

The Barrumbi Kids

by Leonie Norrington

Teachers' Notes

The Barrumbi Kids brilliantly captures the paradoxes of life in the rural north of Australia, showing with honesty and humour the complexities of cross-cultural living. Leonie Norrington says that she was motivated to write for children because she wanted her grandson "to know that Aboriginal and white people can live together despite their different cultures."

The following notes are designed to assist the classroom teacher in communicating and exploring some of the rich themes and ideas contained in the novel. It is by no means implied that you should work through all of the exercises, notes and discussions found here, but that you select and use those suited to make-up and level of your class.

Pre-reading Activities:

1. Look at a local Indigenous Community and discuss:

- What skin groups live there?
- What language(s) are spoken?
- How abundant is the local bush tucker and what foods are available?
- How does the community interact with the nearest urban centre?

Try to source a local person who has spent time on the community, and have them share their knowledge with the class.

2. Familiarise your class with the meaning of "Dreaming" and "Dream-time" stories, and the link between these and the Aboriginal art your students see around your locality. You may find you have some experts in your class, especially among your Indigenous students. If so, encourage them to teach the class about their own experiences and to share the stories they know.

3. There are also some good resources on the Internet. Try the following sites:

<http://www.dreamtime.net.au/dreaming/storylist.htm> (This is an Australian Museum Website. You will require an up-to date version of Real Player to hear stories, but the site also features accurate and comprehensive written information)

<http://www.abc.net.au/southeastsa/stories/s1530069.htm> (This site focuses on South Australian stories).

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<http://www.teachers.ash.org.au/jmresources/dreaming/stories.html> (Contains lesson plans for teaching dreamtime stories, based on the ‘thinking hats’ model.)

Beginning to Read

- The cover of the novel features elements of Aboriginal art, but these are combined with other styles. Ask students to predict what the novel may be about: ask them to ‘judge the book by its cover!’
- Look at the map of the Long Hole community: how is it similar and different to the town or city students live in?

Chapter 1: ‘Wagging’

The author immediately creates atmosphere in this chapter: the vivid description of the dry season breeze, personified as it enters the classroom to ‘tickle [Dale’s] hair’, and the aromatic depiction of the ‘yeasty scent of dry spear grass’ which distracts Dale from his studies.

The character of Gordon Armstrong is introduced here (p. 2) and we immediately understand what type of person he is – a bully who ingratiates himself with his teacher at the same time as getting others into trouble. Dale has a particular reason for disliking Gordon: his father has just taken the position of station manager above Dale’s father, who was previously in charge. Neither Dale’s family or the Armstrongs are Indigenous.

Discuss:

- How Dale might be feeling about these new residents
- Why Gordon might be acting as he does

Chapter 2: ‘Burn –off Time’

The third person omniscient narrator moves here to Tomias’s point of view, and we find out why he is not quick to wag with Dale: he’s afraid of the consequences. Norrington uses Tomias’s musings to explore Dale’s family structure, and further develop Dale’s character while he reveals his own.

Miss Wilson expresses her reservations about the deliberately started bushfires, highlighting the differences in cultural points of view.

Write:

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- Do you agree with Miss Wilson's point of view concerning bushfires or do you have a different point of view? Research the effects of bushfire in the library and on the Internet. Write at least two paragraphs explaining your opinion.

Chapter 3: 'Keep 'ee' off' & Chapter 4 'The Fire Sticks'

The relationship between Gordon and the others is further explored, and we find that Mrs Armstrong, Gordon's mother, has tried to foster a friendship between Gordon and Dale, to the exclusion of the other kids in the community. Dale's mother is not colluding with the exclusion of the other kids, saying "they just don't come in ones around here."(pg19) There is a sense that she is trying to educate Gordon's mother about the way things are on a community, but as Mrs Armstrong leaves, we are aware that she would rather Gordon was kept separate from most of the other kids, than attempt to encourage him to join with them.

Tomias and Dale sneak out of school to spend the day in the bush, and its charms are explored from their points of view. Some tensions in their friendship are delicately exposed here and provide opportunities for readers to connect their own experiences with those in the book.

Discuss:

- In Ch. 3, what do you think Mrs Armstrong is afraid of in letting Gordon play with the other kids? Is she right to be worried?
- Do you think her actions and attitudes are helping Gordon?
- When Tomias and Dale are in the bush, Tomias seems frustrated with Dale: why might this be?
- The boys may not be in school, but what important lesson do they learn in chapter four?
- What techniques does the author use to create tension in this chapter?

