

Teacher Notes

Ruby Moonlight **Ali Cobby Eckermann**

Magabala Books

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SYNOPSIS

Set in the late nineteenth century, *Ruby Moonlight* is a verse novel that tells the story of a young Aboriginal woman whose family has been massacred before her eyes. Alone and scared, Ruby seeks refuge and struggles day by day to deal with this injustice and tragedy in a way that is sympathetic to her Ngadjuri traditions.

Although afraid and distressed, there comes a time when Ruby craves human contact. She forms a beautiful and mutual bond with the Irishman, Jack. Their union is forbidden on all counts, yet their relationship helps to save both from loneliness and despair. Ultimately however, this union cannot endure.

Whilst highlighting many aspects of Indigenous culture and the developing relationship between Ruby and Jack, one of *Ruby Moonlight*'s central themes is the impact of colonisation on mid-north South Australia during the late nineteenth century.

THEMES

Indigenous Culture

- Aspects of Indigenous culture are embedded in the text, such as:
 - Traditional roles of various tribe members
 - Kinship
 - Rituals and customs
 - An innate trust in nature
 - Laws of one's mob
 - Burial or funerary customs/dealing with the death of loved ones
 - Spiritual customs and beliefs

Indigenous History

- Colonisation has caused much death, destruction and dispossession to Indigenous peoples
- Strict social conventions disapproved of relationships between black and white people
- Massacres of Indigenous groups occurred throughout the colonisation period

Relationships

- Ruby has been dispossessed of her family unit. She eventually seeks human contact through the Irishman, Jack
- Ruby's relationship with Jack is based on mutual affection and trust
- Ruby's kin welcome her to their mob
- Ruby's relationship with nature, her country and her mob ultimately pervade

Poetry

- Free form poetry tells this story
- Figurative language and imagery create an effective narrative

WRITING STYLE

Written in third person, present tense, *Ruby Moonlight* is a collection of poems that truly immerses the reader in a time and place much removed from the modern era. Powerful imagery and skilful literary devices result in a moving, haunting and very real narrative.

STUDY QUESTIONS

- Before studying **Ruby Moonlight**, allow students to read the text in its entirety. A second reading will allow for deeper understanding of the narrative.
- The first poem entitled *Nature* (p6) forms the underlying basis of the story structure. As you are reading, keep returning to this poem, making connections between it and the remainder of the story.
- *Nature* (p6) is formatted in the shape of a falling leaf to symbolise the simile 'nature can swirl like a falling leaf...'. Discuss this poem and its meaning.
- The poem *Harmony* (p7) gives an insight into the daily customs and rituals that the people of Ngadjuri undertake. Discuss these aspects such as:
 - Meeting place
 - Gender roles
 - Law holders
 - Singing clan songs
 - The gifting of animals' souls
 - Dancing
- Take note of the powerful imagery used by Ali Cobby Eckermann, discussing her use of poetic techniques. Examples include:
 - His eyes turn to the hillside where earthen thighs hide a sacred spring *Morning* (p9)
 - Soft staccato symphony of raindrops *Intrude* (p21)
 - His skin of wet attire is peeled from pallid skin *Shack* (p24)
- What does the author mean when she says in *Warning* (p8) that 'the old man and his wife hold parliament with magpies'?
- Alliteration is used in the massacre scene in *Ambush* (p10). Discuss the author's choice to use this technique for this particular part of the story. Examine the pace of this poem as well.

- In *Birds* (p13), Ruby instinctively tells herself to trust nature even though she is struggling with the aftermath of the massacre. In later poems, she performs certain rituals such as cutting her legs and rubbing ash into the wounds. Investigate Indigenous beliefs and rituals surrounding the death of loved ones.
- Discuss the grieving process that Ruby undergoes before feeling the need for human contact.
- Ruby dreams of a guardian spirit in *Dream* (p16). What role does this guardian spirit play in *Ruby Moonlight*?
- Re-read *Wash* (p18). How significant is this event in Ruby's grieving process? What is she really washing away?
- In *Smoke* (p22), Ruby describes Jack. Examine how she perceives the Irishman.
- How are Ruby and Jack similar to one another? What experiences have they both endured?
- Describe the relationship that Ruby and Jack share.
- What is the significance of Jack buying a dress for Ruby?
- Discuss how Jack and Ruby are able to have such a close relationship even though they don't share a common language.
- Discuss the author's choice to have a mixed relationship between Ruby and Jack. How does this tie in with the fact that white people were the perpetrators of the massacre? What comment is the author making about race relations and reconciliation?
- *Merger* (p31) mentions that it is 'forbidden for Europeans to fornicate with blacks.' Investigate laws such as these that existed during colonial times. Why were these laws in place? Why were these laws eventually changed?
- What does the author mean when she says 'it is the oasis of isolation that tolerates this union'? *Oasis* (p32)
- Discuss the idea that Jack, the hunter, becomes the hunted.
- Why do you think Ruby is not at first enticed by the old dancer?
- Explain the significance of the miner/gem metaphor in *Clouds* (p43).
- Why does the old dancer take Jack's mirror and gems? How is this included later in the narrative?
- In *Hate* (p62), the pace of the narrative quickens. Why has the author used a faster pace at this stage of the narrative?
- Why do you think Ruby decides to join her mob rather than stay with Jack?
- Investigate the period of colonial Australian history in which Indigenous groups were massacred.
 - Why were many of these massacres hidden in the history books?
- Using a story graph, map the events of *Ruby Moonlight*, showing the way in which the narrative builds to its climax. Give examples from the text to show what is happening during various parts of the story.
- Re-write *Ruby Moonlight* as a piece of prose.
- Select a different story about the treatment of Indigenous people during the colonial period (or a part of the story) and re-write it as a verse novel.