

# The Spirit of Barrumbi

by Leonie Norrington

## Teachers' Notes

*The Spirit of Barrumbi* is the sequel to *The Barrumbi Kids*. It continues the lives of the characters introduced in the earlier novel: two families at Long Hole community, one Aboriginal and one non-Aboriginal, who are closely linked not by blood but by their commitment to each other and their land. Best mates and 'cousin brothers' Dale and Tomias have just left primary school, and Dale's older brother Sean and older sister Megan (Meg) are home from boarding school for the school holidays. At the beginning of the novel, the Wet season is late, and the elder, Caroleena, has taken the families and elders to Barrumbi, a deeply spiritual place, to pray for rain.

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 with younger readers. It is by no means implied that you should work through all of the exercises, notes and discussions found here, but that you select, use and adapt those suited to the make-up and level of your class.

### **Pre-reading Activities:**

1. If the class has not read *The Barrumbi Kids*, give a summary of what happens in the novel.
2. Use the Internet to look up where the NT and Arnhem Land are located. Ask students to find out at least five facts about the area.
3. Check with your students to find out if any of them have lived in a community, or have relatives who do. Ask them if they are prepared to share some stories or information with the whole class or small groups of students.
4. There are strong elements of spirituality in the novel. If you have studied the first book in the series, you may have explored Aboriginal Dreamtime and beliefs about spirituality. If not, or if you would like to revisit this topic, there are some useful 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)

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

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

## Chapter 1: ‘Barrumbi’

Dale’s older brother, Sean, is a collector of snakes, an amateur herpetologist. Dale dreams vividly about something happening to Sean. In looking for snakes, Dale dreams that Sean has ventured to a place called ‘Death Adder Ridge’. Traditionally, no-one but elders are allowed there. He is so engrossed in looking at his captured snake, he doesn’t realise that clouds are massing until it too late. It turns out that Sean really does plan to go to the ridge. Though he has grown up with warnings about the place, he has decided to ignore them, thinking that the warnings are really because of the snakes, not because of the spirits.

### **Predict:**

- What do you think will happen next? Is Dale’s dream going to come true?

### **Find Out:**

- Find a picture of a Death Adder and stick it into your journal. How dangerous are they? Write your findings underneath the picture.

## Chapter 2: ‘A Scientific View’

Sean reads the land, as he has been taught by the men and women at Long Hole, to find out if he is in the right place,. The third person omniscient narrator shows how Sean’s presence is perceived by the reptiles and animals on the ridge: we know there is a death adder nearby, and the air is full of suspense.

Sean’s presence is also felt by the elders holding a ceremony in a cave at the top of the gorge. They are angry, and the Long Hole elders are ashamed: they feel as if they haven’t taught Sean well enough to keep him away from the ridge. Sean is oblivious to the mood changing, and continues to look for baby snakes.

### **Discuss:**

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- Look closely at the passage where Sean describes feeding snakes at the wildlife park. How does the writer convey tension and the depth of Sean's fascination here?
- How do you think the elders know Sean is there?

## Chapter 3: 'Spirit of Barrumbi'

Sean's passion leads him to treat the land with disrespect. He has grown up in a community and should know better. The description of his destruction (pg 17), foreshadows later events, when the land responds.

As Sean is battered by the weather, he remembers what he has been taught. It's too late to stop what's happening, but it probably saves his life. Sean reaches the old men. They do not give him a place in their circle and he is ashamed.

### **Write:**

- How does the author make the land seem alive in this chapter? Find examples in the text and discuss how language is being used to produce effects.
- Compare what actually happens with the events in Dale's dream. What are the similarities and differences?
- What are the old men thinking and feeling about Sean? Write an account in the first person.
- What could Sean have done when he saw the men that might have made them less cold towards him?

## Chapter 4: 'Getting Turtle'

While Sean is in disgrace, the women hunt for turtle. Aboriginal people are the only people allowed to catch turtle, an otherwise protected species, in the NT.

