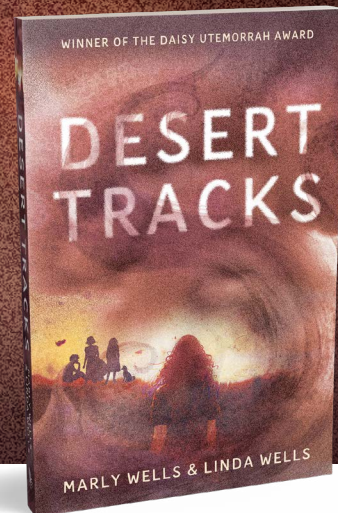




Desert Tracks

Written by Marly Wells and Linda Wells

Teacher Notes prepared by Christina Wheeler

Overview

Have you ever gotten lost in a book? Entranced into the world of a mysterious old story, Millie, a Warlpiri teenager, is sucked up by a willy willy and transported to Alice Springs in 1924. Here she meets a crew of oddly familiar young people, Sonny, Beryl and Spike. As the group continue to find each other in time, they realise the Alice Springs of the past and the future are not as different as they seem ...

Desert Tracks is a time-travelling novel about young people in Central Australia, the historical legacy of racist policies and the relationship between history and the present.

About the authors

Marly Wells is a proud woman of Warlpiri and white Australian descent. She grew up in Alice Springs. She completed a Bachelor of Arts at Melbourne University with majors in Sociology and Indigenous Studies. Marly lived in England for two years in her early twenties. She then returned to Alice Springs where she worked in the management of children's services. Marly has also worked as a freelance editor and researcher for Hardie Grant Publishing. She co-wrote a children's book for the *Girls Can Boys Can* project in Alice Springs and an article for *The Saturday Paper* about the killing of Kumanjayi Walker at Yuendumu.

Linda Wells is white Australian and proud to be Marly's mother. She is a teacher and writer. Linda has lived in Central Australia for many years and worked as a teacher on desert communities as well as in Alice Springs. For over ten years Linda also ran a small business, conducting guided walking tours of Alice Springs with a focus on the history and culture. She has a PhD in creative, post-colonial possibilities for writing Australian history and is a published author.

Themes

- Colonialism
- Stolen Generations
- Truth-telling
- Resilience
- Identity
- First Nations Peoples:
Cultural Knowledge;
Ancestors, Kin; Elders
- Languages – Warlpiri;
Arrernte
- Racism; Racial Profiling
- Aboriginal Peoples
– Health, Education,
Justice Systems
- Alice Springs

Links to the Australian Curriculum

This book and the classroom activities provided are primarily relevant to the following areas of the Australian Curriculum:

Learning area	Year level
English	7-10
History	7; 9-10
Geography	7

The appendix highlights relevant content descriptions, cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities that relate to the text and classroom ideas provided.

Audience and Writing Style

Desert Tracks is a time-travelling historical fiction novel set in Central Australia in 1924 and the present day. With Alice Springs and its surrounds as the backdrop, the story is shared through three parallel narratives, each intertwined. When Millie borrows a history book from her school library, she is swept up in its stories of the past. Before long, she finds herself travelling through time into the scene she's just been reading. Here, she meets Spike, Sonny and later, Beryl. A little further into the story, her new friends find themselves joining Millie in the twenty-first century, where they navigate not only supermarkets, fast food and traffic lights but racism and prejudice reminiscent of their own time. Through the three-tiered storytelling structure, readers are positioned within a powerful truth-telling context that draws attention to societal inequalities resulting from colonialism. Millie learns about massacres, the Stolen Generations, racial profiling and unjust practices that are consequential not only for the past but the present as well. The text also shares First Nations cultures in a way that is empowering and highly engaging. With relatable characters and important subject matter, *Desert Tracks* is a revealing and relevant story that incorporates Warlpiri and Arrernte language and explores the powerful connections Millie has with her ancestors, kin and country. Suitable for readers aged 12+, it has several classroom applications in the lower secondary years.

