



Teacher Notes
Becoming Kirrali Lewis
written by Jane Harrison

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler
in context with the Australian Curriculum

OVERVIEW

It is 1985 and Kirrali has just moved to Melbourne to begin her law degree. Goal-driven and fiercely independent, she could not feel more disconnected from her Koori heritage; as a baby she was adopted by the Lewis family and raised 'white' in rural Victoria.

University life is not quite what Kirrali anticipated and she is soon confronted by notions of her true identity. She also finds herself on an unexpected quest to find her biological parents.

Becoming Kirrali Lewis is a coming-of-age novel about the importance of friendship, family and a genuine sense of belonging.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Harrison is a descendant of the Muruwari people of NSW. Her play *Stolen* has been performed in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Tasmania, WA, the UK, Hong Kong and Tokyo, with readings in Canada, New York and Los Angeles. *Stolen* was the co-winner of the Kate Challis RAKA Award 2002. *Rainbow's End* premiered in Melbourne (2005), has had a Tokyo production, toured to 33 venues throughout Australia in 2011 and won the Drover's Award for Tour of the Year (2012). Both plays have been on the English syllabi. Jane's essays include *My Journey through Stolen*, the MJA Ross Ingram 2010 award-winning *Healing our communities, healing ourselves*, and *Indig-curious; who can play Aboriginal roles?* (2012). She guest edited *RealBlak* performing arts magazine (2012) and has an MA in Playwriting from QUT (2010). She has two daughters.

THEMES

Race relations

- Race relations between Aboriginal and white Australians during the 1960s and 1980s is highlighted in the text.
- Aboriginal culture
- The structure and importance of family and relationships within the Koori community feature in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*.

- Charley shares his cultural knowledge with Kirrali; he tells her about her totem (the brolga) and shows her why she has to fight for her people.

Identity

- Kirrali is confused about her identity, having been born Aboriginal and raised white. She is naïve about the hardships faced by Aboriginal people, refusing to accept any government assistance provided for Indigenous students.
- After meeting Erin (friend) and Kirk (boyfriend) and finding her biological parents, Kirrali begins to discover a whole new side to herself and her heritage.

Independence

- Kirrali is fiercely independent until she realises that accepting the right kind of help is actually courageous.
- Friendship/Relationships
- The friendships that develop between Kirrali and other characters such as Erin and Kirk further connect her with her Koori heritage.
- The friendship between Kirrali and Martina (childhood friend) changes but still provides stability for both girls.
- Kirrali's relationship with her biological mother changes as the text progresses.

Courage

- It takes courage for Kirrali to search for her biological parents.
- Charley shows courage both in his activism for Indigenous rights and in the way he approaches fatherhood and death.

Adoption

- Kirrali was adopted as a baby. Her relationship with her adoptive parents and siblings is very strong.
- Kirrali has to overcome feelings of abandonment when she first meets Cherie.

WRITING STYLE

- *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* is written in first person, past tense. The narrative is told in three sections. The first and last are told from Kirrali's perspective and are set in 1985. The middle section is set in the 1960s and is narrated by Kirrali's biological mother, Cherie. The text suits a Young Adult audience and is very accessible.

CULTURAL NOTES

An effective way to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander information is to regionalise it within your curriculum. Educating your students about their own local history, and bringing to life the Indigenous past of your region is a wonderful way to start. The following websites will be useful when exploring the themes raised in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*.

<http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/media/105332/two-years-after-the-1966-wave-hill-walk-off>

http://indigenoustrights.net.au/land_rights/aboriginal_embassy_1972

<http://www.australianstogether.org.au/stories/detail/the-stolen-generations>

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/crosscurriculumpriorities/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-histories-and-cultures>

<http://theconversation.com/re-writing-australias-history-of-forced-adoption-5142>

<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/aboriginal-history-timeline-1970-1999>

