

## Reading Australia and Magabala Books: High quality literature and teaching units

Robyn Henderson, Wendy Bean, Carmel Turner and Jantiena Batt

For a long time, reading stories has played an important role in the ‘work’ of teachers. Over the years, the literature on offer for school children has changed and it now shows more diversity than previously. In recent years, the place of literature in the curriculum has been cemented in place. Literature is one of the three strands of the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2018), sitting beside Language and Literacy as an important part of the curriculum for all school students.

In previous years, teachers often had to design their own activities for using literature in classrooms, but today we are lucky to have a plethora of high quality literature available and a growing range of high quality resources. One source of these resources is the Reading Australia (2018) website, which was set up by the Copyright Agency, a not-for-profit organisation (see Copyright Agency, 2018). Its website offers a wide range of teaching units based on literature suitable for school students. Very obvious amongst these resources are books written and illustrated by a diverse group of authors and illustrators, including a wonderful selection from Magabala Books. Indeed, teachers are spoilt for choice in terms of what can be accessed from this website.

### Investigating the units on Magabala Books

Now in its fifth year, Reading Australia has more than 350 books, 95 essays and over 140 teaching resources for Australian teachers to access. In conjunction with Magabala Books (2018), it offers a growing number of teaching units celebrating Indigenous authors and illustrators. All units have direct links to the *Australian Curriculum: English* (ACARA, 2018) and the *NSW English K–10 Syllabus* (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2012). ALEA members have been involved in writing these units, which cover a range of relevant themes and curriculum content descriptors. The books ‘were chosen for their educational and literary value and appropriateness for different primary year levels’ (Edie Wright, Chairperson of Magabala Books; see Readings, 2017).

According to Wright, Magabala Books have given ‘people the opportunity to tell their own stories, to ensure that cultural protocols were observed’ (Readings, 2017). She also explained that the project with Reading Australia aimed to build shared understandings and respect around Indigenous issues and culture. The list of available units is growing and the units address important themes, such as loneliness, friendship, identity and belonging, the Stolen Generation, prejudice, home, family and country.

Foundation	<i>The Lizard Gang</i> (Kirra Somerville) <i>Scaly-tailed Possum and Echidna</i> (Cathy Goonack)
Year 1	<i>Two Mates</i> (Melanie Prewett) <i>Little Corroboree Frog</i> (Tracey Holton-Ramirez & Angela Ramirez)
Year 2	<i>Mrs White and the Red Desert</i> (Josie Boyle) <i>Mad Magpie</i> (Gregg Dreise)
Year 3	<i>Our World: Bardi Jaawi Life at Ardiyooloon</i> (One Arm Point Remote Community School) <i>Once There Was a Boy</i> (Dub Leffler)
Year 3/4	<i>Do Not Go Around the Edges</i> (Daisy Utemorrah)
Year 4	<i>Mrs Whitlam</i> (Bruce Pascoe)

	<i>Stolen Girl</i> (Trina Saffioti)
Year 5	<i>Girl from the Great Sandy Desert</i> (Jukuna Mona Chuguna & Pat Lowe)
	<i>Tjarany Roughtail</i> (Gracie Greene)
	<i>Free Diving</i> (Lorrae Coffin)
Year 6	<i>Alfred's War</i> (Rachel Bin Salleh)
	<i>Fog a Dox</i> (Bruce Pascoe)

The teaching activities in each unit have direct links to the Australian Curriculum and the NSW K–10 Syllabus, as well as the General Capabilities and Cross-curriculum Priorities of the Australian Curriculum. Some preliminary information about each book is presented, along with information about author/s and illustrator/s. On the website, each unit is framed around a four-step process that involves Literature, Responding, Examining and Creating, and the content is organised under a set of major headings. Rich assessment tasks are provided for sections 1–4.

1. Connecting to prior knowledge;
2. Responding to the text;
3. Examining text structure and organisation;
4. Creating
5. More resources.

### **Units written by Carmel Turner**

Carmel Turner explains that the units she has written ‘give teachers a rich resource to enhance their programs, especially when focusing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’. Magabala Books describes *Stolen Girl*, written by Trina Saffioti and illustrated by Norma MacDonald, as:

A fictionalised account of the Stolen Generation that tells of an Aboriginal girl taken from her family by the government and sent to a children’s home. She sings and dreams of her mother and the life they once shared but each morning is woken by the bell to the harsh reality of the children’s home. Finally, one day she unlocks the door and takes her first step toward home.

