

A movie poster for the film 'Rabbit-Proof Fence'. The background is a warm, orange and yellow sky with a silhouette of a bird in flight. In the center, a young girl is being carried piggyback by another person. The girl has a serious expression. In the foreground, a wire fence is visible on the left side.

# RABBIT- PROOF FENCE

## STUDY GUIDE

A FILM BY PHILLIP NOYCE

[www.rabbitproofence.com.au](http://www.rabbitproofence.com.au)

# Rabbit-Proof Fence:

## A Study Guide

GERALDINE  
CARRODUS,

LIBBY  
TUDBALL

AND  
TAMMY  
WALSH

### Introduction

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a powerful film based on the true story and experiences of three young Aboriginal girls, Molly, Gracie and Daisy, who were forcibly taken from their families in Jigalong, Western Australia in 1931. The film puts a human face on the 'Stolen Generation', a phenomenon which characterized relations between the government and Aborigines in Australia for much of the 20th century. The girls were taken away to be trained as domestic servants at the Moore River Native Settlement, north of Perth. This was consistent with official government assimilationist policy of the time decreeing that 'half caste' children should be taken from their kin and their land, in order to be 'made white'.

Focusing on the escape of the three girls from Moore River in the 1930s, the film highlights the despair experienced by mothers whose children were taken, and the terror and confusion of those children, snatched from familiar surroundings and forced to adapt to European ways. Led by fourteen year old Molly, the girls defy all odds to travel 1500 miles through unfamiliar territory to return to their land, their homes and families in North-Western Australia, with the authorities chasing them all the way.

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a true story, based on the book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* written by Doris Pilkington Garimara, Molly's daughter.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation argues that the truth about past experiences must be spoken about and acknowledged by all Australians before reconciliation can occur. *Rabbit-Proof Fence* will show viewers truths that many have not seen or heard about before.

The Council tells us that:

*It was standard practice ... Children were taken from their homes ... Whole communities were shifted from their home to another part of*

*the country. Aboriginal life has been regulated and supervised at almost every turn. There was no choice.*

*[Reconciliation and Its Key Issues: Improving Relationships, no.2.]*

### Curriculum Links

The themes and activities developed in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from the middle to senior years studying these subjects: Studies of Society and Environment, Australian History, Cultural Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, English, Personal Development, Religious Studies and Media Studies. In addition to the specific focus on the issue of the Stolen Generations, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* explores themes such as Aboriginal spirituality, relationships with the land, family bonds, courage, determination and faith.

### Before Watching the Film

These activities, which students may complete before seeing the film, provide an historical context for students to understand the film, and draw on the early chapters of the book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Later in the study guide there are activities for students who are comparing the film with the book.

### Historical Context

(Note: the early chapters of the book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, provide historical perspectives on early West Australian Indigenous experiences and contact with Europeans.)

When white settlers arrived in Australia, the interaction of two vastly different cultures, with such different attitudes to the land, made conflict inevitable. In the 19th century, the white man's guns were more powerful than Aboriginal spears. By the mid-19th century, European pastoralists and settlers had moved into Aboriginal lands, interrupted traditional hunting and gathering routines, depleted natural





resources and grasslands, polluted waterways and damaged sacred sites. European diseases such as smallpox and even the common cold decimated the Indigenous population. Alcohol and money further undermined traditional ways. In many areas, Europeans challenged the whole structure of Aboriginal traditional society and the authority of tribal elders was broken down. They had always controlled decision-making structures such as marriage, education, and rituals such as clan gatherings, but more and more young Aboriginal people began to be attracted to white society and began to live on the fringe of both worlds.

By the 1930s, when the story of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is set, many communities had become reliant on government handouts for food, clothing and other necessities, since their traditional ways of life had been eroded over time.

## Why were Aboriginal children taken from their families?

From the earliest years of European settlement in Australia, there is evidence of Aboriginal children being taken from their families as the authorities believed it was 'for their own good'. During the first half of the 20th century, it was official policy in most states to remove half or quarter caste Aboriginal children. The practice continued until the early 1970s, and was only fully

brought to public attention with the release of the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997.