<http://indigenoustrights.net.au/>

CLASSROOM IDEAS

- *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* begins with Kirrali standing at the gates of a university, far from home. She is a 'fish out of water'. Discuss the way in which this technique adds instant tension to the text and draws the reader into the narrative.
- As you read *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* create a 'Character Iceberg' of Kirrali. Above the waterline, note what you are told directly from the text. Below the waterline, write things that you have to infer about her. How could you use a character iceberg when writing about yourself?
- Kirrali reminisces about the day she chose her dog, Finn, from the Lost Dogs home. She says that she feels closer to Finn than anyone. Why do you think this is? How is Kirrali's adoption into the Lewis family similar to that of Finn's?
- Why does Kirrali refuse help such as Abstudy? How did Kirrali's opinions on things like this reflect her 'white' upbringing?
- The author uses figurative language throughout *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*. Keep track of these devices, discussing the way in which they add to the text. Examples include:
 - My mind slid down into a sticky black sadness p55
 - The black text swimming before my eyes like ants having a corroboree p66
 - As laid-back as a lizard on a hot rock p136
 - The air-brushed blue sky was darkening to denim p139
 - The tectonic plates of their lives were about to shift p150
 - Erin's smile was like the sun coming out after a spring storm p215
- How is Charley a reluctant hero? Use examples from the text to support your point of view.
- Discuss the friendship between Kirrali and Martina. How do the girls support one another throughout the novel?
- What does Kirrali mean when she says she wants to get away from 'small communities and people's narrow expectations' (p24)?
- Kirrali feels lonely in her new city. Discuss how the themes of loneliness and friendship are central to *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*.
- Research historical events in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* such as:

- Gough Whitlam sprinkling soil in Vincent Lingiari's hand to return Wave Hill Station to the traditional owners
 - The 1967 referendum.
 - Apartheid in South Africa (and the Springbok Tour)
- Why does Kirrali say, 'I was the little black duck who didn't know how to quack' (p31)?
- Kirrali comments that her 'hairdressing work had taught (her) how to be as small a target as possible' (p35). Discuss her thinking here. What would Charley think of this sentiment? Support your ideas with reasoning.
- What prompts Kirrali to finally look for her biological parents? Why did she wait so long to do this?
- Why does the author decide to have Martina leave uni and marry Robbie? How does this sub-plot fit into Jane Harrison's broader narrative?
- Discuss Kirk's statement that 'there's more than one way to change the world' (p53).
- Why does Kirrali say that 'the cold hand of dread reached up and dug its fingernails into my heart' (p54)?
- Create a graphic organiser that compares the Koori family structure with that of Anglo-Saxon Australians.
- The Stolen Generation and the repercussions are felt through Erin's story and that of her misplaced sister, Mavis. Discuss the significance of this storyline to the novel.
- This story is set well before Kevin Rudd made his 'Sorry' speech in 2007. View his speech on YouTube. Discuss the importance of the speech to characters such as Charley, Erin, Mavis and others.
- How are Cherie and Kirrali similar and different in personality? Why do they describe each other as 'annoying'?
- Discuss Jarrah's thoughts about bitterness in relation to his forgiveness of the white policeman (p138).
- What comments are being made about suburban middle-class attitudes towards race in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*?
- Why is Charley so passionate about Kirrali becoming an Aboriginal lawyer? Why would he be disappointed if she went into international law instead?
- Discuss why the author has included stereotypes and clichés in the text such as the garden figurine of an Aboriginal man standing with one leg folded and propped up with a spear (p149).
- Cherie feels as though she has no control over her destiny when her baby is taken away from her. If you were Cherie, how would you have handled this situation? How much of her life was a result of the era in which she found herself pregnant? If this happened today rather than in the 1960s, how would her life have been different? What would remain unchanged?
- As Charley gets to know Kirrali, he tries to teach her to use her heart, not her head, in order to better help her community and herself. Why does he believe this? What else does Charley teach Kirrali?
- How does Kirrali grow and change from the beginning of the text to the end?

- What does Charley mean when he says, 'To be Aboriginal is to be political. You're born into it' (p191)?
- Why does Martina often feel more Koori than Kirrali? Why does Kirrali get hurt by this?
- Kirrali is asked to speak at Charley's funeral. Write this eulogy in the role of Kirrali.
- How does the relationship between Cherie and Kirrali change as the novel progresses?
- What parts of Charley's letter to Kirrali could help guide you through your own life's journey?
- Using a blogging tool such as Edmodo, keep a class blog as you read *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*. What are your thoughts about the characters? What are your opinions of the text?

Appendix – Links to the Australian Curriculum

Year Level	English- Language	English - Literature	English - Literacy	Geography
Year 10	Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people (ACELA1564)	Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639) Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)	Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including <u>media texts</u> , through language, structural and/or visual choices (ACELY1749) Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)	The environmental worldviews of people and their implications for environmental management (ACHGK071) The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' approaches to <u>custodial responsibility</u> and environmental management in different regions of Australia (ACHGK072)