

You Can Teach That: Writing as a political act

Dr Anita Heiss

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
- Engage with and respond to literature that explores the histories, cultures and perspectives for 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 English 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 Capabilities](#)
- [Personal and Social Capability](#)

Introduction to the resource

Dr Anita Heiss AM (Wiradyuri Nation) is an internationally published, award-winning author of 25 books across genres. *Bila Yarrudhanggalangdhuray* won the 2022 NSW Premier's Literary Prize for Indigenous Writing, was shortlisted for the 2021 HNSA ARA Historical Novel (Adult Category) and longlisted for the 2022 Stella Prize. In 2023, she released a children's book *Bidhi Galing (Big Rain)* illustrated by Samantha Campbell. Heiss is also Publisher-At-Large for *Bundy Publishing*, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. Her latest book is *Dirrayawadha (Rise Up)*.

In this interview for VATE's *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, Heiss explores the notion of writing as an inherently political act, the role of literature in politics and truth-telling, and the power of representation.

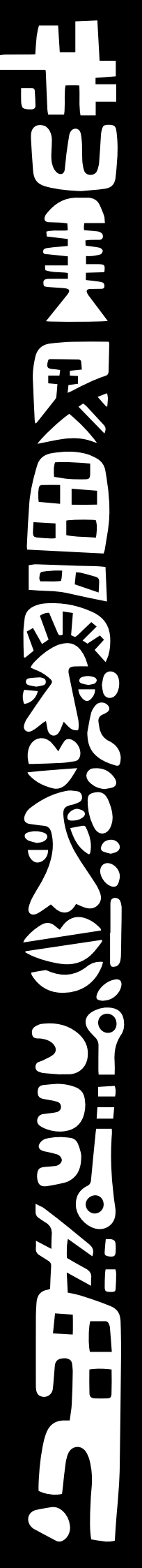
Key knowledge

- Representation
- Stereotyping
- Resistance
- Policy and politics

Key concepts

- Settler narratives
- Historical amnesia
- Political lens

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
1:07 mins	Would you describe yourself as a politically motivated writer?
7:22 mins	Is all writing a political act?
12:24 mins	How are First Nations peoples using literature to speak back against persistent stereotyping, historical myths, and lies?
19:55 mins	A demonstration of AustLit and BlackWords
28:24 mins	In what ways does First Nations writing confront the historical amnesia of White Australia?
35:45 mins	Are some texts ever 'too political' for study?



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 for English teachers to gain further understanding of the topic and explore how the topic can be utilised, dissected, or cemented in the classroom. Materials and activities in this section 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: “It’s about what needs to be heard”

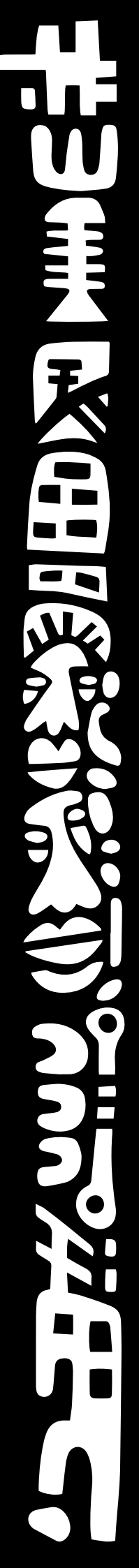
The power of representation is well documented. Representation matters. The [We Need Diverse Books](#) movement is emblematic of this, as is the oft-repeated Rudine Sims Bishop quote about books and stories acting as “[windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors](#)”. Who is telling the stories and who the stories are about is important to consider, just as much as the content, themes and issues being explored. [This edition of *Idiom*](#) also explores these themes.

Considering this, Heiss says her writing process is “not about what needs to be said, it’s about what needs to be heard”. Heiss is “highly motivated to make social change” and uses her “writing as a platform to discuss, challenge [and] question politics at different times”. But Heiss’ primary mission is to write First Nations peoples “into the Australian literary landscape in ways that [they] haven’t been represented before”. Demonstrating resilience on the frontier, intelligence, connections to land, and the many ways that First Nations women contribute to Australian society are driving factors for Heiss’ work.