Teaching Indigenous Content

- Huge diversity exists within and between Indigenous communities. It is important that students understand that each Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander text explores a specific context.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are living, changing and ongoing. Be mindful, particularly when using texts about the past, not to describe cultural practices or beliefs as happening only in the past.
- When discussing a book as a class, avoid generalisations about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Avoid asking students, including Indigenous students, to contribute to discussions on behalf of a cultural or racial group. Students should instead be encouraged to offer personal perspectives.
- Themes covered in some Magabala books, such as the stolen generations, discrimination and violence, may be distressing for students. Care should be taken in classroom discussion, and it is important to challenge stereotypical or discriminatory statements made by students.

Read more at: magabala.com.au/pages/teaching-indigenous-content

CLASSROOM IDEAS

- Before reading, discuss the title, cover, and blurb of the book. Make predictions about the story. After reading, return to the front cover. Explain to a friend what parts of the narrative are represented.
- The dedication reads 'For the Central Australian desert and her people.' After reading *Desert Tracks*, discuss why the authors have dedicated their work in this way.
- Using the description on p7, create a coloured sketch of Millie's house. Why does she describe it as having 'comfort and character' (p7)?
- Discuss Leni's comment that 'too much screentime was turning humans into zombies' (p8). Do you agree? Why?
- Using the description on p9, design the front cover of the book Millie borrows from her school library, *Desert Tracks; Growing up together on the Central Australian Frontier* by EJ Newton.
- Why does Millie think of books as 'treasure maps' (p9). How would you describe books? Why doesn't she usually choose 'books about history'? Why is there a specific mention of the publication date at the end of Chapter 1? Make predictions about what might happen next.
- After reading the first chapter, begin creating a character profile of Millie. As you read on, add to this profile, using evidence from the text to support your ideas.
- Describe the relationship between Millie and her mother Leni. Compare this with Millie's relationship with Aunty Gem. How and why might it be different?
- At the start of Chapter 2, we meet Spike and Sonny. These two characters seem fascinated by the simple things in each other's lives. Why do you think they are so drawn to one another? How do they help each other?
- Discuss the governess Miss O'Connell's character. Why has she been included in the story?
- Explain why Leni disliked working as a governess on the cattle station (see pp14-15). Discuss the issues that she raises such as colonialism, arrogance and a reluctance to listen and learn from the local First Nations people.
- How is the education given to Aboriginal children by their own communities different from that delivered by *whitefellas*?
- How is her father's stone knife used to transport Millie through time?
- As you read *Desert Tracks*, record the words and meanings of Warlpiri language that Spike learns from Sonny. What else does she learn from him?
- Explain what Sonny means when he says the 'whitefella ... way of looking at things was so different from those of his own people' (p20)?
- Describe Pirli Patu in your own words. Alternatively, use the descriptions on p21 to sketch this special place.
- Sonny asks Millie 'Wha's books about?' (p26). How would you explain the concept of books to him?
- In Chapter 5, we learn about a massacre at Pirli Patu. With older students, investigate this further, as well as atrocities that happened in your local area during the colonial-settler period.
- What forces neighbouring tribes to come to Sonny's Country (p34)?
- Why, when reading *Desert Tracks* to Jane and Harlan, does Leni say, 'I hate our history' (p36)? How do you feel upon learning this part of Australia's colonial past? What do you learn through reading texts like *Desert Tracks* that you didn't previously know? Why is it important that truth-telling occurs?
- On p40, Mille is referred to as a 'half-caste'. With reference to the excerpt below, discuss why this term is offensive and inappropriate:
 - o 'Answer me, you little half-breed.' Boss spat that last word out with such disgust that Millie cringed...She knew of it as an old-fashioned, derogatory term that the colonisers used to classify and degrade people who had both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry. That word made her feel like she'd just been kicked in the guts' (p41).
- When Millie travels back to 1924, she encounters evil men who can't touch her. Why is this the case? How does Millie feel about what she witnesses (p41)? Why do 'people like that even exist' (p43)? Discuss.
- In a reflection, respond to the following two excerpts from *Desert Tracks*:
 - o 'They murdered a whole lot of people just for trying to get some food. Just for trying to live on the land.' (p46)
 - o 'None of us can change anything now. The best we can do is learn about what went on, bear witness to our history, and understand its long-term effects.' (p47)

- With reference to the following excerpt and as you read *Desert Tracks* further, create a visual representation of life in Central Australia pre and post the white invasion.

