



TEACHING FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES

You Can Teach That: First Nations texts

Professor Tony Birch

Important notice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers: Pages linked throughout this resource may contain names, images, and footage of persons who are now deceased. We acknowledge the significance and sensitivity of this content and advise reader and viewer discretion.

Curriculum overview

Through subject English, students explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultural knowledge, traditions and experiences as they are represented and communicated through text. Specifically, subject English provides students with the opportunity to:

- Appreciate and investigate texts created by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and illustrators
- Analyse and respond to texts that explores the histories, cultures and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Examine texts that include events, Country/Place, identities and languages, and
- Discuss the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

In the [Victorian Curriculum 7–10 English Version 2.0](#) explicit references to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures are found in the below content descriptions:

Year 7

- Identify and explore ideas, points of view, characters, events and/or issues in literary texts, drawn from different historical, cultural and/or social contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors ([VC2E7LE01](#))

Year 8

- Explain the ways that ideas, issues and points of view in literary texts drawn from diverse historical, cultural and social contexts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, and a wide range of Australian and world authors, may represent the values of individuals and groups ([VC2E8LE01](#))

Year 9

- Analyse the representations of people and places in literary texts, drawn from diverse historical, cultural and social contexts, by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors ([VC2E9LE01](#))

Year 10

- Analyse representations of individuals, groups and places and evaluate how they reflect their context in literary texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors and a wide range of Australian and world authors ([VC2E10LE01](#))

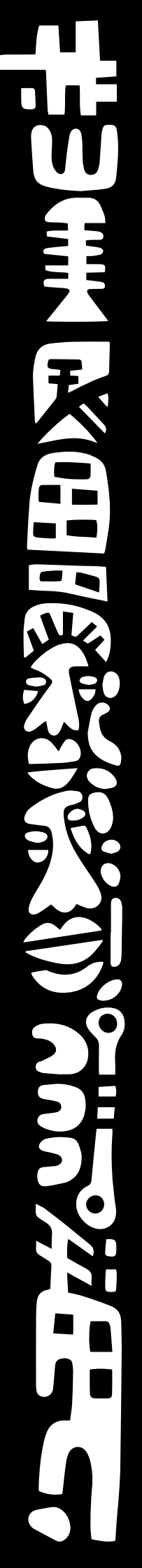
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-Curriculum Priority

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority provides more guidance around the responsibilities of educators to help students deepen their knowledge of the oldest continuous living cultures and contemporary First Nations communities. The below organising ideas are from the Victorian Curriculum F-10 Version 2.0 and are reflected in the *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series.

Country/Place	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities of Australia maintain a deep connection to, and responsibility for, Country and Place and have holistic values and belief systems that are connected to the land, sea, sky and waterways. (VC2CCPAC1)
Culture	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies are diverse and have distinct cultural expressions, such as language, customs and beliefs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural expressions, while also maintaining the right to control, protect and develop culture as Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property. (VC2CCPAC1)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ways of life reflect unique ways of being, knowing, thinking and doing. (VC2CCPAC2)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to the world's oldest continuous cultures. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples demonstrate resilience in the maintenance, practice and revitalisation of culture despite the many historic and enduring impacts of colonisation, and they continue to celebrate and share the past, present and future manifestations of their cultures. (VC2CCPAC3)
People	Australia has 2 distinct First Nations Peoples; each encompasses a diversity of nations across Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have occupied the Australian continent and adjacent islands from time immemorial. (VC2CCPAP1)
	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have sophisticated political, economic and social organisation systems, which include but are not limited to family and kinship structures, laws, traditions, customs, land tenure systems and protocols for strong governance and authority, (VC2CCPAP2)
	The significant and ongoing contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their histories and cultures are acknowledged locally, nationally and globally. (VC2CCPAP3)

Capabilities

- [Critical and Creative Thinking](#)
- [Intercultural Capability](#)
- [Personal and Social Capability](#)



Introduction to the resource

Professor Tony Birch holds the Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature at Melbourne University. In 2017 he was awarded the Patrick White Prize, in recognition of his contribution to Australian literature. He is the author of four novels, five short fiction collections, and two poetry books. In 2022 his book, *Dark As Last Night* was awarded the Christina Stead Literary Prize and the Steele Rudd Literary Award. The book was also shortlisted for the 2022 Prime Minister’s Literary Award for fiction. His most recent novel, *Women and Children* (2023), was awarded *The Age* 2024 Fiction Book of the Year.

