

TEACHING FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES

You Can Teach That: The distinct voices and identities of Zenadth Kes/the Torres Strait

Samantha Faulkner

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](#))

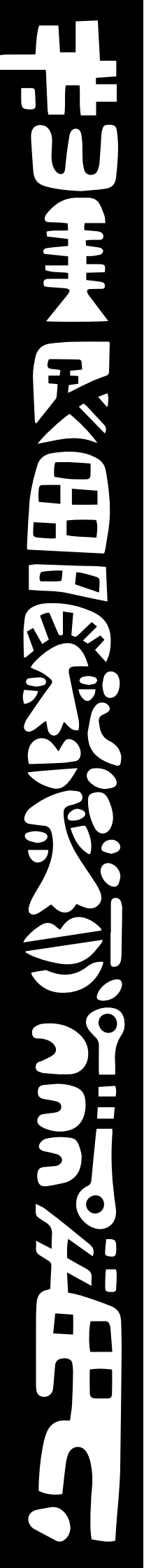
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-Curriculum Priority

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

Samantha Faulkner is a Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal woman, from Badu and Moa Islands in the Torres Strait and the Yadhaigana and Wuthathi peoples of Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Her poetry and short stories have been published nationally and internationally, and she is the proud author of *Life Blong Ali Drummond: A Life in the Torres Strait* (Aboriginal Studies Press, July 2007) and editor of *Pamle: Torres Strait Islanders in Canberra* (2018). She also is a member of the ACT Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Network, MARION (ACT Writers) and the treasurer of First Nations Australia Writers Network and Us Mob Writing Group. In 2023, she was the Torres Strait Islander curator for the Brisbane Writers Festival and in 2024, Faulkner edited the newest anthology from Black Inc.: *Growing Up Torres Strait Islander in Australia*.

In this interview for VATE’s *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* series, Faulkner shares stories from Zenadth Kes (the Torres Strait Islands) and explains the unique perspective that Torres Strait Islanders bring to their creative work.

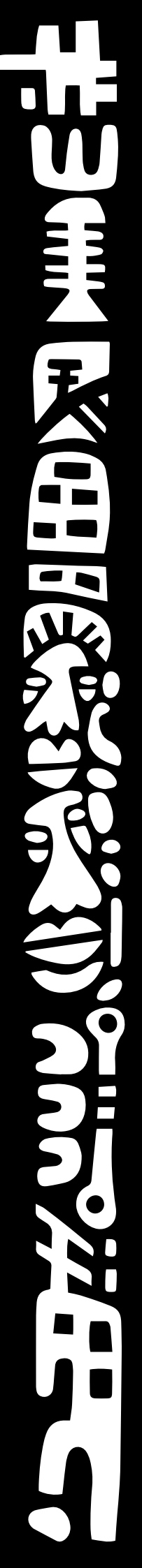
Key knowledge

- Geographic location of the Torres Strait
- Torres Strait Treaty
- Pearl shelling in Australia
- Climate change
- Native Title
- Coming of the Light and the London Missionary Society (1 July 1871)

Key concepts

- The influence and significance of the sea
- Cultural diversity
- Language and storytelling
- Song and dance

TIMESTAMP	KEY FOCUS
0:21 mins	What does ‘Zenadth Kes’ mean and what makes Zenadth Kes unique?
4:47 mins	What is the significance of the sea for Zenadth Kes peoples?
7:48 mins	Important historical developments in the Torres Strait
13:20 mins	Cultural diversity of the Zenadth Kes
18:17 mins	The Torres Strait Treaty and proximity to international neighbours
21:28 mins	Advice for selecting texts by Torres Strait islander peoples