Meg is frustrated by her inability to retain what she is taught by Caroleena and the others, though Lizzie remembers easily.

### **Find Out:**

- What is the story of the Rainbow Serpent in Arnhem Land?

(This website has the story:

<http://www.deh.gov.au/parks/kakadu/artculture/art/ubirr.html>)

- What is the connection between the Rainbow Serpent and turtles?
- How do Aboriginal people decide when a child is becoming an adult? Is it based on a number?

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## Discuss:

- Why should it be that the two eldest children (Sean and Meg) seem to be forgetting about the land and their connection with it?

## Chapter 5: 'Lost'

The beginning of this chapter gives a third perspective on the power of the weather. Dale and Tomias are out having fun when the storm breaks: Dale is full of 'joy and wonder' because he thinks the old men's songs have worked (pg 34).

Dale's father knows they will have to leave Barrumbi, otherwise they will be trapped by the water. Sean's absence is noticed, and his mother finds out that he has gone to the ridge. Everyone knows that the land might make all of them pay for Sean's actions.

## Discuss:

- Why doesn't Sandy want to talk about what Sean has done? (pg 37)

## Find out:

- Dale's father thinks that Sandy is "the best bush mechanic in the Territory"(pg 36). Find out what a bush mechanic is and learn some tips!

Visit:

<http://www.bushmechanics.com/home.htm> If your school doesn't have QuickTime movie viewer, use the html link and you can see the film shot by shot.

*(This site features photos of deceased people. This can be a problem, especially for Indigenous students and family members. Check with your students, letting them know that the families of the deceased have requested that the images remain on the site.)*

The 'Bush Mechanics' TV series is available from ABC shops.

## Chapter 6: 'Left Behind' & Chapter 7 'Signs of Life'

On the journey back, Dale falls from the cage on the back of the truck: he, too, feels the water welcoming him, trying to get him to let go. His shame increases: first Sean does something stupid, now him. He momentarily resents Tomias and his relatives: they seem to know how to do things the right way.

At Long Hole, Dale's father and Sandy decide to go back to look for Sean. Dale and Tomias hide themselves in the Toyota: they are going too!

At Chinaman Creek, the adults get out and Tomias and Dale explore. Tomias finds Sean's boot in the river and they both wildly imagine gruesome ends for him. Soon after, they spot Sir

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Galahad, the hawk Sean used to own. They realise the jess has been put on recently. Sean must be alive!

## Find out:

- Who was ‘Sir Galahad’ in Arthurian legend? Is this name significant?
- Where is the real ‘Chinaman’s Creek’? Why is it so named?

## Chapter 8: ‘In Trouble Again’

Tomias and Dale explain what they have found. Dale’s father discovers a message from Sean inscribed on the jess they have taken from the hawk.

Dale’s father thinks about sending a helicopter to find Sean, but realises that he must, unlike Sean, be sensitive to the culture in which he lives. Sandy, as an elder himself, is allowed to go to the cave near the ridge.

## Write:

- Imagine you are Dale and Sean’s mother or father. Write about how you are feeling at this point in the novel.
- Why would Sean’s rescue be easier if the family weren’t part of an Indigenous community?

## Play:

- The circle game can be useful in helping students to consolidate their knowledge and feelings, while having a lot of fun!