‘She could imagine the Indigenous people of this country, the Mparntwerinya, in pre-colonial times, climbing these hills with spears or digging sticks, claiming themselves a rock wallaby to feed the family or picking a coolamon full of figs from the huge sprawling trees that seemed to grow out of solid rock.’ (p53)

- Discuss the language features in the excerpt below that help describe Auntie Gem’s place so effectively:

‘From Auntie Gem’s outdoor living area, you could look out – to the half-dozen other houses in the village, down to the dry old riverbed that snaked its way across the land, and beyond, into the bush. Auntie Gem’s living area was raked red earth with a fireplace where she sat and cooked her dinner and boiled the billy and ‘talked stories’ with her whole mob of people she called her ‘gangers,’ who were never very far away.’ (p56)

- Reread the passage on p58 in which Auntie Gem teaches Millie about her family line. Explain how kinship works and why it is important that such knowledge is shared.
- In your own words, explain the impact of colonisation on First Nations peoples, their land and way of life (p58). What impact have introduced species such as cattle and bullocks had on water ways and dreaming places (p58-59)?
- When talking about the Stolen Generations, Auntie Gem says, ‘that pain, that trauma come from all that Mill, that’s still with us to this day. Intergenerational they call it. It’s not just in the past. It’s with us here and now’ (p60). Research further into the Stolen Generations. Watch Kevin Rudd’s Apology or read a transcript of this speech. Use picture books such as *Stolen Girl* (Magabala Books) by Trina Saffioti and Norma MacDonald and *Sorry Day* (National Library of Australia) by Coral Vass and Dub Leffler as reference points. Consider viewing *Rabbit Proof Fence* to investigate further. Write an essay or feature article to explain the intergenerational harm caused by such policies.
- Reread the passage on p60 in which Millie contemplates Auntie Gem’s stories about local history and how different this is from the history lessons presented in school. The current Australian Curriculum incorporates the impact of colonialism on First Nations Peoples. In a letter to Auntie Gem,

share what you have learnt at your school in recent times about this aspect of Australia’s history, and what you hope to learn more about in the future.

- Reread the conversation between Auntie Gem and Millie on p61 about the past and time not going in a straight line. In the role of Auntie Gem, write and perform a monologue in response to Millie’s comment that ‘some people say that’s all in the past and we gotta leave it behind’ (p61).
- The credits on the back of Millie’s new copy of the book say:

A classic story of frontier times in Central Australia.

An authentic insight into Central Australian history.

An original work about a crucial time in the development of the interior of Australia and the interface between the original inhabitants of the land and the pioneers. (p65)

- How is this also true of *Desert Tracks* by Marly and Linda Wells?
- Write a journal in the role of Emily Jane upon discovering men from your father’s property have been the aggressors in the massacre. Why doesn’t she talk to her father about this?
- Reread the description of the bush on p71. Discuss the language features that have been used to help readers visualise this scene. Time permitting, sketch this scene based on the description.
- Using your understanding from *Desert Tracks*, construct an annotated timeline that explores the concepts of continuity and change between 1924 Alice Springs and the present day.
- Explain what Auntie Gem means when she says, ‘You can only tell people the truth. What they choose to do with it, that’s up to them’ (p84-85).
- Why does Millie find The Araluen Arts and Culture Centre to be the opposite of Auntie Gem’s camp (p86)?
- Like the exhibition at the Culture Centre, create a photographic journey of your local area called ‘The shaping of our times’ (see p87). What impact does visiting this exhibition have on Millie? Why? Why, when asked if she’s a local, does Auntie Gem’s reply, ‘Been ere thousands of years’ (p88)?
- Each of the four walls of the gallery is dedicated to a different aspect of life throughout the century: ‘Education’, ‘Culture and Traditions’, ‘Station Life’ and ‘Law and Order?’ (p89). Why is there a question mark after ‘Law and Order?’ What do you learn about the

Aboriginal experience by reading *Desert Tracks*?