Write:

- Describe a time when you did something you shouldn't have. How did you feel? Were you ever caught out?
- Have you ever been confused by negative feelings about someone who is meant to be a friend? Describe your experience – you can leave names out or change them if you like.

Chapter 5: 'Cleaning Up the Country' & Chapter 6 'A Circle of Fire'

The effect of the changing seasons on the community is the focus of this chapter. Clearly, there is no attempt to influence nature, rather the recognition that it dictates the daily activities of the women who live there. There is an easy relationship between Lucy and the Indigenous women, who speak in language to each other, except when she is present and would not understand.

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Mrs Armstrong (always referred to as Mrs rather than by her first name) is shown to be isolated once again in her 'Health and Hygiene' initiative. She has approached Lucy as a 'go between' more, we suspect because of the colour of her skin rather than anything else. Lucy's discomfiture at being allocated this role is clear: she has grown up in the community, and does not share Mrs Armstrong's obvious distaste for the 'dirty' community kids.

The women have deliberately set fires to flush out animals for food, and are at ease with its presence. Tomias and Dale, though, are in the wrong place at the wrong time and have a different view.

Discuss:

- The notion of narrative perspective. The events in both chapters are the uses and dangers of fire. However, it is seen quite differently from the point of view of the women and children and the point of view of Dale and Tomias.
- Tomias is concerned about more than the immediate danger, and is torn between survival and 'losing face' in front of the women. Dale does not share his fear. Why might this be?
- How important is the influence of ancestors in this chapter?

Active Task:

- Ask students to form two lines, facing each other. The lines have opposing views about the use of fire. Students put their views and reasons to the person opposite them in the lines.

Chapter 7: 'Bodies in a Circle'

Here, the third person narrator uses a hawk's point of view to describe the burning scene below. This is a clever narrative device as it allows the reader to 'see' the whole scene, from what is happening to small creatures, Tomias and Dale to the reactions of the women and children. Today, we often describe this as a 'helicopter view'. It also gives the reader some insight into the way a hawk might think when presented with an opportunity to gather food. This chapter also presents a chance to introduce or reinforce the concept of anthropomorphism, where animals are accorded human characteristics. The anthropomorphism here echoes that in previous chapters and highlights the close relationship between animals and humans in the community, and the respect accorded to animals by those who hunt them.

The impact of the fire on the whole community is also shown: Mrs Wilson has her fire hose out and Mr Armstrong has the fire truck out, though, as we find out later, there was no need for it. It is clearly seen that the community is a whole organism, rather than just a disparate collection of people.

Group Task:

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- In groups of no more than four, imagine you are an animal from your neighbourhood. From this animal's point of view, describe what might be happening either in your school at this moment, or in a place well-known to all members of the group. You may choose to identify different roles for each member of the group: one could concentrate on smells, another on sights, sounds, feelings and tastes, another on what is actually taking place and so on. How you divide roles depends upon the abilities of your animal and the location you choose.

Chapter 9: 'A Good Grounding'

The boys escape a flogging from Lucy and Mavis, but are made to stay at home and work around the house for the rest of the term. The hiatus has the effect of drawing them closer to Lucy, who teaches them about how to manage anger and about the significance of every experience that makes them individuals. They help her on the property and observe the circle of life taking place around them. The suggestion here is that the boys, having had the time to reflect on their near-deaths in the fire, and on the preciousness of life, have matured somewhat, though after weeks of working, they both wish that they had gone for a flogging – it would have been over a lot sooner, and the bush is calling them.

Chapter 10: 'The Essay Competition'

The boys must write an essay for a competition. Gordon predictably produces thirteen pages in no time, and Dale begins his with help from Lizzie. Tomias's research for 'Fire in the Savannah' is mostly from his relatives: it is real, practical and part of the preparation for his initiation into manhood the following year. Unlike Dale and Gordon, Tomias is reluctant to research in books: he took one home once and loved it so much it was returned dog-eared and with teeth marks in it. Tomias had in fact, loved the book as books should be loved, but got into trouble for returning it in such an obviously 'read' condition. Norrington here highlights the differences in cultures: one so practical, the other somewhat theoretical, and shows the irony present in one culture's assumptions about another.

Tomias's thoughts are unlocked when his cousin Reuben spends some time helping him write his essay: the realisation that he can use words from his first language to describe things breaks through the dam in his head. Tomias has previously resented Rueben for being good at school work, until Rueben points to his own ancestry (Chinese) to explain why he can remember things so easily. Tomias accepts this explanation without a second thought.