## The Circle Game:

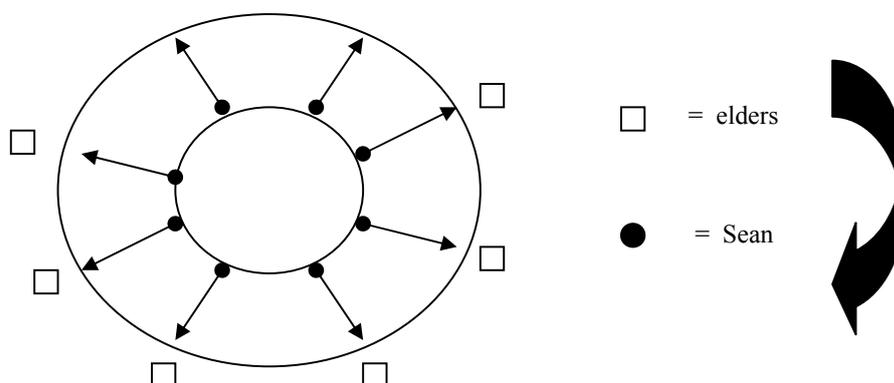
Divide the number of students in your class by two. Place chairs for half the students in a circle facing out. These students will imagine they are Sean. The other students will stand around the circle of chairs, each facing a student. (If numbers are uneven, you can join one of the circles.) The students who are standing will imagine they are elders from the cave above the gorge, the ones who are going to teach Sean.

The elders will accuse Sean of breaking the ‘law’: in turn, Sean will defend himself from their accusations. After two or three minutes – give an audible signal- the circle of elders moves round clockwise one place to face a different student, and so on until each ‘elder’ has spoken with each ‘Sean’. In this way, all students share everything they have learned about what Sean has done, and about the elders’ likely points of view. Obviously, you can easily adapt this game for a variety of characters and texts.



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## Chapter 9: 'The Wet Sets In' & Chapter 10: 'Walking the Knife Edge'

Sean's mother and father sit together in worry. The children, though, can't help but react to the new cool weather the Wet brings. Meg and her friend Jeweleen retreat into their imaginations. Having never experienced tragedy, they don't expect to. Suddenly, during the game, someone shouts "You were dead Dale!" (pg 78), meaning he was out of a game. The word 'dead' brings Sean's predicament back to them and brings the jovial mood to a halt.

The helicopter returns from picking up Sandy. Sean is not on board: the elders want to teach him. This event reveals some of Lucy's past. She was in love with an Indigenous boy called Jardeen. He broke the law (Aboriginal law) and came back from the elders as a different person. Lucy tries to convince herself that that is not going to happen to Sean. Mavis blames the boarding school for making children forget their culture.

### **Discuss:**

- Look again at the story of Lucy (Dale's mother) and Jardeen. What law had he broken? Suggest reasons for the law and discuss whether you agree or disagree with it. A table with 'fors' and 'againsts' would be useful here. Don't attempt to come to a conclusive answer. The idea is only to stimulate thought.
- What do you think the old men will teach Sean? How might they teach him?

### **Find out:**

- On the altar the women build, Lucy places a picture of St Anthony and a St Christopher medallion. Who are these saints? How can they help to keep Sean safe?

### **Suggest:**

- What do you think the object wrapped in a cloth might be? Give reasons for your ideas.

## Chapter 11: 'Wet Season Fun'

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The tension breaks. The kids take their lead from the adults who seem more relaxed about Sean and feel they can have some fun. The kids defy Caroleena and enlist Dale's father to help them make an area of the river safe for swimming. As they play, the water is once again personified, "the particles murmur, tingle, hesitate, listen, and move closer to the noise, hungry, alert" (pg 92).

The joyful mood is shattered when Dale misses the safety rope across the river. It's only then that the children remember all of the sinister tales they have been told about the water and, in so doing, they reinforce the boundaries they have grown up with.

## Discuss:

- The description of the water on pages 91-92. The water is behaving like it's alive. What type of animals might exhibit this behaviour?
- Why don't the children think about all of the frightening stories about water before they play in the river? Are some rules meant to be broken? What happens when things go wrong?

## Draw:

- If the water *was* an animal, what might it look like? Draw your ideas on A3 paper, or use a computer application such as 'Paint'.

## Chapter 12: 'Things Fall Apart'

The title of the chapter evokes the story of the same name written by Chinua Achebe, in which a tribal culture is destroyed by the very people who try to 'civilise' it. (Incidentally, if you are studying *Spirit of Barrumbi* with an older group, *Things Fall Apart* would work extremely well as a comparison piece.)

