

Borderland

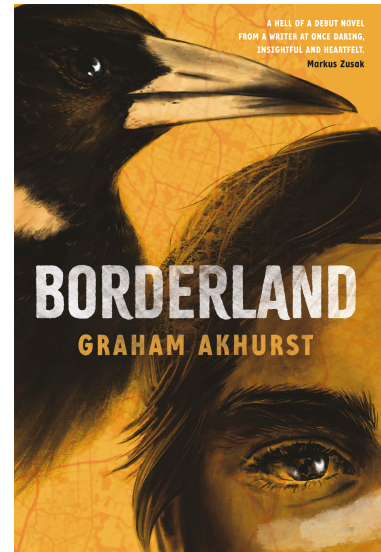
By Graham Akhurst

Synopsis

When Jono graduates from a prestigious Brisbane high school, he is met with both relief and insecurity. His Indigenous scholarship has never sat comfortably with him, but his lack of cultural knowledge and connectedness to mob becomes even more pronounced. Jono is also taunted by visions of a menacing dog-man, causing tremendous distress and self-doubt.

An opportunity to film a documentary in outback Queensland places Jono on Country, where his visions of the beast intensify. In the process, he finds himself caught in the crosshairs of a community torn between the benefits of a mining proposal and the ecological fallout of such a venture.

***Borderland* is a gritty, suspense-filled story with rich themes of identity, belonging and cultural connection.**



Themes

- Identity
- Belonging
- Cultural Connection
- Mining; Fracking
- Ecology; Nature
- Land Rights



About the author

Graham Akhurst is a Kokomini writer who grew up in Meanjin. He is a Lecturer of Indigenous Studies and Creative Writing at UTS. Graham began his writing journey in a hospital bed in 2011. He read and started journaling while passing the time between treatments for Endemic Burkett Lymphoma. As a Fulbright Scholar, Graham took his love for writing to New York City, where he studied for an MFA in Fiction at Hunter College. He is a board member for the First Nations Artists and Writers Network and Varuna. He lives with his wife on Gadigal Country in Sydney and enjoys walking Centennial Park with a good audiobook. *Borderland* is his debut novel.

Writing Style

Borderland is a YA novel written in first person, past tense. First Nations protagonist Jono knows little of his culture and feels like an imposter. Having just graduated from an Indigenous scholarship at a prominent Brisbane school, he is overwhelmed by feelings of alienation and disconnectedness. He is also branded a coconut by members of the Indigenous community who see him as having black skin but a white heart. Woven into the narrative are Jono's visions of an ominous beast that lures him into a place of uncertainty, fear, and confusion. These visions are shared by Tabitha, a First Nations film maker who, like Jono, is yet to connect with Country. As their stories intertwine, the author cleverly explores identity, belonging and cultural connection in a thrilling, fast-paced and provocative text. Rich figurative language reflects vivid settings and the turmoil that threatens Jono's sense of self. This is set against the backdrop of a mining venture that compromises land rights and the ecological integrity of Gungarri Country. Powerful themes of cultural understanding, acceptance and identity are pitched against the backdrop of a land under threat and the alienation of urban Indigenous peoples who are yet to connect with their Indigenous culture. *Borderland* is suited to older readers aged 13+.

Study Notes

- Discuss the mood of the opening chapter of *Borderland*. How has the author used language features to create this mood? How are readers able to relate to Jono? Why are such connections important in the opening paragraphs of narratives?
- What does Jenny mean by the term "dancing possum" (p2)? How do she and Jono fulfil this role?
- Critique the school's Great Change program. How does Jono feel about it? How do we know? Do initiatives like this help "close the gap" (p2)? Discuss.
- At his graduation, why might Jono be feeling a "sense of dread" (p3)?
- Why is Jono reluctant to attend Steve Presley's party? Why has this scene been included in the text? How would the story be affected if this was removed?
- Describe Jono's experiences of attending APAC.
- Why does Jono feel "inferior...like a second-class citizen...either invisible or... [standing] out so much that I [want] to hide" (p10)?
- What is the importance of Jono's dance performance at APAC to *Borderland*? Why is he surprised by the "cheering and praise" at the end of his performance (p22)?
- Reread and discuss the passage on p22 in which Jono speaks about "colour typecasting". What does he mean by this? How do the recurring "coconut" taunts Jono is subjected to reflect this?
- Discuss Jono's observations about the other students at APAC who were "bound... together [by] estrangement: estrangement from the world of privilege outside" (p22). Why, when in this environment, does Jono feel "like a fraud"?