- Millie asks Aunty Gem, 'How come you know things, but you make me find out for myself?' (p92). Paraphrase Aunty Gem's response (p93). Describe a time when you have been made to find things out for yourself.
- What does Aunty Gem mean when she says to Millie 'You two ways' (p96)? How is this an appropriate and inclusive concept?
- How are Millie's ancestors 'looking after' her (p97-98)?
- How is the knowledge belonging 'to family and on country' different from 'the kind of knowledge ... presented in the education system' (p105)?
- Like the students in Millie's history class, conduct an inquiry into the history of Central Australia (or your local area) from any point of view you choose (see p106). Consider a range of perspectives from that time. Share your findings in a mode of your choice such as a story, song, film, graphic novel, poetry, play or painting.
- What must life at the Bungalow have been like for the children sent there? What was the goal of their education in such places? What rights were stripped from them? What were the impacts of their removal from their families? What would you like to say to policy makers of the day about this? Share in a letter to the government or a member of the Stolen Generations.
- In a reflection, respond to the following statement: 'You can't change history. You can only affect the future' (p131-132).
- Why does Millie say, 'sometimes you needed to step out of your life to have a good look at it' (p132)?
- Why is Beryl so nervous about getting into a car in modern day Alice Springs? What memories does this trigger (p145)?
- In the role of Spike, Beryl, or Sonny, write a series of journal entries about your experiences in modern-day Alice Springs.
- How does Millie perceive Alice Springs now that she is seeing it through the eyes of her visitors (p155)?
- How is discrimination in the 21st century similar and different from that in the early 20th century (p170)?

- Use the following excerpts to discuss the Northern Territory laws that changed in 1964:

The Northern Territory Government passed legislation that outlawed a lot of discriminatory practices against Indigenous Territorians. That included buying and drinking grog. Also, they had to be paid proper wages for their work. Relationships between white men and Indigenous women were no longer illegal and ... also property rights. Indigenous people were to have the same rights as other Australians in respect of property and land ownership.' (pp176-177)

- Discuss the legacy of the injustices faced by First Nations Australians:

These injustices and the disadvantage and discrimination that stem from them, they continue to this day. Some injustices have been put right but the legacy of the past lives on powerfully. Even though the laws get changed, society takes a long time to catch up. The discrimination is deeply entrenched.' (p177)

- When Millie tries to explain why so many Aboriginal people are imprisoned, Spike adds, 'Cos they made a world that's hard for Aboriginal people to live in, then they punish them for not fitting in' (p180). Why does Millie think 'perhaps it was easier to see things clearly when you looked at them from a distance. And also when you hadn't been brainwashed into seeing it as normal or right' (p181)?
- How does Sonny experience racism whilst in modern day Alice Springs? Why do the authors include this in the story?
- Create a graphic organiser that compares First Nations' approaches to health, medicine, education, food and housing with *whitefella* ways.
- Debate whether a statue of John McDouall Stuart should remain in Alice Springs (p208), giving evidence to support your ideas.
- What would Sonny and Beryl think of a department store like 'Can't Love Without'?
- Discuss why Mr Parker's diatribe below has been included in *Desert Tracks*:

'Your people ... They lived here for a long time. Oh it was a hard life with just what they had around them, but everyone knew their place and the elders were in charge. None of this crime everywhere like we have today ... People sitting down and taking money for nothing now. That's not good for anyone. Parents not looking after

their kids properly. Kids running round town causing trouble. Too much drinking and gambling and fighting.' (p222)

