

# Magabala Books • Teacher Notes

## Black Cockatoo

Written by Carl Merrison and Hakea Hustler

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Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

### OVERVIEW

*Black Cockatoo* is a vignette that follows Mia, a young Aboriginal girl as she explores the fragile connections of family and culture.

Mia is a 13-year-old girl from a remote community in the Kimberley. She is saddened by the loss of her brother as he distances himself from the family. She feels powerless to change the things she sees around her... until one day she rescues her totem animal, the dirran black cockatoo, and soon discovers her own inner strength.

*Black Cockatoo* is a wonderful small tale on the power of standing up for yourself, culture and ever-present family ties.

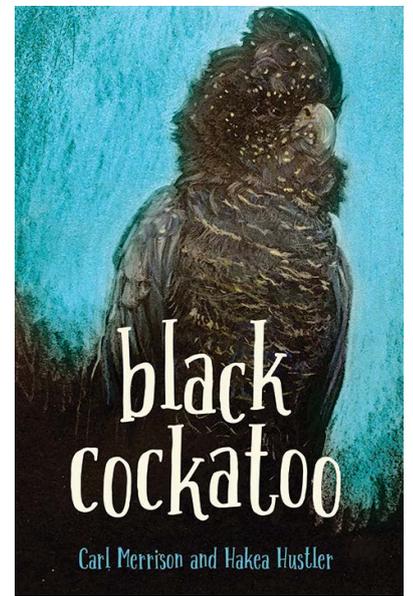
- Highly original Australian story set in a small community – main character, Mia, will resonate with girls and reluctant readers
- Highly engaging story with a universal theme
- Extraordinary read
- Publicity will be sought in all relevant magazines, journals and newspapers

### THEMES

- Respect
- Freedom
- Relationships
- Aboriginal Peoples – Social Life and Customs
- Totems
- Black Cockatoos
- Sustainability

### AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

*Black Cockatoo* is a powerfully written vignette that focusses on Mia's struggle to understand her brother's changing attitudes and behaviour; she is sensitive to the impact this is having on her family and heritage. Integrating Jaru language and various aspects of Aboriginal culture, the writing style and narrative structure provides a high-quality text that explores the importance of inner strength and the value of relationships. Due to its themes and context, it is best suited to Upper Primary and Young Adolescent audiences.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Carl Merrison** is a Jaru man from Halls Creek. Carl works with young Indigenous boys through the Clontarf Academy focusing in improving engagement with education and providing a positive role model. Carl was nominated for Australian of the Year in 2016.

**Hakea Hustler** was a high school English teacher at Halls Creek District High School. Hakea is committed to Indigenous education with a particular focus on school engagement, English language and story as learning, understanding and empowerment.

## LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This book and the classroom activities provided are primarily relevant to the following areas of the Australian Curriculum:

Learning area	Year level
English	Years 5-10

The appendix highlights relevant content descriptors and cross-curriculum priorities that relate to the text and classroom ideas provided.

## CLASSROOM IDEAS

- The opening sentence of *Black Cockatoo* is both arresting and engaging. Discuss how the authors have achieved this through their use of language features.
- What makes Mia save the dirran? Highlight phrases in the text that show the connection that Mia feels to the *dirran*. How does this connection intensify as the narrative progresses?
- Both Mia and the dirran are described as being defiant. How do they both exhibit this characteristic? Why might they have this in common?
- The grandfather remains calm when Jy's inappropriate behaviour requires mediation. Why does he respond in this way? How does this help to stabilise the longevity of their relationship? How do you think Jy would have reacted had his grandfather been angry with him instead of disappointed?
- What is the grandfather's opinion of Jy killing the birds? How do we know this?
- What makes the grandfather think that Jy has slowly lost respect for him? What signs are there that Jy does still hold respect for his grandfather?
- What is the difference between hunting animals in a traditional way and killing them as Jy is? Why do the authors make mention of the fact that Mia is used to seeing animals die and has hunted many of her own?
- Using evidence from the text, discuss the role that respect plays in Aboriginal culture?
- Why is Mia not 'meant to challenge [Jy]' (p2)? Why might she find this a difficult rule to follow?
- The authors use figurative language to enhance the text. Analyse their use of such language, and the contribution it has on the narrative. Examples include:
  - The choruses of the *yidiyidi* cicadas hummed p3
  - Large storm clouds rolled in across the horizon and the moon cast eerie shadows as it peeked out between the clouds p3
  - A strong wind brushed against the family p3
  - Picking a stick off the ground to hit them across the yard like a tennis ball p10
  - Her hair still streamed cold water down her back p10
  - Jy seethed, his anger rippled under his scarred skin...Mia, her skin unblemished, radiated optimism and hope p11
  - The old man met his gaze sadly, his disappointment clear p11
  - She could feel the dirran's freedom like a physical force p14
- Discuss the importance of totems in Aboriginal culture. See Section 4 of the following site for more information <https://www.australianstogether.org.au/discover/indigenous-culture/aboriginal-spirituality>.