Study Notes continued

- Why doesn't Jono "like [himself] when [he was] ...isolated and had too much time to think" (p29)? Have you ever felt this way? Share in a reflection.
- After completing the text, reread pp35-36 on which Jono's mum shares the Dreaming story of Wudun. What connections can you make between this story and what happens in *Borderland*? Why is it often necessary to revisit certain passages from texts to make full meaning of the story?
- Throughout the text, Jono feels like an imposter. Why does he feel this way? What eventually helps him to feel less like this?
- In your own words, describe what the magpies are really trying to share with Jono. How does Jono's relationship with magpies grow and change as the novel progresses? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- How are kookaburras used in *Borderland*?
- On p46, Jono tells Jenny that "who my mob are ain't gonna change who I am" (p46). Do you agree? Discuss, using evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- How does the magpie card that Jenny draws from her pack of cards foreshadow what happens to Jono in *Borderland* (see p51)? When filming, Jono narrates a script justifying the mining venture. Later, he re-records the voice-over. Rewrite the script for this new version.
- Why does Jono say of Jenny that "sometimes she makes me feel like a fraud, like I'm not black enough" (p65)? It is Jenny who makes Jono feel this way, or Jono? Explain your ideas in a journal entry.
- Which of Jono's values are evident in *Borderland*? Give examples from the text to support your thinking.
- What impact do the repeated coconut taunts have on Jono (see p68)?
- Jono only knows snippets of his family's history. Why is the past something that Jono's mum keeps "tight and forbidden" (p73)? How does this affect Jono?
- Initially, Jono is more interested in earning money for the documentary than the film's purpose. How and why does this change?
- Why, when in the pub at Gambari, does Jono feel "nervous and excited at the same time" (p87)?
- In your own words, explain how Marrgany was formed (see p92).
- What clues do we get that Tabitha is having similar experiences to Jono?
- Reread Sid's notebook writings on p100. What does this reveal about Sid's mixed feelings towards the mining project? Why does Jono say, "parts of it reminded me of a rapid-firing gun" (p100)?
- Discuss Jono's observation that "maybe things weren't so black and white" (p100). How is this true of most situations? Share in a reflection.
- As the film crew get closer to the campsite, they come across the basin that is "full of artefacts from mob camping and moving across long time ago" (p110). Why does Jono feel "incredibly small and so very large at the same time" when here?
- Why does Jono get agitated when Jenny tries to "tease out deep and meaningful talk about...identity" (pp 119-120)? How is Jenny's sense of identity conflicted later in the text? Why do you think the author has included Jenny's dilemma in the story?

Study Notes continued

- Why does Tabitha cry when on Country?
- What role does Possum play in *Borderland*? How would the story be different without her?
- Why do you think Wudun is reluctant or unwilling to help Jono? Why does the beast say "Badarra" (p180)?
- In the role of Jono, write a reflection upon becoming aware that you are Gungarri: "'This is your place. This is your County. You're Gungarri.'" In that moment, the hairs on my arms stood on end and I felt a tremendous wave through my body." (p188)
- Why does Norman think that Jono and Tabitha have been brought to Country? How do his stories of Wudun help Jono to accept what is happening (see pp 189-192)?
- Why does Jono feel that his "identity was something others decided" (p197)?
- What impact does the fracking have on Gungarri? Find out more about fracking and its ecological consequences. Time permitting, write an exposé to share your findings.
- In the role of Tabitha, write a journal entry describing your experiences on Country.
- How does the author use magpies throughout *Borderland*? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
- What role do characters like Rick play in *Borderland*? Why include characters like this?
- Explain the relationship that Jono develops with Norman. Make predictions about how this relationship may grow in the future.
- Throughout the text, Jono experiences panic attacks. What instigates these attacks? How does he manage these? How do the above examples of figurative language help to convey these attacks to readers?
- Why does Jono sometimes feel invisible? Have you ever felt like Jono? Share in a reflection.
- Stop reading at p205. Make predictions about how *Borderland* may conclude. Use reasoning to justify your thinking.
- Describe the relationship between Jono and his mum. How does she help him throughout the text, even though they are hundreds of kilometres apart for much of the story?
- What does Jono mean when he says, "Norman's words were bittersweet. I knew my place in the world, but immediately had to fight for it" (p207)?
- Choose a scene from *Borderland* to illustrate such as the depiction of the river on fire (p198), the cave (p200), the magpie's song (p201) or the Bora Ring (p203). Use the figurative language in the description to help bring this scene to life.
- Time permitting, use Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife* (or extracts) as a companion text to *Borderland*. Why is this play a favourite of Jono's? What does he mean when he says, "I reckon it showed how confusing it was for Australia to have a black history" (p59)?
- In the role of Jono, write a journal entry based on his understanding that: "I am Gungarri and my totem is Galbular" (p204).
- Discuss the author's intentional use of repetition on p211: "That's when...That's when...That's when...". Why has this language feature been used in this way?

