

Teacher Notes
A Most Peculiar Act
written by Marie Munkara

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

OVERVIEW

Another hilarious novel from prize-winning author, Marie Munkara, *A Most Peculiar Act* takes a look at the ludicrous and bizarre nature and interpretations of the Aboriginal Protection Act of the early twentieth century making merciless fun of those involved. Set in Darwin, during the Japanese bombing raids with the White Australia Policy in full swing, the story follows the trials and tribulations of Sugar, a 16 year-old Aboriginal fringe-camp dweller.

Sugar's resistance to assimilation, and 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.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR

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 childrens' books, *Rusty Brown* and *Rusty and Jojo*. Marie currently resides in Darwin with her menagerie of pets and her teenage daughter.

THEMES

Aboriginal Histories and Cultures:

- Governmental policies including the Aboriginal Protection Act of the early Twentieth Century provide the basis for the text.
- Aboriginal people were expected to assimilate with the 'white' way of life.
- Much displacement and disregard for traditions and culture took place during this time.

Stolen Generation:

- The book is set during the era of the Stolen Generation; the direct impact of this policy is felt by Sugar when Honey is taken from her.

Acceptance & Belonging:

- Ralphie craves acceptance after being abandoned as a child; the Aboriginal people in the camp accept Ralphie.

WRITING STYLE

A Most Peculiar Act is a cleverly written and humorous novel for Young Adults aged 15+. The sophisticated vocabulary and narrative structure evokes a sense of irony as it ridicules not only the Protection Act themselves but also the people who upheld them. The characters are perfectly nuanced and the plot, while seemingly simplistic, is anything but. This literary text is relevant to both the English and History curriculums.

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

These notes have been written in context with the Australian Curriculum. The appendix highlights a selection of relevant content descriptors across a range of year levels that the following activities address.

CULTURAL NOTES

- Learn more about the Aboriginal Protection Act using the following websites:
<http://foundingdocs.gov.au/item-sdid-22.html>
<http://australianmuseum.net.au/Indigenous-Australia-Timeline-1901-to-1969>
- To identify the many different Aboriginal nations of Australia, use a Map of Nations <http://www.mappery.com/Australia-Aboriginal-Tribes-Map>
- To learn more about the Stolen Generation, access the following websites:
<http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/education-kit/stolen-generations/>
<http://www.nsdcc.org.au/stolen-generations/history-of-the-stolen-generations/the-history-of-the-stolen-generations>
- Examine indigenous artefacts such as like dilly bags
<http://australianmuseum.net.au/Dilly-bag-from-south-western-Queensland-c1905>

CLASSROOM IDEAS

- Discuss the introduction to *A Most Peculiar Act* which provides useful information about the Aboriginal Protection Act, highlighting the policy of assimilation. This will provide useful pre-reading background knowledge.
- The author provides particularly witty and well-formed characterisation throughout the text. As you read each chapter, keep a record of the traits of each of the main characters. Discuss the way in which Marie Munkara has done this so effectively, including use of language features and point of view.
- Each chapter begins with an extract from the Aboriginal Protection Act. Discuss the ways in which each extract relates to the remainder of that chapter.
- In what ways did Aborigines have to 'act and think like whitefellas now' (p16)? Which of their own customs and beliefs were forbidden under the Act?
- 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 why he was, 'beginning to feel terrible' when the Aborigines had to abandon their traditional language and names. Why does he think that, 'their language was the glue,' and that, 'the fabric of their civilisation began to dissolve before their very eyes' (p19)?
- Why do the camp dwellers think that Honey has been possessed by a bad spirit?
- 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. After reading this chapter, discuss the government's misunderstanding of the various nations of the Aboriginal peoples. Use a map of nations to explore and discuss the different nation of Aboriginal Australia. How are the two mobs in *A Most Peculiar Act* different?
<http://www.mappery.com/Australia-Aboriginal-Tribes-Map>
- 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.
- 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?
- How do Drew's mannerisms and actions with Aboriginal people show how language can have inclusive and exclusive social effects? How does language empower or disempower people in this text?