In this interview for VATE’s *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, Birch discusses the importance of selecting and teaching texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

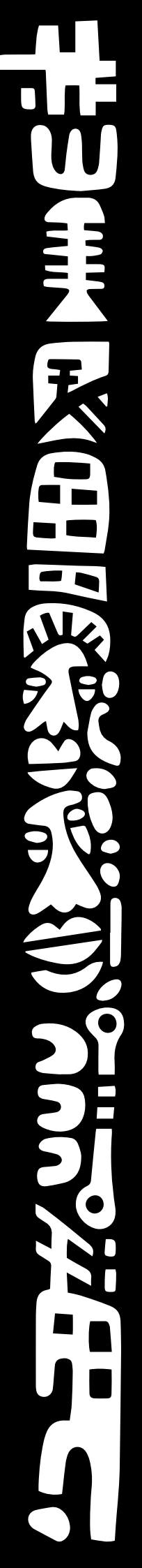
Key knowledge

- 1970s Australian television screen culture
- Aboriginal storytelling
- Cultural sensitivities and protocols
- Ongoing effects of colonisation
- Fiction as a means of validating the truth

Key concepts

- Advocacy
- Representation
- Relationships and responsibility
- Perspective
- Australia’s ‘national story’

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
0:21 mins	Birch’s experience of texts in high school
6:41 mins	Considerations for selecting First Nations literature for study
13:07 mins	How can English teachers ensure that they’re not omitting or conflating the voices, experiences or histories of First Nations people?
16:10 mins	Power of fiction to “validate the truth without having to defer to capital H-history”
19:44 mins	The challenges with and opportunities for Australia’s national story
23:36 mins	Recommended First Nations reading



The following activities, prompts, lesson ideas and external links are designed to interrogate and embed the concepts, ideas, questions, themes and knowledge presented in the accompanying video. They are designed to gain further understanding of the topic and explore how the topic can be utilised, dissected, or cemented in the classroom. Materials and activities have been selected with a view to creating opportunities for bringing the content of this topic to students and colleagues.

The structure of these activities has been inspired by the [8 Aboriginal Ways of Learning pedagogy framework](#) which is grounded in the research of Dr Karen Martin and Dr Martin Nakata and created by Department of Education staff, James Cook University's School of Indigenous Studies, and the Western New South Wales Regional Aboriginal Education Team.

STORY SHARING: Yarning about your vision for subject English

Birch talks about the importance of selecting texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors, not just because they're excellent works of literature, but because of the universality of their themes. He says that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who don't see their stories reflected in fiction experience an erasure, another act of "terra nullius in the sense of the complete obliteration of Aboriginal life from popular culture", that contributes to feelings of being devalued and inadequate. Subsequently, non-Indigenous Australians who don't read or engage with First Nations literature risk ignorance and bigotry and "a terrible deficiency" in their understanding of the histories, cultures, achievements and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Consider facilitating a discussion with your English faculty in the spirit of a [yarning circle](#). Yarning circles have been used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to learn collectively, pass on cultural knowledge, and build respectful, authentic and reciprocal relationships. The circle represents the belief that everyone is equal and that each story is valuable. By forming a physical circle, each member of the group can be seen clearly and face each other. Some guidelines for using a yarning circle, or dialogue circle, can be viewed [here](#) from the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority. You might like to dedicate a faculty meeting to undertaking a yarning circle.