Since the report's release, there has been much public discussion of the issue of the Stolen Generations. Some have argued that it wasn't a whole generation; others have said that the children were not 'stolen' but removed in order to give them a better life. Nevertheless, certain facts are undisputed:

- Thousands of Aboriginal children were forcibly taken from their families or their families were 'tricked' into giving them up.
- The policy was definitely aimed at 'breeding out' Aboriginality, because only half and quarter caste children were taken. Fully Aboriginal half brothers or sisters in the same families were left with their parents, while their lighter siblings were removed. If the policy was really about giving Aboriginal children a better life, then all children of an allegedly 'bad mother' would have been taken.
- Whilst some gained opportunities, education and a materially better life, the vast majority went to missions, orphanages or children's homes where they were poorly treated and suffered identity crises and mental anguish.
- Many of the Aboriginal people who today are alcoholics, drug addicts, psychologically damaged or imprisoned were 'stolen' children, and continue to suffer the effects of the destruction of their identity, family life and culture.

## A.O. Neville and the Moore River Settlement

In 1905, Western Australia became the first state to pass an Aborig-

ines Act which made the Chief Protector the legal guardian of every Aboriginal and part Aboriginal child under sixteen years in the state. The Chief Protector was appointed not elected and he answered only to the Premier. From 1915 until 1936, Mr A.O. Neville was Chief Protector. He believed very strongly in the removal of part Aboriginal children as a means of benefiting the whole community:

*the chief hope ... of doing our human duty by the outcast is to take the children young and bring them up in a way that will establish their self-respect, make them useful units in the community and fit to live in it, according to its standards.*

A.O. Neville, *The West Australian*, 1938.

The Moore River Settlement, just north of Perth, was W.A.'s most significant institution for the purpose of training 'part' Aboriginal children. In 1938, a visiting journalist wrote of Moore River that it was a

*creche, orphanage, relief depot, old men's home, home for discharged prisoners, home for expatriated savages, home for unmarried mothers, home for incurables, lost dogs' home and school for boys and girls.*

Anna Haebich, writing in the 1980s, said that in the 1930s,

*visits to Moore River were not encouraged and it was an offence to enter the reserve without official permission. This was rarely granted even to Aborigines wishing to visit close relatives. The Aborigines living on the settlement were virtually prisoners.*

It was under the auspices of the W.A. Aborigines Act that A.O. Neville issued the order, in 1931, that the three girls, Molly, Gracie and Daisy, were to be removed from their homes and families at Jigalong and taken to the Moore River Settlement.









a description of the landscape the girls passed through.

### After Watching the Film

- Firstly, write down a few of your own thoughts about the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. How did you react to the film? Did you enjoy it? Why or why not? Discuss your views with other class members.
- What do you think are the film's key themes and issues?
- Write two different descriptions: one in a few short words or phrases and another in a full paragraph commenting on its style, what the film is about, where it is filmed, the key characters and what you learn from the film. Discuss the different impressions you create with the language you choose.
- How would you describe the genre of the film?
- The film passes through several phases – beginning at Jigalong, the journey to Moore River, the Moore River settlement, the first part of the journey, crossing the salt lake and finally, the return to Jigalong. What techniques does the director use to reflect and define these different phases?
- Which features of the events and scenes in the film surprised you? Explain your answer.
- What other films has Phillip Noyce directed?
- The film was shot in the Flinders Ranges in Adelaide. Why do you think the production team chose

this location instead of shooting in Jigalong where the film is actually set?

- How did the cameraman use specific camera angles and lighting in the film to indicate different moods? What did you notice about the camera angles as the girls became more threatened?

### The Start of the Film

The film begins with background information, powerful music and what appear to be abstract images.

- How do the filmmakers begin the film and engage us in the story?
- When the film begins, what do you think you are seeing at first?
- What impressions do you gain of life in the desert Aboriginal community?
- Very early in the film, we see the eagle, Molly's totem, her spirit bird. Her mother tells her the eagle will look after her. When does the bird appear again in the film and why?

