



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Class: \_\_\_\_\_

**MY STORY**

# 1 Who Am I?

## The Diary of Mary Talence.

### Sydney, 1937.

Ten-year-old Mary Talence lives in the Bomaderry Aboriginal Mission where she goes to school and helps care for the little kids and babies who have been taken from their families. She thinks of herself as their big sister. Just like them, she was taken from her family when she was little. Back then she was called Amy. Now she can hardly remember her real brothers and sisters or her parents.

At the home, Mary is Matron Rose's favourite. She has good friends too, especially Marj. But Marj has darker skin than Mary and is taken away with some of the other girls to the Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls' Home where she is going to learn to be a domestic. Then the older boys are taken to the Kinchela Aboriginal Boys' Home where they are going to learn to be farm labourers. Mary is lonely when she is left behind.

Soon after, Mary is taken to live with the Burkes, a family living in Sydney. She feels lonelier than ever. The Burkes' children, Sophie and Sam, don't really want a sister and they don't make her welcome.

At school Mary is the only Aboriginal and is called names and teased by the other children. She does make one good friend though, a girl named Toni who is Italian and who is teased as well. Unlike Mary, Toni has a big, warm family; people she really belongs with.

Mary also meets an Aboriginal woman named Dot who works as a domestic in a home nearby. But when Mary mentions Dot to Ma B, she gets in big trouble. She is told to forget about being Aboriginal and to try and be like white people, like good Aboriginal people should. But Mary is drawn to Dot. She keeps on talking to her and starts to learn about her people and what is happening to her. Dot thinks that Mary's big sisters were at Coota with her. She takes Mary to an important Aboriginal Conference where Mary realises how good she feels amongst her own people. At last doors are opening for Mary, doors that might one day lead her back to her family.



*Mary Talence*

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## Writing *Who Am I?*

Anita Heiss believes that Australian history contains many wonderful moments that are worthy of being celebrated, but that there are also many terrible events that should not be ignored. She feels that we need to know about both aspects of our nation's history from an early age to really understand it. The policy of assimilation and the Stolen Generations that suffered under this policy form one of the most tragic chapters of our history.

As Anita began to write *Who Am I?* she was very aware that there was little material available for young people on the government policies of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families. Writing the book gave her the opportunity to, in her own words, 'transport the reader to a particular moment in Australian history that is still impacting on many Australians today'. Anita says that she does not know one Aboriginal person who has not been affected by the protection and assimilation policies. Her own grandmother was taken from her family at the age of six to the Cootamundra Girls' Home, was then sent to the Home of the Good Shepherd in Ashfield, and at the age of fourteen was put into service. Anita, like many other Aboriginal people, feels strongly compelled to educate and inform others about the consequences of such policies.

To create the character of Mary, Anita found herself drawing on her own experiences as a child, and found also that writing the story gave her 'an opportunity to purge some of the issues I was faced with as a child'. Anita remembers frequently being made aware of her Aboriginality by white people even though it wasn't an issue for her. On the playground and out of school other children called her names like abbo, boong or coon.

As well as reading extensively on the experiences of Aboriginal people who were sent to children's homes, she was able to speak with Eileen Stevens who spent nine years in Bomaderry Aboriginal Children's Home. These experiences were also woven into Mary's story and drawing on them as well as her own childhood helped Anita make Mary's voice strong and authentic. Letters from Marj and Matron are included to show some other sorts of experiences.

As well as paying attention to the language of the time, Anita took Mary's age into consideration as she wrote. A couple of Anita's young cousins read the manuscript for her and gave her tips about what words Mary might not and would have understood. For instance, they felt that 'assimilation' was too big a word for Mary to have used, so Mary calls it 'the "A" word'. Mary also writes lovely little songs that express how she feels. They are simple and repetitive, just as a young child's would be. She frequently describes what people do, but doesn't understand why they might do them. Mary also takes pleasure in things that children love, such as chocolate cake and parties.

Mary's Aboriginality is also reinforced through the use of language in the diary. She uses slang such as 'Coota' for the girls' home, and even though white adults tell her not to, she defiantly continues to punctuate her language with 'eh?' and drop the 'g' from words ending in 'ing'. Mary enthusiastically learns and uses the Wiradjiri words that Dot teaches her, even using them in her songs and to confuse nasty kids like Johnny Jones.