A Long Hole elder challenges Sandy about the cause of the rising waters and the heavy rainfall: he suspects that the whole truth about what Sean did has been hidden. Though Caroleena tries to defend Sean and his family, they are isolated from the community, lest their actions lead to bad luck for everyone. Mavis and Caroleena, because of their close association with Sean's family, also feel a sense of shame. The children link their earlier frightening experience at the river with what Sean has done, and it all seems to make sense.

Tomias's instincts win out, though he's confused about whether he is still allowed to be friends with Dale.

## Write:

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- Sandy reminds the elder of Dale's family's ancestry in the community (pg 98). What is he trying to achieve?
- Why don't Mavis and Caroleena join in their neighbour's card game?
- What has Caroleena done to offend the old man and some of the other elders?
- Are the floods happening because of the spirits being angry with Sean, or because nature is taking its course?
- Does the narrator (not the author), agree with your point of view? Give reasons for your answer and include evidence from the text

## Chapter 13: 'The Worst Christmas' & Chapter 14: 'The Rain Stops'

The community is cut off by the rain, a common occurrence in the Wet. There are no presents under the tree, but the kids try to make it cheery by taking breakfast to their parents.

Caroleena notices that the rain has abated: she attributes this to the kids having kept away from the water – which, as we know- they haven't. Even the elders get it wrong sometimes, which is an interesting counterpoint to Sean's mistake. Little Jimmy realises that Caroleena's feelings are based on incorrect information and he is afraid as the kids return to the river to play on the pontoon the adults have made them for Christmas.

Jimmy's sense of foreboding proves correct, though again, the cause of what happens in the billabong is again ambiguous. Lizzie and Tomias frighten each other, and Lizzie is caught in weeds at the bottom of the billabong. The narrator again personifies the moving water underneath the surface, but there is a physical explanation for its presence. The sense of two cultures, two points of view, is lucidly communicated once more.

Pathetic fallacy is in evidence as the clouds gather once again, and the families leave the billabong in a hurry, as a "wall of wind and rain" seems to chase them home (pg 128).

### **Discuss:**

- What circumstances contribute to Lizzie and Tomias's over-reactions when they glimpse each other in the billabong? (Are Sean and his misdeed more present than absent?)
- The duality of spirituality and physicality is further emphasised by the presence of the Jesus bird, which can walk on water. What other spiritual elements are suggested in this chapter?

## Chapter 15: 'The Flood'

The sense of oppression grows as the rain keeps the children trapped indoors. The people who would normally live in bottom camp or outside are driven inside and Mavis's house is full. Meg sees an old man sitting in the corner, singing. Mavis does not tell her that he's singing for

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forgiveness and protection: she knows the elders still see the floods as retribution for Sean's actions.

Dale's father is aggrieved to find out that no-one told him about the flood in bottom camp. Sandy is too embarrassed to point out that the others don't want help from his family after what Sean has done. Mavis remains loyal: they are family to her. She makes Rueben join Tomias at Dale's house for the night. Tomias no longer feels quite so estranged from his countrymen.

As Dale's father and Sandy help to move the people from Bottom Camp, a dog growls at Dale: her reaction is a physical expression of the feelings the old people have about Sean's family at this point.

## Discuss:

- As some of the older members of the community climb into the Toyota for a lift to safety, one of them asks Sandy: 'Is that young boy brother for that criminal?' (pg 136). Is Sean a criminal? How does the label affect our perceptions of Sean? What other labels do we apply to people? Explore the possible effects of these.
- What is the meaning of 'family'?

## Chapter 16: 'Finding Treasure'

Tomias and Dale go through the houses at Bottom Camp, looking for things that can be used by the community members who will stay at the school. Dale finds a trunk belonging to 'Old Copper', one of the elders who is still with Sean. He is surprised to see photographs of Old Copper in the war, and realises he's never been told about the role of Aboriginal people, much less been shown photographs like these. It transpires that other men from Bottom Camp fought in the war.

Dale goes some way to mending his relationship with the unfriendly dog: he finds her puppies and takes them back with him. This action symbolises the possibility that he and his family will be able to mend other relationships.

