

**Book Club Notes**  
**A Most Peculiar Act**  
**written by Marie Munkara**

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**ABOUT THE BOOK**

Another hilarious novel from Marie Munkara, *A Most Peculiar Act* takes a look at the ludicrous and bizarre nature and interpretations of the Aboriginal Protection Acts of the early twentieth century – and makes merciless fun of the characters involved. The story follows the trials and tribulations of Sugar, a 16 year-old Aboriginal fringe-camp dweller.

Set in Darwin during the Japanese bombing raids with the Aboriginal Ordinances Act and the ‘White Australia’ policy set as a backdrop, Sugar’s resistance to assimilation and the attempts by Horrid Hump and his henchmen to enforce it becomes a protracted battle that ends at the Christmas party from Hell. The story sees Sugar and her oppressors finally meet on a level playing field that none of them ever expected – a Japanese bombing raid. No one is safe from ridicule, regardless of race.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Marie Munkara was born on the banks of the Mainoru River in Arnhem Land. She is the author of *Every Secret Thing*, which won the 2008 David Unaipon and 2010 Northern Territory Book of the Year, and two children’s books, *Rusty Brown* and *Rusty and Jojo*. Marie currently resides in Darwin with her menagerie of pets and her teenage daughter.

**REVIEWS AND QUOTES**

*“The narrative voice is yarning, chatty and sardonic, but under all the jokes and stories there’s a sharp critique of bureaucrats and institutions, and an appreciation of the heroic nature of resistance.”*

– Kerry Goldsworthy, Sydney Morning Herald

*“among all the over-the-top bureaucratic orgies, the ludicrous and belittling names (Fuel Drum, Donkey Face) with which whites replace those they can’t pronounce and the dialogue in a range of approximate and competing pidgins, Munkara inserts moments of*

quiet reflection on the effects of the Act (and now, by implication, the Intervention) on indigenous people and their ways of dealing with it.”  
– Christine Piper, *The Advertiser*

## THEMES

- Aboriginal Histories and Cultures
- Governmental policies including the Aboriginal Protection Acts of the early Twentieth Century
- The expectation in this era that Aborigines should assimilate with the 'white' way of life
- The displacement and disregard for traditions and culture that took place during this time
- The Stolen Generation
- Acceptance & Belonging

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the Aboriginal Protection Acts (see the introduction), that promoted the policy of assimilation.
2. Discuss the author's witty and well-formed characterisation throughout the text. Who are your favourite characters and why?
3. Each chapter begins with an extract from the Aboriginal Protection Acts. Discuss the way in which each extract relates to the remainder of that chapter.
4. In what ways did Aboriginal people have to 'act and think like white fellas now' (p16)? Which of their own customs and beliefs were forbidden under the Acts?
5. Why is Ralphie such an integral character to *A Most Peculiar Act*? How do his thoughts, regrets and sentiments echo those of many of today's Australians? Discuss that he was, 'beginning to feel terrible' (p20) when Indigenous people had to abandon their traditional language and names. Why does he think that, 'language was the glue,' and that 'the fabric of their civilisation began to dissolve before their very eyes' (p20)?
6. Why do the camp dwellers think that Honey has been possessed by a bad spirit?
7. In Chapter 3, mobs from different countries are placed together into one camp with the assumption that they will have the same language, traditions and customs. Discuss the Government's misunderstanding of the various nations of the Aboriginal

peoples. How are the two mobs in *A Most Peculiar Act* different?  
<http://www.mappery.com/Australia-Aboriginal-Tribes-Map>

8. Discuss the changing role of women in Australia during the Twentieth Century and the way in which Drew Hepplewaite defies the typical 'female' of the 1940s.
9. Why does Drew insist on burning the bags made by the camp dwellers? What does this show about white people's understanding of indigenous ways of life during this era?
10. How do Drew's mannerisms show the inclusive and exclusive social effects of language? How can it empower or disempower people?
11. Why does Ralphie have, 'tears from the effects of the caustic smoke and his own emotion roll(ing) down his cheeks' (p67)?
12. Why does Ralphie struggle to find acceptance? Why does he find the fact that the camp dwellers 'only had each other' to be 'the most beautiful thing he's ever seen – he wanted that too.'  
P69
13. What role does Fuel Drum play in Ralphie's life?
14. Discuss the following extract that reveals the attitudes towards Aboriginal people during this era: 'It was expected that he exploit native women. It was expected that she be exploited' (p79).
15. Discuss The Stolen Generation as it features in the text, particularly with reference to Sugar and Honey.
16. Discuss the way in which Aboriginal people used passive resistance to protest against unjust policies: 'Be like a reed and bend in the wind' (p111).
17. Discuss the irony in Horrid Humps opinion that, 'just because his office was meant to look after the welfare of these people didn't mean the blighters could come in and make themselves at home' (p127).
18. Discuss Ralphie's sentiment that they deserved to be bombed because of the way they'd treated Indigenous people (p160).
19. How does Marie Munkara present her point of view through the ridiculing of characters and situations in the text?
20. How does the tension build to Penelope's Christmas dinner and the unexpected bombing of Darwin?
21. Discuss the ending of *A Most Peculiar Act*, particularly as Sugar leaves the cave that is soon to be filled with water and as

Ralphie ironically hopes that the leprosarium will be bombed.  
Why has the author concluded her text in this way?

22. *A Most Peculiar Act* is very cleverly written, with perfectly nuanced characters. It ridicules not only the types of people carrying out the Protection Acts but the Acts themselves. Discuss the way in which Marie Munkara has juxtaposed irony and humour to expose what is a very blatant and racist policy? Discuss the power of this in creating such a meaningful text.