

Magabala Books • Teacher Notes

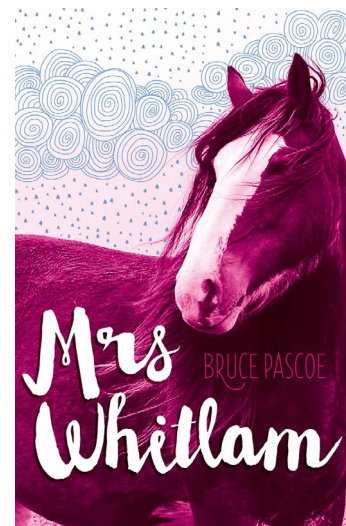
Mrs Whitlam

Bruce Pascoe

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

OVERVIEW

Marnie Clark of Curdie Vale can ride but she doesn't have a horse. She dreams of owning one and having the whole world to ride it in. Before too long Marnie is gifted Mrs Margaret 'Maggie' Whitlam, a beautiful, big Clydesdale – bold, fearless and able to jump anything. From the very first ride, Marnie and Maggie get more adventure than they bargained for. Soon Marnie is learning to negotiate newfound friendships, pony club and how to stand up for what she believes in. Will her friendship with George Costa, another outsider, make being accepted harder? Or will being true to yourself be the hardest decision Marnie makes?



THEMES

- Identity
- Belonging
- Racism
- Aboriginal histories
- Family
- Courage
- Horses

AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

Mrs Whitlam is a beautifully descriptive and literary text suitable for middle readers. Written in first person, past tense, Bruce Pascoe uses an authentic and relatable voice to convey the thoughts and emotions of protagonist, Marnie. It is an excellent choice for study within Year 3-4 classrooms, as the writing style and language choices are so well developed.

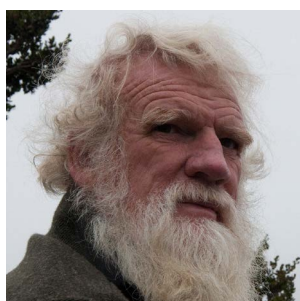
LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

These notes have been written in context with the Australian Curriculum. The appendix highlights a selection of relevant cross-curriculum priorities, general capabilities and content descriptors across a range of year levels that the following activities address.

CULTURAL NOTES

- Role that family members play in extended family structure – discussion with Marnie about women and their general role.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Bruce Pascoe is a Bunurong man born in Melbourne. He is a member of the Wathaurong Aboriginal Co-operative of southern Victoria and has been the director of the Australian Studies Project for the Commonwealth Schools Commission. Bruce has had a varied career as a teacher, farmer, fisherman, barman, fencing contractor, lecturer, Aboriginal language researcher, archaeological site worker and editor. He now lives in Gipsy Point in Victoria.

His books include the short story collections *Night Animals* (1986) and *Nightjar* (2000); the novels *Fox* (1988), *Ruby Eyed Coucal* (1996), *Ribcage* (1999), *Shark* (1999), *Earth* (2001), and *Ocean* (2002); historical works *Cape Otway: Coast of secrets* (1997) and *Convincing Ground* (2007); the childrens' book *Foxies in a Firehose* (2006); Young Adult fiction *Fog a Dox* (2012); the critically-acclaimed *Dark Emu* (2014); and the mid-primary fiction book *Seahorse* (2015). In 2013 Bruce was awarded the YA Fiction Prime Minister's Literary Award for *Fog a Dox*. In 2016, *Dark Emu* won the Book of the Year and was co-winner of the Indigenous Writer's Prize in the NSW Premier's Literary Awards.



