



Dirrarn

written by Carl Merrison & Hakea Hustler

illustrated by Dub Leffler

OVERVIEW

We first met Mia in *Black Cockatoo*, as she navigated her way through culture, Country and familial ties. *Dirrarn* follows Mia as she finds herself at boarding school and the challenges of living thousands of kilometres away from home, family, and the big sky country she loves. Mia along with her best friend, Naya, negotiate new friends, new ways of thinking and new ways of being in a different world. As Mia wrestles with all that is unfamiliar, she soon must learn to stand in her truth when confronted with unending challenges.

The dirrarn (black cockatoo) is Mia's totem animal. It provides her with the strength and freedom to stay connected to her world, even when she is a long way from home. It is this totem she draws upon. *Dirrarn* is a sensitive story on the power of place, personality and the honour of standing up for the truth.

- Daisy Utemorrah Award Winner
- Sequel to the best-selling title, *Black Cockatoo*
- Illustrations by multi award-winning Bigambul and Mandandanji man from southwest Queensland, Dub Leffler
- Highly original Australian story that follows 13-year-old Mia, a First Nations girl from a remote community
- Highly engaging story with a universal theme, that will resonate with readers, young and old alike

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR

Carl Merrison is a Jaru man from Halls Creek. Carl works with young Indigenous boys through the Clontarf Academy focusing on improving engagement with education and providing a positive role model. Carl was nominated for Australian of the Year (2016).

Hakea Hustler was a high school English teacher at Halls Creek District High School. Hakea is committed to First Nations education with a particular focus on school engagement, English language and story as learning, understanding and empowerment.

THEMES

- Identity
- Aboriginal Peoples – Social Life and Customs
- Change
- Coming of age
- Bullying
- Boarding school
- Relationships
- Country
- Strength & Courage

AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

In *Dirrarn*, the sequel to *Black Cockatoo*, we follow Mia from her community in the Kimberley down to Noongar country for boarding school. Mia grapples with schooling in this new context. As she adjusts to this unfamiliar environment, stands up to bullies, heads back home for school holidays, she reflects on what it means to be strong. Integrating Jaru language, the writing style and narrative structure provides a high-quality text that explores the importance of inner strength, resilience, and the value of relationships. Due to its themes and context, it is best suited to Young Adolescent audiences.

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	Years 6-8

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

CULTURAL NOTES

Dirrarn addresses the experiences of bullying and homesickness. Address with your students, where they can access help and assistance in your school should either of these issues be impacting them. Following are some examples of resources (use at own discretion);

- <https://www.13yarn.org.au>
- <https://headspace.org.au>
- <https://headspace.org.au/headspace-centres>
- <https://headspace.org.au/online-and-phone-support>
- <https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-peoples>
- <https://www.lifeline.org.au>

Dirrarn also refers to men's business and the changes to family relationships after coming of age. This is culturally specific content that is unable to be taught in general terms by those who do not have connection to Jaru culture or practices.

For information about teaching Australian Indigenous content see [Teaching Indigenous content with Magabala Books](#).

CLASSROOM IDEAS

English

Language use within the text

- Direct students to note down all their current knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages under the title 'I used to think...', as per this [visible thinking activity](#). Then access the following resources:
- Direct students to read the information on language on the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) [website](#), prepared by Sharon Davis. They should then read Sharon Davis' post entitled '[Aboriginal English – what isn't it?](#)' These webpages present information about Aboriginal English, traditional languages, and Standard Australian English. Students can then take the Aboriginal English quiz on the AIATSIS [website](#). Students can also access this [Kimberley Kriol chart](#) as well as [Kimberley languages map](#).
- Direct students to note down all their newfound knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages under the title 'Now I think...', as per the visible thinking activity [instructions](#).
- Lastly, direct students to collect five examples of the use of Jaru language in the text and note the meaning of these words in their workbook.



CLASSROOM IDEAS CONT.

Illustrations

- Consider the symbolic nature of Dub Leffler's illustrations throughout *Dirrarn*. Direct students to select three illustrations, locate a quote that links to the three selected images.
- To explore the concept of symbolism further, direct students to Chapter 7. Read this aloud as a class, pausing to discuss the symbolic qualities of each of the animals Mia sees at the zoos and thinks about from home.