- Before reading the final chapter, make predictions about how *Desert Tracks* will conclude.
- Write Chapter 1 of the sequel to *Desert Tracks*.
- Having finished reading *Desert Tracks*, write a reflection in response to the dedication: 'To the future, that very few of us get to glimpse but we all play a part in creating.'
- Aunt Gem says 'Past isn't past. Past is here, right now' (p241). Discuss Millie's realisation that 'everything that happened in those frontier times, like the trouble, the massacres, all the pain that it caused. That's carried forward into our present. Understanding history is so important' (p241). What are other examples that show the importance of understanding history?
- What does Millie learn about herself and her culture from her time with Sonny, Beryl and Aunt Gem?
- What does *Desert Tracks* share about the importance of truth-telling?
- Using the chapter headings as a guide, create a graphic organiser to record the story's main themes and storyline.
- Create a Thought Tunnel by lining up two rows of students facing one another. Choose volunteers to assume the roles of Sonny, Beryl, Spike and Millie. As these characters walk through the tunnel, have students ask questions of them to help better understand and unpack the story.
- Choose a scene to retell in the style of a graphic novel.
- What role does Aunt Gem play in *Desert Tracks*? How would the story be different without her?
- As you read *Desert Tracks*, refer to the Warlpiri Glossary (pp243-244) and Arrernte glossary (p245).
- In the Acknowledgements, the authors say: 'We offer this story as a contribution to the truth-telling which is needed for Australia to evolve as a nation' (p247). In a letter to Marly and Linda Wells, share with them how you have evolved as an Australian from reading *Desert Tracks*.
- Discuss the contribution of figurative language to the text. Examples include:
 - Sonny went first, leaping over rocks like a wallaby (p34)
 - The sounds of people wailing filled the air with deep mournful howls and cries of grief (p34)
 - Bodies lay crumpled in pools of blood (p35)
 - Sonny shook his head, fresh tears (p36)
 - She was churning with fear and could feel her heart galloping (p39)
 - They ... stepped into the descending evening (p48)
 - They sat in pensive silence (p49)
 - Tears welled in Leni's eyes (p49)
 - To the north, there were just the jagged folds of the desert that was once the ocean floor (p53)
 - Dogs lazed about in the dusty earth on the perimeter of the camp, ears cocked and growling softly (p54)
 - Her mop of brown-grey hair (p54)
 - Millie watched as the flames licked the twigs and sticks (p55)
 - Millie knew her Yapirliyi Beck sitting cross-legged on the earth, out bush, with her dusty brown skin, thin legs, gnarled fingers and witch's cackle (p58)
 - They sat listening to the fire crackle and the late afternoon song of birds in the bush (p60)
 - Golden orb webs strung between trees and guarded by spiders with bulbous bodies and long, elegant legs (p71)
 - She had no shoes but bounded along, as sure footed as a kangaroo (p71)
 - A flock of zebra finches darted by; pretty little black and white birds with splashes of red on their beaks and breasts (p122)
 - She felt the pull. It lulled her the way the warmth of a sunny afternoon can lull you into dreamy dozing (p124)
 - The four young people standing on the footpath, facing into the yard at the assembled group who, like a collection of statues (p223)
 - The sun was low in the western sky, casting a golden glow across the desert plains and lighting up the distant ranges (p226)
 - The entire scene was bathed in the glow of the late afternoon sun (p226)
 - The snap and crackle of the fire and the evening call of distant birds were the only sounds as everyone, in their various positions around the fire, gazed into the flames, deep in thought (p229)

Appendix

Links to the Australian Curriculum

Year	Curriculum Area V9
7	English Literature • AC9E7LE01 identify and explore ideas, points of view, characters, events and/or issues in literary texts, drawn from historical, social and/or cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide ranging Australian and world authors • AC9E7LE04 discuss the aesthetic and social value of literary texts using relevant and appropriate metalanguage • AC9E7LE05 identify and explain the ways that characters, settings and events combine to create meaning in narratives History • AC9HH7K03 how First Nations Australians are the world's oldest continuing cultures, displaying evidence of both continuity and change over deep time Geography • AC9HG7K07 the cultural connectedness of people to places and how this influences their identity, sense of belonging and perceptions of a place, in particular the cultural connectedness of First Nations Australians to Country/Place
8	English Literature • AC9E8LE01 explain the ways that ideas and points of view may represent the values of individuals and groups in literary texts, drawn from historical, social and cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors • AC9E8LE02 share opinions about the language features, literary devices and text structures that contribute to the styles of literary texts • AC9E8LE03 explain how language and/or images in texts position readers to respond and form viewpoints
9	English Literature • AC9E9LE01 analyse the representations of people and places in literary texts, drawn from historical, social and cultural contexts, by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors • AC9E9LE02 present a personal response to a literary text comparing initial impressions and subsequent analysis of the whole text History • AC9HH9K03 the causes and effects of European contact and extension of settlement, including their impact on the First Nations Peoples of Australia

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English

Literature

- [AC9E10LE01](#) analyse representations of individuals, groups and places and evaluate how they reflect their context in literary texts by First Nations Australian, and wide-ranging Australian and world authors
- [AC9E10LE03](#) analyse how the aesthetic qualities associated with text structures, language features, literary devices and visual features, and the context in which these texts are experienced, influence audience response
- [AC9E10LE04](#) evaluate the social, moral or ethical positions represented in literature

History

- [AC9HH10K09](#) the causes of First Nations Australians' campaigns for rights and freedoms before 1965, such as discriminatory legislation and policies, the 1938 Day of Mourning and the Stolen Generations