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: Zenadth Kes

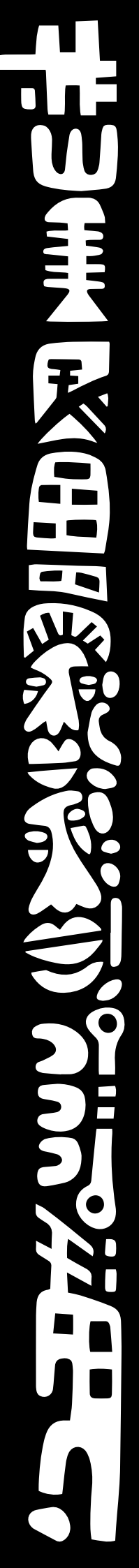
The Traditional Owners of Australia belong to two distinct cultural groups – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. There is no single Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity. Peoples from Zenadth Kes, or Torres Strait Islanders, are the Traditional Custodians of the more than 200 islands that lie between the northern tip of Cape York in Queensland and the south-west coast of Papua New Guinea. The islands can be divided into [five cultural \(island\) groups](#) that are represented by the white five-pointed star on the flag of Torres Strait Islander peoples:

- Top Western Group (Boigu, Dauan and Saibai)
- Near Western Group (Badu, Mabuiag and Moa)
- Central Group (Iama, Warraber, Poruma and Masig)
- Eastern Group (Mer, Ugar and Erub)
- Inner Island Group (Waibene, Ngurupai, Hammond, Price of Wales and Friday)
- There are also two Torres Strait Islander communities at Bamaga and Seisia in the Northern Peninsula Area of Queensland. Seisia is the most northern community on the Australian mainland.

'Zenadth Kes' is an alternative term for Torres Strait Islanders and is "used by Islanders who don't wish to use the colonial nomenclature of 'Torres Strait', but unlike specific clan names, it acknowledges all the groups in the region" (Lui and Nakata, 2024). In the [2021 census](#), 983,700 people identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. 4.0% of these respondents identified as Torres Strait Islander and 4.3% identified as both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. While colonisation has meant that many First Peoples live away from their Country, the majority of those who identify as Torres Strait Islander or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander live in Queensland. In Victoria, the number of people who identify as such is much smaller. A [population growth model](#) commissioned by the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) shows a 74% increase in the population of Victorian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in by 2037.

The [Victorian](#) and [Australian](#) curricula emphasises these two separate groups of First Peoples. It has become commonplace to conflate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures, knowledges and histories or to focus primarily on the stories, experiences and histories of First Peoples from mainland Australia. Torres Strait Islanders are a 'minority within a minority' with a unique way of being, knowing, thinking and doing that makes each of them distinct from other groups, including Aboriginal peoples.

'Zenadth Kes' is an alternative term for Torres Strait Islanders and is 'used by Islanders who don't wish to use the colonial nomenclature of 'Torres Strait'



According to the [2008 Native Title Report](#), “many Australians would be hard pushed to locate the [Torres Strait] region on a map” (2008, p. 232). If you find yourself lacking in knowledge about the histories, cultures, or experiences of Zenadth Kes, below is a list of programs that you could watch. English teachers know the power of storytelling to connect people. A number of these are available on SBS but you will need to create a free account in order to do so.

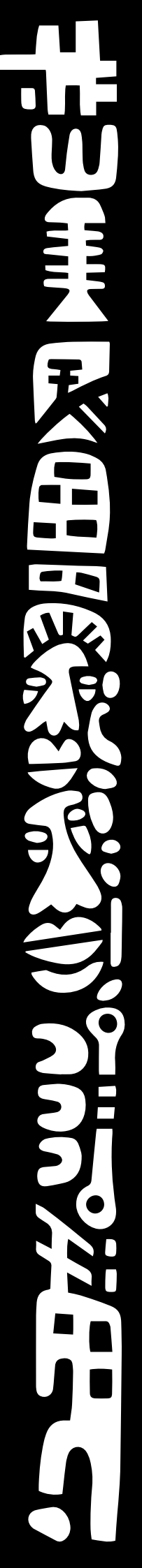
- A collection of [retellings of stories and songs](#) from the Torres Strait reclaimed by community members in language
- [Living Black](#) (2021, SBS) episode with Torres Strait Islander actor and television personality, Aaron Fa'aos
- [Away from Country](#) (2016, SBS) episode with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander basketball player Patty Mills
- [Singing Country](#) (2023, SBS) episode with Torres Strait Islander singer songwriter Jack Bani
- An interview with artist Gail Mabo for [One Plus One – The Elders](#) (2023, ABC)
- Black comedy television show [The Straits](#) (2012, ABC)
- Two episodes of [Little J and Big Cuz](#) (ABC) that are in Torres Strait Creole – ‘After the Storm’ and ‘School Sleepover’ (with subtitles)
- [Yarrabil: First Nations Songs](#) (2024, ABC) episode of the song ‘Kerkeri Wed’ sung by Ruth Ghee in English and Meriam Mir

