

James Vance Marshall is the pseudonym of Donald Payne [English, b. 1924]. *Walkabout* is a work of collaboration between Donald Payne and James Vance Marshall [1887–1964], an Australian who was quite knowledgeable about the people, flora, and fauna of the outback. With Marshall's permission, Payne used Marshall's writings as background for their novel *Walkabout*. Subsequently, and with the consent of Marshall's son, Payne continued to publish under the pseudonym Marshall.

Lee Siegel is the author of four books, including *Against the Machine: How the Web Is Reshaping Culture and Commerce—and Why It Matters* and *Are You Serious: How to Be True and Get Real in the Age of Silly*. He is also the author of the Amazon Kindle Single “Harvard Is Burning.” He has written essays and reviews for many publications, including *Harper's Magazine*, *The New Republic*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New York Times*. In 2002, he received the National Magazine Award for Reviews and Criticism.

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Season of Migration to the North

by Tayeb Salih (introduction by Laila Lalami)

Memed, My Hawk

by Yashar Kemal (introduction by the author)

The Mountain Lion

by Jean Stafford (afterword by Kathryn Davis)

A High Wind in Jamaica

by Richard Hughes (introduction by Francine Prose)

Riders in the Chariot

by Patrick White (introduction by David Malouf)

WALKABOUT

By James Vance Marshall

Introduction by Lee Siegel

\$12.95 US / 978-1-59017-496-8 paperback | 978-1-59017-505-7 ebook

“Discloses a rare beauty of human relationship...” —*Newsweek*

“Does not hesitate to face, honestly and unsentimentally, the questions it raises... .
There will be many who not only enjoy it, but long remember it.

—Elizabeth Janeway, *The New York Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

James Vance Marshall's *Walkabout* chronicles the journey of Mary and Peter, sole survivors of a plane crash, as they traverse the remote outback of the Australian Northern Territory. Stranded in the Sturt Plain, the siblings imprudently set off on foot to find their uncle in Adelaide, a city they only know to be located in the south of the country. Unaware that their destination is 1,400 long miles away, they begin a foolhardy trek across a vast expanse of inhospitable wilderness, rapidly realizing how ill-equipped and isolated they are. The pair soon encounters an Aboriginal boy out on walkabout, a rite of passage set to test his survival skills which will qualify him for manhood within his tribe. Fortunately for Mary and Peter, the boy interrupts his solitary walk to help them, teaching the siblings skills that will reveal what initially seems a punishing environment to be one that can also yield, nourish, and even delight. Mary, however, distrusts the boy despite his kindness, and is consciously at turns grateful, jealous, resentful, and terrified. Conflicted as she is, she comes to understand how meaningless her prejudices are, and is finally able to shed them, but at great cost.

Part allegory, part adventure story, *Walkabout* is also a hauntingly rendered observation of the natural world. The Australian outback, gorgeously evoked in all its danger and fierce beauty by Marshall, plays an important role in the novel, a presence that both teaches and tempers the children. These images, and the story of Mary and Peter, will stay with the reader long after the last page is read.

FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) At the beginning of the story, we are told that Mary, at 13, has always cared for and been protective of Peter, 8. After the plane crash, she tends to his wounds, gives him her share of the only food they have, and guides them toward Adelaide. By the end of the novel, it is Peter who insists they keep on the path outlined by the Aboriginal boy [p.106], and later leads the way following directions given by the Aboriginal man [p.125]. How and why does the dynamic between brother and sister change? Do their individual relationships with the Aboriginal boy have an influence? Are there other factors?
- 2) Although we are not told the year, we know from various clues that Mary and Peter are children of the Jim Crow South. Throughout the novel, Peter continually addresses the Aboriginal boy as “darkie.” Do you think it is odd that he never tries to ask the bush boy what his name is, or attempts to introduce himself or his sister? Even if “darkie” were not considered offensive in the South during the period that this novel takes place, do you think Peter's addressing of the Aboriginal boy as such is done—consciously or unconsciously—to maintain a superior status, or do you believe he is entirely ignorant of the racist overtones? As Mary does not ever directly address the Aboriginal boy as “darkie,” do you think that the author has Peter call the Aboriginal boy this so consistently because it is authentic, or does he do it to illustrate something about Mary and Peter? Given their upbringing and the time period in which the novel is set, can the siblings be considered racist?
- 3) One of the running themes and concerns in *Walkabout* is religion. If *Walkabout* is indeed an allegorical tale that draws from the Bible, in what ways can the Aboriginal boy be seen as a Jesus-figure? What do you make of Mary's cradling of the boy's head in her lap as he dies [p. 95], and her understanding of his smile as “forgiving”? Mary and Peter reach “the promised land” [p.109] and see “wonderful things” [p.111], described in great detail and length in Chapter 17. If the author is drawing on a Garden of Eden story somehow, what role would the three main characters have in such a story?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

James Vance Marshall,
Stories from the Billabong

ALSO OF INTEREST

Walkabout, 1971 film directed by Nicolas Roeg. Screenplay written by Edward Bond, based on the novel by James Vance Marshall.

