Teacher Notes
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SYNOPSIS

*Stolen Girl* is a fictionalised account of the Stolen Generation. This picture book for younger readers tells the story of an Aboriginal girl taken from her family and sent to a children’s home. Through the combination of beautiful mixed media illustrations by artist Norma MacDonald and a sensitive yet uncomplicated text by Trina Saffrotti, readers are given an insight into the life of a child who has been displaced into a world void of love, family and culture. The book concludes with a sense of hope as the girl takes her first steps towards home.

THEMES

**Relationships**
- The young Aboriginal girl has a strong bond with her mother and her people.
- Although she has been taken away, the girl strives to recall all that she has been taught by her family.
- It is her love for her mother that provides her with the courage to leave the children’s home.
- Her dreams of returning home underpin the text.

**Indigenous Culture**
- Indigenous children from various regions and language groups were placed together in children’s homes, regardless of the fact they did not speak the same language or share the same histories.
- Illustrations in the book reveal the power of indigenous storytelling through art.
- The girl’s mother and Elders share their knowledge and stories with her.
- Assimilation was a government policy that overlooked the value of Indigenous culture.

**Identity**

*The identity of the Stolen Generation was stripped in the following ways:*
- The children were given ‘white’ names rather than being permitted to use their given names;
- The children were discouraged from speaking in their indigenous languages;
- Their clothing was replaced;
- Connections to their own people were severed;
- A lot of very young children did not learn of their indigenous heritage until they were adults.

**The Stolen Generation**
- Government policy decided to take away children who were not ‘full blood’ Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders.
- This occurred from the early 1900s to the late 1960s.

WRITING STYLE

*Stolen Girl* is a narrative told in the third person. It is written in a combination of past and present tense. The narration promotes compassion and empathy. It conveys the theme of the Stolen Generation in a way that allows readers to form their own opinions and judgements.

STUDY NOTES

**Before reading**

*Discuss the front cover and title of the book.*
- Describe the body language of the girl on the front cover.
- Who is she?
- How old might she be?
- Where is she?
- What does the title suggest this book may be about?

*Discuss the Stolen Generation as a class.*
- When did this occur?
- Who did it affect?
- Why did this occur?
- What effects may this have had on children taken from their families and on parents whose children were taken from them?
• Watch Kevin Rudd’s apology.
  • Why was the Prime Minister’s apology an important step towards reconciliation?
  • Why had an apology not been offered previously?
  • With older students, debate the decision of the previous Prime Minister, John Howard, to express ‘regret’ rather than an apology. How are these two different?

Read the preamble of Stolen Girl – ‘About the Stolen Generation’.
• What is meant by terms such as ‘full blood’, ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’?
• Discuss the reasoning behind the government policy that led to the Stolen Generation.
  • Use De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats to assess the government policy.
  • In a paragraph, discuss your own conclusions about this policy and its long-term implications. Use examples and reasons to support your opinions.

Have you ever been separated from your family? You may have become lost or had to stay with friends or relatives? Brainstorm words to describe how you felt.
• Write a journal entry to reflect on a time when you have been separated from your family. How did you feel? What was it like when you were reunited?
• Show this through an illustration.

After reading
The story begins very abruptly with the sound of bells waking up the children before they eat breakfast at the children’s home.
• Compare the first two double-page spreads, especially the way in which the illustrations depict the very different experiences of eating breakfast.
  • Discuss how these two illustrations symbolise very simply the differences between being with family and being at the children’s home.
  • The illustration of the girl having breakfast with her mother shows the two of them extremely content. Note that this happiness has nothing to do with material possessions — it is a true happiness based on love. What makes you truly happy?
• What story is being told in this illustration? Examine other examples of indigenous art that tell stories.
• The girl’s mother teaches her essential life skills. What are these skills?
  • What important life skills have your parents taught you?
  • Discuss the importance of the relationship between parents and their children.

Using watercolour pencils, if possible, draw a picture to illustrate one of your favourite things to do with your family. Write a journal piece to accompany your picture.
Have you ever listened to stories from the ‘old days’ from your elders such as grandparents? How important are these stories to your identity?

- Watch an episode of the SBS documentary series ‘Who Do You Think You Are’ such as that about Torres Strait Islander Christine Anu. Discuss the notion of ancestry and identity.

- Trace your own family tree.

- Look carefully at the page opening in which the uniformed man takes the girl away.

  - The reader sees the life of the Aboriginal girl from two different perspectives. In the foreground of this illustration are things that may have seemed important to white people of the time such as the fact she is not wearing shoes. In the background are things important to the girl — her country, her home.

  - Re-read the text on this page. Discuss the significance of these words as she is taken away from her mother. Do you think that the government perhaps did try to ‘forget’ that she was there by taking her away?

  - Imagine you are this girl. What might be going through your mind at this point in the text?

- Discuss the ways in which the girl’s identity has been taken away.

  - The reader never learns her name. Why do you think this is?

  - The dress she is wearing is taken away; her clothes are replaced.

  - She gets into trouble for using her native language.

- What does the girl do to try to hold onto her Indigenous culture and to remember her mother?

  - Draw a rectangle with a diagonal line. On one side, write nouns, adjectives and verbs to describe the girl’s home. On the other side, write words to describe life at the children’s home.

  - The final page opening offers a sense of hope as the girl decides to leave.

  - Look carefully at the illustration. What stands out in this picture? What does the key symbolise?

- Compare the use of colour throughout the book. How has the illustrator used colour to convey meaning?

- Read extracts from people of the Stolen Generation readily available online or from books such as Rabbit Proof Fence.

- If age appropriate, view scenes from Rabbit Proof Fence. Use this in conjunction with a discussion of the issues in Stolen Girl to provide stimulus for a variety of tasks such as:

  - A letter to the editor;

  - Poetry;

  - A persuasive essay;

  - A letter of apology;

  - A newspaper article;

  - A short documentary or photo story;

  - A class blog on this topic;

  - A piece of artwork.