CLASSROOM IDEAS

- The opening scene of *Mrs Whitlam* places the reader directly into the story. How has the author been able to achieve this instant sense of connection to the story? Discuss the descriptive techniques used to create this scene.
- How important is the need to be “well looked after... [and] loved” (p2)? How is this theme integrated into the *Mrs Whitlam*?
- Why is there so much emphasis on Mrs Arnold’s teacup in the opening chapter?
- What clues do we get that Marnie’s family is in a crisis of its own? As the novel unfolds, discuss how Marnie’s family is not all that different from Vicki’s.
- Why doesn’t Marnie want Mrs Arnold to cry in front of her?
- Reread the description of the horse, Mrs Whitlam, in Chapter 2. How has Bruce Pascoe used language features to create such rich imagery?
- Project an image of another creature, or a horse that looks different from Maggie, onto the screen. Using descriptive techniques, write a passage about this animal that will allow your reader to visualise.
- Why does Marnie feel like a thief when she is given Vicki’s horse and clothing?
- Why does Vicki’s mother almost beg Marnie to take Mrs Whitlam away? Why does Marnie cry when she takes the horse away from Vicki’s property?
- Why does Marnie feel that she can’t change Maggie’s name? Why are names so important?
- Maggie is part Clydesdale, which means that the horse and Marnie gets teased by the ‘rich, girls’ at the pony club. In what ways is Marnie like Maggie? Are there parts of her heritage that others make fun of? Discuss.
- Marnie’s mum speaks about former Prime Minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam, saying that he did a lot for Indigenous people. She also says that Margaret Whitlam, after whom the horse is named, ‘was a wonderful woman’ (p6). After reading about the Whitlams, discuss why Bruce Pascoe chose to draw attention to this couple. What is his purpose for doing so? In what ways did the Whitlams’ actions help Indigenous people?
- Create a character iceberg of Marnie. Above the surface, write what we know about her character from direct or literal information given to us. Beneath the surface, write aspects of her character that we have to infer.
- Create character profiles for minor characters in *Mrs Whitlam*, such as Marnie’s mum, dad, Indi or George Costa. For each character, use examples from the text to support your ideas.
- How would you describe the relationships that Marnie shares with her parents? How do they help her in their own ways? What values do they have that Marnie uses to help her through this time?
- Re-read the description of Maggie’s hooves as she gallops towards Stinky Stevenson and the other boys in Chapter 3. What is effective about the language features of this passage?
- Sketch the scene of the countryside as it’s described on p10. Choose an image of a different landscape, and write your own descriptive passage to help readers visualise this scene.
- What role does Mr Marriner play in *Mrs Whitlam*? Give explicit examples from the text to support your ideas.
- In what ways does *Mrs Whitlam* contrast courage with fear? What examples are there of this contrast in the text?
- What is the symbolism of the Bert’s many chiming clocks that he’s fixed from the tip? How does this reflect the themes of identity and belonging?
- Discuss Bruce Pascoe’s use of figurative language and the way in which this contributes to the text. Some examples include:
 - The boys could hear the detonations of bombs exploding behind them p9
 - They came past here like a bar of soap was after ‘em p10
 - They were the kind of words that seemed to hang in the air p17
 - They just pulled out of my eyes even though I tried to squeeze them away p18
 - Silver’s eyes were like dinner plates p20
 - The shades behind another human’s face p25
 - Maggie’s great feet made a rhythmic sound like someone whacking a hot water bottle with a stick wrapped in lambs’ wool p29
 - It was like the whistle from a leaky kettle; high pitched and moist p30



- A knuckle the shape of an old artichoke p31
 - His leaky squeezebox laugh p32
 - Great banksia which bowed down low in the bowl of a sand dune p33/34
 - Made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end like a cranky dog p36
 - The water was bucketing along p38
 - She looked like a woman whose cat had died in the washing machine p48
 - Cascading paper everywhere p51
 - Grabbed me like a Greco-Roman wrestler p51
 - What evidence is there in the text of racism? Discuss your reaction to the teasing and ridicule that Marnie is subjected to?
- What does the author mean when he writes, 'the word Abo [was said] in the tone reserved for a dog' (p17)?
 - Discuss the language features in the following passage from p21: *At the tea table that night, in the quiet created by full mouths and the din of arguing clocks, I dreamed of Maggie.*
 - How is the author able to create such vivid imagery in his writing?
 - How are Indi's and Silver's spirits broken by Indi's father? What comment is the author making about the dangers of perfectionism and competitiveness?
 - Why does Marnie's dad think that saying 'nothing' to bullies 'usually works' (p22)? Why does Marnie's mum reply, 'might work but doesn't fix racism' (p22)? What is racism? How is it shown in *Mrs Whitlam*?
 - Discuss Uncle Binny's conversation with Marnie when he says, 'we all come from woman...first eye, woman always first. That's the lore" (p32).
 - Why does Marnie find it so difficult to process the 'horror of having stared at death and wrestled with it on the beach. Kissed it on the mouth' (p40)? How would you have coped with bringing the dead toddler back to life?
 - Why does Mr Marriner say to Marnie that 'patience...is the hardest thing to teach anyone' (p42)? Share in a journal entry a time when you had to learn the virtues of patience.
 - Even though Marnie's mum is too embarrassed to smile when at the Costas' BBQ, she still says of Mrs Arnold, 'that poor woman, all that money and no daughter' (p51). What does this reveal about the character of Marnie's mother?
 - Discuss the last line in *Mrs Whitlam*. What is the author's purpose in finishing the text in this way?



APPENDIX - LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Year Level	English
3	<p>Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss texts in which characters, events and settings are portrayed in different ways, and speculate on the authors' reasons (ACELT1594)• Discuss how language is used to describe the settings in texts, and explore how the settings shape the events and influence the mood of the narrative (ACELT1599)• Discuss the nature and effects of some language devices used to enhance meaning and shape the reader's reaction, including rhythm and onomatopoeia in poetry and prose (ACELT1600)• Create texts that adapt language features and patterns encountered in literary texts, for example characterisation, rhyme, rhythm, mood, music, sound effects and dialogue (ACELT1791) <p>Literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning and begin to evaluate texts by drawing on a growing knowledge of context, text structures and language features (ACELY1680)
4	<p>Literature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss literary experiences with others, sharing responses and expressing a point of view (ACELT1603)• Discuss how authors and illustrators make stories exciting, moving and absorbing and hold readers' interest by using various techniques, for example character development and plot tension (ACELT1605) <p>Literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use comprehension strategies to build literal and inferred meaning to expand content knowledge, integrating and linking ideas and analysing and evaluating texts (ACELY1692)
<p>Cross curriculum priorities</p> <p>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures</p>	