Rabbit-Proof Fence, a 2002 film directed by Phillip Noyce. The film is about half-Aboriginal, half-white children who are forcibly taken from their families, and put into re-education camps. The movie follows three girls trying to return to their mother as they are pursued across the outback. Based on a true story.

NYRB Classics is an innovative list of outstanding books from many eras and all around the world. It includes both acknowledged masterpieces and hidden gems of literature with introductions by distinguished contemporary authors. NYRB Classics offers a wide-ranging and endlessly surprising selection of books including novels, short fiction, mystery, suspense, history, autobiography and memoir, and poetry. Visit www.nyrb.com to learn more about NYRB Classics and to discover, or rediscover, a host of wonderful books.

- 4) The boys are said to have a special rapport, “a mutual liking and understanding” [p.93]. Why is that so? Is it due simply to their sex?
- 5) Mary is conscious of the resentment she feels toward the bush boy, and that “All the tenets of progressive society and racial superiority combined inside her to form a deep-rooted core of resentment. It was wrong, cruelly wrong, that she and her brother should be forced to run for help to a Negro” [pp. 34-35]. Do you think that this awareness, not simply of her resentment but the reasons behind it, is realistic in a character of Mary’s age? Is Mary a sympathetic or deplorable character?
- 6) Both Mary and the bush boy are at the far reaches of childhood, and have just entered their teens. Mary finds herself in an extraordinary situation and rapidly loses her confidence to make a good decision. On pages 46-47, we are told that Mary “fell back on a woman’s oldest line of action: passivity.” What do you think of this statement? Is it one fairly and accurately applied to Mary? The siblings meet the bush boy while he is on a rite of passage trek, one that precedes a test of manhood. Is he childish, or would you consider him more mature than Mary? What is “adult” behavior, and is it culturally defined?
- 7) We see changes in the characters of Mary and Peter. Does the Aboriginal boy’s character develop? If so, how? If not, why do you think not?
- 8) Peter easily sheds his clothing and does not suffer from the sun or other elements. In this book, clothes clearly do more than serve as protection. Mary is particularly disturbed by the Aboriginal boy’s nakedness [pp. 24-25], and thinking that he should be ashamed of his nakedness [p.27], feels “guilty” [p.49] whenever she looks at him. She magnanimously acts as “the first Australian missionary,” [p.50] and gives the boy her panties, a “symbol of civilization,” [p. 54] to cover himself. When Mary loses her dress, she feels no embarrassment, whereas in the previous week, “nothing more calamitous could have happened” [p.116]. Does her dress symbolize “civilization” as well, or are we to understand it to mean more than that? What does it signify when Mary is no longer self-conscious about nudity? Is it for the better in the long run?
- 9) Who do you think will have a greater change in worldview once they return to the United States—Mary or Peter? Why? How do you think this experience will shape them in the future? Do you imagine that any changes will be permanent?
- 10) The “noble savage” trope is common in literature, one in which indigenous peoples are romanticized as simple, but uncorrupted and good. Ironically in this story, it is the civilized who must be taught the ways of the “savage,” learning skills that raise them “above the level of the beasts” [p. 44]. The Aboriginal boy “knew what reality was” [p. 26], and his life’s purpose is defined for the reader as “the battle with death.” [p. 26]. The siblings on the other hand, and Mary in particular, are burdened by the neuroses of civilization, and Mary’s shame of nudity and fear of sexual violation become increasingly “unreal” and meaningless in the outback. Do these imagined threats hold her back, and if so, how? Does Peter develop differently, and why? In turn, what does civilization bring to the Aboriginal boy?
- 11) Mary and Peter suffer from hunger and thirst, and although intent upon satisfying these needs, rarely dwell on the subject of death. In contrast, death is an ever-present specter for the Aboriginal boy, and he mortally misapprehends Mary’s look of terror, believing she sees the Spirit of Death in him. Do you think that the siblings effectively “kill” the Aboriginal boy, Peter with his cold, and Mary with her fear? Or do you think the bush boy dies by “autosuggestion,” mentioned on page 67?
- 12) The realization that “what was split in two was one” occurs twice within the novel, first when the bush boy dies [p. 95] and again, when Mary suddenly understands that “heaven, like earth, was one” [p. 98]. Do these two instances refer to the same cleaving/unifying force? What is that force? What were the previous two divisions she’d known?
- 13) The body is very important in this narrative. It’s the absurd action of a sneeze that breaks the awkwardness between the children at the beginning of the book, and it is the nakedness of the Aboriginal boy that appalls Mary. Sexuality, obviously, is associated with the body. Do you think that one of Mary’s chief problems with the boy has to do with a nascent sexuality of which she’s not yet aware, or can acknowledge?
- 14) When Mary and Peter meet the Aboriginal family [p. 120], Mary “wasn’t nearly as frightened as if they’d been white!” Despite this fact, Mary and Peter are eager to reach the white man’s house that the Aboriginal man directs them to over the hills. What do you imagine their story will be once they approach the house, absolutely nude? What do you think, as adults, they will consider the lessons learned on this walkabout of their own?