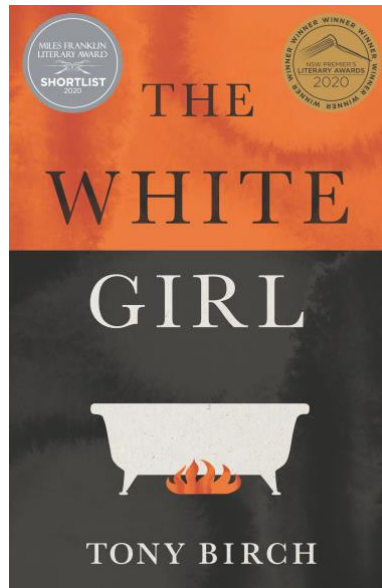


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THE WHITE GIRL

by Tony Birch



Teachers' Notes

Written in context with the Australian curriculum
(English) by Cara Shipp, a practising teacher

ISBN: 9780702263057/ AUS \$24.99

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What I do hope for with this novel, is that the love and bravery conveyed by Odette and Sissy provides some understanding of the tenacity and love within the hearts of those who suffered the theft of their own blood.
 – Tony Birch, Author’s Note, *The White Girl* (p. 263).

SYNOPSIS

The White Girl by Tony Birch is a deeply moving yet unsentimental account of an Aboriginal family’s experiences living under ‘the Act’ – the *Aborigines Protection Act* (1909). Birch notes that this is a fictional story set in ‘a fictional town somewhere in Australia’ (p. 263), and his use of a generic reference to ‘the capital’ and ‘the city’, where the main characters travel to, reinforces this generic representation. While Birch concedes that he could never presume to tell anyone’s specific story, this story echoes the hundreds of thousands of true stories threaded through every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family.

The story is set after World War II and before Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were granted voting rights (1962) and citizenship rights (after the referendum to count Aboriginal people as citizens in the National census, 1967).

Odette Brown is Nanna to Cecily (Sissy), who she raises alone after her traumatised daughter, Lila, leaves town, unable to deal with the town gossip about her pregnancy and continuing harassment by the farmer who raped her. The details of the circumstances of Sissy’s conception, and Lila’s departure, are at first unknown and revealed later as the story unfolds.

Sissy, being white-skinned, is particularly at risk of being taken away from her family under the Act. However, it is also her saving grace as Odette manages to get her out of the town and onto a train to the city by pretending she is a rich white girl being escorted by the family’s servant, Odette. Once in the city, new possibilities are opened up for the family as more progressive thinkers seek to improve the rights and living conditions of Aboriginal people. There is a growing movement calling for Aboriginal people to be classified as Australian citizens and enjoy citizenship rights but, until that is successful, Aboriginal families must compromise their values and way of life to gain ‘exemption’ from the Act. Many, including Odette, choose to do this in order to protect their families and stay together. Gaining exemption is easier in the more progressive city, but the so-called ‘freedom’ still comes with many strings attached.

Told in Birch’s signature understated, simple-yet-profound, style, the story alludes to what the family has been through rather than describing it with any graphic detail. Therefore it is easy to read and digest for students with a range of abilities and from a range of backgrounds, while the thoughtful characterisation that builds empathy in the reader ensures that it does not lose its poignancy.

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Historical references

The Aborigines Protection Board was established in 1883, initially to ‘protect’ Aboriginal people from violent contact with frontier settlers. The Board’s powers were formally legislated in the *Aborigines Protection Act* (1909), which appointed policemen as guardians of Aboriginal people in their jurisdiction, with the government controlling Aboriginal people’s lives by forcing them to live on ‘reserves’ or ‘missions’ administered by government and churches. It quickly became a way to move Aboriginal people off their lands, and utilise them for labour as settlers moved in and took over. Aboriginal people were punished for speaking their language and practising culture, and in 1915 greater powers were granted to remove Aboriginal children for any reason, under the guise of their ‘welfare’. The assimilation period followed, where the belief was that Aboriginal people were ‘dying out’ and mixed-race children would be better off being ‘raised white’ and assimilating into white society, forgetting their family and culture.

