



Benevolence

Written by Julie Janson

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

OVERVIEW

For perhaps the first time in novel form, *Benevolence* presents an important era in Australia's history from an Aboriginal perspective. Told through the fictional characterisation of Darug woman Muraging (Mary James), *Benevolence* is a compelling story of first contact. Born around 1813, Muraging is among the earliest Darug generations to experience the impact of British colonisation – a time of cataclysmic change and violence, but also remarkable survival and resistance.

At an early age Muraging is given over to the Parramatta Native School by her Darug father. Fleeing the school in pursuit of love, she embarks on a journey of discovery and a search for a safe place to make her home. Spanning the years 1816–35, *Benevolence* is set around the Hawkesbury River area, the home of the Darug people, in Parramatta and Sydney.

Julie Janson's intensely visual prose interweaves historical events with detailed characterisation – she shatters stereotypes and gives voice to an Aboriginal experience of early-settlement.

- Historical novel from an Aboriginal perspective.
- From an established playwright and author.
- Authentic depiction of the atmosphere, milieu and identity ambiguity in the early days of the Sydney white colony.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR

Julie's career as a playwright began when she wrote and directed plays in remote Australian Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. She is now a novelist and award-winning poet. Julie is a Burruberongal woman of Darug Aboriginal Nation. She is co-recipient of the Oodgeroo Noonuccal Poetry Prize, 2016 and winner of the Judith Wright Poetry Prize, 2019.

Her novels include, *The Crocodile Hotel*, Cyclops Press 2015 and *The Light Horse Ghost*, Nibago 2018. Julie has written and produced plays, including two at Belvoir St Theatre – *Black Mary and Gunjies* and *Two Plays*, published by Aboriginal Studies Press 1996.

THEMES

- Aboriginal Histories and Culture
 - Country, Kin, Ancestors, Language, Song, Spirituality, Totems, Connection
- Colonisation
- Dispossession
- Identity
- Courage

AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

Benevolence is suitable for older readers, including Yr 10 and Senior Secondary students, as well as adult audiences. Set in New South Wales during the first half of the nineteenth century, its third person, present tense prose shares the crushing impact of colonisation on Aboriginal peoples brought on by dispossession, government policy and racism. Through Mary's character, readers are exposed to the personal and systemic obstacles facing Aboriginal people during this era, and the importance of Country, kin, rituals and customs for survival. This is a powerful, raw and honest text that evocatively depicts the difficult position Aboriginal people faced existing on the fringes of white society, marginalised at an excruciating cost. As such, the narrative is gritty, sincere and sophisticated, allowing for deep analysis of policies and practices during the colonial era, and the legacy of these policies today. It contains explicit language and scenes.

LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This book and the classroom activities provided are primarily relevant to the following areas of the Australian Curriculum, as well as various Senior Secondary English Syllabuses in most Australian States and Territories:

Learning area	Year level
Australian Curriculum: English	Year 10
Senior Secondary English	Years 11-12

The appendix highlights relevant content descriptions, cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities that relate to the text and classroom ideas provided.

