

# YEAR 7 ENGLISH – LITERATURE AND CONTEXT & EXAMINING LITERATURE

## Whose experience? Whose perspective?

**Warning** – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and students are advised that this curriculum resource may contain images, voices or names of deceased people.

### GLOSSARY

**ancestry:** the cultural group a person most closely identifies with; where a person's family originates.

**Anglo-Celtic:** *Anglo-*, meaning English (comes from the Angles, a Germanic people that invaded Britain in the 5th century CE); *Celtic*, meaning Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Brittany.

**bias:** (noun: a bias) an unfair way of thinking negatively or positively about a person or group. Example, *the author's bias was obvious*.

**biased:** (verb: to be biased) to show an unfair way of thinking about a person or group, or to make others share your thinking. Example, *the author was biased*.

**census:** an official government survey that collects population and housing data about every citizen. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), a government agency, collects data for the Australian Census every four years.

**colonise:** one country invades and takes over another; the invaded country is called a 'colony'. The British began the colonisation of Australia in 1788.

**custodian:** a person who has the responsibility for caring and looking after someone or something.

**depict:** to represent or describe.

**diversity:** the state of having many differences.

**Elder:** a respected Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who's recognised as a custodian of knowledge and lore.

**Eualeyai and Kamillaroi:** two Aboriginal cultural groups from what's now called New South Wales.

**European:** a person or people originating from continental Europe.

**kinship:** family or blood relationship; in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, a person's position in the kinship system determines their relationship to others and the universe, and their responsibilities towards other people, the land and natural resources.

**mainstream:** the most dominant version of something; normal or conventional (what's expected).

**Songline:** songs which are part of the landscape, telling of the law, histories and cultures of diverse groups across the country – created, maintained and practised for thousands of years by First Nations Peoples.

**stereotypes:** overly simple and very fixed ideas about particular types of people or things.

**text:** something that conveys a set of meanings to the person who examines it. For example, a shopping list, a photograph, a poem, a novel, a film, an audio broadcast etc.

**uncivilised:** not having social standards or a culture; not advanced.

**uncultivated:** (of land) has not been improved by attention and labour.

**yarning:** Indigenous way of learning by sharing within a collective group to build relationships and preserve and pass on cultural knowledge in respectful ways over centuries.

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“When we read, we tend to make connections between what we are reading, our own lives and what we know about the world.” (ETA NSW, n.d.)

### Making meaning

We're all influenced by our own background – what we know already, our family, society and our understanding of history. All this helps us make meaning of what we read and see in books, movies, television, newspapers and other forms of media communications. Because of this, the meaning or experience of something for one person can be very different from another.

These same influences that we all use when interacting with a **text** are also used when someone creates a text, whether that's a song, a book, a podcast, a dance or a film. Texts contain representations of fictional events and characters or actual events and real people, usually from the perspective of the writer or creator. Sometimes these representations are made carefully, and sometimes they are made with no thought for the perspectives of the people being represented.

### Colonial perspectives of Australia

When the British **colonised** Australia, this land was home to over 500 Indigenous groups who had cared for it for thousands of years.

The British came with their own cultural perspectives and ways of living. What they found was so unfamiliar to them that they couldn't understand the sophisticated cultures, systems of **kinship** and ways of caring for the land that First Nations people had. They labelled Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people '**uncivilised**' and the land '**uncultivated**'. We see these kinds of descriptions in records of Australia's early colonial years, which were written by the colonisers, such as coloniser diaries, newspaper articles, government policies and fictional stories. Descriptions such as these helped colonists justify the horrifying treatment of First Nations Peoples and the use of the land for monetary gain.

### Thousands of years of stories

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have stories that have been passed from generations to generation for many thousands of years. Historically these haven't been written down because Indigenous cultures are oral cultures, which means that information is shared verbally rather than in writing. The oral stories of First Nations Peoples include tales of the first encounters with **Europeans** and first sightings of Captain Cook's ship from the shore. Looking at examples of these stories and comparing them to colonial stories about places and events helps us understand the vastly different viewpoints in and of Australia's history.

### One loud voice

Australia is and always has been a multicultural country. In fact, the 2016 Australian **Census** identified more than 300 different **ancestries**, which means that there are many different perspectives to be shared. However, because of our nation's past, the majority of Australians identify as English (36%), Irish (11%) and Scottish (9.3%) (ABS 2017). Add it up! More than half of Australia's current population comes from a white **Anglo-Celtic** ancestry.