With frontier contact came illicit liaisons between Aboriginal women and settler men. Some may have been mutually consensual; many were not. Aboriginal girls and women assigned as domestic servants were particularly vulnerable to abuse by the men of the house, but could also be ‘hunted down’ by men in the local towns – followed in cars as they walked to or from school and work (travelling by foot as car travel was an expensive luxury only wealthy white families could afford). Mixed-race babies were born as the products of rape, and while the police usually turned a blind eye to the crime, they had to do something about the mixed-race children.

Protection and assimilation policies made police and government officials obsessed with establishing the ‘amount’ of ‘white blood’ in a child, and how the child inherited their lineage. References to ‘half-caste’, ‘quadroon’, ‘octoroon’ and other calculations quantified the child’s genetic make-up and established how desirable they were in terms of being taken away and ‘raised white’ (the less ‘Aboriginal blood’ in them the more successful the assimilation would be). It is this history that now makes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people sensitive about how they are addressed and the terminology used to describe them.

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

It is important that students understand the past government policies and their implications on the lives of Aboriginal people before approaching the novel.

Resources include:

- Muswellbrook Shire Council has worked with a local Indigenous reference group to put together an informative and easy-to-read website: [Working with Indigenous Australians](#), outlining historical periods from pre-colonisation to the protection era and assimilation era and, more recently, reconciliation.

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- National Museum of Australia, Defining Moments: [Aborigines Protection Act](#)
- Civics and Citizenship education: [The 1967 Referendum](#)
- National Museum of Australia: [Rights and Freedoms](#) Digital Classroom resource. This includes the little-known story of Yorta Yorta elder [William Cooper](#), an Aboriginal man who not only protested for the rights of his people but also led a march to the German consulate in Melbourne to protest the treatment of Jews in Europe at the hands of the Nazis in the lead up to World War II.
- Stolen Generations and Bringing Them Home report: National Museum of Australia [NMA Bringing them Home](#); [NMA National Apology](#); [John Howard's position](#).
- [Importance of land and connection to Country](#): a resource explaining the role of Country in First Nations culture, how central it is to wellbeing and what the connection to land means for First Nations people. Also, see the article '[Diverse First Nations Identities](#)' which also talks about Country and family as part of identity and touches upon the impact of past government policies on identity.
- Indigenous servicemen in World War II: [Australian War Memorial](#) research.
- Missions and reserves under the *Protection Act*: [AIATSIS Collection](#) of resources and archival records. For a North Queensland example, Yarrabah, see article by Lynn Hume, [Them Days: life on an Aboriginal reserve 1892–1960](#). For a South-East Queensland example, see the Ration Shed Museum and [Cherbourg Memory](#) website. Teachers should also research local stories and resources for missions and reserves local to their school context. Your local Aboriginal land council, library, town council or museum would be a good place to start.
- Exemption certificates allowed Aboriginal people freedom from the Act, but at a cost: having to relinquish their culture and stop associating with their people. Read about this in the AIATSIS article '[Exemption: the high price of freedom](#)', and view the video and website '[Aboriginal Exemption](#)'. View ABC Article, '[Remembering the days of the “dog licence”](#)', to see a real exemption certificate.

ACTIVITIES

- Students can work in groups to research the different resources listed above and report back a summary to class.

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- b. Build a timeline visual in the classroom to show the key events from the protection and assimilation eras, with emphasis on the period 1945–1967 in which the novel is set (or, an online shared digital timeline would also work).
- c. Discuss with students how and why these historical events still impact families today: disconnection from family, land, language and culture; displacement; trauma from abuse; alcohol abuse and other unhealthy coping strategies; shame and secrets in the family; confusion about identity; fear and mistrust of governments and schools.
- d. Prepare students for the fact that there will be racist policies, opinions and words used in the book which reflect the government and people of that time in history. In particular, some of the white people in the town use the word ‘Abo’, which is considered highly offensive and derogatory.