As Heiss explains in this interview, a key part of the vision for writing is to tell stories about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women that show them as experiencing “all the same human emotions as other human beings” – challenging the dominant representation of First Peoples as ‘other’ in many texts. The notion that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are represented as such, often through a deficit lens, has been spoken about by [Professor Tony Birch](#) and [Associate Professor Jeanine Leane](#) in the [You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives](#) series – both of whom have challenged teachers to evaluate the texts they’re selecting. Wiradjuri/Welsh author and teacher Cara Shipp outlines the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples being ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ in the English classroom through text selection in [Idiom](#) (2021, vol. 57, no. 2, pp. 29 – 31) and Gamilaroi academic Dr Tamika Worrell outlines influences to text selection when including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in English in [English in Australia](#) (2022, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 5 – 14). An explanation of postcolonial ‘otherness’ can be read [here](#).

It is important for people to hear stories of and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that position them as strong, active and capable individuals within the story arc; to be presented with stories that present them in their capacity as archetypal ‘everyman’ or common person. In particular, Heiss wants to show Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women as “matriarchs, as nurturers, as sisters, as lovers, but also as entrepreneurs and visionaries and international travellers”. Regardless of “race, regardless of socioeconomics, regardless of geography or cultural background” it is being part of and sharing a “sense of sisterhood” that unites all women.

As Heiss says “...teachers are making choices about what they think their students should know” in terms of the history of Australia and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Text selection is one way in which this occurs, as is the type of lens that teachers bring to the study of texts by First Nations peoples. [Jeanine Leane](#) discusses this in her interview also. [Worrell’s research](#) (2022) highlights the “continuing overreliance on non-Indigenous authored texts when including Indigenous perspectives in the English classroom, with non-Indigenous misappropriations continuing to be utilised in the classroom” (p. 12 – 13). Worrell speaks about her research into the use of First Nations literature in NSW classrooms in the [You Can Teach That](#) series [here](#).



At the end of the day, stories reinforce our worldviews. When narratives align with the beliefs and values we have, they validate our experiences and opinions. In the same way, being presented with narratives that challenge our perspectives encourages us to question our values and beliefs and consider new ideas. [Research from Green and Appel \(2024\)](#) shows that the “same mental processes that allow us to understand and empathize with real people are also activated when we engage with narrative characters” (p. 71) and note that narratives can “help individuals see the world in a new way. They can provide a sense of meaning or identity. They can give comfort and provide a feeling of belonging through parasocial contact. Engagement with fiction, especially when individuals engage in fiction reading over time, can also help improve social skills” (p. 75). If you are concerned about the ways in which the texts your students study perpetuate negative stereotypes or inherent biases about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, below is a list of texts that may be suitable replacements for your context:

- [Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia](#) edited by Anita Heiss (teachers notes [here](#) and [here](#) is a unit of work mapped to Year 9)
- [Growing Up Torres Strait Islander in Australia](#) edited by Samantha Faulkner (Faulkner is interviewed for the *You Can Teach That* series [here](#))
- [Growing up Wiradjuri](#) edited by Anita Heiss
- [Am I Black Enough For You?](#) by Anita Heiss
- [Meet Me at the Intersection](#) edited by Rebecca Lim and Ambelin Kwaymullina
- [Sister Heart](#) by Sally Morgan (with adaptable resource [here](#))
- [Our World: Bardi Jaawi Life at Ardiyooloon](#) by One Arm Point Remote Community School
- [Personal Score](#) by Ellen van Neerven
- [Tracks of the Missing](#) by Carl Merrison and Hakea Hustler
- [Robert Runs](#) by Mariah Sweetman
- [Becoming Kirrali Lewis](#) by Jane Harrison (Year 10 unit [here](#))
- [Fog a Dox](#) by Bruce Pascoe (adaptable unit [here](#))

If you are interested in auditing your curriculum for alignment with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cross-curriculum priority, [use this resource prepared by Narragunnawali](#). You could also conduct small group discussion in year level teams or English department around:

- The characterisation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in the texts you study. To what extent are they all the same?
- The history of Australia that is presented in the texts you study. Have you included a range of voices that includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples? Are you relying on non-Indigenous voices to tell this story?
- What kinds of storylines are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characters involved in? Are they the protagonist in stories or are they relegated to the ‘sidekick’?
- What kind of worldview does your text list enforce?