Discuss:

- Do some cultures have specific natural ability in some areas, or is it the importance placed on specific skills that encourages members of those cultures to develop certain skills?
- What particular thing that Rueben does really helps Tomias?
- Predict whose essay might win the competition, and suggest reasons why.

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Chapter 11 'The Prize'

Tomias wins the prize for the best essay, but the old people are really interested in Gordon's, as his is about Victoria, and mentions things they have no knowledge of. As they look at his work, Gordon's speech mimics the patterns of the Indigenous elders: the first sign he is interested in communicating properly with members of the community (pg 77). Gordon's father suggests that Tomias's win is a result of 'positive discrimination' (pg 78), which reveals so much about his opinion of Indigenous people, as he describes them as being 'less able', while his son is bracketed with 'normal' children...

Task:

- Find out what 'positive discrimination' is. Draw a table with two columns: one column for listing all the things you think are right with it, the other for all the things you think are wrong with it. Which column is longer?

Chapter 12 'Smoke on the River' & Chapter 13 'The Lure'

It's the school holidays and Tomias wakes Dale to see real smoke drifting over the river. Tomias's brother Rex is already there fishing, and he looks magnificent as he skilfully casts his hand-line. Tomias claims him as his brother, and Dale, similarly moved, claims him as his 'cousin-brother'. It's as if some of Rex's magnificence is theirs by association – reflected glory, just as earlier, Rueben's mother claimed Tomias as Rueben's cousin, when Tomias won the essay prize.

The children begging to fish: copying Rex. We discover that Dale has brought one of his father's lures, which is strictly forbidden. The scene is peaceful, almost idyllic, as Lizzie practices language words with Mavis.

Dale, having earlier managed his anger in front of Gordon (who has since been seen hanging around by himself), is eaten up with jealousy about the huge Barramundi Gordon had caught with a fishing rod. It is this jealousy that led to the stealing of his father's lure and which then leads to the situation in Chapter 14.

Chapter 14: 'The Paperbark Raft'

Jimmy has cast the lure and it's stuck in a tree on the opposite bank of the river. They make a raft from paperbark, and Lizzie tries it out. She is warned about 'ginga' (crocodiles) by Mavis. She gets the lure but is pursued by the croc in a fast-paced episode.

Task:

- Read the chapter again: how does Norrington create tension? Look for at least two techniques.

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Chapter 15: 'Properly Sad' & Chapter 16: 'Mrs Armstrong'

Rex, Tomias and Dale go off to hunt, and Jimmy, Mavis, Lizzie and baby Alfred are sitting by the fire when Gordon comes towards them. Mavis observes that he seems 'properly sad' (pg 109). Jimmy half-recalls a conversation concerning Gordon's family between his parents, but he does not remember what they said.

The reason comes to light in chapter sixteen, where we discover that Gordon is being made to do schoolwork during the holidays, and is not allowed to use his computer. It transpires that his mother is eaten up by the fact that Tomias beat him in the essay competition. As Jimmy speaks with him, and shows him his baby wallaby, Gordon brightens, glad of a friend. This ends abruptly with the arrival of his mother.

Mrs Armstrong has rediscovered a passion for teaching –Gordon- and we glimpse her life as it was before the community: ordered, neat, and, we suspect, predictable. It emerges that she tried to make her community house look like the one she left in Melbourne: she bought the same plants and tried to make them grow: a poignant gesture that highlights her inability to adapt to a different environment. It's clearer than ever that she hates community life, and fears that her precious son Gordon will be 'infected' by it.

Chapter 17: 'A Plan for Gordon'

Gordon continues to be taught by his mother at school. Jimmy, worried by this, devises a plan to help him. Gordon suggests that when he is Chief Minister, he will give some land to Jimmy (pg 125). Jimmy is confused by this – his family and the other families in the community already own the land don't they?

Find Out:

- What are land rights and native title? Who has them in Australia? When and how were they formalised?
- Write a brief biography of a person who was important in having the Australian Government recognise the rights of Indigenous people in Australia.
- Name the only state in Australia that doesn't have a land rights agreement.

The following websites are useful and have links to further information:

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http://www.dfat.gov.au/facts/indg_landrights.html

<http://indigenoustralia.frogandtoad.com.au/land3.html> (This site is written by Indigenous people.)

<http://www.abc.net.au/messageclub/duknow/stories/s888144.htm>

These sites could form a basis for further English or Social Education work, depending on your timeline.