THEMES

Birch’s style is open and matter-of-fact, never shying away from the sad and shocking elements of our history but never angry or bitter, and often optimistic. He examines the hard truths of our colonial past and its irreversible impact on First Nations people but always draws attention to First Nations peoples’ strength, tenacity, love, humour, resourcefulness and resilience.

This style is also seen in Birch’s collection of poetry *Whisper Songs*, which would be a useful companion text to this novel.

In *The White Girl*, there is a quiet defiance of government and white law-enforcers, born out of strength of culture and family. It is the strength of knowing oneself, unwaveringly; and being oneself, unapologetically.

Themes covered in this collection include:

- Grief and loss from the death of family members and separation from living family members
- Racism in Australia
- Colonial oppression, the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – including poverty, violence, dispossession of land and freedom, being managed by governments, and continual displacement
- Stolen Generations
- Connection to Country and culture
- Survival

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STUDY NOTES

Chapter 1 – Plot/backstory, setting and character establishment

In an interview on ‘The Garrett’ podcast, Birch shares that he wanted the first chapter to establish the character of Odette, her backstory, the environment and context of the novel, but not in an overly detailed way. He wanted to provide just enough detail to hook the reader in and gain a sense of where Odette is coming from. He talks about the ‘generous reader’ who works with the writer to fill in the spaces themselves, and he shares a writing tip from his university lectures: you can have a photograph with a detailed representation of a scene, or you can have an impressionistic painting. If your writing is more like an impressionistic painting, you allow the reader to make their own sense of the image (<https://thegarrettpodcast.com/tony-birch-white-girl/>).

Activity: consider how Birch introduces character, plot and setting in an ‘impressionistic’ way, giving just enough detail but leaving some gaps and silences using the key quotes below.

Chapter 1: Setting

The following quotes establish the basic yet cosy home Odette has made, and the history of the town, its treatment of Aboriginal people and its treatment of Country:

She put a lit match to the wood chips and strips of old newspaper in the stove. She then fetched the iron kettle and made her way out into the yard, filling it with cold water from the tap above the gully-trap. (p. 1)

Deane carried the blood of so many Aboriginal people on his hands it could never be scrubbed away, not from the man himself or the town that carried his name. The Line had been drawn a century earlier to separate the Aboriginal people incarcerated on the nearby mission from the good white *settlers* of Deane. A government regulation deemed that any Aboriginal person living west of Deane’s Line was a resident on an Aboriginal reserve. (p. 2)

Although it had been raining heavily for more than a week, the river or what was left of it, could no longer quench its own thirst. Over the years its life-force had been stolen by farmers irrigating upstream. (p. 5)

Chapter 1: Plot/backstory

The following quotes establish the position Odette is currently in, caring for her granddaughter and in constant fear of government authorities:

The birth of her daughter changed Lila. She’d grown up a quiet girl, thoughtful and calm, but as a young mother she hardened ... The white community of Deane,

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thriving on the gossip of a light-skinned Aboriginal baby, exchanged salacious tales about *them wild young gins off the mission* ... (pp. 2–3)

With no parents to speak for her, Sissy was in danger of being removed from her grandmother's care. From that time on, Odette had no choice but to engage in a dangerous game of cat and mouse with the Welfare authorities. (p. 3)

A flashback to many years earlier gives a hint at how Lila became pregnant:

Odette was surprised to find Joe Kane on her doorstep ... 'I want you to come out to the farm and look after my boys. They're running wild.' He rubbed his ample belly. 'You can bring that lovely girl with you.' ... Over the following months Odette would occasionally see Joe Kane's truck parked along the river track. The sight of him not far from her home caused Odette great unease ... she was relieved to find the truck gone...but when she opened the front door and called out to her daughter, to Odette's surprise the house was empty. (p. 13)

Chapter 1: Character

The following establishes Henry as a loyal ally to the Aboriginal people of the town, and emphasises the cruelty of the town's white population:

Henry was in tears. One of the older boys had painted his face black while the others held him to the ground. 'You wanna hang round with the boongs,' one of them screamed, 'you're gonna have to be one.' Henry never went back to school from that day on ... On Sunday mornings, he'd sneak over the junkyard fence, head for the mission and wait in the long grass for the [Aboriginal] boys to gather after church service. (pp. 8–9)

The following quotes establish Odette as a strong, proud, courageous and steadfast woman:

Many years had gone by since Odette had last seen Joe Kane but the man's anger, evident in his older son, was unmistakable. 'Oh, my people are still here, son. A few of us are above the ground, the rest are below it. We've always been here and we're going no place.' (p. 15)

'I don't take charity from anyone. I never have.' (p. 16)

Characterisation through the novel

Key quotes for class discussion:

- Bill Shea, the town policeman, and his comparison to the new policeman, Sergeant Lowe.

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‘Odette had known Bill since they were children – they’d played in the dirt together – but she had little respect for him. Shea started his day with a drink to cure himself of the hammering in his head from the night before ... The only positive to come out of his neglect on the job was that he left the Aboriginal people of Deane to themselves.’ (p. 22)

‘The figure emerged from the fog. Odette first noticed a pair of black shoes, spit polished and almost gleaming, a task the dishevelled Shea was hardly capable of. She looked up at the policeman’s face, at a man years younger than Bill. His skin was opaque. Like death. The policeman removed his cap. His hair was cut brutally close to his skull.’ (p. 22)

‘In his new role he was simultaneously appointed as *Guardian* to the Aboriginal population of the district. He found the title both enticing and apt.’ (p. 25)

- Millie Khan

This feisty Aboriginal woman holds some power in her community, having married a Punjab free settler who owns their property. She is not reliant on government welfare and is not controlled by government under the Act. When stopped and questioned by Sergeant Lowe about the disappearance of Odette and Sissy, she is ‘unable to disguise her contempt’ (p. 203), and evades his questions by stating: ‘I don’t know anything much about anything, unless it has something to do with horses. White folks have been telling me since I was a child, that being a native there wasn’t a lot I could learn. I heard it so many times, I reckon they must be right.’ (p. 203)

She then evades his question about when he last saw Odette: ‘It may have been this week sometime. Or it could be the week before this one. You know how it is with us? My people, we’re not so good with dates and times. What’s that thing your people have? I reckon there’d be one in your office, on the wall there ... What do you call that thing, with the numbers all over it? The calendar. That’s it. If I had my own calendar I could tell you what day I last saw that girl, Odette.’ (p. 204)

When Sergeant Lowe becomes angry at her cheekiness, he begins to lecture her about being a woman who enjoys government support. She retorts that she enjoys no support, being married to a free man who owns land: ‘My husband purchased the property we live in with hard-working money from the old stockman who took it away from my people and then hired my own father to work for him. Me and Yusie paid good money for a patch of land stolen from my people ... We take nothing from the government, we are free to do as we want.’ (p. 205)

Finally when Lowe reminds her that he is in charge of Sissy’s welfare, she replies:

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‘Welfare? Oh, you’ve looked after the welfare of our young girls for a long time now. Most of them are dead, disappeared, or were sent mad by what you did to them in the institutions. That’s not welfare, Sergeant. I think your own law would call that murder.’ Millie turned her back on Lowe and walked away. (p. 205)

Millie’s boldness was unusual for Aboriginal women at that time, given the fear around settler and police brutality. Her resistance and defiance is a humorous and inspiring addition to the novel.

- Wealthy white woman on train

When a wealthy woman from a landowning family enters the train on which Odette and Sissy are escaping to the city, this is their first test of the ‘story’ they are fabricating about Sissy being a rich white girl being escorted by the hired help, Odette.

The woman’s tells them: ‘My family, we’ve been in this area from the very *beginning*. We are pioneers. We know everyone.’ (p. 143) Immediately we see the ridiculousness of the white psyche of the time – to claim to have been on the land from the ‘beginning’ when talking to Aboriginal people who have clearly been there longer.