Caroleena feels the resentment towards her grow. She is afraid that the old people might "sing" her (pg 145). She knows that such a curse would mean the end of her: she would have to leave: she might even die. The crows she sees are harbingers of death, Caroleena knows.

We learn that the drains under the road become "sucking holes" when the water is high (pg 147). There is a strong sense of anticipation created by the linking of Caroleena's thoughts with the presence of the holes.

## Find out:

- What role did Aboriginal people play in World War II?

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- Look at images from the war. How many of them reflect contributions from Aboriginal people? What reasons might there be for this?

## Chapter 17: 'The Sucking Hole' & Chapter 18: 'A Miracle'

Dale and Tomias disregard warnings and seem to dare each other to walk close to the holes. Neither of them wants to be labelled a “scaredy cat”(pg 150). Meg is aware of the danger and tries to warn the boys, but she is the one who is pulled into the water.

Meg hits her head and becomes unconscious. She ‘sees’ Sean, who tells her to “Go Back!” (pg 157). The water, denied its victim, begins to pour from the sky. The description “the big rain follows” (pg 158) again produces vivid images of something stalking the people of Long Hole.

As the news of Meg spreads in an unreliable fashion, some elders are relieved. Her death would mean the land was satisfied, so no further ‘revenge’ would be necessary. Others, who know ‘daughter for Lucy’ as “Meg”, “Meggie” or “Megan” – in other words, those who feel some personal connection to her, are still hoping she survives.

Mavis’s family know their relationship to her. They are ready to grieve. Mavis tells them that Meg’s alive. Caroleena and the women sing for her all night. Meg wakes up the next morning – as a result of the prayers and singing?

Norrington uses humour to welcome Meg back to the world. Dale’s assertion that “She’s not brain-damage!” (pg 163) is correct, though his method of ascertaining this fact is less than scientific. Meg is comforted by Caroleena, who orients her firmly back to the land.

### **Discuss:**

- An old lady says “It’s always this way. Women must suffer for the mistakes of men.” (pg 139) As far as the novel is concerned, is this statement true?

## Chapter 19: 'The Tin Trunk' & Chapter 20: 'Finding Sean'

Dale gets the chance to re-investigate Old Copper’s trunk under a bed in Sandy’s lean-to. In it is a wrapped object: it could be the same, or a similar object that Caroleena placed on the altar for Sean. Dale knows that he won’t go near it. He is trapped under the bed by Forty Mile, who has come to get away from the crowd in the school. Dale thinks Forty Mile doesn’t know he is there: the reader knows better.

The flood recedes and life begins to return to normal. Dale’s family, able to go into town for supplies, finally have their idea of a proper Christmas.

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The Long Hole community, relieved that the flood has gone, start to look out for the elders. Tomias shows Dale the spires of rising smoke on the horizon. The elders have walked from Barrumbi. The only question is whether Sean is with them.

Lucy receives a radio message from Saltbush Floodplain. She hears Sean's voice, yet he doesn't sound like the son who accompanied her to Barrumbi. Sean uses Kriol expressions. This is unlike him, because she has always corrected her children and tried to get them to use Standard Australian language. She is further perturbed by hearing the airboat pilot use Kriol to address Sean. He is coming home the next morning.

The morning is shrouded in unseasonable mist, it seems as if Sean is returning not from a place, but from a time. Sean arrives. For a moment, Lucy sees Jardeen in his face, in his expression. In this moment, Lucy too learns the lessons of the land. She berates herself for having allowed this to happen, for allowing herself to think that "his whiteness protected him...that [she] could take the best of both worlds." (pg 183)

Dale's father wonders why his friend Sandy didn't tell him what would happen to Sean. He realises that Aboriginal law is all there is for Sandy, that he treated Sean just as he would his own son. In acceptance, there is always difference.

## Write:

- What does Lucy finally realise about her chosen way of life, about her community?