Chapter 18: 'Gordon Goes Feral'

Jimmy's plan – to give a snake to Gordon so he can frighten his mother- seems to be working. Mrs Armstrong is so frightened and disgusted, she takes Gordon out of the school that day. Gordon gets his wish: he goes to a boarding school. Mrs Armstrong buys an air conditioner, and Dale's mum says being in her house is 'like being in a hospital' (pg 133).

Discuss:

- If Mrs Armstrong's house is like a hospital: what does that suggest about her? Is she sick?

Write:

- Pretend you are a member of the community. Write a letter or e-mail to an interstate friend, describing Mrs Armstrong. Say what you really think of her behaviour.

Chapter 19: 'Top of the School'

The weather is changing, reflecting the changes that are happening to the boys. The end of the dry season, just before the monsoonal rains – the wet – is called 'the build-up'. The air is heavy with moisture and perspiration cannot evaporate. Commonly, residents of the NT overheat and are enervated by this weather. The local description for the bad tempers of children and adults alike is that they've 'gone troppo'.

The kids plan a swimming excursion, and realise that Miss Wilson won't let them go unless there is someone to 'show culture'. They decide to ask Caroleena. This chapter is particularly useful for the study of language.

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Discuss:

- Look closely at the speech in this chapter (particularly Caroleena's). How is it different from Standard Australian English?
- Try to write the exchange between Caroleena and the kids using Standard Australian English. Is it believable?
- How important is it for an author to accurately reproduce the features of speech? What would happen to the effect of this and other stories if all the characters spoke the same way?
- What words are used only between certain groups in your area? Do children and teenagers speak differently to adults? Why or why not?

Chapter 20: 'The Council Meeting'

Dale's father takes the idea of a camp to the council, and faces opposition from Mr Armstrong, who doesn't want him to take the truck out of the community. The real reason for his ire is that he thinks the kids don't deserve the excursion. He is ignoring the effect of the climate and is ignorant of the educational value of the trip.

When Caroleena hears the trip is cancelled, she is extremely upset. She has seen 'Aldjurlum' (a dust-devil, or mini tornado), and traditionally these have a message for the observer. It is telling her that Barrumbi, a place of deep spiritual significance, is calling. The kids are not aware of her plans, and just want to swim and fish. Caroleena tells Sandy, a member of the council, that the trip is going ahead: she speaks in language so Dale's dad cannot understand. Resentment of the Armstrongs builds further.

Chapter 21 'The Chook Farm' & Chapter 22 'The Blood Pit'

It transpires that the kids used to be allowed to play with the chickens in the cool, wet chicken shed during the worst of the weather, but Mr Armstrong has stopped this. One afternoon, they see him leave the farm, and decide they need the shade of the trees and the cool interior of the shed.

The kids are shocked to see the chickens penned: they used to be allowed to walk around, but now their claws grow around the cages. This doesn't make sense to the kids: the previous manager had encouraged the chickens to range near the mulberry trees: the chickens liked the trees and the trees enjoyed the manure the chickens produced. Again, Armstrong's ignorance of the rhythms of the land is shown starkly, and the reader fully understands what the children do next...

Armstrong comes back to find the cage doors open and instructs his men to look for intruders: one of the men sees Lizzie and Jimmy, but he says nothing. In a slapstick scene, Armstrong

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chases little Jimmy and ends up in the 'blood-pit' which contains all the entrails, blood and feathers of the chickens which have been killed. As his workers stand and laugh at him, the end is signalled for Armstrong.

Tasks:

- Draw or paint your impression of the scene at the end of chapter 22.
- With a partner, discuss why the workers did not tell Armstrong about Lizzie and Jimmy when they saw them.

Chapter 23 'Keeping the Eggs'

Jimmy joins the others at the spring. Before he can see them, he hears them talking animatedly about his taunting of Armstrong and the speed with which he took off. He realises that for the first time, he is a hero among them. Armstrong says he is going to resign: the kids have won!

Chapter 24 'And School is Over'

The community can use the dinghy again and there is much relief at the departure of the Armstrongs: order has been restored. Dale's older brother and sister come back from school for the holidays. Dale's father decides the excursion is back on! Caroleena is going to take them to Barrumbi, but doesn't mention this to the kids or their parents. Dale's first clue is when he realises they are not on the right route to Black Bull Yard...

Barrumbi is a place of ceremony, and elders accompany them on this special trip. Dale's father realises the significance of the trip, and acquiesces to Caroleena's wishes.

Write:

- The story has nearly ended, for now. Write your own ending without reading any further.