The woman then sits with Odette, to connect with her as an ‘Auntie’, as white children used to call their Aboriginal servants, and to determine Odette’s heritage: ‘I’m sure you would be interested to know that before I went away to school I was cared for by one of your own people. Although,’ she added, ‘she came from the desert and she was darker than you ...’ Odette had long ago learned that white people were fascinated with the skin colour of Aboriginal people, and what it might indicate ... Odette understood that what this woman really wanted to know was how she’d inherited the white blood she carried and who it had come from ... She turned to the woman and repeated a fiction she’d told before, the story of the mythical white forebear who’d *saved* her family. Stories of such benevolence comforted white people ... Odette ended the tale with the punchline she often quoted. ‘The white man who came into our lives, he was a true Christian man.’ (pp. 145–146)

The way in which Odette manages the interaction with the white woman is a revelation to Sissy, who has never witnessed Odette being spoken down to and patronised like that before. Odette sees it as an annoying part of life: ‘Odette had been raised to excuse the ignorance of white people, but it was a difficult task. *It will be for your own sake more than theirs*, her father had explained to her many times. *If you can’t get them people out of your head, they will hold you down for the rest of your life.*’ (p. 148)

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- Dr Singer

The new doctor to town is a significant character for several reasons. He is a Jewish immigrant, having fled Poland after World War II, with the tell-tale sign of a concentration camp tattoo: ‘Odette noticed a set of numbers tattooed onto his forearm. Their eyes met. Odette looked away.’ (p. 66)

He is unfailingly polite and respectful in his interactions with Odette – unheard of in that era for a white man to treat an Aboriginal woman with such respect and dignity. When she thanks him for actually helping her with her medical condition (unlike doctors she’d experienced in the past), he simply replies: ‘It’s what we do,’ he said. ‘Help people.’ (p. 67)

Later in the novel, when Odette is applying for an exemption certificate and requires references and an explanation as to why she left her town without permission, Dr Singer comes to her aid and writes to the Protection Board, taking responsibility for sending her away for urgent medical care and neglecting to tell the relevant authorities, clearing her of any wrongdoing so that she can obtain her exemption (p. 239)

Activity

Discuss with students the sense of connection Dr Singer and Odette may have, both having come from experiences of being oppressed. Share with students the little-known fact that Aboriginal people in Melbourne, led by activist William Cooper, protested against the treatment of Jews during the war. How extraordinary is it that, even while themselves oppressed and fighting for rights, Aboriginal people saw the injustice in the world and fought against it to help others in need? What perspective does that give you about humanity?

See:

- SBS Language video: [Aboriginal elder William Cooper extraordinary anti-Nazi protest after Kristallnacht](#) (Hewbrew)
- Sydney Jewish Museum [information book](#).

Language features of note for class discussion

Birch’s crisp and evocative descriptions:

- ‘A red pick-up truck, belching dark smoke, was sliding from side to side in the congealed ochre-stained mud’ (p. 10)
- ‘Odette pushed the heavy church door open, announcing her arrival with a heaving creak.’ (p. 18)

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Birch's ability to be unsentimental yet poignant:

- 'The first children of the mission had been buried in nameless unmarked graves, struck down by previously unknown illnesses – whooping cough, measles and fever. The only indicator of the presence of the children beneath the earth were the wildflowers that revealed themselves each year. The seeds had been sown by mothers.' (p. 18) The image of unmarked graves with flowers planted by their mothers emphasises the mothers' grief and despair.
- 'Although her grandmother never spoke to her about girls in the district who'd been taken away from their families, Sissy had heard stories at school about missing sisters, cousins and friends. In the schoolyard at lunchtime they would sometimes argue over who the Welfare Board went after, the dark or fair children. They would line up from darkest to the lightest skinned. Sissy always found herself at the end of the line, not sure if she was the safest or if she might be the next child to be taken.' (p. 77) Seeing the Stolen Generations through the eyes of a child and the playground chatter of children is extremely powerful.

