



Dingo: The dog who conquered a continent by Jackie French

Book Summary:

All of Australia's dingoes may be descended from one south-east Asian 'rubbish dog' who arrived here over 5,000 years ago. This is a story about the first dingo. It is also the story of Loa, who heads off across the sea in his canoe when the girl he loves marries another. He takes only his spears and a 'rubbish dog', one of the scavengers from around the camp to eat if he gets hungry, or to throw to threatening sharks or crocodiles. But when a storm blows boy and dog out to sea, both must learn to survive in a strange new world as partners - and even as friends.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

ACELT1599, ACELT1594, ACELT1605,

Appropriate Ages: 9+

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Introduction

'A man and a dog were far more powerful than man or dog alone.' (p 121)

A boy and a rubbish dog find themselves alone — first on the ocean and then in a new land south of where they were born. There they have to fight for survival and adapt to a new, often frightening, and lonely environment. They survive a storm at sea, injury, thirst, hunger fearsome predators, and the change of seasons and then learn to live off this new land. They miss their families and friends but the bond between them becomes the most important factor in their adjustment and healing.

This is a survival story, an adventure, an imagined history, and a moving account of a boy growing up alongside a dog which becomes his best friend.

About the Author

Jackie French is the Australian National Children's Laureate for 2014 and 2015 and Senior Australian of the Year 2015 she is also an historian, ecologist, dyslexic, and a passionate worker for literacy, the right of all children to be able to read, and the power of books.

Jackie's writing career spans 25 years, 148 wombats, over 140 books, 36 languages, 3,721 bush rats, and over 60 awards in Australia and overseas.

Jackie wrote her first children's book 'Rainstones' in a desperate attempt to earn \$106.40 to register her car, while living in a shed with a wallaby called Fred, a black snake called Gladys and a wombat called Smudge. The editor at HarperCollins said it was the messiest, worst spelt manuscript they'd ever received. The mess was because Smudge the wombat left his droppings on the typewriter every night. The spelling was because Jackie is dyslexic. Jackie recommends all beginning writers misspell their first book so it stands out of the pile.

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Author inspiration

Jackie says:

'I met my first dingo when I was seven years old, living temporarily on Bribie Island in Queensland when recovering from an illness. We had had a pet dog most of my life. But this was no pet — she was a wild animal who has chosen to live with humans.

Bribie back then has no bridge to the mainland, one proper road, and a bus held together with binding twine to take you from one end to the other. The dingos howled at night and the emus tried to steal your lunch.

And then we went home, to the world of pets. But I couldn't forget the joy of living with a wild animal who had chosen to be friends with human beings. Years later I would make friends with wombats, wallabies, other wild creatures. But the last dingos in the area where I've lived most of my life now had been killed by poisoned baits.

Dingo: The Dog who Conquered a Continent began when I first read the amazing research that all dingos may be descended from one pregnant female. Who was she? And how did she get here? The wild 'rubbish dog' in Dingo is the dog I knew, when I was seven, with a little of the dog who sat with his head on my feet as I wrote the book that is dedicated to him.'

Study notes on themes and curriculum topics

- Friendship

Discussion Point: 'Had anyone ever had a friendship with animals like this before?' Discuss this novel in relation to other texts about friendships between humans and animals.

Discussion Point: 'He was all she had.' (p 74) Does the dog become dependent on Loa, or is Loa just as dependent on the dog?

- Adventure

Discussion Point: 'Haven't you ever dreamed of new places, Loa? Something beyond the hunting ground and the lagoon?' (p 14) Discuss with students their dreams of faraway places.

What sorts of places would they like to visit?

- Clan

Discussion Point: 'The loss of his clan hurt like a wound.' (p 95) How would it feel to lose your family and your community? How might you have coped?

- Survival

Discussion Point: 'He had learned to live with this new land. Now it was time to learn its people too.' (p 135) How important to survival is learning about the landscape and the people who inhabit it? Read about the experiences of early settlers and explorers in Australia and how they tragically misread the land and failed to understand how to survive in it.

Activity: How would you have felt if isolated in a canoe as Loa was when the storm hit them (p 33)?

- Growing Up

Discussion Point: 'Bony Boy, she thought, not a pup but not grown up either.' (p 23) Loa grows older in the book and physically changes as he becomes stronger. But there are other things which make him into a man. Discuss the factors and incidents in the novel which make him more mature.

Discussion Point: 'She saw a hunter. A man, his muscles stronger form the last hear year of work, not the boy he'd been such a short time earlier. A man who could survive alone, who could make a camp from nothing. A warrior who commanded animals. That's me, he thought.

That's who I am now.' (pp 143-4) This quote gives some idea of the qualities which Loa feels make him a man. What other qualities make a boy into a man? eg His love for Arrunna makes him feel a new maturity too.

Curriculum Topics

Literacy and Language

Chapters are narrated from the alternate third person personal perspectives of Loa and the dog.

Discussion Point: How important was it that the story be told from both perspectives and why?

Loa's night in the canoe in a storm is an exciting event (p 33) described in a very cryptic short chapter. This is a difficult thing to do; to describe an event from one person's perspective. Compare Loa's version of the event to the dog's perspective on the storm (pp 34-5).

The story is narrated in short, sharp and very concise sentences and chapters which enhance pace and suspense.

Activity: Read 'But today he was a man ... His spear was good.' (p 3) Re-write this paragraph using your own words. Compare the two versions by reading them aloud.

