



Book Club Notes
Becoming Kirrali Lewis
written by Jane Harrison

Book Club Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

ABOUT THE BOOK

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. Set in the 1980s, it allows readers to recollect or discover social attitudes and race relations in Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Harrison is a descendant of the Muruwari people of NSW. She is an award-winning playwright and has an MA in Playwriting from the Queensland University of Technology. In 2002, her first play *Stolen* was the co-winner of the Kate Challis RAKA Award. It has since been performed throughout Australia as well as the UK, Hong Kong and Japan. Her most recent play *The Visitors* formed part of the Melbourne Theatre Company 2014 Cybec Electric Series. Jane has been the recipient of several playwriting awards and her essays have been published in various journals. Jane lives in Melbourne and has two daughters.

REVIEWS AND QUOTES

"I thoroughly enjoyed Jane Harrison's 'Becoming Kirrali Lewis' – a gutsy and poignant coming-of-age story about two incredible women, that casts a critical eye over Australia's changing (and still needs to change) racial landscape. 5/5"

-Danielle Binks, ALPHA Reader

"In *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*, which follows in the footsteps of *Looking for Alibrandi* and has the potential to become a school text, Harrison is able to tell a relatable story for

all races and ages, and importantly, one in which indigenous young people can be represented."

-Sally Browne, The Courier Mail

THEMES

- Race Relations
- Aboriginal Culture
- Identity
- Relationships
- Courage
- Adoption
- Belonging

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* begins with Kirrali standing at the gates of a city university, far from home. She is a 'fish out of water'. How can you relate to Kirrali as she stands at these gates? What does this scene symbolize?
2. As a modern audience, what aspects of the text do you find politically incorrect? Reflect on social attitudes during the 1980s in contrast with today's. How would characters such as Charley, Mavis and Erin respond to Kevin Rudd's 2007 'Sorry' speech had they been there to witness it?
3. How is Charley a reluctant hero? What aspects of his life might he have chosen to change had attitudes towards indigenous people been different?
4. Discuss the friendship between Kirrali and Martina. How do the girls support one another throughout the novel?
5. How do the themes of loneliness and friendship underpin *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*?
6. 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?
7. What prompts Kirrali to finally look for her biological parents? Why did she wait so long to do this? How would you have handled this situation?
8. 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.
9. How are Cherie and Kirrali similar and different in personality? Why do they describe each other as 'annoying'? How do you find these characters?
10. What comments are being made about suburban middle-class attitudes towards race in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*? Have these attitudes changed since the 1980s?
11. Why has the author included stereotypes and clichés in the text such as the garden figurine of an Aborigine standing with one leg folded and propped up with a spear (p149)?
12. 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?

13. Discuss Charley's statement that, 'To be Aboriginal is to be political. You're born into it' (p191).
14. How important is a sense of belonging and identity in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*?
15. How does the shifting point of view shape your experience of *Becoming Kirrali Lewis*?