Birch's use of tiny details speak volumes in a scene, such as when the new policeman, Sergeant Lowe, is questioning Sissy with retiring policeman Bill Shea:

- 'Odette felt a single bead of perspiration run from the base of her neck down the centre of her back ... Odette looked nervously toward Bill Shea, hoping he might have the courage to intervene. Shea dropped his head, finding a sudden need to study the frayed cuffs of his trousers. (p. 68)

The bathtub imagery, a recurring motif in the novel:

The bathtub is a symbol of the strength of the Brown family and their survival against white oppression. It is a symbol of the love that binds them and keeps them strong.

The tub was obtained by Odette's father, Ruben, who had managed to get a well-paid mining job, allowing him to own the miner's cottage in which Odette, as an old woman, raises her granddaughter Sissy. The tub was obtained by outsmarting the white locals, using the brains, money and brawn of Ruben and his family. Having a hot bath on a Sunday became the family tradition. The bath is outside, where they can watch the sky and commune with birds, the messengers of their ancestors.

Sissy and Odette regularly share a special tradition – Odette washes Sissy's hair in an act of tender and protective love.

- As she fetched the wood Sissy thought about how her great-grandfather Ruben first rescued the bath from a muddy ditch along Deane's Line. It was a story Odette had told her many times and she never tired of hearing it. The bath had fallen from old

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Jed Lamb's buggy, and Jed, being too lazy to retrieve it, left it where it fell ... (p.28) 'I've got a way of getting that tub. I'm willing to pay you for it.' Lamb's eyes lit up. He was well aware that Ruben was earning good money, a white man's wage, at the mine. It was a widely known fact that upset some folk in town ... Ruben's crew moved the iron bath from the side of the track with more ease than Jed Lamb, or any of the sceptical locals who came to witness the operation, believed possible. Ruben's younger brother, Elias, worked as a rigger at the mine. With the aid of pulleys, ropes and a wooden frame, he rigged an elaborate contraption between the bathtub and a buggy ... 'It's all about the physics,' Ruben explained to the bewildered Jed Lamb. (pp. 29–31)

- Sissy closed her eyes and rested her neck against the edge of the bath. Odette gently poured the warm water over Sissy's head, her hair darkening as the water ran onto her shoulders. Odette massaged Sissy's scalp, working the soap into a rich lather. She then rinsed Sissy's hair with several pails of water, poured a few drops of castor oil into one hand and raked the oil through Sissy's hair with her fingers. Sissy sighed with pleasure. 'I love this, Nanna. It's the best part of the week.' 'I'm happy you do.' Odette smiled. 'I love it too.' (p. 33)

Later in the novel, Sissy, now in her thirties, having grown into adulthood in the city with her grandmother after escaping the *Aborigines Protection Act*, returns to her childhood home and sits in the empty, dilapidated bathtub once more, remembering her grandmother. The tub again becomes synonymous with family, love, culture and survival.

- She sat on the edge of the bath, removed her boots and then stepped into the tub. She lay down and closed her eyes. Sissy could hear the birds of old, the birds that spoke to her grandmother. She rested the back of her head against the edge of the bath and felt the warm water caress her young skin. She could feel Odette's fingertips massaging the back of her neck. Odette and Sissy Brown had come home together. (pp. 260–261)

A significant message from the bathtub motif is the importance of physical touch. Children taken from their mothers and families and placed in institutions have often highlighted the absence of affectionate touch and its psychological effect. Wanda, the hotel receptionist in the city, connects with Odette immediately and urgently shares her own story of being separated from her family. Odette patiently listens, knowing how important this is, and when Wanda asks her for a hug, she freely gives it:

'Can I have a hug?' she asked, in a tone so hushed Odette could barely hear her. Odette smiled. 'Yes, Bub. Yes.'

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The women embraced. Wanda savoured the scent of Odette's hair, the touch of her skin and the warmth and strength of the older woman's body against her own. She listened for Odette's breathing and the rhythm of the older woman's heartbeat. It was the first time Wanda had felt the touch of an Aboriginal woman since the day she had been taken away from her own mother.

