



**Teacher Notes**

***The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert***  
**written by Mona Chuguna and Pat Lowe**  
**illustrated by Mervyn Street**

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

**OVERVIEW**

***The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert*** is the charming account of the life of Mana, a young Walmajarri girl, and her family, in the desert country of north-west Australia.

Delightful tales of children growing up and a social and cultural history of a way of life, Mona Chuguna's semi-autobiographical stories are set before European settlement impacted on the lives of the people of the Great Sandy Desert, and before they left their homelands.

Beneath the hot blue sky, Mana is joined by her brothers, sisters and cousins, as well as her many mothers and her favourite dogs. With gentle humour, the stories depict the daily life of hunting and gathering, kinship obligations, the never-ending search for water, and the exploits of the young children. Alongside each story are cultural insights that enhance understanding of the text, making it especially valuable to educators looking for authentic material.

Acclaimed Gooniyandi (Fitzroy River) artist Mervyn Street captures the subtle nuances of the stories and the Walmajarri way of life with beautiful black and white illustrations.

**RELEVANT POINTS**

- Authentic Indigenous Australian stories with strong cultural content, including notes that complement main text, glossary and pronunciation guide. Beautiful illustrations.
- Universal story for all ages and cultures; explores themes of identity, kinship and independence; strong characters and male/female child role models.
- Publicity sought in all relevant journals, newspapers, local and national radio especially targeting education market.
- Teacher notes linked to the new Australian Curriculum

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR**

**Jukuna Mona Chuguna** was a Walmajarri woman from the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia. She left the desert with her husband in the 1950s to live and work on cattle and sheep stations in the Kimberley's Fitzroy Valley. In middle age, Jukuna took up painting and became a well-regarded artist, holding exhibitions of her work

around Australia and overseas. She was a natural teacher and great storyteller. She died in 2011.

**Pat Lowe** is an Englishwoman who fulfilled her childhood ambition to settle in Western Australia. She moved to Broome in 1979 and in 1986, went to live in a desert camp with Jukuna's uncle, Jimmy Pike, where she came to know Jukuna and her family. Later in life, when both Pat and Jukuna were living in Broome, they worked together to record Jukuna's stories.

**Mervyn Street** is a Gooniyandi artist, from the Fitzroy River region of northern Western Australia. In his youth he worked as a stockman and later developed his artistic talents, producing many paintings, drawings and prints of station life. He now divides his time between drawing and painting at Mangkaja Arts in Fitzroy Crossing and teaching the Gooniyandi language at Yiyili School.

## THEMES

Indigenous Culture

- Various aspects of indigenous culture feature in the text, including family, marriage, lifestyle, customs and beliefs.

Desert People

- The stories in the text come from the Walmajarri people whose homelands lie in the Great Sandy Desert to the south of Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia
- Water plays an enormous role in the lives of the Walmajarri people
- A Walmajarri pronunciation guide and glossary are included.

## WRITING STYLE

Told in a series of short recounts, *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert* shares Mona Jukuna's stories of growing up in the Western Australian desert. With this storytelling comes an insightful historical narrative that pieces together not only the region's past, but that also incorporates indigenous culture and customs from the desert people. The writing style is easily accessible to an upper-primary audience and beyond. The Walmajarri language is included throughout the text.

## 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

- Cultural notes specific to every story follow each chapter of *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert*. These notes provide explanations of the various aspects of Indigenous culture that feature in each individual entry. It is recommended that teachers read these cultural notes in conjunction with the stories in order to better understand the perspectives and histories being shared.

## CLASSROOM IDEAS

- Before reading the text, locate The Great Sandy Desert on a map of Australia. [http://margaretdeangraetz.net/Walkabout/Rock\\_Art-](http://margaretdeangraetz.net/Walkabout/Rock_Art-)

[Painting/Pages/Great\\_Sandy\\_Desert\\_files/shapeimage\\_1.png](#). Likewise, locate the Walmajarri language area.