Study Notes continued

- What is the importance of language, songlines and stories in *Borderland*?
- Discuss the significance of the following excerpt to the overall themes of *Borderland*: "My words hung over the river and land. I felt a cold gust of wind brush the back of my neck. I released the air from my lungs and watched the past, present, and future unfold in the flames. I thought of home and how much had changed. I looked up at the stars. Bright and infinite. On a dead tree branch above me, two magpies slept." (p219)
- How important to Jono is his new sense of belonging (see p222)? How does this help him to develop as a character?
- Why, when Jono returns from the outback, does his mum say, "My boy. You look so black" (p225)?
- Discuss the open-endedness of *Borderland*. Write the next chapter of this story.
- How has Jono's relationship with magpies changed from the beginning to the end of *Borderland*? Why, on p232, does he say, "the past, present and future fluttered before my eyes"?
- In what ways is *Borderland* a coming-of-age story?
- What is the place of totems in First Nations culture? View the following Aboriginal Kinship Presentation from The University of Sydney:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpHG9V2qJiE>
- Discuss the use of figurative language in *Borderland*. How does this further engage readers with the characters, settings, and events of the text? Examples include:
 - My stomach was tight p1
 - All consequent breaths sat on top p1
 - It was usually a crazy wiry mess like a bird's nest p1
 - The terror was knotting up my insides p2
 - Each round of clapping rang out like thunder in my head p3
 - Storm clouds formed on the horizon p4
 - A wave of anxiety washed over me p11
 - That familiar feeling of dread crept in as my chest tightened p14
 - The stillness was smothering p15
 - Panic suddenly hit me p16
 - I closed my eyes to dance in the safety of darkness p20
 - My eyes felt wired shut p20
 - Its skin was bloodless and pale. It had elongated arms with claws that rasped on the ground. A pinched mouth opened, baring canines, and empty pitch black eyes stared through me p21
 - Thinking about my future felt like walking through thick fog p22
 - Suffocating humidity greeted me p29
 - The sky was overcast, trapping the heat p29
 - The panic racked my arms into tense wires. It crawled up my neck to my throat and into my sinuses. The dread burrowed into my brain p33
 - I swallowed the dread p33
 - Time moved differently p33
 - My body wound up and taut like a double knot p34
 - I felt pinned down by the stale muggy air in my room p40
 - Even with the fan blowing full-pelt, I sweated bullets p40
 - A pair of kookaburras cackled at me p53
 - I watched the sun reflect off the murky water p53
 - I felt an uncomfortable pang of jealousy p55
 - He...strummed lazily on a ukulele p55
 - I could smell the ocean, feel the sun on my face, and the sand between my toes p55