- Why does Ralphie have, 'tears from the effects of the caustic smoke and his own emotion roll(ing) down his cheeks' (p67)? What relationship does this sentiment have with Ralphie's admiration for the way in which Aboriginal people accept one another?
- Ralphie is struggling to find acceptance 'in a world that wasn't very accepting of those who were less fortunate than themselves' (p67). He wants to stay with the camp dwellers who have little else but each other. What does Ralphie mean when he says, 'it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen' (p69)?
- What role does Fuel Drum play in Ralphie's life?
- In a paragraph, respond to the following extract: 'It was expected that he exploit native women. It was expected that she be exploited' (p79). What does this show about the treatment of Aboriginal people during the early twentieth century?
- The Stolen Generation features in the text. Discuss this policy in light of Sugar and Honey. Incorporate other texts into this discussion including the picture book *Stolen Girl* by Trina Saffroti and Norma MacDonald.
- When Honey is taken from Sugar, the author writes, 'How could a baby be taken from right under your nose and given away like a puppy ... by the very ones who could throw you into the clink for stealing a blanket?' (p110)? She continues: '... it would break their hearts,' [meaning the adoptive parents] to give the babies back.' Write a public speech, a letter to the editor or create an advertisement that shares your point of view on this theme.
- Discuss the way in which indigenous people used passive resistance to protest against such unjust policies: 'And so it was that the strategy of passive resistance came into being ... Be like a reed and bend in the wind.' (p111)
- Discuss the irony in Horrid Hump's 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)
- In a paragraph, respond to Ralphie's sentiment that they deserved to be bombed because of the way they'd treated Aborigines (p160).
- How does Marie Munkara present her point of view through the ridiculing of characters and situations in the text?
- Create a graphic organiser that pieces together all of the characters and events of *A Most Peculiar Act*. Show how the tension builds to Penelope's Christmas dinner and the unexpected bombing of Darwin.

- 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 the text in this way?
- *A Most Peculiar Act* is very cleverly written, with perfectly nuanced characters. It ridicules not only the types of people carrying out the Protection Act but the Act itself. Discuss the way in which Marie Munkara has juxtaposed irony and humour with what is a very blatant and racist policy? Discuss the power of this in creating such a meaningful text.
- What values and attitudes are being expressed in *A Most Peculiar Act*?
- What do you think is the main theme or message in *A Most Peculiar Act*? Why? Discuss.
- Select a scene/chapter from *A Most Peculiar Act* on which to write a script for a play. Perform this scene.
- Who is your favourite character in *A Most Peculiar Act*? Why?
- The main theme of the novel is epitomised in the last paragraph of p168. Here, Sugar contemplates the white people's fear of a Japanese invasion – yet they cannot see that they themselves invaded the Aboriginal nations. What point is the author making about invasion, assimilation and the ludicrous Aboriginal Protection Act? Discuss how this humorous and ironic novel is also an example of passive resistance to such policies and events.

Appendix – Links to the Australian Curriculum

At the time these teacher's notes were compiled (2014, the Australian Curriculum for Year 11/12 was still at draft stage. Content descriptions may therefore change.

Year Level	English - Language	English - Literature	English - Literacy
Yr 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people (ACELA1564) • Understand that people's evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems, the context and the purpose and mode of communication (ACELA1565) • Compare the purposes, text structures and language features of traditional and contemporary texts in different media (ACELA1566) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639) • Reflect on, extend, endorse or refute others' interpretations of and responses to literature (ACELT1640) • Analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced may influence audience response (ACELT1641) • Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812) • Identify, explain and discuss how narrative viewpoint, structure, characterisation and devices including analogy and satire shape different 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts are represented in texts, including media texts, 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) • Use comprehension strategies to compare and contrast information within and between texts, identifying and analysing

		interpretations and responses to a text (ACELT1642)	embedded perspectives, and evaluating supporting evidence (ACELY1754)
Yr 10 History		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Background to the struggle of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples for rights and freedoms before 1965, including the 1938 Day of Mourning and the Stolen Generations (ACDSEH104) 	
Yr 11/12 English		<p>Unit 2 Compare texts in a variety of contexts, mediums and modes by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining the relationship between purpose and context (ACEEN021) <p>Investigate the representation of ideas, attitudes and voices in texts including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing the ways language features, text structures and stylistic choices shape points of view and influence audiences (ACEEN024) analysing how attitude and mood are created, for example, through the use of humour in satire and parody. (ACEEN027) <p>Reflect on their own and others' texts by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing the values and attitudes expressed in texts (ACEEN038) evaluating the effectiveness of texts in representing ideas, attitudes and voices (ACEEN039) <p>Unit 4 Evaluate how texts convey perspectives through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the selection of language features that generate empathy or controversy, for example, juxtaposition of image and text. (ACEEN068) <p>Reflect on their own and others' texts by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing and evaluating how different attitudes and perspectives underpin texts (ACEEN076) 	
Yr 11/12 Modern History		<p>Unit 2 Recognition and rights of indigenous peoples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nature of government policies and their impact on indigenous peoples, for example protection, assimilation (including the Stolen Generations), and self-determination (ACHMH072) 	