- Why does the grandfather say that the approaching storm is in response to Jy's actions? How does Jy react to this comment?
- In what ways does *Black Cockatoo* address the importance of consequences?
- Why does Jy's grandfather tell him that 'you need to respect our past' (p3)? How does this comment help share the significance of the past in Aboriginal culture?
- When the dirran frees itself from the box in her bedroom, Mia sees 'more of herself in the bird than she dared to admit' (p4). What does Mia mean by this?
- Discuss the symbolism of the cage, both the dirran's and Mia's.
- How do you feel about Jy's treatment of Mia? Write a reflection that shares your ideas, also exploring the kind of sibling that you hope to be.
- Why does Mia cry as her brother drifts further away? Why do you think Jy is behaving in this way? What might be the cause of his anger?
- There is no mention of Jy's father in the text, however, there is mention of his uncles and cousins. How might the absence of his father contribute to his behaviour? What role do his grandfather and uncles play in guiding Jy through this difficult period?
- Why, as the dirran gains physical strength, is 'his mind [is] still broken' (p10)?
- Discuss the significance of the other dirrans taking turns landing beside the cage and copying the sad dance of the injured cockatoo. How is dance an important form of storytelling and expression in Aboriginal culture?
- Reread the passage on page 10 describing the sounds of Mia's household at night. Write a reflection that shares your thoughts on Mia's 'quiet crying' included in this description.
- Discuss the use of skin to compare Jy and Mia: 'His anger rippled under his scarred skin...Mia, her skin unblemished, radiated optimism and hope' (p11). Why is Jy's skin scarred? Why do these siblings have such different experiences?
- How has the relationship between Jy and his grandfather changed since he was a young boy? Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Discuss the importance Aboriginal culture places on 'advice or creation stories about the land and languages they were all connected to' (p11). Why is Jy straying from these traditions?
- Why would it be better if Jy could turn his anger into passion? How would that make things different for him?
- Why does the grandfather want Jy to go out to the station and spend time with he and his uncles there?
- Why, if Jy can get away from the town and its influences, might there be hope for him?
- When on the station, what do you think the Law time may have encompassed? What other lessons would Jy be exposed to during his visit?
- When the men go to the station, Mia falls asleep under a tree. She dreams she is a dirran, and that she too is locked up. In the role of Mia, write a reflection about your dream and its meaning.
- Why does Mia decide to release the dirran even though she knows it is not strong enough to survive in the wild? What does this share about the message of *Black Cockatoo*?
- Discuss the way in which Mia feels a sense of freedom after hearing the woman telling her the story of the old dirran. How does this help her to understand that 'she could stretch her wings far and still land safely back home whenever she needed' (p15)?
- In your own words, retell the story of how the dirran came to be Mia's totem.
- How have Carl Merrison and Hakea Hustler used characterisation and imagery to create a vivid and captivating text? In what ways do they 'show not tell'?
- As you read *Black Cockatoo*, discuss aspects of Aboriginal culture that are evident throughout the text.
- Retell the story of *Black Cockatoo* in the form of a poem.
- Using evidence from the text, create character profiles of Jy, Mia and their grandfather. How have the authors created these characters in so few words?
- Choose a descriptive passage from *Black Cockatoo* to illustrate, such as Mia's dream on p14.



- Discuss how the authors have made this story engaging and moving. How have they held the readers' interest by using various techniques, for example character development, plot tension, imagery and symbolism?
- Create a story graph to map the plot of *Black Cockatoo*.
- Tell this story from Jy's point of view.
- Jara language has been integrated into *Black Cockatoo*. Why have the authors done this? Consult the glossary at the end of the text to use these words in retelling this story in your own words.

## APPENDIX - LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Year	Curriculum Area
5	<p><b>English</b> Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify aspects of literary texts that convey details or information about particular social, cultural and historical contexts (<a href="#">ACELT1608</a>)</li> </ul>
6	<p><b>English</b> Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse and evaluate similarities and differences in texts on similar topics, themes or plots (<a href="#">ACELT1614</a>)</li> <li>• Create literary texts that adapt or combine aspects of texts students have experienced in innovative ways (<a href="#">ACELT1618</a>)</li> </ul>
7	<p><b>English</b> Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (<a href="#">ACELT1619</a>)</li> <li>• Discuss aspects of texts, for example their aesthetic and social value, using relevant and appropriate meta language (<a href="#">ACELT1803</a>)</li> <li>• Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (<a href="#">ACELT1622</a>)</li> </ul>
8	<p><b>English</b> Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups (<a href="#">ACELT1626</a>)</li> <li>• Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (<a href="#">ACELT1806</a>)</li> <li>• Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts (<a href="#">ACELT1807</a>)</li> </ul>
9	<p><b>English</b> Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (<a href="#">ACELT1633</a>)</li> <li>• Reflect on, discuss and explore notions of literary value and how and why such notions vary according to context (<a href="#">ACELT1634</a>)</li> </ul>
10	<p><b>English</b> Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (<a href="#">ACELT1639</a>)</li> <li>• Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (<a href="#">ACELT1812</a>)</li> <li>• Compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts such as poetry to evoke particular emotional responses (<a href="#">ACELT1643</a>)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Cross-Curriculum Priorities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Sustainability</li> </ul>	