Worrell refers to this resource by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) as an extensive guide to considerations for teachers when looking to bring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives to the classroom. The resource recommends five evaluation criteria with key questions, a guide of what to look for when evaluating your specific text, and follow up actions to take:

1. Authenticity
2. Balanced nature of the presentation
3. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participation
4. Accuracy and support

It is important for people to hear stories of and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that position them as strong, active and capable individuals within the story arc; to be presented with stories that present them in their capacity as archetypal ‘everyman’ or common person.

5. Exclusion of content of a secret or sacred nature.

NON-LINEAR: “What do people need to know?”

Heiss refers to the important work of [Oodgeroo Noonuccal](#), specifically her first book of poetry *We Are Going*. A [review of this work by Jim Henderson](#) in the Tribune (6 May 1964) described the collection as a “battle cry” that “no one with a spark of humanity in their make-up” could ignore. Heiss describes Noonuccal’s ‘[Aboriginal Charter of Rights](#)’ as an influential piece of writing from the collection noting Noonuccal’s overtly political motivations and intent. Ellen van Neerven gives a critique of Noonuccal’s *Kath Walker in China* (1988) and Noonuccal’s legacy as a leader, writer, thinker, activist, conservationist, artist and educator [here](#).

Noonuccal played an influential role in coordinating and campaigning for the [1967 referendum](#) and she used her poetry to respond to, and advocate for, the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In [this 1977 interview](#) for *Meanjin*, Jim Davidson questions Noonuccal about the hopeful tone of *We Are Going*. She replies, “I couldn’t afford the luxury of despair”. The interview continues:

INTERVIEWER: No. Well, how do you feel about it now?

WALKER [OODGEROO NOONUCCAL]: Oh, I still have that, I still have that. I still live in hope. In spite of the fact that people say it’s useless protesting, when I’m convinced that the white man is destined to destroy our sacred sites. In spite of the fact that I think we’re going to lose the battle I will not give up. I’m dead the day I stop protesting.

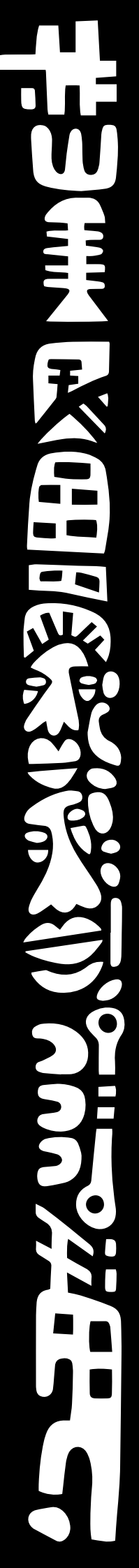
INTERVIEWER: It’s important to protest, to bear witness, even if it’s useless.

WALKER: Oh yes, even if it’s useless. Never say die, get on, and hope that somewhere there’ll be a break-through. I haven’t much hope that I’m going to win any battles, I no longer look for that. What I’m doing is putting the truth before the public, and it’s up to them.

Noonuccal’s statement about the power of her poetry to ‘put the truth before the public’ demonstrates the same dignity demonstrated by the members of the Uluru Dialogue in [this statement](#) about the result of the 2023 failed referendum on the Voice to Parliament. Likewise, in [this article](#) in *The Conversation* by Elfie Shiosaki poses that we re-envision First Nations poetry as a work of Makarrata in light of the referendum result. *Makarrata* is a Yolngu word for peacemaking, Treaty or agreement making.