Potential questions for yarning:

- What is your vision for subject English at our school?
- How has your experience as a student influenced your teaching practice?
- How do you challenge your biases as an English teacher?
- At the completion of their secondary school education at our school, what do you hope that students take away from studying English?
- What are some of the strengths of the English program at our school?
- Where do you think there are areas for improvement in our English program?
- How do we challenge ignorance and bigotry in our work as English teachers?
- How does our curriculum programming centre students' experience? If it doesn't how could it?
- Where are our students being exposed to ideas and perspectives that are different to their own?
- What points of view, lifestyles, or beliefs are being reinforced/marginalised by our text selection processes?
- How can we learn from our students about the ideas, issues and concerns that face them?
- Where are our students being exposed to stories about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander lives by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?

In sharing responses to these prompts, consider the views of your colleagues and their potential interest in changes in curriculum planning. You may also like to ask students these questions and invite their comments and agency in planning for their learning.

LEARNING MAPS: Plotting text, theme, representation and tension

As Birch discusses, the text selection process can pose a range of issues at some schools. He acknowledges that there is some “sensitivity around the negativity of the dominant [white] society” and concerns about backlash from an inherently, colonial racist society. However, Birch asserts it is “quite hypocritical when you consider that, you know, schools don’t have any problem dealing with issues of inequality and violence” in other contexts – “difficult issues...about offshore stories, they’re a bit more palatable”. To further this point, Birch says, “There are cultural sensitivities, because we live in a colonial society. We are still dealing, not only with the legacies of colonialism, but very contemporary acts of disadvantage...so I don’t think it’s possible to teach Aboriginal writing without having to deal with and be confronted by those tensions”.

Undertake a mapping activity charting your students’ engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts, histories, characters. Begin in Year 7 and work through to Year 10 charting the:

- Texts that students are exposed to including mandated texts, supplementary reading material, audiovisual and multimodal texts, journalism and other social media content
- Themes that students explore
- Characterisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Representation of people from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community
- Tensions that are presented in the works.

This learning map should be an opportunity to discuss with a year level team, or whole English faculty, the power of representation and an opportunity to assess the lens through which your students perceive and learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. As Lenore Keeshig-Tobias wrote in her essay ‘[Stop Stealing Native Voices](#)’ (1990), “Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories are how a people, a culture, thinks”.

Individually, with your year level teams or whole English faculty, create a picture of the learning pathway of knowledge that students are on. After their time at your school, what would you like them to have learned and understood about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, concerns, issues, achievements and celebrations. Consider also the ways in which student knowledge is likely to be enhanced with their other curriculum areas.

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SYMBOLS AND IMAGES: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation in film

Birch refers to the renaissance of Australian film and television culture in the 1970s and the representation of Aboriginal women. He says, “You would see an increasing number of Aboriginal characters in those portrayals, but they’re always marginalised, and... there are so many films where Aboriginal characters appeared where they weren’t even named; they were just there as sort of vehicles to portray violence in a voyeuristic way”.

You may be familiar with the [Bechdel Test](#) which measures the representation of women in film and other fiction, but there are many other variations of this test that encourage greater and more authentic representation of people of colour. The [Ali Nahdee Test](#) was designed by Native American woman Ali Nahdee to test the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in mainstream media including television, film, and books. To pass this test, the story must have:

- An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander woman who is a main character
- Who does not fall in love with a white man
- Who is not abused and does not die at any point in the story.

Undertaking an analysis of some of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature you study and exploring the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women using the Ali Nahdee Test will prove to be a worthwhile experience.

The period of Australian New Wave cinema that Birch refers to was marked by a resurgence in worldwide popularity of Australian film. Films such as *Walkabout* and *The Last Wave* were popular films of the time, both starring Aboriginal actor David Gulpilil. According to the [Australian Centre for the Moving Image](#) (ACMI), the 1970s saw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples stepping behind the camera to control their on-screen representation, share their culture, as well as disrupt and challenge ideas of Australian nationhood. The [National Film and Sound Archive](#) (NFSA) has a short history of First Nations filmmaking, Screen Australia has a [spotlight on First Nations voices](#), ACMI has an article about [Blak women flipping the script](#), and Narragunnawali has a [resource guide](#) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander contributions to the media arts. This [article](#) provides an annotated bibliography of sorts for First Nations film contributions.