The first image of Constable Riggs makes him appear huge. The camera pans from his boots up.

- What impressions do you get of the role of the policeman in the community?
- How do we know that the Aboriginal people fear the police?
- By the end of the film, have your impressions of the police changed? Why or why not?

### Mr Neville, the Chief Protector of Aborigines

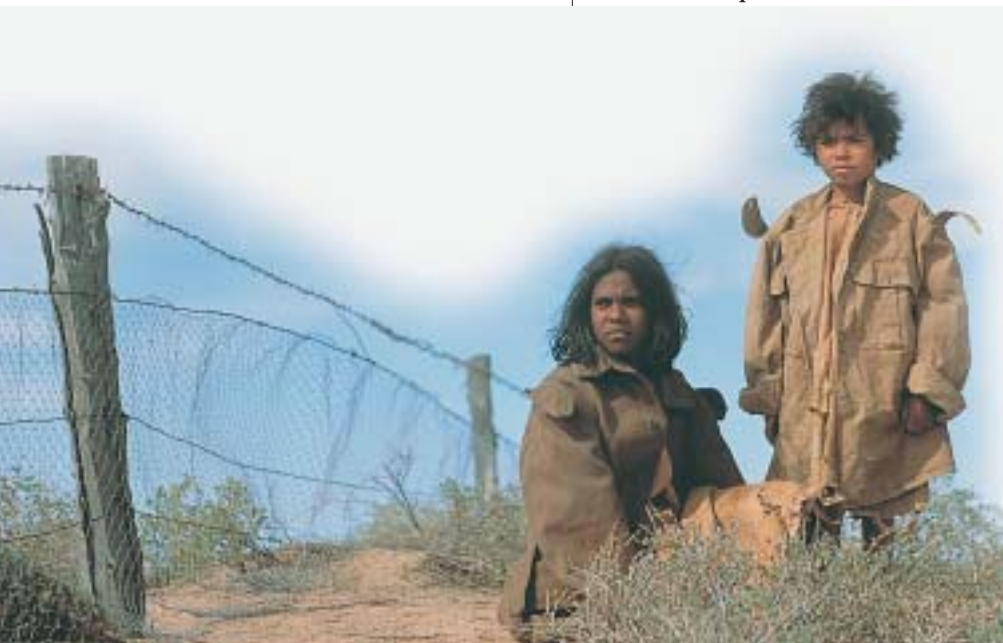
Mr A.O. Neville uses many words and phrases to justify taking the girls away. Some of them include: 'unwanted third race'; 'advance to white status'; 'in spite of himself, the native must be helped'; they are our 'special responsibility', etc.

- Imagine years later Molly meets with Neville and has a chance to answer these justifications. Write a dialogue between the two.

### The Book's Introduction

Doris Pilkington tells us that Molly and Daisy wanted their story to be published.

- Read the introduction to the book to find out why it was so challenging for Doris to retell their story and for Doris to interpret and record what happened.
- Why do you think that Molly and Daisy wanted to tell their story?
- Look at the map of Western Australia showing key places in the girls' journey. Using an atlas, calculate the distance of the route south and the return journey. By looking at a physical map, write









- Write or explain the different reactions that these people would have to Neville's views on the treatment of Aboriginal people he defines as 'half caste' or 'quadroon' (a person of one-quarter Aboriginal descent):
  - a. one of the women in the room listening to his explanations at the time (1931)
  - b. one of the mothers trying to make contact with their children
  - c. Molly's mother
  - d. members of your class watching the film
  - e. government policy makers today
- Why would some people today say that Neville's policies were racist?
- What were his policies and official duties?
- Why was he implementing a policy of removal of 'half caste children'?
- Outline Neville's attitude towards the girls. Does it change over the course of the film? Give some examples of words and actions that indicate this change.
- How would you judge Neville? Can he be seen as a product of his society and its values, or are the decisions he made universally wrong? You might like to consider some of Neville's own words (above) in answering this question.

