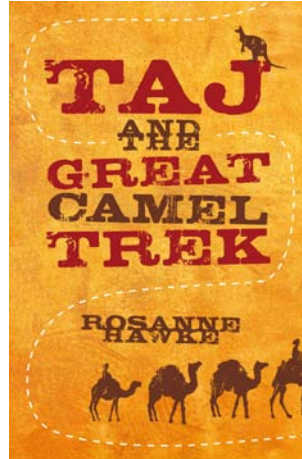


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# Taj and the Great Camel Trek

## Rosanne Hawke



### Teachers' Notes

Written by a Practising Teacher Librarian (Middle School)  
in context with the Australian Curriculum  
(English and History)

ISBN: 978 0 7022 3877 2

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**SYNOPSIS**

Retracing the 1875 expedition of explorer Ernest Giles as he treks the desert between South Australia and Perth, *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* is an adventurous and realistic account of this difficult journey. Based on extensive research and historically accurate details, Rosanne Hawke retells the experience of an Afghan cameleer and his son as they embark on this challenging crossing with Ernest Giles.

Taj and his young camel, Mustara, are invited to join Mr Giles' group. Along the journey, Taj and the explorers are threatened by many hardships including poisonous snakes, scorpions and a severe lack of water. In addition to this, Taj is struggling to find his identity and peace after the loss of his mother. It is a story of courage, perseverance and identity.

**THEMES**

Identity and Culture:

- Taj and his father are Afghans. While they can speak English, their lifestyle, customs and language are different from the rest of the group.
- They are deeply religious, following the Islamic faith.
- Taj's father tells many folktales from the 'old country'.
- Taj's mother, as he discovers later in the book, was Irish.
- Tommy, a young indigenous boy in the group, is ostracised for leaving by his people. He has to try to live now as a white person.
- The English exploring group bring their folk songs and traditions to the party.
- Taj comes to an understanding about his life as an Afghan living in Australia.
- Various aspects of the traditional customs and practices of indigenous groups are represented.

Family/Relationships:

- Taj has a respectful and loving relationship with his father, Padar.
- Taj has a positive friendship with a white girl in Beltana, Emmeline .
- Taj has an especially close bond with his camel, Mustara.
- Taj thinks his mother has left him and his father; he later discovers that she died.
- Taj is not very trusting of Tommy or Jess Young; he later learns to trust Tommy.
- Taj forms a lasting friendship with Alec Ross.
- Taj finds it difficult when camels or their calves have to be put down.

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## Fear/Grief:

- Taj is fearful that his mother left him.
- Taj grieves the loss of his dingo pup, Asad. He then realises he is grieving for his mother.
- There are many obstacles to fear in the desert, including sickness, poisonous plants and animals, attacks from desert people and a severe lack of water.

## Perseverance, Leadership and Survival:

- Mr Giles perseveres and makes good decisions as a leader.
- Leadership involves making difficult decisions and making decisions based on the good of the whole group.
- Survival skills such as tracking for water used by the Aborigines helped save the lives of the group many times over.
- Taj overcomes hardships along his journey to emerge as a resilient, respectful and thoughtful young man.

## Explorers and their Relationships with Indigenous Groups:

- Explorers relied on the survival skills of the Indigenous people to find water.
- English explorers like Mr Giles didn't always understand the motives or actions of Indigenous people, sometimes misreading their behaviour as being aggressive or threatening. This may have led to unnecessary conflict.
- Mr Giles took Tommy away from his people, thinking he was helping him; this was not the case. Tommy was then shunned by his people.
- Less tolerant members of the group such as Jess Young had little, if any, understanding of Indigenous people and their customs.

## Explorers and Early Australian History:

- Explorers such as Mr Giles took many risks to open up areas of Australia's interior.
- Decisions made by explorers impacted on their survival in the harsh outback or desert environments.
- Afghan cameleers and their camels played a pivotal role in the exploration of outback Australia.

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**WRITING STYLE**

*Taj and the Great Camel Trek* is written in first person, past tense. Taj is the narrator. Through his eyes, we experience the emotions, hardships and challenges involved with such an expedition. Not only that, the reader gains a sensitive insight into the cultural differences between Afghan cameleers, indigenous groups and the English explorers.

Taj's voice is authentic and endearing. He is devoid of pretence and is suitably naïve. His personal journey is enriched through his experiences. This is a 'coming of age' story.

**STUDY NOTES**

Before reading, carefully examine the book's front cover.

- Note the camels and the kangaroo, along with the name Taj. What might this book be about?
- Now read the blurb and examine the map on the inside cover.
- Commence a **KWL** chart about early Australian exploration, with particular emphasis on Ernest Giles.