Study Notes continued

- The smell of perfume greeted me first p56
- The cackle of kookaburras drifted in on a breeze that shifted stale air p59
- I felt the wetness and smelled the rotting breath earlier p61
- As I considered the fragile state of my sanity, I felt the dread under my ribcage and behind the tightening of my chest p61
- The gate rattled p62
- I sat at the back of an old shed that creaked and cracked exhaling the heat of the day. It... smelled of freshly cut grass and petrol p62
- The night air was humid and thick, and the loud droning of cicadas travelled over the pitch-black oval in front of me pp62-63
- A newly trapped moth flapped violently in the dim yellow light above me casting frantic shadows upon the wall p63
- I sighed and felt the night close in around me p64
- Bats squealed in the distance cutting the silence. They were drunk off the overripe fruit from a sprawling mango tree across the oval p65
- I could almost taste her soft lips p65
- The humidity clung to us p71
- A soft breeze came in off the ocean p71
- A soft breeze came in off the ocean p77
- Sun-worn skin p83
- The sky was filled with a myriad of colour made grand by the flat desert floor p84
- The roof was corrugated iron with veins of rust and large gutters that looked like they hadn't seen rain in a long time p86
- Bits of Gungarri language was heard on the slight breeze p86
- We walked into the pub through a haze, the smell of tobacco clutching our clothes. It was my first time experiencing anything like the place p87
- We traversed a sea of sweaty bodies out to the utes p88
- I heard the loud barking of dogs through the crisp desert air p95
- I woke to light poking through the grille on the window, filling the room with little spots of yellow p97
- Parts of it reminded me of a rapid-firing gun p100
- I felt like a kid caught with his hand in a lolly jar p101
- The ceiling fans in the pub were caked in dust p103
- The sun reflected off the parched ground. I felt marooned by the haze of heat surrounding me. Beyond was the desert – the true bringer of isolation. I looked out toward the nothingness p104
- I felt my shoulders tense into knotted weights p104
- I grabbed the hand grip above the window as the car bucked through the waves of loose sand and gravel like a ship through rough waters p109
- Marrgany really did look like a goanna lying on its back p110
- The desert greedily gobbled it up p110
- The desert was seemingly endless. The air became cool and crisp and patches of scrub began to dot the landscape p112
- The moon was rising behind her and the sun on the other side caught her face at just the right angle, brightening the dust in the air around her like little specks of glitter p112
- Ahead of us, I noticed a long line of green snaking its way through the red sand p112
- I sat near the fire and watched the different yellows, reds, blues, and greens lick and spit at the hardwood logs p118
- I watched as shadows danced over Jenny p120
- My stomach felt like it had been branded by hot iron p121
- The fear that had gripped me at the fire the night before had only slightly loosened its talons p131

Study Notes continued

- With the wind blowing off the water and the gum trees waving along the banks, I walked into the centre of camp p131
- The river was pale brown and it felt like I was bathing in milk p134
- A desert wind disrupted the surface of the milky river p135
- The desert greeted us with a dry heat, and even this early in the day it reflected off the ground like clear flame p141
- The sand dune snaked its way up to a high precipice p141
- The sky was filled with stunning hues of orange and pink. The station was an oasis in the red desert p149
- Her hand sagged like a dead fish under the weight of his sweaty pale palm p154
- The moon crept in and cast its light upon her, giving her the appearance of an apparition p160
- A bolt of lightning flashed with a crack of violent thunder pp163-164
- Another jagged flash brought a thunderclap that rattled the house p164
- Hail started to bang violently against the tin roof, followed by a downpour of rain. The noise was deafening p165
- The horizon was still dark, but there were small beams of light poking through the angry clouds p167
- The storm may have poured rain, but the earth had drunk deeply and was parched again p171
- I watched the tip of the red sun disappear beneath the horizon p173
- A log cracked in two and flames danced light over the pictures and stuffed dogs and pigs p180
- The air in the room was stagnant and streaks of light came through gaps in the drawn curtains p195
- Clouds wrought a patchwork of darkness on the desert floor p207
- My calf muscle was deeply cut. I could see the sinewy tendons poke through, and blood flowed from the gash onto the ground p209
- Wudun released a piercing cry that shook me p210
- The familiar humidity clung to us as we got off the plane at the airport p223
- The sun was setting, and spectacular colours crossed the sky adding contrast to the lush grass. One fiery red flower had come through on the flame tree in the front garden p226
- We rocked to-and-fro like a boat cast deep at sea p233

Links to the Australian Curriculum

Year	Curriculum Area
8	English Literature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups (ACELT1626)• Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (ACELT1806)• Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts (ACELT1807)
9	English Literature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1633)• Explore and reflect on personal understanding of the world and significant human experience gained from interpreting various representations of life matters in texts (ACELT1635)
10	English Literature <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)• 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)
Cross Curriculum Priorities	
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Sustainability	