## Chapter 21: 'Changed Utterly'

Mavis goes to Sean, not to comfort him, but to reinforce the lessons of the elders. She understands the most about what has happened to him, about the culture he is a part of by birth, and about the culture he is actually a living, breathing part of. She is, therefore, entitled to her anger.

Mavis is the product of life with the land. She knows that the education he has received will never be forgotten, that it is the best teaching for someone who will survive in the bush. Inside, she would like to comfort him, but knows this will dull the effectiveness of the elders' teachings.

Sean remembers being ashamed of his culture when on work experience. He, like Sandy, Mavis and Caroleena, has been forced to walk the line between two cultures.

Sean has learned. He cares for his family and doesn't let his own pain obscure it. Meg and Sean tell each other the truth: they saw each other when Meg was in between life and death. There is no choice but to accept the spiritual aspect of their experience.

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## Chapter 22: 'Christmas Eve Again' & Chapter 23: 'A Real Christmas'

Sean and Dale's family have a re-run of Christmas, pretending that things are the same, better, now that Sean is home.

Sean seems okay, just more concerned about his family and about teaching. He's had the knowledge inside himself from childhood; the elders have perhaps just reminded him it is there.

Meg and Jeweleen signal the future, at least for them. They want magazines full of stories about how to look good, about clothes and makeup, things that are not important in Long Hole. But when Meg actually receives her presents, she realises that what her heart desires is not the same as her head has been telling her.

The kids realise that their parents know more than they have let on, which seems orderly and natural after recent events. The presents are not necessarily expensive, but they show an understanding of what the kids have been through, and an appreciation of the future.

### **Discuss:**

- What is the significance of this version of Christmas as compared to the earlier version? What is the real difference?

## Chapter 24: 'The End'

Order is restored, and the old people have learned just as much as the young. The story closes with the elders recognising the threat of allowing their children to be taught by others before their education about the land is complete.

Jimmy is excited by sharing his new present with the elders: he is finding his own way to communicate with the past. His sensitivity to his elders and to the circumstances in which they find themselves throughout the novel gives hope for continuing understanding and respect.

The children's thoughts mirror the evolving society in which they have grown up. It is up to them to forge the future, to be the mediators between the old and the new. For now, Tomias and Dale remain children.

## **Major Assignments**

### **The people**

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- Discuss the Aboriginal system of kinship, where people unrelated in a conventional sense call each other ‘sister’ or ‘mother’. Show how, in this novel, kinship aligns people on opposite sides regardless of their feelings for each other.
- What is the significance of Dale’s discovery of the medals and photographs in Old Copper’s tin trunk? Research the role of the Aborigines in the Northern Territory during the Second World War. Describe the relationship between the black soldiers and their white officers at this time. Would this relationship be different now?
- Compare Aboriginal and Western attitudes towards elderly people, as shown in this novel.
- Compare Aboriginal and Western attitudes towards women, as shown in this novel.

## The natural world

- Compare Western scientific knowledge with Aboriginal knowledge. How are they similar and different? Can the two be reconciled?
- Research the seasons in the Northern Territory. How do they affect people's lives? Compare the Dry season as portrayed in *The Barrumbi Kids* with the Wet as described in *The Spirit of Barrumbi*.
- Talk about ‘bush tucker’. List all the foods mentioned in the book and find out what local bush tucker exists in your area.

## Culture

One of the most striking things about both *The Barrumbi Kids* and *The Spirit of Barrumbi* is their 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. Discuss similar beliefs in other cultures (e.g. those of Native American peoples). You may present this as a PowerPoint slide show, a poster, orally or as an essay.

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- 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.

## **Style**

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 story is told largely from the children's point of view. 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'. How different might it have been if it were written in the past tense?
- Much of Leonie'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.
- Although some serious subjects are dealt with in the story, they are often shown in an extremely funny light. Talk about how humour can be used to illuminate such serious things as bigotry and racism, or defuse a sense of danger. What are some of the funniest moments in the novel? What is their effect on the rest of the story?