Wanda didn't want to let go. 'Thank you, Auntie,' she finally whispered. 'Thank you.' (p. 199)

The bathtub represents the strength gained through physical connection between women in Aboriginal families – mothers, grandmothers, aunties.

Racism and denial of the human rights of First Nations people

- Odette muses on her contemporaries' graves, remembering that children with measles were isolated and their mothers were not permitted to take them to their cultural healing place on the river. When the children died, the wailing mothers and family were not permitted to the graveside. The shed where they had been isolated was promptly 'doused in oil and burned to the ground'. (pp. 19–20)
- Odette's father taught her to be somewhat obedient on the mission, and 'sing just loud enough to keep them satisfied' (p. 34) in church, despite not believing in the Christian God. He explained that 'it's best to keep them fellas happy, keep their meanness down'. (p. 34)
- Odette earns money as an artist, but 'Without citizenship, Odette could not open an independent bank account ... and kept her savings in old jam tins stored at the back of the pantry.' (pp. 38–9)
- Odette avoids going to doctors: 'The last doctor I saw in this town was more than twenty years back. He was so afraid of touching me he stood on the other side of the room and washed his hands three times without even examining me.' (p. 58). When she does finally go to the doctor, she insists on paying privately: 'I am able to pay you myself. There's no need for you to bill the Welfare people. I can take care of this.' (p. 65). Odette fears Welfare and is constantly calculating her moves to protect Sissy from being taken away – she does not want them to be aware that she is ill, in case it may attract their interest.
- Sissy is followed menacingly by Aaron and George in the same way their father had followed her mother. Aaron's attitude sums up the situation that young Aboriginal women are in during that era: 'Take a good look at her, George. I want to have some fun, that's all ... Get in the truck. You Abo girls don't get to make choices. Our old man taught us that.' (pp. 80–81)
- The story of Delores is a heartbreaking example of the impact of trauma on a family: she tells how she had one child taken from her, and in desperation packed her baby

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in a suitcase to escape, but, being caught, had her baby taken and was sent to a mental institution. She managed to track down the children later and got a job working at the church that ran the home her children were in. They took pity and allowed her to see the children once a month, a fact she is proud of, telling Odette: 'I'm a lucky one' (p. 87). Sometime later, the church decided to move the girls to another home, and did so without telling Delores. Heartbroken again, she takes her own life by suicide. Odette finds this out when going to visit Delores, and the gardener gives her an envelope of Delores' photos of her daughters, Iris and Colleen (p. 95). Initially reluctant to take them, the photos become important to Odette, a way to remember and honour the lost girls and the pain Delores carried. When Odette and Sissy go to live with the Haines family in the city, Odette asks Alma if they can find a spot on the wall for the photographs, explaining 'it's important to me that these girls are not forgotten' (p. 244). Alma, having been through her own Stolen Generations experiences, agrees and understands the importance of remembering those lost. Throughout Delores' story the insistence of the church that the girls will be better off, and their complete disregard for Delores as the mother, is shown in sharp contrast to the love of these women, Alma, Delores and Odette – complete strangers, connected by their common experience.

- The racist policies and attitudes of the time are highlighted when Sergeant Lowe travels to the city and confronts the Protection Board, trying to protest the granting of an exemption certificate to Odette and Sissy: see p. 220, and pp. 241–243.

