

Magabala Books • Teacher Notes

Becoming Kirrali Lewis

by Jane Harrison

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

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.

THEMES

- Race relations
- Aboriginal culture
- Identity
- Adoption
- Independence
- Friendship/Relationships

AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

Becoming Kirrali Lewis is easily accessible for a Young Adult audience and explores themes relevant to the age group. Written in first person, past tense, the narrative is told in three sections. The first and last sections are told from Kirrali's perspective and the middle section is narrated by Kirrali's biological mother, Cherie.

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This book and the classroom activities provided are primarily relevant to English and History for Year 10. The appendix highlights relevant content descriptions, cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities. *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* is also appropriate for senior secondary students.

CULTURAL NOTES

Becoming Kirrali Lewis explores complex themes that some Indigenous and non-Indigenous students may find confronting or distressing. Teachers may find it useful to read [Teaching Indigenous content with Magabala Books](#).

To further explore some of the events and themes raised in the text the following links may be useful:

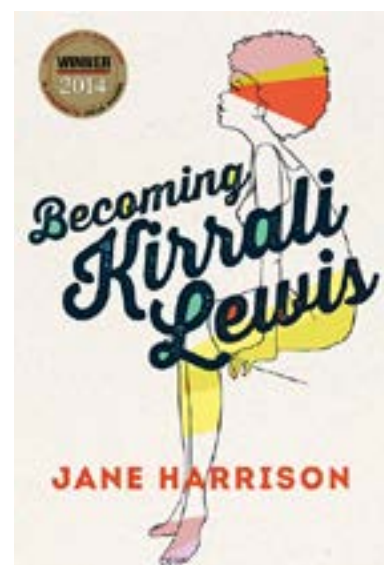
<http://splash.abc.net.au/home#!/media/105332/two-years-after-the-1966-wave-hill-walk-off>

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

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

<http://forcedadoptions.naa.gov.au>

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





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Harrison is a descendant of the Muruwari people of NSW. Her play *Stolen* has been performed across Australia and Internationally, and was the co-winner of the Kate Challis RAKA Award 2002. *Rainbow's End* premiered in Melbourne in 2005, before touring extensively and winning 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.

CLASSROOM IDEAS

English

- *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 do you think Kirrali refuses help such as Abstudy?
- 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*.
- 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 depicted in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* with that of other communities.
- 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.
- 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?

History

- Research historical events referenced in *Becoming Kirrali Lewis* such as:
 - The return of Wave Hill Station to the traditional owners
 - The 1967 referendum
 - The Aboriginal Tent Embassy
 - The Stolen Generation
 - Forced adoptions
- Locate some personal stories (oral histories, biographies) from people involved with one or more of the events above. Compare their experiences to those of the characters.
- 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 to Australians in general.
- Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using fiction to learn about history.



APPENDIX - LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM F-10 (VERSION 8)

Year 10	English	History
	<p>Understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people (ACELA1564)</p> <p>Compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1639)</p> <p>Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)</p> <p>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 (ACELT1643)</p> <p>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)</p> <p>Identify and analyse implicit or explicit values, beliefs and assumptions in texts and how these are influenced by purposes and likely audiences (ACELY1752)</p>	<p>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)</p> <p>The significance of the following for the civil rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples: 1962 right to vote federally; 1967 Referendum; Reconciliation; Mabo decision; Bringing Them Home Report (the Stolen Generations), the Apology (ACDSEH106)</p> <p>Continuity and change in beliefs and values that have influenced the Australian way of life (ACDSEH149)</p>
<p>Cross curriculum priorities</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures</p>		
<p>General capabilities</p> <p>Literacy, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, Intercultural understanding</p>		