Show students the following film trailers for films by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander film makers and that feature First Nations actors and actresses. Consider the Ali Nahdee Test criteria, as well as questions about representation including:

- What is the storyline of this film?
- Do the characterisations of First Nations people extend beyond harmful stereotyping?
- What kind of attitudes are conveyed in the film (attention to the dialogue may help here)?
- Do these films convey an image of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women that matches the experience of Birch – “very strong matriarchs” who are centred and in control of their storyline?

Films

- [BeDevil](#) (dir. Tracey Moffatt, 1993)
- [Samson and Delilah](#) (dir. Warwick Thornton, 2009)
- [Bran Nue Dae](#) (dir. Rachel Perkins, 2009)
- [The Sapphires](#) (dir. Wayne Blair, 2012)
- [Sweet Country](#) (dir. Warwick Thornton, 2017)
- [Jasper Jones](#) (dir. Rachel Perkins 2017)
- [Top End Wedding](#) (dir. Wayne Blair, 2019)
- [The Drover’s Wife: The Legend of Molly Johnson](#) (dir. Rachel Perkins, 2021)
- [Sweet As](#) (dir. Jub Clerc, 2022)
- [The New Boy](#) (dir. Warwick Thornton, 2023)
- [Limbo](#) (dir. Ivan Sen, 2023)

DECONSTRUCT/RECONSTRUCT: Scaffolding the search for supporting material

Birch acknowledges that “there will be missteps” in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander texts and that many teachers did not experience schooling that modelled how to select, prioritise, and integrate Aboriginal literature. However, he notes that he has “heard the comment...that people would teach more First Nations writing but there’s not enough supplementary material [to support it]”, a claim he rejects, reminding us that “we have a very strong history of Aboriginal filmmakers, photographers, dancers, artists; so there’s a lot of material there”.

Birch suggests four supplementary texts for his text *The White Girl*, challenging the comments he has heard about a lack of supporting material for the teaching of First Nations texts. He suggests “a lack of creative interest in how to pursue Indigenous texts” is the reason why people do not engage in the teaching for First Nations literature. The texts suggested by Birch are:

- *Rabbit Proof Fence* (dir. Phillip Noyce, 2002) based on the novel *Follow The Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Nugi Garimara (Doris Pilkington)
- *Lousy Little Sixpence* (dir. Alec Morgan, 1983)
- *First Australians* documentary series (dir. Rachel Perkins, Beck Cole, 2008)
- *Bringing them Home*: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (April 1997)

Using Birch’s example as a model, engage in a process of creative brainstorming about supplementary resources that you could use to teach a new or existing First Nations text in your classroom. Consider feature films or television miniseries, historical documentaries, historical documents, articles or reports, and cultural expressions through photography, artwork, and dancing. Interrogate these supplementary resources for ways in which they could complement the study of the First Nations literature in your classroom. If you are unsure about what texts to select, consult the [AIATSIS guide to evaluating and selecting education resources](#) which steps through a helpful pyramid that steers teachers away from inadvertently selecting racist and culturally inappropriate material for use in the classroom.

No text is created or received in a vacuum – creators and their audience are influenced by a range of historical, social, political, racial, and cultural factors. Strengthening cultural responsiveness entails engaging with First Nations literature, research, and media. Through this conscious consumption, you will gain a better understanding of both the enduring impact of colonisation and the ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures continue to be practiced today. Building familiarity with these ideas, concepts and knowledges is integral to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures. Some examples of supplementary material you could use in the classroom to complement the study of First Nations texts are below.