Carmel explains her thinking as she wrote the unit:

When writing *for Stolen Girl*, the aim was to create an understanding of home, self and belonging. By creating this understanding, the facts and history of the Stolen Generation are magnified as the book focuses on the disruption of family and place. The outcomes of the Australian Curriculum: English and the NSW English Syllabus are applied throughout the unit, offering a true integration of History and English.

INSERT COVER OF STOLEN GIRL APPROXIMATELY HERE

*Once There was a Boy* was written and illustrated by Dub Leffler. The publisher describes the book as ‘the whimsical story of a little boy with a broken heart who meets a young girl who shares his secret’. The story is identified as a ‘timeless and elegant tale ... transformed into a beautiful grown-up story by the use of subtle analogies, such as the use of sapotes as forbidden fruit’. Carmel explains that her intent was:

to emphasise the themes of relationships, forgiveness and friendship, while addressing the content of the Australian Curriculum: English. Again, this unit is an integration of History and English. The narrative is told in an allegorical form which models this form of writing for the students to explore and to understand why it is used by authors.

INSERT COVER OF ONCE THERE WAS A BOY APPROXIMATELY HERE

*Do Not Go Around the Edges* was written by Daisy Utemorrah and illustrated by Pat Torres. As Magabala Books explains, the author's own story is included in the text: 'Daisy's life story runs along the bottom of the pages: how she was born on a mission, schooled, introduced to Christianity, started writing and what she does now. The poems and illustrations on each page often relate to her life story.' Carmel reiterates that this book is:

a unique text which offers art, poetry and biography. It is a wonderful vehicle to introduce intercultural understanding, along with the power of story and creative thinking. The unit was written with an emphasis on story and the importance of telling our story to coming generations. As part of the unit, students are given an opportunity to compare their life with Daisy's life. An important teaching focus is to give students a scaffold to develop the skills of writing poetry. This is integrated into the unit with the appropriate references to the Australian Curriculum: English.

INSERT COVER OF DO NOT GO AROUND THE EDGES APPROXIMATELY HERE

### **A unit by Jantiena Batt**

*The Lizard Gang* was written by Kirra Somerville when she was nine years and illustrated by Grace Fielding. Jantiena Batt has written several teaching units for Magabala Books, including this one. She explains:

When writing the units of work, my intent was to weave Indigenous culture and perspectives into learning sequences that honoured personal histories, beliefs and values. Thinking back to my own early reading experiences with stories that stayed with me throughout my youth, and now my teaching career, I realised that our consciousness is forever changed when we acknowledge and respect each other's perspectives and ways of seeing the world. This is where we can connect, grow and learn.

INSERT THE COVER OF THE LIZARD GANG APPROXIMATELY HERE

As Magabala Books states, *The Lizard Gang* is about 'a spirited gang of monitor lizards who are constantly trying to outdo each other'. The lizards 'live deep in the Australian bush and are forced to learn the real meaning of teamwork when they have to band together to escape a raging flood'. In the teaching unit, Jantiena uses the idea of teamwork when she proposes a finger puppet activity. This has students working together to compose a script and it requires them to think about characters' traits affecting teamwork. As Jantiena explains:

*The Lizard Gang* focuses on teamwork, bravery and friendship, so the learning experiences were planned to explore these attributes. Learning to accept and reconcile differences, face adversity and move forward together are concepts that allow students to pose questions and seek answers. By focussing on recording 'wonderings'

throughout the process, students are supported to articulate their own beliefs while hearing from others. Having the opportunity to grapple with shared information allows perspectives to be considered and challenged over time. This is a lifelong skill that students will transfer to all learning areas. Ensuring that viewpoints are valued is essential, with just the right amount of nurturing and nudging! *The Lizard Gang* provides an environment that is supportive and safe to do so.

### **Conclusion**

We recommend that you check out the Reading Australia website, which contains a large number of teaching resources. We have talked about the teaching units on Magabala Books. Detailed information about the books, along with the units, can be found from the ‘primary’ tab. However, more is on offer via the secondary, tertiary, essays, books, authors, and teachers’ corner tabs. Go to <https://readingaustralia.com.au/about/> or scan the QR code with your mobile phone.

INSERT QR CODE HERE

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**Carmel Turner** and **Jantiena Batt** have both authored units for the Reading Australia website. Carmel has spent over 30 years in primary schools and now works at the Australian Catholic University. She is passionate about the teaching of literature and is researching the use of postmodern picture books in the development of critical literacy. Jantiena is the deputy principal at Maribyrnong Primary School in the ACT and is passionate about quality literacy practices in the early years and whole school practices. She is the current president of the ALEA Local Council and has been a member of ALEA since graduating from university.