Descriptions of Landscape 'the earth between them a patchwork of cracks, parched from the sun. It looked like a land crying for water to make it live.' (p 68)

Activity: Choose a description which evokes a feeling like this, and draw a picture of what it suggests to you.

Activity: Create a Book Trailer for this novel. [See Bibliography below.]

Activity: Design a Book Cover for this novel.

Jackie French often chooses an aspect of history in her novels and then creates a fictional account of it. This is sometimes called 'faction' and is an interesting way of telling about history and culture and far more likely to engage a reader's attention. This novel imagines how the dingo came to the continent of Australia.

Activity: Choose an historical event which interests you. Then write a short story in a factional way.

The novel falls into the classic genre of an adventure story and an animal story in which man and beast battle the elements.

Activity: Read and compare novels such as *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London, *The Incredible Journey* by Sheila Burnford, *The Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O' Dell and *Souther* by William H. Armstrong.

Read other survival stories such as *To Die For* by Mark Svendsen.

This is a rite of passage story as well; it is about a boy and a dog growing up.

Discussion

Point: Discuss the trope of a rite of passage narrative and find other stories which are based on a similar idea.

SOSE

Marriage Customs 'This was a big thing – to leave his clan, to try to find a wife all by himself' (p 21) The story opens with young Leki about to be married to Bu, a man in a neighbouring clan. When Loa later falls in love with Arrunna he must behave in a certain way to earn the clan's respect. Activity: Research Aboriginal marriage customs and beliefs.

Food 'The world was full of food.' (p 20) Loa has learned from his elders about eating off the land and is very adept at finding food. Activity: Research Aboriginal foods and cooking.

If a white man had been in the same environment, many of the foods would have been considered inedible.

Discussion Point: 'Flying fox and crab were good food, but both had to be cooked.'

Some foods like pandanus nuts killed you if you ate them raw. Others made her sick.' (p 77) People who are unused to bush food can make terrible mistakes in eating raw foods. Read about the dangers of bush food as well.

Crafts 'He could use the leaves to make fibre for nest and cord too.' (p 91) Loa uses his knowledge of various traditional crafts to help him survive in this new place. He also makes a spear point out of wax (p 80).

Activity: Choose a simple activity suggested in this novel and make it with your students.

Male Initiation 'And he'd be a hunter. A man.' (p 80)

Activity: How important is hunting in the initiation of a man in Indigenous cultures?

Science

Dingoes

'This land was empty. It had no dogs at all.' (p 74) Read Jackie French's Notes

About dingoes and other related topics [See Author's Notes pp 154-163] and then research the topic further. [See Bibliography below.]

Discussion Point: Ask students some simple questions about dingoes. [See Questions below for some examples.]

Seasons

Discussion Point: In this story the seasons are very important – Dry/Thunder/Rain (Wet) and the Season of Fruit and Flowers frame the narrative and drive the story since Loa and the dog have to respond to the seasons in adapting to this land. Divide a large piece of art paper up into a weather chart in four panels and depict Loa and the dog doing something appropriate to the weather in each of the panels. .

Fire

'The fire was more than warmth, more than good meals to come. Fire was a way of saying to the darkness: I am here.' (p 90) Activity: How important was fire in Aboriginal cultures? Read about how Indigenous peoples have used it and controlled it.

Geography of Ocean/Island

Activity: Study a map of the area between Timor and the Australian mainland and find out what you can about the topography of that area.

Cycle of Life

Discussion Point:

'It was a song of loss, of understanding. It said, "I am here, and you are there" ' (p 130) When the puppy is killed and then two of the other puppies go off to find their own territory, the novel shows that the cycle of life demands both loss and renewal.

Discuss the role that predators play in this cycle, and how the seasons also play a part in the biological and ecological cycle.

Questions for reading and discussion

1. When did dingoes come to Australia?
2. Why are they becoming an endangered species?
3. Loa and his friend Leki both travel to new places. Read about the migration of Indigenous peoples in our region 2000 years ago.
4. This is a story about growing up. What makes a boy into a man? Loa and Leki both accept that they need to leave home. Is this an important part of growing up? Discuss.
5. Which incidents in this novel reveal the gradual growth of trust between boy and dog?
6. What role did the seasons play in the novel?
7. Which aspects of the Loa's culture interested you and why? Research them further.
8. What might have happened if Loa had stayed on the island?
9. Crocodiles are a constant worry to Loa and the dog. How would you protect yourself from a crocodile if travelling in their territory?
10. What is the central theme of this novel?

Key Learning Outcomes:

Have students write a brief summary of what they learned about the environment from reading this novel.

Invite students to write a survival story in the style in which this is narrated.

Discuss the boy's journey and what he learned on the way.

Create a visual response to this text either in a collage work on paper, or a sculpture using techniques such as papier mâché or clay moulding.

The novel has a sub-title: how did students interpret that sub-title?

Conclusion

The novel begins 'It was a bad day to be a rubbish dog' (p 10) and ends: 'It was a good day to be a dingo.' (p 153) Jackie French has written a tribute to the friendship between a man and a dog. But she's also posed a hypothetical history of the dingo and how it made its way to Australia. By the end of the book, the rubbish dog is not a rubbish dog anymore but a fierce warrior. Just like Loa himself.

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About the author of the notes

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and publishes regularly on children's literature, Australian fiction, and publishing history. She chaired the inaugural judging panel for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards for Children and Young Adults 2010 and 2011, and was the recipient of the 2011 Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Services to Children's Literature in Queensland. She is a member of the ASA, IBBY Australia Inc, and ACLA Boards, and president of the CCLC Committee.