Themes

Explore the themes of 'strength and courage' throughout the text. Complete the following table. Students can fill the last two rows with their own examples.

	How is strength and courage conveyed or explained in the text?	Direct quote from the text to support ideas
Dirrarn		
The friendship between Mia and Naya		
Tilly's support of Mia		
Mia's chat with her Jaja back home in		

Setting

Consider the setting of the text – boarding school on Noongar Country and Mia's home back on Jaru Country. Read through Chapter 4 and consider the descriptions of Noongar Country. Draw some symbols or small illustrations to represent each of the key elements described. Now read Chapter 11-12 to consider the descriptions of Jaru Country and complete a second set of symbols or small illustrations.



CLASSROOM IDEAS CONT.

Characterisation

Consider the characterisation of Mia and Charlotte throughout the text, using the table below. Students could work through this individually or in small groups. Each note in the table should be referenced by a page number.

	MIA	CHARLOTTE
APPEARANCE		
THINKS		
SAYS		
ACTS		
FEELS		

Language Devices

Discuss the language devices used throughout the text. Focusing on simile and metaphor, read the two examples below.
Simile: 'Mia made sure to circle around the outside of the room in the opposite direction of Charlotte, watching her like a galbun.' (p39)

Metaphor: 'It took all Mia's self-control to remember to be the galbun. Circling, aloof, not getting involved in the spider's trap.' (p43)

Divide the class into pairs and allocate a chapter of the book to each pair. Students need to see if they can find any more similes or metaphors in their chapter.

Totems

In Chapter 7, while at the zoo, Mia and her friends discuss totems. Read pp. 57-61. Discuss:

- Why do the girls suggest other totems for Naya before she tells them her totem?
- What is Naya's totem?
- What is Mia's totem?
- What does Mia learn about the black cockatoos on Noongar Country while at the zoo?

Cultural practices

In Chapter 12 & 13, Mia returns home and spends time with her family. Discuss the following questions:

- What do we learn about the changes in Mia's relationship with her brother?
- Why have these changes occurred?
- How do Mia's family welcome her back to country?
- What happens during the smoking ceremony?
- How does Mia feel afterwards?
- How does Mia's Jaja use art as a metaphor for learning?



Year	English
6	- Understand that different social and geographical dialects or accents are used in Australia in addition to Standard Australian English (ACELA1515 - Scootle) - Make connections between students' own experiences and those of characters and events represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1613 - Scootle) - Identify and explain how choices in language, for example modality, emphasis, repetition and metaphor, influence personal response to different texts (ACELT1615 - Scootle) - Analyse how text structures and language features work together to meet the purpose of a text (ACELY1711 - Scootle) - Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse information and ideas, comparing content from a variety of textual sources including media and digital texts (ACELY1713 - Scootle)
7	- Understand the way language evolves to reflect a changing world, particularly in response to the use of new technology for presenting texts and communicating (ACELA1528 - Scootle) - Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619 - Scootle) - Reflect on ideas and opinions about characters, settings and events in literary texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others and justifying a point of view (ACELT1620 - Scootle) - Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts (ACELT1621 - Scootle) - Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (ACELT1622 - Scootle) - Analyse and explain the ways text structures and language features shape meaning and vary according to audience and purpose (ACELY1721 - Scootle) - Use comprehension strategies to interpret, analyse and synthesise ideas and information, critiquing ideas and issues from a variety of textual sources (ACELY1723 - Scootle)
8	- Understand the influence and impact that the English language has had on other languages or dialects and how English has been influenced in return (ACELA1540 - Scootle) - Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups (ACELT1626 - Scootle) - Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (ACELT1806 - Scootle) - Share, reflect on, clarify and evaluate opinions and arguments about aspects of literary texts (ACELT1627 - Scootle) - Understand and explain how combinations of words and images in texts are used to represent particular groups in society, and how texts position readers in relation to those groups (ACELT1628 - Scootle) - Analyse and evaluate the ways that text structures and language features vary according to the purpose of the text and the ways that referenced sources add authority to a text (ACELY1732 - Scootle)

