



Meet Poppy

by Gabrielle Wang

Poppy and her brother, Gus, live at the Bird Creek Mission near Echuca on the banks of the Murray River. Poppy's Aboriginal mother died just after she was born and she knows little about her Chinese father or where he is. Her real name is Kalinya, and her brother's name is Moyhu. They were given English names when they came to the Mission, and it is strictly forbidden to use their Aboriginal names. Poppy discovers that Gus is to be sent to another mission, so forewarned, he escapes, intent on getting to the gold fields, telling Poppy of his escape route. When she hears she is to be sent to Sydney to work as a servant, she escapes too, and this book follows the beginning of her adventure to find her brother – and maybe her father. She is in possession of a letter written in Chinese given to her by the Chinese peddler, Johnny.

This story is set during the gold rushes in Victoria, a heady time of quickly amassed wealth, and tales to match, such as horses being shod with gold, and miners eating five pound note sandwiches. The setting of the book is a rural Australia rich in wildlife and colourful characters, including the real life bushranger, Harry Power.

Indigenous people

These notes will have **three focuses** which can be selected from according to the age of readers. The first is Indigenous people, connecting to the Australian Curriculum: *'English and its focus on helping students to engage imaginatively and critically with literature to expand the scope of their experience. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have contributed to*

Australian society and to its contemporary literature and its literary heritage though their distinctive ways of representing and communicating knowledge, traditions and experience' (ACARA,2010, p1) .

Indigenous people

- Poppy is a brave and resourceful girl of the Bangerang people. She uses her knowledge of the land to survive.
- The tear jar (p14).
- Napu – mother in Bangerang (p16).
- Totems: Poppy's is the echidna; the Crow is totem for her people.
- Poppy uses the Southern Cross to guide her as she travels from Bird Creek to Echuca and then to Beechworth (p50). Her accumulated knowledge informs her route, such as following water birds – knowledge she has learned from Gus.
- Create a map of Victoria as a chart or on a smart board and trace Poppy's journey. Estimate how long her travels are; how much time it takes to get between places. Compare this to today. Research an old map from the early 1860s. What major towns that exist today along the Murray, didn't exist then.
- Make a visual representation of what she eats, such as wild raspberries, inner bark for chewing, honey-flavoured sap-sucking bugs (p27).

Language

The second focus is on Language: For instance, for Year 5 the ACARA document says that students will *'understand, interpret and experiment with sound devices and imagery, including simile, metaphor and personification in narratives...'* (2010, p29).

The rural setting is evoked in vivid descriptions, which give readers a sense of how different the landscape was a century and half ago. Creating is part of the

Literature strand so students can be encouraged to look at how writers use language as models for their own writing.

- Similes: students can identify the similes they like and practise writing their own.
- P49 *'the moon shone like a beacon above, and it was if she [Poppy] fled over white silk between the tall trunks of the gums. On both sides they stood, like ghostly columns leading to a Pharaoh's tomb.'*
- P2 *'as nimble as a brushtail possum'*.
- P11 *'As warm as a splash of sunshine'*.
- P57 Poppy's description of the train – *'a big metal snake with a huge head'*.
- P73 *'...she saw a huge river red gum standing alone like a giant with its arms outstretched, welcoming her'* is an example of personification.

Terms

A feature of the ACARA English curriculum is the development of *'unfamiliar technical vocabulary'* (2010, p29) and this story is rich in terms of the time and place. Students can compile a glossary of the terms, and for younger ones, an illustrated glossary might be useful and appealing. Below are some examples, but students can compile their own lists:

- Bullockies (p4)
- Harmonium (p5)
- Slate (p7)
- Inkwell, blotting pads wooden writing box (p25)
- Lucifer sticks (p45)
- Wagon drawn by bullocks (p53)
- Humpy (p67)
- Drover (p68)
- Frockcoats, tall hats, bonnets (p68)

Ethical nature of literature

The third focus of these notes is *'the ethical dilemmas within real-world and fantasy settings'* (ACARA, 2010, p29) which are presented in *Meet Poppy* ready for exploration.

- Younger readers could put all the characters they encounter in the story into two categories of either good or bad. For some, this might be difficult (e.g. Harry Power) and stimulate rich discussion.
- Older readers could discuss Poppy's actions: she is defiant at the concert and steals coins. We know why she does this, so is the suggestion that wrong actions can be justified? Using evidence from the book the students could make a case for 'The ends justify the means'.
- P62 Poppy encounters racism – *'No Blacks Allowed'* the boys say to her. And they throw stones at her. How do readers feel here?
- P64 *'She wondered how people could grow to be so mean.'* Discuss.
- This attitude is reinforced by the adults on the paddle steamer who say about shooting the dog, Fisher, *'They kill the pastoralists' sheep, just like those damned natives'*. Discuss readers' reactions to this.

Society

Aspects of life at the times will stimulate rich discussion, such as:

- Bushrangers, escaped convicts, gold diggers.
- *'No place for a girl'*. Would that be true today?
- Bartholomew is bitten by a black snake and dies. Would he survive today?
- Milking cows, collecting eggs, dusting the matron's house.
- The Chinese peddler and what he sells (p35).

Adventure Story

'Students learn how to explain and analyse the ways which stories, characters, settings and experiences are reflected in particular literary genres, and how to discuss the appeal of these genres' (ACARA, 2010, p4).

This story belongs firmly in the adventure story genre and readers can be invited to identify the stages in the adventure – suspense, fear, excitement.

- Poppy prepares and plans her escape.
- She escapes and disguises herself as a boy and returns to her real name.
- She hides on the bullock dray and meets Frank O'Reilly.
- Stows away on a paddlesteamer.
- P70 She is in danger of being discovered and hides in the water.
- Climbs into a *'nest in a giant river gum'*.
- P75 A large, wild dog comes to her tree. She watches it catch a fish and names it Fisher.
- P84 She sees a bushranger, Harry Power, who invites her to eat the stew and bread he has stolen.
- Finds herself at Tocumwal, on the wrong side of the river.
- P93 She is arrested and chased by the policeman who assumes she was stealing.
- She is saved by Fisher.
- P 98 Finds the message carved on the tree from Gus in their code and Chinese symbols. This provides an excellent opportunity to predict what might be the next stage of her journey, and then again after reading the first chapter of the next installment. Have predictions changed?

Follow on activities

- The idea of Poppy and Gus devising their own secret code is sure to appeal to some readers, and provides an opportunity to develop their own. Perhaps some will have already used Pig Latin.

Related reading

- While they might struggle to read it themselves, students could be read (parts of) *We of the Never Never* (there was a film made in 1982 and three PG rated clips are available at <http://aso.gov.au/titles/features/we-never-never/clip/>) Also *The Little Black Princess* by Mrs. Aeneas Gunn.
- *Who Am I?* Anita Heiss