<b>K</b> What do you <b>know</b> about Ernest Giles and his exploration?	<b>W</b> What do you <b>want</b> to know about Ernest Giles and his exploration?	<b>L</b> What did you <b>learn</b> about Ernest Giles and his exploration?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He travelled from South Australia to Perth</li> <li>• This expedition took place in 1875</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who travelled with him?</li> <li>• Why did he wish to travel to Western Australia?</li> </ul>	(To be completed at the end of the unit)

Each of the camels' names have special meanings. Keep a table that details their names and meanings as you read.

- What does your name mean? Does this represent your personality?
- Do your pets' names reflect their natures?
- Read Colin Thompson's picture book *Fearless*, in which the dog named Fearless is anything but fearless.

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As you read *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*, document the cultural differences between Padar and Taj and the rest of the group, using examples from the novel to illustrate these differences.

Using a software program such as Inspiration 7, create a mind map that shows your understanding of the relationships that Taj has with various characters in the book such as Tommy, Padar, Mr Giles, Alec Ross, Jess Young, Emmeline and Mustara.

Are there any heroes in *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*? If so, are these heroes flawed in any way? What makes a hero? Discuss.

View a documentary on Ernest Giles' expedition. The link below provides details of a commercially available DVD distributed by ABC that includes Ernest Giles [http://www.maxwells.com.au/assets/pdfs/history/Aust\\_History.pdf](http://www.maxwells.com.au/assets/pdfs/history/Aust_History.pdf)

Ernest Giles wrote *Australia Twice Traversed* which is readily available to download or save as an e-book (use a search engine to search this title).

- Use excerpts from this text in conjunction with Rosanne Hawke's retelling of his journeys.
- Read an extract from *Australia Twice Traversed* not referred to in *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*. Use this information to write your own piece of prose or poetry about the explorer and his travels.
- Compare pieces of primary and secondary evidence about Ernest Giles' expeditions, including sketches, photographs and excerpts from *Australia Twice Traversed*.
- Teach students how to search for primary sources of information about Ernest Giles on the National Library of Australia's website [www.nla.gov.au](http://www.nla.gov.au)

Research the work of Ernest Giles, including his other expeditions. Complete an information report on his life's work. This could take the form of an information website, PowerPoint presentation or a poster.

Write either a biography of Ernest Giles or an autobiography in the role of this great explorer.

Research Afghan migration to Australia, particularly with reference to the cameleers who worked with the explorers.

Compare the Rosanne Hawke/Robert Ingpen picture book *Mustara* with the dust storm scene in *Taj and the Great camel Trek*.

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Construct a timeline of the expedition.

- This could be completed as either an individual or whole class project.
- In pairs or small groups, choose one part of the journey on which to prepare a visual postcard to use as part of this illustrated display.

Reference is made to the fatal expedition of Burke and Wills.

- Compare the ways in which Burke and Wills conducted their expedition with that of Ernest Giles.
- Why was Giles' expedition less glorified yet safer? Focus on divergent decision making and leadership skills of the key figures.
- Reread p136/137. Why is Alec frustrated about the way in which different explorers are treated?

Camels play an integral role in early Australian exploration. Research this topic using books such as *Hoosh! Camels in Australia* by Janeen Brian and various websites.

- Consult the bibliography in *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* to access various resources.
- Discuss search techniques when using the internet.
- Evaluate the websites you visit:
  - When was the website last updated?
  - Can you find an author?
  - Is the site user-friendly?
  - Is the information useful?
  - Can you contact the author of the site?
- Use *Hoosh! Camels in Australia* as a teaching point for the parts of a non-fiction book such as contents, index, glossary, sub-titles, captions.
- Use extracts from *Hoosh! Camels in Australia* for reading comprehension activities.
- *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* includes a bibliography, as does *Hoosh! Camels in Australia*.
  - Take time to look at these bibliographies. How are the bibliographies organised? What information does a bibliography require? Where is this information found?
  - Does your library have any of these titles? Visit some of the websites.
  - Discuss why bibliographies are important inclusions to books such as these.
  - Discuss the format used by your school for bibliographies e.g. the Harvard System.
  - Practise using the bibliography tool found in the reference ribbon of Microsoft Word 07.

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- Create a bibliography of resources about explorers of Australia or camels in Australia in order to practise this important skill.

Create an informational brochure about camels, including their appearance, habitat, diet, reproduction and interesting facts.

Camels are an introduced species. Conduct a discussion or debate about the introduction of camels into this country. Use the Six Thinking Hats to examine the issue fully.