All **mainstream** media outlets are owned by people with Anglo-Celtic ancestry (Evershed 2018). Because of this, most advertising, television and film in Australia is presented from an Anglo-Celtic perspective and assumes a white audience, even though people from many different cultures consume this same media.

This is a historical issue that goes back to colonisation. Since colonisation, there's been a lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in mainstream media. This means that often stories have been written *about* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rather than *by* Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. When this happens, key information may be missed that the author or producer is unaware of. The piece may include the author's own **bias**, and it may add to negative **stereotypes**. The ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are **depicted** in the media today are usually more positive than historical representations. However, there are still many examples that are incorrect, **biased** and racist, which helps to keep negative stereotypes strong (Cannon 2018, p.29). The lack of **diversity** in Australian media and literature is unfair for those whose faces aren't shown and whose voices aren't heard.

## Change is coming

While the majority of poems, stories and artworks in mainstream media and education are still from a white Anglo-Celtic perspective, things are changing. We now see much more Indigenous content on TV, and in 2007 NITV (National Indigenous Television) was launched. Social media has also meant voices that are often left out of the mainstream are being heard. In these ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are able to tell their own stories and represent themselves.

## Fair representation

Australia's first television broadcast was enjoyed by viewers on the 16th of September 1956 (Tully 2016). By 1992, there were still no characters of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent on Australian television. In 1999, there were two, across all television shows. By 2016, five per cent of all characters on television were Indigenous (Screen Australia 2016, p.6). However, what these statistics don't allow for is that the percentage was reached by including shows with a cast that's predominantly First Nations people – shows that aren't necessarily viewed by the majority of the population. So, the representation isn't even and doesn't reach all Australians, which is what needs to happen to be fair.

## Everyone's responsibility

Everyone experiences Australia in different ways. It's important for all students, but especially Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to have the opportunity to tell their own stories. It's also important for us all to watch and listen to stories that show perspectives and experiences that are different from our own.

When we listen to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's own stories, it helps us understand perspectives that aren't often found in mainstream media and helps undo stereotypes. Digital media makes this easier than ever. Stories and videos from many perspectives and cultures are just a simple click away!

## What do we mean when we talk about culture?

Culture begins with what we learn from our family – we learn our language, how to behave, rules, what's okay and what's not okay, our celebrations and the places that are important to our family. As we grow older, go to school, make new friends and mix with new classmates, we become aware of cultures other than our own.

## Oral culture

For thousands and thousands of years Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have been successfully recording whole 'libraries' of information by following special rules and using clever techniques (Hamacher 2016). One of those techniques is the use of stories. It's quite an amazing feat – imagine trying to repeat the same story again and again, generation after generation, without losing or messing up any part of it. Details are kept safe across thousands of years by only allowing a certain number of people to be the **custodian** of any particular story. Some stories are only for women, some only for men; and knowledge is passed down only when the person receiving that knowledge is ready. Custodians of the most important knowledge are **Elders**. While there are other oral cultures around the world, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have the world's longest held oral traditions (Nguyen-Robertson & Reddiex 2018).

## Sharing culture through storytelling

As oral cultures, First Nations cultures thrive through the sharing of Dreaming stories, **Songlines**, **yarning**, dance, song, and imagery.

Dreaming stories are much more complex than the English name they were given sounds. In fact, Dreaming teaches not just about the past, as many non-Indigenous people think, but also about the present and future. It offers rules for living (a moral code) as well as an understanding of how people and all other things exist in relation to each other. All Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups have a Dreaming of their own. Dreaming isn't just told through stories; it's also communicated through art, songs, dance, poetry and drama. Dreaming can include information that acts as a map for finding food and water; it might tell of important events or sacred places, and it's used to inform people about Creation stories and ancestral beings (Edwards in DHA 2013).

Larissa Behrendt, a writer and **Eualeyai and Kamillaroi** woman, explains the significance of Dreaming stories:

"What can sometimes be characterised as Dreamtime stories and are often told as children's stories are actually stories that have deep Indigenous knowledge and laws in them. They're much more like parables in a Bible than they are like children's stories" (The Garret 2020).

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have generously shared and continue to share many of these cultural stories with non-Indigenous Australians, in both old and new ways. This is happening through verbal recordings, written texts and multi-media storytelling.

### Challenging perspectives

There are many ways you can broaden your knowledge of the histories, cultures and literary heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. For example, you could:

- Look for, read and share books by First Nations authors.
- Consider whose point of view a text is written from, and whose voices have been included in the text.
- Share what you've learnt with friends and family.
- Take a virtual tour of the Australian Museum's online First Peoples exhibition

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