

CROC BAIT

Written by Leonie Norrington

Illustrated by Beth Norling

A Solo fiction title

About the author

Leonie Norrington was born in the old Darwin Hospital in 1957, the oldest girl in an Irish-Catholic family of nine. When she was still very small the family moved to the Aboriginal community of Barunga, south of Katherine. They lived there for ten years while her father was the mechanic there and her mother taught at the pre-school.

Leonie and her brothers and sisters grew up among traditional Aboriginal people. They were looked after by Claire, who taught them Aboriginal culture, and spent a lot of their time in the bush with her, and in the Aboriginal camps. They spoke Aboriginal English and Kriol, although their mother made them speak "properly" at home.

Leonie went to high school in Darwin. She left school to become a hairdresser, and married at seventeen. When she was in her thirties and the mother of three sons, she went back to school at Humpty Doo and completed Year 12. After matriculating she did a journalism degree at the Northern Territory University. Leonie's first book for children was *The Barrumbi Kids*, a novel about the lives of Aboriginal and white children living in an Aboriginal community together. It is based on her own life and experiences, and its vivid writing and authenticity have gained it glowing reviews and a Children's Book Council of Australia award (Honour Book, Book of the Year: Younger Readers, 2003). A sequel, *Spirit of Barrumbi*, was published in 2003 and was short-listed in the 2004 Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature.

About the illustrator

Beth Norling was born in Sydney to artist parents in 1969, and was encouraged to draw seriously from an early age. She studied art for a year at TAFE, and at the age of nineteen she moved to the Blue Mountains and began illustrating for a

graphic arts company, G-Raffix. Now working as a freelancer, she produces a wide range of work, from children's picture books to illustrations for gardening magazines.

Beth's talent has been recognised with several awards. She won a Rexell Derwent drawing prize at the age of sixteen, and in 1992 she was given a Queen Elizabeth Silver Jubilee Trust Award and grant to help her set up her own illustration studio. In 1993 she was a finalist in the Australian Young Achievers Award for art, and in 1995 she received a grant from the Literature Board to write and illustrate a children's picture book, *The Stone Baby*. Most recently she won the Ena Noel Award for her work in *Cherryblossom and the Golden Bear*.

In 1997 Beth illustrated her first Omnibus Solo (*The Best Pet*), following this with another in 1998 (*Watch Out, William!*). Her first picture book for Omnibus, the beautiful *Cherryblossom and the Golden Bear*, was published by Omnibus in 2000, and her next, which she also wrote (*Little School*), in 2001. *The Stone Baby* (Lothian) was published in 2002.

Beth lives at Leura in the Blue Mountains with her husband Joss and their two young children, Indigo and Juno.

Croc Bait

Croc Bait has special significance within the Solo range because it is the only Solo fiction story -- in a list of 44 titles -- to be placed in a recognisably Australian setting. In fact, it can be placed very accurately, because in her author essay at the back of the book Leonie identifies the setting as Black Bull Yard, a well-known fishing spot on the Daly River.

It tells the story of Sean, a little Aboriginal boy who loves camping and fishing with his extended family, including his two uncles, Uncle Spook and Uncle Whistler. He'd love to go night fishing and croc hunting with the grown-ups, but is always told that he's too small. ("A croc could eat a little thing like you in one mouthful", says his dad.) Sean must be content with lying in his tent and trying to see his father and his uncles working their fishing lines and yabby pots. "But all he could see was the spotlight shining up the trees and across the water."

Early one morning Sean takes things into his own hands. All alone, he sneaks out of the tent and down the river to check the fishing lines. A line tied to a big old fallen tree is moving round and round in the water. It's a fish! Excited, Sean walks out along the tree to pull it in. But unknown to him, he's being watched too. A cold, sleepy crocodile has his eye on the "warm, fat little human" perched on the tree above him.

Luckily Uncle Spook comes to Sean's rescue with his spear-gun, and the two make a pact not to tell Mum and Dad. Out of it all Sean finally has a nickname, just like Uncle Whistler and Uncle Spook. It's Croc Bait. But only Sean and Uncle Spook know the story behind it!

Croc Bait has personal significance for Leonie Norrington, and not only because

its setting is a place she knows well. For many years she and her family have gone fishing and camping just like the characters in the story, and she says that she wrote the story "because I remember camping with my son when he was little". Some of the characters are also named for members of her family -- Spook and Whistler are nicknames for two of her brothers -- and her beloved first-born grandson, to whom *Croc Bait* is dedicated, is named Sean.

Notes for teachers

Croc Bait has immediate appeal. It is an exciting story about averting a crocodile attack; it is set in the Northern Territory, a place that immediately evokes visions of wildlife and adventure (many children will have a particular interest in crocodiles, with their fearsome reputation); it is a potent cautionary tale about the perils of setting off alone in wild country; it underlines the support and affection that exist within an extended family; and it gives us a glimpse of an Aboriginal family group for whom hunting and fishing are not simply recreation but an essential part of life. Boys who are reluctant readers may well find this an involving read, and of course it will have a special attraction for children in the Northern Territory, particularly Aboriginal children, who often find it difficult to relate to stories that don't have immediate relevance to them.

Some topics for discussion

Society and environment

Aboriginal lifestyle (e.g. hunting)

Talk about traditional Aboriginal culture. Does Sean's family live in the traditional way?

Extended families

Aboriginal kinship values

Camping: children might talk about their own experiences camping or fishing

Safety

Talk about crocodiles and people. Why are they dangerous to people? Why are people still attacked, even in areas where warning signs are posted? What is the best way to avoid a crocodile attack?

Was Sean right to creep away from the tent by himself? What else could he have done?

What would *you* have done?

Should Uncle Spook have killed the crocodile? Is there anything else he could have done to save Sean?

Natural history

Talk about crocodiles! -- their life cycle, their place in the natural world, how we

feel about them. Who has seen a real crocodile? Where?

Fishing: what kinds of fish live in the Northern Territory?

How do yabby pots work? Look at the pots in the illustrations.

The story tells about fishing at night. Why would Sean's dad and his uncles go fishing at night? When do crocodiles go hunting?

Ask children about their own fishing experiences.

Geography

Talk about the Northern Territory

How is the weather in the NT different from the weather down south? Talk about Wet season floods (pages 18/19)

Language

What is a nickname?

At the beginning of the story Sean doesn't have a nickname. Why does he want a nickname? How do people get their nicknames? How might Spook and Whistler have got their names? (Their real names are mentioned on page 1.)

Talk about the nicknames of people you know. Do you have a nickname?

Do you think "Croc Bait" is a good nickname for Sean?