<http://www.abc.net.au/indigenous/map/>

- As you are reading, keep a journal or graphic organiser to track the various aspects of Indigenous culture that are included in the stories. Add to this journal after reading the relevant cultural notes.
- Which story appeals to you the most? Why? Write a reflection to share your thoughts and opinions.
- The Walmajarri people are born under a tree and also die under a tree. Discuss the significance of nature to the desert people and the role of trees in their life cycle.
- How does the reader get a sense of the importance of family to the desert people? Give examples from the text to support your response. How is this similar to/different from the role of family in your own life? Discuss.
- Write a piece of description about the desert using inspiration from *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert*. Use an X-Chart to help brainstorm appropriate vocabulary for your description using the senses – what would you see, hear, feel and smell in the desert?
- The Walmajarri people used a wide range of techniques, tools and customs to hunt and gather food. What food was eaten? How was it hunted or gathered and prepared for eating? Create a table to share this information.
- Locate Aboriginal art work that features the desert
- Water is a central theme in *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert*. Choose a way in which to show your understanding of the importance of water to the desert people, such as a painting, a poem, a song or a piece of writing.
- Choose one of the stories from *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert* on which to create a picture book.
- How did Mana and her family use tracking techniques to hunt animals?
- *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert* shares many childhood experiences of the younger members of the mob. Compare these experiences with your own. How is 'childhood' a universal experience for all youngsters? In which ways is it different?
- Explain the role that dogs play in the stories of *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert*.
- How do the desert people deal with death and grief?
- Why is fire treated as such an important resource?
- How does the death of Mana's father impact on her and her family? How would you feel in this situation? Discuss.
- A boy wanting to help Mana is unable to speak as he is going through his initiation. Find out more about initiations and the rituals that accompany this important time.
- Why did the authors include stories about dying of thirst in *The Girl from the Great Sandy Desert*? What do such stories reveal about the desert people?
- Visit the following CSIRO website that shows details of the Wamajarri Seasons. Create a calendar that explains the various seasons and activities that would accompany each season. <http://www.csiro.au/Organisation-Structure/Divisions/Ecosystem-Sciences/Walmajarri-Seasons-Calendar.aspx>

- Find out more about the desert people at the Aboriginal Heritage in the Great Sandy Desert website: [http://www.diamantina-tour.com.au/outback\\_info/deserts/great\\_sandy\\_desert/aboriginal\\_heritage\\_great\\_sandy\\_desert.html](http://www.diamantina-tour.com.au/outback_info/deserts/great_sandy_desert/aboriginal_heritage_great_sandy_desert.html)
- Learn about Australia's Great Sandy Desert at the following website. Create a tourist brochure to promote this very unique part of Western Australia. [http://www.desertusa.com/du\\_great-sandy-life.html](http://www.desertusa.com/du_great-sandy-life.html)
- Visit the National Film and Sound Archive's webpage about people of the Western Australian Desert. Create an information report about these people. <http://nfsa.gov.au/collection/film-australia-collection/program-sales/search-programs/program/?sn=911>

### Appendix – Links to the Australian Curriculum

Year Level	English - Language	English – Literature	English - Literacy	History
	Incorporate new vocabulary from a range of sources into students' own texts including vocabulary encountered in research ( <a href="#">ACELA1498</a> )	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 ( <a href="#">ACELT1605</a> )	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 ( <a href="#">ACELT1605</a> )	The diversity of Australia's first peoples and the long and continuous connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to Country/Place (land, sea, waterways and skies) and the implications for their daily lives. ( <a href="#">ACHHK077</a> )
5		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 ( <a href="#">ACELT1605</a> )		
6	Understand that different social and geographical dialects or accents are used in Australia in addition to <a href="#">Standard Australian English</a> ( <a href="#">ACELA1515</a> )	Make connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts ( <a href="#">ACELT1613</a> ) <a href="#">Create</a> literary texts that adapt or combine aspects of texts students have experienced in innovative ways ( <a href="#">ACELT1618</a> )	Participate in and contribute to discussions, clarifying and interrogating ideas, developing and supporting arguments, sharing and evaluating information, experiences and opinions ( <a href="#">ACELY1709</a> )	
7		Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts ( <a href="#">ACELT1619</a> )		
8		Explore the interconnectedness of Country and Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors ( <a href="#">ACELT1806</a> )		