Padar retells many folktales from the 'old country'.

- Read more folktales from northern Pakistan/Peshawar.
- Are any of the folktales from *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* similar to other folktales you know?
- What role do folktales play in modern culture?
- How are folktales similar to/different from Aboriginal Dreamtime stories?
- Compare some Dreamtime stories with some of the Afghan folktales retold by Padar.

We learn various aspects of both the Islamic faith and Indigenous culture by reading *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*.

- Keep a journal of these cultural aspects.
- Discuss how skilfully the author has portrayed these aspects in a non-political manner.
- The character of Jess Young portrays a white person with little respect for or understanding of different cultures. Discuss this, giving examples from the text. Would Jess' attitude have been common in this era? If so, how do the other characters in the story seem ahead of their time in terms of tolerance, acceptance and cultural respect?

Much equipment is taken on the expedition.

- Find out more about the types of resources required for such a trip.
- Imagine you were Ernest Giles. What would you personally pack for this journey?
- Make a list of the items taken on this trip.
- Why would Mr Giles have wanted to 'metholate' the snake (p184)?

Sextants and compasses are used extensively by the party.

- How do these pieces of equipment work?
- Make your own compass (readily available online).
- Lines of latitude are used to help map their journey. Learn about longitude and latitude.

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Survival and leadership skills are both important features of *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*.

- What survival skills does Tommy teach the group?
- How do clay wells work?
- What leadership skills does Mr Giles show? Reread p120 to help stimulate discussion.

Create a character portrait of one of the characters from *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*, detailing their characteristics, likes and dislikes, hobbies etc.

Mr Giles keeps a journal. Taj begins to write as well after Alec teaches him to read and write in English.

- Choose a character from *Taj and the Great Camel Trek*. Write some journal entries as that character. You may wish to include some sketches.

How are Mustara and Taj similar to one another?

What misunderstandings occur in relation to the Indigenous people they encounter?

Taj matures a great deal on this trip, yet he still feels that being sad about the death of camels makes him a child. Do you agree with Taj? Discuss.

Tommy misuses English pronouns (p156). Use this as a teaching point about pronouns.

What obstacles does Taj encounter on this journey? How does he overcome these?

Taj's mother came to Australia from Ireland as a result of the potato famine. Research this time in Irish history.

What is the correlation between burying the dingo pup, Asad, and Taj's recent discovery of his mother's death?

- Why does he cry so much burying the pup?
- How does his discovery about his mother's death ultimately help Taj to heal and move forward?
- How was this holding Taj back?
- What does Taj mean when he says, 'there was a country inside us that I was learning about, a country that could also be a desert and needed nourishment and love to survive' (p189/190)?



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There are illnesses referred to in *Taj and the Great Camel Trek* such as scurvy and typhoid fever.

- Research diseases such as these. What are their causes and cures? Why are these diseases less of a threat today?

Imagine you are Taj. Write a letter to Emmeline back home in Beltana from Perth.

How are the spiritual stories of Tommy and Taj similar? (Both have lost family members, both are estranged from the native homelands etc.)

After Padar tells the story of the prince and the tiger (p227+), Taj says, 'there was something all of us feared ... and it wasn't until we faced our tiger that we found it wasn't so huge after all.' Discuss Taj's realisation.

Construct a timeline of the expedition.

- This could be completed as either an individual or whole class project.
- In pairs or small groups, choose one part of the journey on which to prepare a visual postcard to use as part of this illustrated display.

### AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Although I loved explorer stories as a child, my first motivation to write *Mustara* came when I was helping Afghan students with their English homework and I couldn't find any fiction about Afghans for them to read. Later I read how Ernest Giles truly had a camel called *Mustara* in his string and Taj's story was born. When Robert Ingpen did such beautiful paintings for the book I kept looking at them. Every time I got to the last page where the expedition is setting off I had the feeling Taj's story wasn't finished. I bought a copy of Giles' journals, *Australia Twice Traversed* and read them. Translating the journals into fiction for modern children was difficult but I wanted to tell not only Taj's story but Ernest Giles' as well. I mainly wanted children to enjoy the story and their history.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rosanne Hawke is an award-winning South Australian author. She has lived in Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates as an aid worker for ten years. Her books include *Marrying Ameera*, *The Keeper*, *Soraya, the Storyteller* and *Mustara*. She is a Carclew, Asialink, Varuna and May Gibbs Fellow, and a Bard of Cornwall. She teaches Creative Writing at Tabor Adelaide, and writes in an old Cornish farmhouse with underground rooms near Kapunda.