For learning about the Stolen Generations

- AIATSIS guide to [missions, stations and reserves](#) and the [Stolen Generations](#)
- Deadly Story’s article on [the reserve system](#)
- *Bringing them Home* report (1997)
- [Survivor testimonies](#) and accounts of being reconnected with loved ones and Country

For exploring Aboriginal spirituality

- [Dust Echoes](#) – a series of animated Dreamtime stories from Central Arnhem Land
- [Australians Together](#) resource of Aboriginal spirituality

For understanding connection to Country

- Evolve Communities’ ‘[Connection to Country](#)’ [video](#)
- [Australians Together](#) resource on the importance of land
- [A resource](#) from the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation on the history of Victoria
- [Diverse First Nations Identities](#)
- ‘[Seeing the Light: Aboriginal Law, Learning and Sustainable Living on Country](#)’ by Ambelin Kwaymullina (2005)
- [The Land Owns Us](#) by Global Oneness Project

For explaining intergenerational trauma and ongoing impacts of colonisation

- Tyson Holloway-Clarke's [article on the history of](#) colonisation and how it affects First Nations people today
- The Healing Foundation's [YouTube channel](#) and [this article](#)

For discussing the rate of juvenile incarceration and hyperincarceration of First Nations people

- 'I don't want to just be known as the boy in a restraint chair' – [an article by Dylan Voller](#) who came to attention in 2016 when video of him exposed the treatment of children in juvenile detention in the Northern Territory.
- 'Raising the age of criminal responsibility is only a first step. First Nations kids need cultural solutions' in [The Conversation](#).
- 'First Nations imprisonment is already at a record high. Unless government policy changes, it will only get worse' in [The Conversation](#).
- [An article on Aboriginal deaths in custody](#) and reflection on the impact of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 30 years after it was delivered
- [Real time dashboard](#) of deaths in custody

For countering stereotypes

- ABC's [You Can't Ask That](#) on what it is like to be an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person
- The University of Sydney's '[Ask us anything: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people](#)'

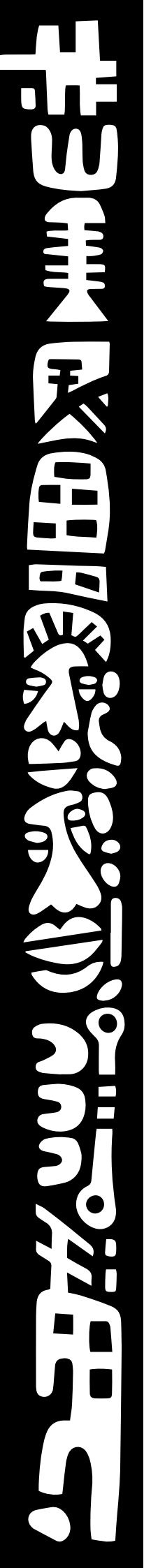
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ADDITIONAL READING

Below is an annotated list of sources worth consulting as you look to expand the way in which you teach with First Nations texts.

<u>First Languages Australia</u>	A website dedicated to showcasing the work of First Nations communities in supporting, strengthening, and connecting language communities in Australia. Their <u>First Languages Map</u> and <u>50 Words Project</u> are helpful resources in showing students how Aboriginal people lived and communicated on the land pre-colonisation, and important in exploring the work that various organisations are doing to document first languages.
<u>AIATIS map of Indigenous Australia</u>	A map that attempts to represent the language, social or nation groups of pre-colonial Australia.
<u>Uluru Statement from the Heart</u>	The invitation from First Nations peoples to the Australian public to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the constitution.
<u>Reconciliation Australia</u>	Collection of resources, educational material and opportunities to support reconciliation in Australia. Their education counterpart is <u>Narragunnawali</u> .
<u>Deadly Story</u>	"Deadly Story is a cultural resource portal that aims to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people who are in out-of-home care, to grow in their knowledge of who they are and where they come from as well as support their growing connection to Culture, Country and Community."
<u>Australians Together</u>	A collection of curriculum resources and professional learning for the teaching of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander material.
<u>SBS First Nations Cinema</u>	Free, on-demand First Nations films to stream on the SBS.
<u>First Nations stories</u>	A collection of resources by ACMI to support the teaching of First Nations storytelling through the moving image.
<u>National Gallery of Australia</u>	First Nations collections and exhibitions.
<u>National Gallery of Victoria</u>	Permanent Warrdha Marra collection at NGV Australia.
<u>Healing Foundation</u>	An Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisation that platforms the lived experiences of Stolen Generations survivors and their families.

If you're looking to make changes to your text lists to include more First Nations texts, consult [Magabala Books](#) and [Reading Australia](#).



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