In her interview, Faulkner talks about the significance of food and gathering in Torres Strait Islander culture. As Faulkner says, the multiculturalism of Zenadth Kes is reflected in the food that is shared in communities. Another way to increase your understanding of life in Zenadth Kes is to watch a documentary series centred around eating, cooking and celebrating! A good way to get a sense of the importance of food, and of the ways in which Torres Strait Islander peoples use the sea as “the supermarket”, as Faulkner says, is to watch these programs to observe their ways of life:

- [Strait to the Plate](#) (2021, SBS)
- [Torres Strait At Home](#) (2022, SBS)
- [Island Echoes with Nornie Bero](#) (2025, SBS)

Some of the important historical events in the Torres Strait Islands that Faulkner outlines in this interview include:

- The London Missionary Society and the [Coming of the Light](#) (1 July annually)
- Pearl diving including [pearl luggers](#) and [swim diving](#)
- [Eddie Koiki Mabo and the claim for native title](#)
- The [Torres Strait Treaty](#) (December 1978)



LAND LINKS: Sea Country

In December 2022, five First Nations groups – the Ankamuthi and Gudan Yadhaykenu, and the Kaurareg, Kulkalgal and Kemer Kemer Meriam people of the Torres Strait – were awarded native title over 40,000 square kilometres of Torres Strait Sea Country. Justice Deborah Mortimer of the Federal Court of Australia was so compelled by the evidence submitted as part of the claim that the decision was awarded without a trial. The evidence demonstrated a profound connection to and understanding of Sea Country, showcasing the way First Nations people spoke about the “waves crashing on the Great Barrier Reef and the sound they heard after that, the way they could navigate at night with the stars, the way they knew one reef from another reef (ABC, 2023). Mortimer acknowledged that the depth of knowledge held by Torres Strait Islander peoples “is something I think that is hard for outsiders [non-Indigenous people] to comprehend”.

Faulkner says of the sea, “it’s many things”. In this interview, she describes the sea as “the supermarket. It’s where you go for your food” and describes arriving to Ngurupai/Horn or Thursday/Waibene Island wharves to see fishermen trying to catch sardines. The sea is “a provider and it’s also a highway...it’s the road that allows people that accessibility to each island as well”. Over 90% of the Torres Strait area is the ocean (Nona, 2024), with ‘Sea Country’ being crucial to the Torres Strait Islander peoples’ “cultures, as it provides hunting and fishing resources for a subsistence-based livelihood, and is also an integral part of Islander identity, contributing to [their] spiritual and physical well-being” (Nona, 2024, p. 1).

Faulkner mentions the importance of song and dance in this interview, and the way in which experiences of Torres Strait Islander peoples find their way into song. She mentions songs and dances that reflect the relationships between the international neighbours of the Torres Strait, and the way that language, culture and connection is taught through song. ‘Taba Naba’ a song sung in the language of Meriam Mir that describes going out to the reef to fish. Here is a version by The Wiggles and Christine Anu (showing the accompanying sit-down dance) and a version by Jessie Lloyd and the Torres Strait Islander Songwomen. The ways in which the sea features prominently in Torres Strait Islander artwork can be seen in the creations by Kapua George Gutchen Snr and Segar Passi. As mentioned, many of the stories in *Growing Up Torres Strait Islander in Australia* centre around the sea. More about the ways in which Torres Strait culture is preserved through song can be read here.