You might like to consider the ways in which First Nations poets have used their platform to celebrate the values, views and ideas that Heiss proudly advocates for in her work: resistance, intelligence, history, representation, truth.

- Heiss’ own poetry collection *I’m Not Racist But... A collection of social observations*. Poems ‘The Other’, ‘Making Aborigines’, ‘Expectations’ and ‘The Creator’s Prayer’ are [available here](#).
- An audio recording of ‘Dear Australia’ by Don Bemrose (mentioned by Heiss) can be heard [here](#) but is in *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*.
- Kirli Saunders’ collection *Returning*.
- *Dropbear* by Evelyn Araluen
- *Throat* by Ellen van Neerven
- Jazz Money’s collections *mark the dawn* and *how to make a basket*
- *Gawimarra: Gathering* by Jeanine Leane
- *Shapeshifting: First Nations Lyric Nonfiction* edited by Jeanine Leane and Ellen van Neerven
- *Whisper Songs* by Tony Birch



COMMUNITY LINKS: “You are choosing what you want your students to know”

In response to the question ‘What would you say to a teacher who says that some texts are ‘too political’ for study?’ Heiss says:

I think you are choosing what you want your students to know about the world they live in, and that subjectivity can be debilitating when they actually go into the real world.... Your job is to teach history, which includes policy...and that’s politics, right? ... It’s not that something is too political, it’s about how the work is taught, how the teacher chooses to unpack the themes and the topics in their classroom.

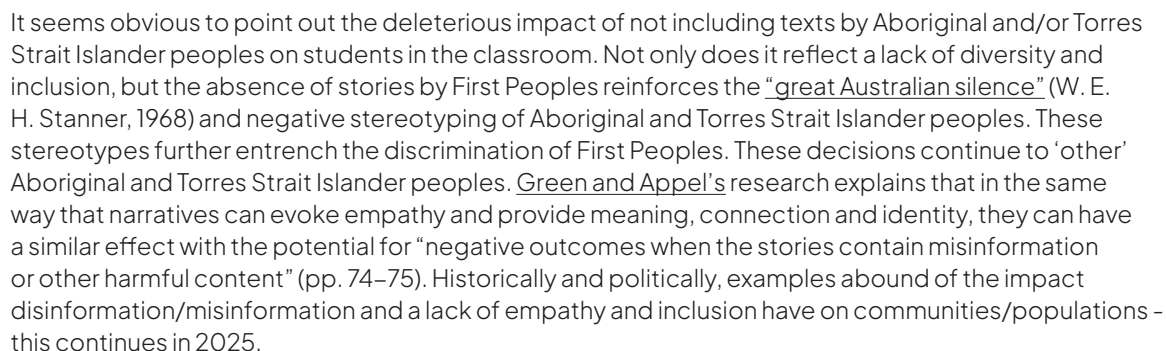
The Australian Teachers’ Survey 2023 found that over half (51%) of all teachers aged 35 years or older felt “unprepared to deal with First Nations histories and culture” (Hogarth, 2024). Members who reach out to VATE echo similar concerns and identify a range of barriers to engaging with First Nations material. A fear of ‘doing it wrong’ is chief among them. What exactly is ‘it’?

Each guest who has been interviewed for this series has given ‘permission’ for non-Indigenous educators to teach texts by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at every stage. As Associate Professor Al Fricker has reminded us, there is simply not enough Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers available to teach each of these texts in every class around Australia. This is where non-First Nations educators must leverage their position and do this work (as allies, advocates, and comrades) for First Nations people.

Consider whether your colleagues or school leadership has the same level of concern or degree of handwringing when it comes to other texts. VATE’s member text survey reveals that texts such as *Animal Farm*, 1984, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Stasiland*, *Night*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Things Fall Apart* and many of Ray Bradbury’s short stories continue to be studied across Years 7–10 – many of which are political in their motivation and content and involve challenging material. Does this fear of ‘doing it wrong’ apply to these texts?