### **Jigalong Depot**

- Jot down words used to describe Jigalong depot and share your images to form a class description.
- Why were depots like this established throughout Australia with Aboriginal Protectors?
- Find out why it was necessary for the government to hand out blankets, tobacco and flour.

### **When the Children were Taken**

- In your own words, describe the scene when the children are taken

and how the tension is built up. Comment on how you feel, the music, the reactions of the children and the women. How do the sound effects and music add to the feelings of fear and confusion? How is the panic of the girls conveyed?

- How does the film depict the anguish of the mothers whose children are taken? Also consider the acting, the settings, the sound effects and the use of symbolism.
- Write a description of the scene through the eyes of either Molly, one of the mothers or Riggs, the police officer.
- Compare this scene with the description of the children being taken in the book. What is the same and what is different?
- Why do you think the grandmother would have hit herself with the stone?
- Record how you think each of the children would have been feeling as they were locked up in the train.
- Compare the journey the children took by sea in the book with the journey by train depicted in the film. Why might the filmmaker have decided to treat the journey in this way?

### **Arrival at the Moore River Native Settlement**

- Write or explain how each girl might have felt as they arrived at the Moore River Native Settlement.
- How might they have reacted to seeing the nun for the first time?
- What are your impressions of the conditions at the Moore River Native Settlement?
- Why do you think that some children just accepted their fate, whereas others were desperate to escape?
- What were the consequences for those who escaped and were caught by the tracker?



- How did Molly, Daisy and Gracie learn what was expected of them at the mission?
- Why would they have been denied the right to speak in their own language?
- What kinds of activities were the children involved in to 'civilize and Christianize' them?

## The Escape

Molly and the girls were well aware of the consequences if they tried to escape and were caught, yet Molly was prepared to take this risk.

- What happened to Olive when she was caught?
- Why do you think Molly decided she should lead their escape?
- Why do you think Gracie was reluctant to go? Why might she have changed her mind?
- How is music used in the escape scene to heighten the atmosphere?

## The Black Tracker

- Consider the role of Moodoo, the Aboriginal tracker. Do you think that he could have found the girls if he really wanted to? What reason may he have had for not wanting to find them?
- Do you think Moodoo gives up on searching for the girls? Why or why not?

## Survival on the Journey Home

- How do you think each of the girls might have been feeling after they first escaped?
- How would their moods and feelings have changed as the journey continued?
- Why would Mr Neville have been so keen to keep news of the escape out of the paper?
- What might have motivated the woman at the farm to give the children clothes and food, but then inform the authorities of their whereabouts?



Molly is not only very determined but also very clever.

- Identify the various strategies that she uses to evade capture and enable the girls to survive and pursue their journey to the end.
- How would you describe the country that the girls had to cross on their journey? Use an atlas to help construct your answer to this question.

Whenever Molly is asked where she is going, the answer is always the one word: 'home'.

- What does this concept mean to Molly? Represent Molly's concept of home either as a drawing or as a poem.
- Imagine you are Molly aged about thirty, and the mother of two children. Tell your children what you learnt (life truths and practical skills) from your experiences in 1931.

## Meeting Mavis

The girls stumble across a remote farm where they meet Mavis, another Stolen Generations Aboriginal girl who is working as a domestic helper.

- What evidence is there to suggest that life is very difficult for Mavis?
- Why was she so keen for the girls to shelter with her for the night?
- Why did Mavis think that her boss would not report the girls?

- Why do you think that Mavis rejects the option of running away?

## Returning to Jigalong

When Molly and Daisy are reunited with Maude and their other family members, Molly is devastated when she tells them, 'I lost one, I lost one'.

- Why did Gracie want to run off to Wiluna?
- Why did the girls subsequently follow her there?
- Why do you think she was caught?

The final scenes of the film have a very powerful impact on the viewer.