Chapter 25 'Barrumbi' & Chapter 26 'Calling for Rain'

Caroleena introduces the kids to the land at Barrumbi: their land. Dale is unimpressed until he sees the water and plunges in. He is affected by the atmosphere of the place, and recognises himself as part of it. It isn't what he expected: it's much better. Dale, helped by Lizzie, conquers his own fear of diving from a high place: another milestone on his way to adulthood. As he surfaces, he feels the love of his family around him and is elated by the whole experience.

As night falls, Caroleena speaks of a spirit with 'long teeth' and 'red eye' who might them if they venture from the camp at night. The caution is effective – the kids shrink under their blankets. The next morning he goes climbing the rocks with Tomias. They look into a pool of water and see 'one black face and one white face, but the same' (pg 185). This poignant note binds them as they face a disaster: the elders' call for rain is answered, and the boys lose their

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way back to camp. The nature that had seemed so benign the night before was now threatening and frightening. The boys run for cover and find themselves in a small cave with rock paintings intermittently visible in the lightning. It disappears, and the boys realise they have experienced something spiritual: the visit of an ancestor. When they come to leave: Dale is awestruck that they had ever got in through a tiny opening – that too is inexplicable in the physical world.

Chapter 27 'The End'

The boys recognise their own community from a high vantage point at Barrumbi. They see it objectively for the first time, and recognise their place within it. The thought of leaving it, and of the changes they will inevitably find when they return is too much, and the novel ends with the sombre mood broken as the boys throw themselves into the water.

Major Assignments

The people

- In what ways does *The Barrumbi Kids* show that people of different races can live together in harmony?
- In what ways does it show differences between Aboriginal people and white people? Think about how the manager Mr Armstrong relates to the working men, or how Mrs Armstrong regards the Long Hole residents.
- Are the relationships between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children living at Long Hole different from the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal adults? If so, how? And why?
- Think about Miss Wilson, the schoolteacher. What is her attitude to Long Hole and the children she teaches? Compare her way of teaching with the way Mavis teaches the children language.

The country

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In a sense the land is yet another character in the story. For many thousands of years things like topography and climate have governed the way Aboriginal people live.

- How do the seasons affect people's lives?
- Do non-Aboriginal people react to extremes of climate in ways that are different from the Aboriginal people? Fire plays an important part in the story of *The Barrumbi Kids*. Describe the importance of seasonal burning off - "cleaning up the country". Why do non-Aboriginal people (e.g. Mr Armstrong, Miss Wilson) view this in a different light from the way the Aboriginal people see it? Who do you think is right?
- Talk about "bush tucker". List all the foods mentioned in the book. Some of these are also delicacies to non-Aboriginal people; others are not. Why? Why might non-Aboriginal people be unsure about eating flying fox, for example?
- Talk about the incident where Rex shoots a mother wallaby and Dale finds and keeps the joey, giving it to Jimmy as a pet. What are the ethics involved here?

Culture

One of the most striking things about this novel is its deep grounding in Aboriginal spirituality. Leonie Norrington says: "I have been influenced by two forms of spirituality. My mum's brand of Irish Catholicism, with its emphasis on the magic of the world and the spiritual way of being in it; and ... strict Aboriginal spirituality, with its rigid rules and laws. We all grew up with great respect for the spirits of the land and sacred places."

- Show how the Aboriginal people's deep beliefs dictate how they behave and how they live their lives. Talk about (a) Caroleena; (b) the old woman who teaches the children about the stars (Chapter 11); (c) the old men from Bottom Camp. Do you think their beliefs will continue into the next century? Why, or why not?
- Discuss the importance of the land and the concept of people belonging to land and being responsible for it. Talk about the meaning of the place called Barrumbi.
- Why do you think this novel is called *The Barrumbi Kids*?

Style

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Leonie Norrington's style is extremely accessible but also very rich and complex. Discuss some of the elements of her writing that make this such an interesting and involving book.

- The descriptions of people and places are particularly vivid. Look at the use of sensory images that help the reader to visualise exactly what is being described. Think of heat, water, vegetation, fire, storm, sky, and rock.
- The story is told largely from the children's point of view - usually Dale's. Look at the language and see where the grammar and expressions reveal this. How different might the story have been if it were told purely from the author's point of view?
- Look at the ways in which the story gains immediacy e.g. the use of the present tense, and the use of "stream-of-consciousness".
- Much of Leonie Norrington's writing is lyrically beautiful. Find some passages that seem especially appealing - very often these will be descriptions of the natural world - and analyse their appeal.