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HOME

Larissa Behrendt



Teachers' Notes

Written by a practising high school teacher and head of department – middle school curriculum

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SYNOPSIS

Larissa Behrendt's award-winning novel, *Home*, is a poignant look into the direct and indirect consequences of the Aboriginal stolen generation. The chain of events begins when Garibooli, a young Aboriginal girl, is removed by authorities in 1918, never to be reunited with her family.

The subsequent search for identity by the generations of children stemming from Garibooli reveals scars within the Aboriginal community that can never be healed completely. Behrendt cleverly shows this search for identity and belonging in a colonial world by following the children and grandchildren of Garibooli, as Garibooli was made to feel too ashamed to pass on her heritage to her progeny. The numerous characters give human faces and experiences to a highly politicised issue in contemporary Australian society, making *Home* a solid text in which to explore these issues in the classroom.

This insight into Aboriginal culture highlights the many myths and prejudices surrounding Aboriginality and the stolen generation. The challenges faced by Aboriginal people at the beginning and end of the twentieth century are implicitly paralleled, with the reader forced to make their own decisions about the present plight of Aboriginal people.

Although the novel is devoted to the colonial chapter of history for Aboriginal people, Behrendt also makes statements about general marginalisation in society, which ensures *Home* is rich for classroom discussion. Overall, *Home* challenges readers to assess their current ideologies surrounding Aboriginality, Australian history, marginalisation, and the importance of belonging.

THEMES**Belonging**

- After her removal by the Aboriginal Protection Board, Garibooli continually searched for a place to belong. She started her own family to fill the void left after losing her parents and brother.
- Bob, Danny and Daisy's time in the children's home left them feeling out of place, on top of the fact that they were Aboriginal in a predominantly white group.
- Bob's desire to find the truth pushed him away from his family.
- Neill O'Reilly, Garibooli's lost child, spent years wandering Europe and Australia in search of his roots.

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- Grigor Brecht was an outsider in Australian society due to his German heritage and socialist ideals.
- Thomas spent his entire life denying his family roots, as he tried to gain acceptance with other groups.
- Patricia, like her mother, started her own family to give meaning to her life.
- The general search for belonging in the colonial world for the Aboriginal characters is the driving theme for the entire novel.

Marginalisation

- The poor treatment of Aboriginal people in the early twentieth century is documented through the characters.
- Homosexuality and homophobia is briefly explored through the character of Thomas.
- Racism in the late twentieth century is highlighted by interactions between Candice and her university peers.

Cultural Identity and Aboriginality

- The traditional rituals and rites of Aboriginal culture faded due to families being split by the Aboriginal Protection Board.
- Discussions between Bob and his Aboriginal family who he tracks down in his later life show the changes in Aboriginal life and culture.
- Numerous Aboriginal stories are woven throughout the story to demonstrate Aboriginal cultural beliefs.

Aboriginal History and Law

- Aboriginal history and law is discussed through Candice, an Aboriginal solicitor in the 1990s.
- Euroke saw many changes over the decades in the treatment of Aboriginal people by white people.
- The treatment of Aboriginal soldiers during World War One is highlighted.

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- Bob's analysis of the documentation of Australian history is a good example of the white ideologies constantly surrounding Aboriginal people.

STUDY NOTES

- Draw a family tree with the information given in the book. Information such as cause of death, occupation and family ties at the time of death can be included to give a solid overview of the characters and their relationships. This is highly recommended considering the non-chronological format of the story.
- From the first chapter, do you think Candice has problems visualising her own identity? Can you empathise with her?
- Do you think the Aboriginal concept of family differs to that of their colonial counterparts? Research Aboriginal family values and compare and contrast the underlying differences between the different concepts of family.
- The story of *biggibilla* in chapter three symbolises a major difference between Aboriginal and colonial culture. Explain this difference. What effect do you think this has on Aboriginal people living in a colonial world?
- How did you feel during the description of Garibooli's abduction?
- Who is Tom Kerrigan? What was his role in the Aboriginal community? Why did the Aboriginal people he abused not take legal action against him for his crimes?
- Who is Mrs Carlyle? Do you consider her an evil character?
- Explain the presence of Chinese people at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Do some research to ascertain their treatment by the colonials. Why do you think Garibooli and Xiau-ying formed such a strong friendship?
- Do you think it is possible for a person to completely erase their past and restart a new life, especially against their wishes? How would you feel if you were taken from your family and placed in an alien setting with no prospects of being reunited with them?

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- When Garibooli became pregnant, think about her plight in terms of her lack of power in the situation. Do you think a similar situation could occur in contemporary times?
- ‘Grigor Brecht was a marginalised character for many reasons.’ Explain this statement. Discuss your interpretation of his strong interest in Garibooli as a potential wife.
- Is Grigor a positive or negative character throughout the novel?
- Why do you think Garibooli desired a large family so much?
- Euroke (Sonny), Garibooli’s brother, lived a hard life, seeing Aboriginal rights at their worst. What were some of the rights issues mentioned in the chapters devoted to him?
- Neill O’Reilly was brought up in a solid Irish family. Why did the author choose to include the opinions of Neill’s adoptive father and his Irish heritage? Why do you think Neill chose to pass on his Irish ‘heritage’ to his children?
- After Garibooli’s death, her family was torn apart again. In your opinion, who was to blame for this?
- Patricia and her mother Garibooli were both very similar in personality. Did this make them more susceptible to marginalisation or more able to fit into society?
- Danny struggles to slot into society as do Bob and Patricia and, to an extent, Daisy. Is this his fault?
- ‘Thomas was never true to himself and died unfulfilled.’ Respond to this statement, giving evidence to support your opinion.
- While Bob is in the navy, he begins to question the interpretation of history in the history books he studied while in the orphanage. If possible, find a history book from the 1950s or earlier, and do a brief analysis of the language used when Aboriginal people are discussed. How do you think an Aboriginal person studying these books would have felt?

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- In his mid-forties, Bob leaves his family to trace his family roots. Arguably, he was never truly comfortable with his understanding of his past. Try to put yourself in Bob's position. How would you feel?
- When Bob finally finds his biological family, he learns firsthand the truth of the treatment of Aboriginal people. Can a family ever be compensated or feel completely at peace when their children have been taken?
- Research *terra nullius*. What are your opinions on this? Write a short essay justifying your position.
- The stolen generation is a very complicated issue to address in contemporary times. What is your opinion on the government's behaviour in the past – can you see any logical reasoning behind it? What should be done about it now? Is there anyone to blame? Was it necessary for the present-day government to apologise to Aboriginal Australians for previous governments' decisions?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Larissa Behrendt is Professor of Law and Director of the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is a member of the Eualeyai/Kamilaroi nations of north-west New South Wales. Her first novel, *Home*, was the winner of the David Unaipon Award for Indigenous Writers and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book (South-East Asia/Pacific region).