CLASSROOM IDEAS

English

- The opening paragraph of *Benevolence* offers a clear sense of setting and voice. Discuss the language features used by the author to create such an arresting mood in the text.
- What evidence is there of the devastating influence of the British presence on the Deerubbin Aboriginal people? Why are some “dressed in rags” whilst others are dressed “resplendent in possum-skin cloaks” (p2)? How does this image reflect the sudden impact of colonisation?
- Governor Macquarie appears at the *Annual Native Feast Day*, giving a speech about “his feelings of benevolence towards native people” (p3). What is the meaning of benevolence? Why is this the book’s title? How do you think Mary views the “benevolence” given to her?
- Mary comments that the “English words sound like the rattle of sticks” (p3). How does this epitomise the impact of British colonisation on First Nation peoples?
- Why does Mary describe the British as “ghost men with fire sticks that killed” (p3)? How does this help readers see events more clearly from Mary’s perspective?
- In the role of Mary, write a recount of your first encounter with the *Aboriginal Native Institution*, sharing your understanding of her character at this stage of the narrative.
- Why does Mary often describe the *waibala* as having “snorting pink noses” (p5)? How does this help readers to understand Mary’s perceptions?
- Discuss the use of descriptive and figurative language in the following passage:
“The hot air smells of burning gum leaves as men clear the bush of the beloved trees. Crack, crack, crack as tree spirits fall and are hacked and split with wedges. It rips apart the spirit pathways to the sky. An endless cracking of death to the Darug.” (p26)
- Discuss the relationship between Mary and Mercy. What are your opinions of Mercy’s character? Why is she in this story? Why does Mary accept Mercy unconditionally?
- Why has Julie Janson commenced Chapter Four with an article from the *Sydney Gazette*? How does the inclusion of primary sources and historical details at the beginning of chapters help contextualise this story for readers?
- From an early stage in the text, Mary loves being with children. How is this sense of connection vital to the text as it progresses? How, if this is the case, is she able to leave Eleanor with Mrs Byrne? Why doesn’t she decide to leave her with Reverend Smythe?
- What role does Granny Wiring have in *Benevolence*? How does she help Mary?
- Why does Mary “[push] her love for her father into a tight ball so it won’t poison her” (p35)? If you were Mary, how would you feel about your father leaving you with the white people?
- Discuss the relationship between Mary and Mrs Shelley. Why does Mrs Shelley give Mary the violin? How does this change Mary’s life? Discuss the letters between Mary and Mrs Shelley on pp 170-171. Why does Mrs Shelley refuse to accept Mary and Eleanor into her home? Does this surprise you? Why? What does this reveal about society during this time?
- How do readers know that Mary and Mercy miss their families and communities?
- After reading the description of Mary’s first visit to Sydney town, sketch this scene.
- When Mary meets Boothuri, why does she have doubts about being accepted by his people? How does this reflect the difficult position in which she finds herself?
- Why does the opening scene of Chapter Eight (p78) describe the land as “newly logged and broken,” evoking “a kind of sorrow...to witness this new *waibala* destruction” (p78)? What destruction is occurring?
- How does Boothuri help Mary? Why, after he leaves, does she decide to return to town?
- Why does Mary have “confused loyalties”, thinking she can “be in two worlds and not have to choose” (p93)? How is this theme evident throughout the narrative?
- Create a character profile of Mary, showing your understanding of her strengths, weaknesses and traits. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Why doesn’t Reverend Smythe marry Mary? Why does he ignore her when he discovers she is pregnant? Why does Mary eventually grow to despise him? Why, at the end of the text, does he try to redeem himself to her, yet still refuse to help her? How does this reflect attitudes of the era?
- Although Susan despises Mary, why are they “both servants to these men” (p163)? Why, if this is the case, does Mrs Smythe blame Mary for setting fire to the corn field, even after Mary saves her from an attack by Jerungi?
- Why, after she and Eleanor spend time with her people in the Liverpool Blacks Camp, does Mary feel “her reliance on *waibala* is now shameful,” (p189)?
- What role does Bowen play in Mary’s life? Although he is a somewhat minor character, why is he integral to the story?



CLASSROOM IDEAS CONT.