Rising sea levels attributable to a lack of action on climate change by the Australian government means that Torres Strait Islander people inhabiting the islands could become Australia’s first climate refugees. In September 2022, the United Nations Human Rights Committee found that the Australian government had failed to “adequately protect indigenous Torres Strait Islanders against adverse impacts of climate change” and this had “violated their rights to enjoy their culture and be free from arbitrary interferences with their private life, family and home” (UNHRC, 2022). A summary of the complaint and the findings is available here. This is short clip by NITV outlines some of the ways that climate change is impacting Sea Country.

Below are some prompts to use when exploring the concept of Country with students:

- What does Country mean to you?
- What does Country mean to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- How do you connect to Country?
- What have you learned from Country?
- What is y/our responsibility to look after Country?

When broadening your students understanding of Country, consider the impacts of the below on Sea Country.

- Climate change
- Fish farms
- Tourism
- Exploitation
- Conservation efforts
- Management (good and poor)

DECONSTRUCT/RECONSTRUCT: Picture books as conversation starters

Faulkner provides a list of picture books and other short texts that can help to build awareness of Zenadth Kes stories, cultures and languages. Her suggestions include:

- [*Our Flag, Our Story*](#) by Bernard Namok Jr and Thomas Mayo with illustrations by Tori-Jay Mordey
- [*Bakir and Bi*](#) (e-book only, no longer in print) and [*Bid Buai, Dolphin People*](#) by Jillian Boyd-Bowie
- [*Kin Island*](#) by Terri Janke and Jaiki Pitt (part of the [*Yarning Strong*](#) series)
- [*First Australians: Plenty Stories*](#) published by Pearson, specifically [*Kaisiana's journey to the Torres Strait*](#) by Trish Albert
- [*Sam's Fishing Adventure*](#) by Monique Russell
- [*Wandihnu and the Old Dugong*](#) by Elizabeth and Wandihnu Wymarra with illustrations by Benjamin Hodges
- [*Children of the Torres Strait*](#) edited by Ron and Anne Edwards
- [*Gelam the Man from Moa*](#) by Anne Abednego Gela
- [*Mura Migi Kazika: For Us Little Mob*](#) by Alick Tipoti
- [*Aukam: The Woman Who Wove by the Light of the Moon*](#) by Belinda Kabai

Although picture books are usually targeted at children, they are great places to start with introducing context and themes. If you or your students are unfamiliar with stories from the Torres Strait Islands, this is a good starting point! Faulkner also recommends teachers to [Magabala Books](#), [AustLit](#), and the [teaching notes](#) for her anthology *Growing Up Torres Strait Islander in Australia*.

Avril Good's edition of [*Middle Ground*](#) on using picture books to develop visual literacy skills has a range of activities for ways in which you can use the style, tone and purpose of picture books to explore both the genre and theme. The resource includes a section on exploring picture books by First Nations authors (p. 9).

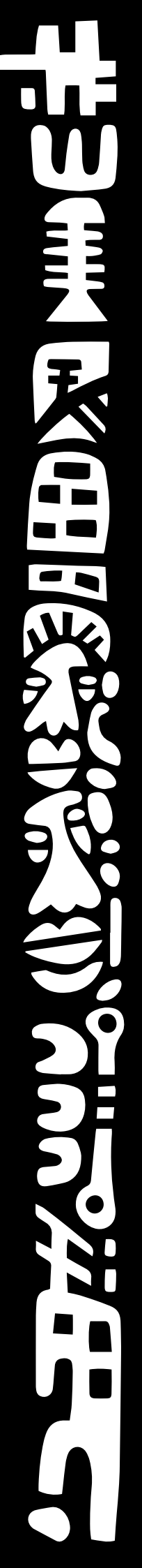
Use the picture books as a conversation starter.