Heiss’ asserts: “...teachers are making choices about what they think their students should know”. In her [research](#), Dr Tamika Worrell highlights a “range of justifications relating to and accounting for a lack of effort or work being put into [teaching First Nations perspectives]” (p. 13). A summary of some excuses being used by the four teachers in her initial survey include:

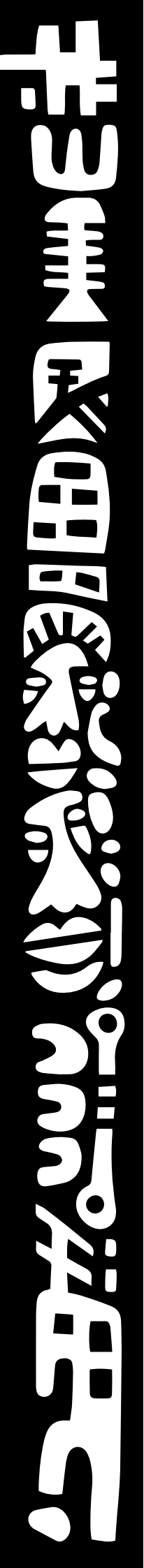
- Being “overly preoccupied with measures of compliance...at the expense of thinking beyond notions of content knowledge and mandated requirements” (p. 13).
- Emphasis on a need to select “light-hearted texts” (p. 10).
- Under-resourcing and funding in public schools that impact ability to purchase new novels for study and not seeking alternate ways to engage in the content.
- ‘Fear of doing the ‘wrong thing’ including fear of causing offence, “pushing the boundaries” and taking risks (p. 10).
- Using a “self-imposed barrier” of being non-Indigenous as a means to disengage from the work. “If teachers were only teaching texts which belonged to the dominant group...this would result in a furthering of the white Anglo male cannon” (p. 12).
- Fear of teaching students the wrong information. [Shipp](#) (2013) explains this could apply to any subject or topic that we teach but shouldn’t stop proactivity and engagement.
- Belief that there are no Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students in the class or community therefore they are not required to engage with this material.
- Use of a stand-alone unit or text as evidence of engagement with First Nations perspectives.
- The degree to which teachers engage in reflexive practice and remain open to changing their processes and thinking.
- Prioritising personal interest and picking something that can be taught ‘easily’ (comments from one teacher in Worrell’s study include: “I’ll pick something that I can teach easily, I’m not going to try and make my life harder” and “I’ll have a look in our bookroom and just pick whatever’s available” (p. 12)).
- Attributing a lack of preparation to teach this content through Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses as a barrier to engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives now.



Politics does not have to be unapproachable. The classroom should be a space where these discussions can take place and where students can engage in democratic discourse – and learn how to contribute to these kinds of discussions in their voting future. Politics is part of everything, even when we think it isn't. Students must learn to think critically about the world they live in and preparing students for democratic citizenship is one of the aims of education. The role of the teacher is not to indoctrinate or provide partisan commentary – but neutrality is a political choice. Choosing texts that are 'easy' to teach is a political choice. Choosing texts that present an inaccurate account of Australia's history is a political choice. Silencing particular characters or certain voices is a political choice.

I would invite you to review the list of 'justifications' (excuses) that Worrell has identified in her research above. If some of the items on the list resonate with you, sit with that discomfort and consider the ways in which you can make gradual changes in your practice to ensure you are putting in the effort when it comes to teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives. Assisting teachers to overcome their apprehension to teach First Nations perspectives is a key motivator in developing the *You Can Teach That* series. Its purpose is to meet educators where they are – and to assist in demonstrating tangible and practical ways that they can move forward with their responsibility to teach First Nations perspectives through subject English. If you need some guidance, you can email me.

It seems obvious to point out the deleterious impact of not including texts by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples on students in the classroom. Not only does it reflect a lack of diversity and inclusion, but the absence of stories by First Peoples reinforces the “great Australian silence”



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