she enjoys writing stories about a mythical princess, stories that she shares with her brother.

The lives of the people in the novel are woven together as they each try to make the best of their situation. The characters in Nia's daily life subtly show the hardships that surround the everyday people in Nia's community. They include: her best friend Yuli, who also can no longer go to school and helps look after her own brother; the local street vendor, Mumma Tutti, who keeps a close eye out for Nia; even the bar owner, Jango, who makes money as best he can through liquor sales.

One day Nia's luck changes unexpectedly. An accident results in

Nia escaping without a scratch and the community believing her to have good luck. Her food cart becomes popular, sales rise and a new friend, Oskar, helps to spread the story about her good magic banana fritters. The story of good magic continues but Nia begins to uncover some secrets about her father, including a secret agreement he made that she is expected to commit to. Things begin to unravel and Nia must draw on all her strength to make grown-up decisions that will allow her to live the life she wants.

The easy-to-read narrative and short chapter style encourages the reader to consider adult topics such as responsibility, family, persistence and hard work. *Girl* of the Southern Sea is particularly suitable for the 12+ age group as it does have some adult themes. It could be included within both the junior English and Humanities curriculum.





The Student Guide to Writing Better Sentences in the English Classroom (Books 1 and 2)

Reviewed by Lauren Maserow, Methodist Ladies' College

Publisher: Ticking Mind, 2020, Bk 1–191 pages, Bk 2 – 239 pages | RRP: \$41.95 each

I have seen a few textbooks from Ticking Mind and they have all impressed me in the way in which they are presented and laid out. This is an update of a previous version which I had not seen, but in this new edition, there are two books. Book 1 is designed for Years 7 and 8, while Book 2 is for Years 9 and 10.

Most traditional grammar textbooks are split up based on the various grammatical elements, such as the different parts of speech, punctuation and sentence structures. What makes these books from Ticking Mind different is that each chapter focuses on a text type, such as text response analysis, persuasive writing, or creative writing, and then the grammatical instruction is embedded within that context.

The first twenty or so pages are dedicated to explaining the various parts of speech and punctuation marks but these are fairly brief (about one page per part of speech and two or three pages for punctuation). This leaves the majority of the text for the different

styles of writing where there is more detail woven throughout focusing on the various grammatical elements.

If you have purchased one of Ticking Mind's other textbooks, you'll be familiar with their user-friendly and eye-catching layout. The colours are bright and vibrant and the blocking of each section means it's easy to see the steps of the writing process. There is an abundance of vocabulary lists, sentence starters, and helpful phrases for each section and this is truly one of the best things about these textbooks. So often, students really struggle with knowing where to start and providing these scaffolded tools for them is invaluable. For those students who find expanding their vocabulary challenging, the vocab lists provided are excellent.

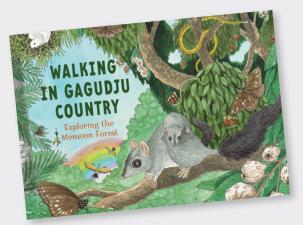
Even though the books are split and designed around the curriculum content for Years 7 and 8 and then 9 and 10, the books will be useful for many years even if they only have one of them thanks to the grammar and writing rules. However, there is great benefit in listing both books for your students to buy in

Years 7 and 9 because the language and writing tasks are adjusted accordingly. For instance, the Poetry Analysis chapter in Book 1 is briefer and gives students a gentle introduction to what can be a daunting task and walks them through it. The same chapter in Book 2 is longer, more detailed and advanced, preparing the students for a more sophisticated written analysis.

Accompanying the purchase of these textbooks is a Teacher's Guide from Ticking Mind that is free to download. The PDF is there to show teachers how to get the best use out of the textbooks, gives some quick reference links to pages and sections that they might need depending on the writing activity, while also providing some suggested ideas about lesson activities to go with them. Very handy indeed!







Walking in Gagudju Country: Exploring the Monsoon Forest

Reviewed by Belinda Engelman, Geelong Lutheran College

WRITERS: Dianne Lucas and Ben Tyler | **ILLUSTRATOR:** Emma Long **PUBLISHER:** Allen and Unwin, 2021, 32 pages | **RRP:** \$29.99

What's special about this children's picture book is in the collaboration. The brainchild of three Northern Territory residents, the book was conceived during the 2019 Octopus Story Camp in Darwin and provides insight into the rich tapestry of life in the Monsoon Forest, in Kakadu National Park.

The immersion of the reader into the flourishing world of the Monsoon Forest is immediate, with the beautiful, intricate and captivating illustrations of Emma Long who uses ink and water colours to illustrate the book. Her colourful illustrations also include close ups of residents of the forest such as butterflies, bush bees and owls. Often the pictures resemble that of an object under a magnifying glass, allowing the viewer to marvel at their unique

The writing is lyrical in its rhythm and the interspersing of Kundjeyhmi language provides an authentic experience of vicariously walking through country with the characters, an experience most younger readers would enjoy. In a practical sense, the glossary at the back of the book and Kundjeyhmi language in red corresponds with an

English word on each page to provide literal translations of the key words and phrases that could extend to a vocabulary list in the classroom.

The story follows a group of walkers who 'head off into the shady monsoon' with adventure and discovery in their hearts and a keen eye for nature and a deep understanding of the traditional connections to this land. The expertise of First Nations Peoples is revealed as the narrator refers to Elders in the text who have shared their knowledge of country with the characters and acts as an opportunity for children to learn the wonders of this beautiful country and its ability to provide in abundance.

The story is rich with information about bush food, nature and animal behaviour that is unique to the area, and spans thousands of years of knowledge about the intricacies of the land and its ecosystem. The discussion of 'bush honey' and the directive to go 'sleep under' a tree is enough to entice anyone to visit the bush and stay awhile to take in its natural beauty. The picture book provides an excellent launching pad for discussion about the ecosystem of the forest and caring for land which is an important part of education for all humans.

The publishers have also provided teaching notes, written by Dianne Lucas, that correspond with the Australian Curriculum and which would make the study of this text manageable given the support material provided. Additionally, there is a free audio reading of the book available which will assist with the pronunciation of Kundjeyhmi words, that some students may find difficult. This picture book can be used to open discussion in the classroom about a plethora of important topics, including sustainability, First Nations history and culture, Indigenous languages, plants and wildlife, and could even lead to creative responses from students as well as providing an opportunity for interdisciplinary learning. I would recommend this book to teachers exploring the aforementioned themes in the classroom and believe it to be suitable for younger children.





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