- Why do you think Riggs withdraws from the women's camp?
- Do you think Neville has changed his views at all?
- Write a short storyline describing the sequence of events in the closing scenes of the film.

## Comparing the Book to the Film

- After viewing the film, compare the book to the film and note the differences, for example, in the journey south, what happens at the Moore River settlement?
- Why do you think the filmmakers would have decided to alter aspects of the story?
- Suggest reasons why the filmmaker did not choose to focus on chapters one to four of the book in the film.

- Would the content of those early chapters have 'fitted' the genre of the film?

## What happened to Gracie, Daisy and Molly?

Both the book and the

film tell us what happened to the girls. Gracie was transported back to Moore River settlement after her capture. Later she was sent out as domestic help on farms in the wheatbelt, and to institutions in the city. She married and had six children. She never returned to Jigalong and died in 1983.

Daisy moved to the Jimalbar goldfields, then to a camp along the rabbit-proof fence south of Jigalong. She married and had four children. Later she lived and worked on a mission. Daisy now lives with her family at Jigalong.

Molly was trained and employed as a domestic help on Balfour Downs station where she met and married Toby Kelly, a stockman. She had two daughters, Doris and Annabelle. In 1940, she was again transported to Moore River, and was denied permission to return to Balfour Downs. In January 1942, she again escaped, leaving Doris behind, but took her eighteen month old daughter on the same route she had taken nine years earlier. Three years later, Annabelle was taken from her, and Molly never saw her again. Molly and Toby worked on stations until their retirement in 1972. Molly now lives quietly at Jigalong, where she is actively involved in community affairs.

## Working Towards Reconciliation

One of the key recommendations of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is that all Australians should have greater knowledge of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture.

- What did you learn from viewing *Rabbit-Proof Fence* that you did not know before?
- How does this knowledge help you to understand Indigenous Australians today?

In recent years, more and more Australians have joined in nation wide activities and calls for reconciliation, and the public are







better informed about the realities of the impact of the European settlement on Indigenous peoples. Many Aboriginal Australians today are still suffering from the effects of loss of identity and family brought about by the practice of removing Aboriginal children.

- In a class discussion, talk about what you understand by the word reconciliation.
- Consult web sites suggested in this guide if your class requires more information to discuss this issue.
- What do you see as the best approaches to healing the scars of this experience and helping *all* Australians move forward in harmony?
- What practical actions can students in school take to become part of the reconciliation movement?

Many Australians support the notion of an official apology for the removal of children, while others resist the idea.

- Make a list of the arguments in support of an apology and those against the idea. What is your opinion?

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

### The Stolen Generations

- Using some of the written and visual sources listed at the end of this guide, examine some of the experiences of other Aboriginal children who were removed from their families. To what extent were the experiences of Molly, Gracie and Daisy typical of others?

### The Mission Experience

All over Australia, missions were

established where Aboriginal people of all ages lived. Many went to missions willingly when their traditional hunting grounds and food supplies were taken by pastoralists, or simply for safety. Others had no choice.

- As a class project, find out more about the mission experience in the 19th and 20th centuries in various parts of Australia.
- The eagle is Molly's totem. Find out about the role of birds and animals as totems in Aboriginal clans. Choose a particular totem and examine its meaning and significance.

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## WEB SITES

The Reconciliation Council has been succeeded by Reconciliation Australia:

- <http://www.austlii.edu.au/orgs/car/index.htm>
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission:  
[http://www.atsic.gov.au/default\\_ns.asp](http://www.atsic.gov.au/default_ns.asp)
- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies:  
<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/Lore of the Land web site: http://www.loreoftheland.com.au>
- Face the Facts:  
<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~aar/factfile.htm> (This has frequently asked questions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people prepared by the Federal Race Discrimination Commissioner).
- Bunjalika (Museum of Victoria): <http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/bunjalika>
- The Journey of Healing

- Reconciliation site:  
<http://www.alphalink.net.au/~rez/Journey>
- Yarra Healing: <http://www.yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au>
- Koorie resources: <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/koorie/curric.htm>



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