- What is the story about?
- What is the theme of the story?
- What is happening in the story?
- How does the story connect to your knowledge about Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures and experiences?
- What have you learned from reading this story?
- How did the story make you feel?
- What was your favourite scene/illustration from the story?
- What do you think is the author's motivation for creating this work?
- Can you identify any language features or literary devices that you could explore with students who might read this book?

A quick Google search will bring up any number of questions for a book club style conversation – like these [Australia Reads book club prompts](#).

If you would like to introduce students to YA titles by Torres Strait Islander authors, this [article by Jasmin McGaughey](#) is a powerful reminder about the importance of representation and of sharing culture and heritage.

If you want to discuss the artwork and illustration in the picture books, it is worth exploring the impact of inauthentic Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 'style' art and craft. In 2017, the Standing Committee on Indigenous Affairs published its [final report](#) into this issue, with [Chapter 2](#) outlining the meaning of art in First Peoples cultures and its importance in celebrating and preserving history and culture. It is worth thinking about the impact of work that has been culturally appropriated or marketed as authentic when it isn't. In 2021, [Berlei Australia apologised](#) for selecting artwork by a non-First Nations artist which featured Aboriginal symbolism as the winner of a competition, and even now, a Belgian record label has been [accused of appropriating dot painting style artwork and language](#) of the Anangu people for a new record release. Here are some guidelines around [appreciating vs appropriating](#) First Nations artwork and [whether or not non-Indigenous people can create Aboriginal art](#).



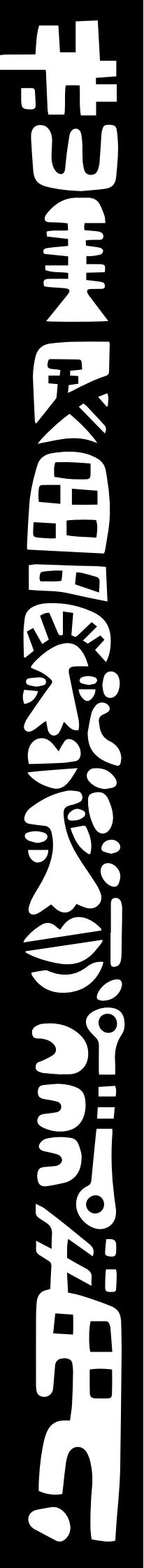
Creative Australia has [protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts](#) (including education) that encourages self-determination and outlines appropriate ways to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural material. As the guide states, “good faith, mutual respect and cultural values” are paramount in interactions with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The protocols also explain a little about Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights when it comes to both tangible and intangible ICIP including:

- Traditional knowledge
- Traditional cultural expression
- Performances
- Cultural objects (including arts, crafts, jewellery, weapons, tools, photographs etc)
- Human remains and tissue
- Secret and sacred material and information
- Documentation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' heritage in all forms of media.

The ICIP protocols are necessary as “artistic and creative expressions of ICIP are important ways of storytelling, transmitting knowledge, preserving, celebrating and expressing culture and languages, reclaiming and maintaining culture, as well as passing culture down to future generations and raising awareness about Indigenous issues” (Creative Australia, p. 7). Importantly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are “concerned that there seems to be no respect for their cultural knowledge, stories and other expression on the wider Australian landscape” (p. 8) especially when it comes to the right to “own and control representation and dissemination of their stories, knowledge and other cultural expression” (p. 8). This impacts the ways in which teachers share stories and invite discussion about the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The ICIP protocols include several helpful resources, including a checklist that can be adapted (or at least, considered) for use in the classroom. This ensures that the stories you are sharing are culturally appropriate and that sources of information you consult are properly acknowledged. The publication checklist (p. 171) for example, is helpful to VATE’s work in publishing these *You Can Teach That: Teaching First Nations Perspectives* resources. For all those people who reach out to us because they are struggling to find Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to connect with, this resource is incredibly valuable.



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