Strength of culture

There are many references to cultural beliefs that keep Odette and Sissy strong and connected:

- Communing with nature, birds as messengers: each morning Odette appreciates Country and says that the birds speak to her. When the town was segregated and Aboriginal people were banned from crossing 'the line' into the white township, the birds spoke with the old people and said: 'If you folk aren't allowed in the town, we won't be bothering with it ourselves.' The birds don't fly over the town, they go around it (p. 8). Odette tells Sissy that birds are the truest of friends, and when the magpie is around, they are safe. (p. 33)
- Odette talks with Sissy about nature, noticing Country. Sissy is initially frustrated about not being able to see and sense the things Odette does, and Odette teaches her 'you're not looking with soft eyes', that she will learn 'with age and patience' and is 'not ready yet'. (pp. 39–40)

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- Odette teaches Sissy about their connection to the stars, their stories – and that these are sacred and safe: ‘*Them whitefellas, they can never touch the stars, no matter how clever they think they are.*’ (p. 85)
- Odette draws strength from being near the river. (p. 110)
- The Aboriginal people warned the white people that mining would cause damage to the earth and themselves, but their knowledge was dismissed as ‘*superstitions*’. (p. 21)
- Sissy asks Odette about how she talks with the old people when she visits the mission graves (pp.34–35) and, when Odette passes away years later, Millie is visited by Odette’s ghost on a rare ‘east wind’ (p. 256). When Sissy makes her way home with Odette’s ashes, Millie knows she is coming because: ‘The old people told me.’ (p. 255)
- Odette also ‘uses’ her culture to make money by giving white people the commodities and answers they want: selling her art work and making up a story that she is from the Bilga tribe, despite not knowing her family history due to dislocation on the mission growing up (pp. 36–38). In a sense, she is taking something back, after the dispossession and racism her people have been subject to, and it highlights the double standards existing where white people look down upon Aboriginal people and their culture in one sense and then want to profit from it in another.

Extension Activities

1. Adam Thompson’s short story ‘Honey’ (from the collection [Born Into This](#)) would be a useful comparison text when discussing the points presented in this guide under ‘Strength of culture’.
2. Students can research how the various impacts of being part of the stolen generations can affect generations of family members through: intergenerational trauma, entrenched poverty and disenfranchisement.
3. Students can select another of Tony Birch’s works to compare and contrast with this novel: *Shadowboxing*, *Father’s Day*, *The Promise*, *Common People*, *Dark as Last Night* and [Whisper Songs](#) would pair well and draw on similar themes.
4. Students can compare and contrast to poetry and short stories in the collection [Fire Front](#), edited by Alison Whittaker.
5. Students can explore the impact of mining on both environmental sustainability and cultural sites (and refer to recent events related to BHP in the Pilbara, and Rio Tinto in Juukan Gorge).
6. Students can explore World War II and the Holocaust, the experience of Holocaust survivors immigrating to Australia, the refugee experience compared to the Aboriginal experience.

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7. Students can explore [First Nations soldiers](#) in World War II and their treatment when returning from war.

About the Author: Tony Birch

Tony Birch is the author of three novels: the bestselling *The White Girl*, winner of the 2020 NSW Premier's Award for Indigenous Writing, and shortlisted for the 2020 Miles Franklin Literary Prize; *Ghost River*, winner of the 2016 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing; and *Blood*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2012. He is also the author of *Shadowboxing* and three short story collections, *Father's Day*, *The Promise* and *Common People*. In 2017 he was awarded the Patrick White Literary Award. In 2021 Tony released two new books, a poetry collection, *Whisper Songs*, and a new short story collection, *Dark as Last Night*, which won the 2022 Christina Stead Award for Fiction in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. Tony Birch is also an activist, historian and essayist. His website is: tony-birch.com

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Teachers Notes by Cara Shipp

Cara Shipp is a Wiradjuri/Welsh woman (descending from the Lamb and Shipp families in Central Western NSW) and is Head of Senior Campus at Silkwood School, Mount Nathan, in the Gold Coast hinterland. She has previously run alternative educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; held Head Teacher English/HASS/Languages positions; and served as President, Vice President and Editor with the ACT Association for the Teaching of English (ACTATE). Cara has completed a Masters degree in Education, focusing on Aboriginal literacy, and regularly presents cultural competence training at local and National conferences, particularly within the context of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the English curriculum. In 2013, Cara was part of the ACARA working party on incorporating the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures Cross-curriculum priority into the Civics and Citizenship curriculum.