- In a mode of your choice, respond to the following extract from *Benevolence* as it relates to the themes of the text: “Mary...[ponders] the injustice of being locked up for taking a few birds while the English take everything from her and her people.” (p232)
- In what ways is *Benevolence* also a story about the role of women during the nineteenth century? Give evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- *Benevolence* includes reference to the *terra nullius* claim made by the British in 1835 (see p237). Using Bruce Pascoe’s *Dark Emu* (Magabala Books, 2014) or *Young Dark Emu* (Magabala Books, 2019), prepare a presentation to disprove the validity of the *terra nullius* proclamation.
- How is it that Mary finds herself chained and subjugated by Captain Woodrow and forced onto his mountain expedition? How is “her stolen country...somehow all bound up with the man who wants to rape her” (p285)?
- Why doesn’t Captain Woodrow press charges against Mary after she injures the Corporal? How is this a reflection of the white version of “benevolence”?
- Why, after Henry refuses to assist the drowning Masters, is he described as “black against the swirling clouds” (p326)?
- In the role of Mary, write a reflection about your arrival at Palm Beach. Why do you cry when called by your tribal name, Muraging? Why is “to live here...a last resort”, finding yourself drawn to your “true country upriver” (p334)?
- What is the importance of Darug language in *Benevolence*?
- Discuss Reverend Masters’ character. How do his racist and sexist tendencies amplify the hardships faced by Aboriginal women at the hands of white people? Why is a character such as Reverend Masters necessary to *Benevolence*? What is his version of benevolence?
- How are totems and wildlife used throughout *Benevolence* to reference the importance of Aboriginal traditions and beliefs?
- How and why does the author contrast the native landscape with its vanishing flora and fauna with the English gardens and tree lined driveways?
- Discuss the motif of the violin and the beautiful music Mary plays throughout *Benevolence*. How does its loss, replacement and loss again reflect Mary’s struggle with living between two worlds?
- As you read *Benevolence*, take note of the strong presence of Aboriginal traditions, customs. Language and culture. How does the inclusion of these elements strengthen the narrative?
- Why do you think the author has chosen to tell this historical story in present tense? How is Mary’s story relevant to Aboriginal issues in the 21st Century?
- After reading *Benevolence*, re-read the first few pages of Chapter One. What of Mary’s character traits are evident in her, even as a young child?
- Research the breast plates that were given to certain tribal leaders during the 19th Century. Why, if you were an Aboriginal leader, would you agree to wear these plates? Why does Mary say “the shiny metal crescent is hanging from his neck like a noose” (p9)?
- What parallels can be drawn between the lives of the convicts and ex-convicts, and those of the Indigenous peoples? How do characters such as Ferdinand and Timothy, and to some extent Mrs Shelley and Reverend Smythe, offer a layer of complexity to the text?
- Using the chapter headings as a reference point, create a story map of *Benevolence* outlining the plot, character development and themes of the narrative.
- Compare the Aboriginal experience of colonisation and dispossession in *Benevolence* with poetry from Alison Whittaker’s *Lemons in the Chicken Wire* (Magabala Books, 2016) such as ‘Carry the One’ (p14), ‘The Double Mirror’ (p39) and ‘The Body Country’ (p44). What is the mood and perspective of these texts? How has this been achieved?
- Discuss the author’s comment on the British invasion of Australia? What are the implications for her people and culture? How does she share these ideas through her choice of language features?
- Discuss the inclusion of the massacres and other atrocities towards Aboriginal people in *Benevolence*. Why are they essential to this story?
- Discuss the author’s use of figurative language throughout the text. How does it contribute to the reading experience?
- In retrospect, what advice would you give to the British colonists about their arrival in Australia? How could history have been different for both the colonists and the First Nation peoples?



APPENDIX – LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Year		
10	<p>English Language</p> <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) <p>Literature</p> <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) 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 interpretations and responses to a text (ACELT1642) 	
Senior Secondary	<p>English Unit 1 Investigate the relationships between language, context and meaning by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining how texts are created in and for different contexts (ACEEN001) <p>Examine similarities and differences between imaginative, persuasive and interpretive texts including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining the ways language features, text structures and conventions communicate ideas and points of view (ACEEN004) explaining the ways text structures, language features and stylistic choices are used in different types of texts (ACEEN005) <p>Reflect on their own and others’ responses to texts by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing textual evidence to assess the purpose and context of texts (ACEEN018) questioning responses to texts (ACEEN019) investigating the impact and uses of imaginative, interpretive and persuasive texts. (ACEEN020) <p>Unit 2 Compare texts in a range of contexts, mediums and modes by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> explaining the relationship between purpose and context (ACEEN021) <p>Investigate the representations of ideas, attitudes and voices in texts by:</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) 	<p>Analyse and evaluate how and why responses to texts vary through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> the impact of language and structural choices on shaping own and others’ perspectives (ACEEN028) analysing changing responses to texts over time and in different cultural contexts. (ACEEN031) <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) explaining how and why texts position readers and viewers. (ACEEN040) <p>Unit 3 Compare texts from similar or different genres or contexts by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> analysing and evaluating how similar themes, ideas or concepts are treated in different texts. (ACEEN043) <p>Unit 4 Investigate and evaluate the relationship between texts and contexts by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> undertaking close analysis of texts (ACEEN060) examining how each text relates to a particular context or contexts (ACEEN061) <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)
	<p>Cross curriculum priorities</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures</p>	<p>General Capabilities</p> <p>Literacy, Intercultural understanding</p>