Because *Who Am I?* is a diary, it offers an intensely personal insight into life as one of the Stolen Generations. Mary faces terrible, hard circumstances in her life, harder than most Australians have to ever face even as adults: she loses her family, then everyone she knows at the home; she has to fit in with a new family whose children obviously find her presence threatening; she is made to feel different to the other children at her new school; and she is prevented from talking to Dot, the one person with whom she feels comfortable in her new surroundings. Through all these ordeals she has few people with whom she can talk about her real feelings or turn to for explanations or help. Her diary is the one place where she can be herself and say what she really feels, even using words and language that are forbidden to her when she speaks. Mary's diary allows her to be honest and for us to see how hurt, confused, creative, thoughtful, sometimes lonely, and remarkably resilient she is. It is a testament to the injury Aboriginal people suffered under the policies of assimilation, and the strength and resilience with which they fought and endured them.

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## Stealing the children away

The removal of Aboriginal children from their families began very early in the history of the European settlement of Australia. Within the first few months of the arrival of the First Fleet, Aboriginal children had been caught and were being used as servants or labourers, even though this was against the settlers' own laws.

The early British arrivals were convinced of the superiority of their own culture. They saw themselves as 'civilised' and had little understanding of Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal culture continued to be seen as inferior by most Australians until well into the twentieth century. This belief underlay the policies of protection and assimilation that emerged over time. White Australians were convinced that they were 'civilising' Aboriginals by taking away their culture and replacing it with a European way of life.

The first government-sanctioned removal of Aboriginal children from their families occurred in 1814. Governor Macquarie opened a school in Parramatta for girls and boys where they would learn to read and write, to become Christians and do menial work. The school's headmaster, William Shelley, noted that although the children were good pupils, they were held back by the fact that they often wanted to go to their parents. Indeed, most of the pupils did run away and there were only ever twenty students at a time attending. The school closed in 1820 to save government money.

As settlers moved across the land, the Aboriginal population was decimated. Exotic diseases took their toll, as did death through violent clashes with settlers. Dispossessed from the land that had sustained them for thousands of years, with no rights to hunt and collect food, Aboriginal people were forced to work as station hands and servants for clothes and basic food. The structure and authority of traditional societies began to buckle under these strains. Aboriginal people frequently became the poorest of the poor, living in camps on the fringes of towns or stations. The living conditions in these settlements were so bad that many more people died of disease. However, before 1880 there were no government reserves and very few missions and Aboriginal people were at least able to keep their independence, often keeping in touch with their land and following their

cultural practices. Some had successfully started farms and other businesses of their own.

By the 1880s many white Australians came to believe that Aboriginal people were destined to die out. Governments passed laws that they claimed were for the protection of Aboriginal people but in reality sought to control them. In 1883 the Aborigines Protection Board was formed in NSW. It was stated policy that all Aboriginals should live on reserves. From this time on the Board controlled where Aboriginal people could stay, what jobs they could do, whom they could marry and what they could own. They were forbidden to maintain their traditional cultural practices. Similar laws were passed all over Australia.

At this time too it became policy to take Aboriginal children from their parents. The aim of the policy, as stated in the Board's 1921 report, was to dissociate the children from their families to 'solve the Aboriginal problem'. They wanted Aboriginals to learn the ways of white Australia, to marry white people and thus gradually to reach the stage where Aboriginal people and their culture simply no longer existed.

To carry out this policy, thousands of children in NSW alone were abducted from their families and sent to children's homes, just like Amy Charles and her brothers and sisters are in *Who Am I?*. The children were to be trained to take up low-skilled work such as labouring and cleaning. In the homes they were not allowed to speak their languages, they were not able to communicate with their families, their names were frequently changed and they were often abused. This practise went on until the Board, now the Aborigines Welfare Board, was finally abolished.

As Anita Heiss has pointed out, not one Aboriginal family in Australia has been left untouched by policies such as these. If a family had not lost a child, a brother, a sister, a cousin, an aunty or uncle, they knew of people who did and they lived in fear of losing their own children. The deep wounds caused by the policies of child abduction will take many years, and maybe generations, to heal. Many Aboriginal people around Australia today are working towards that goal.

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## It really happened

Thousands of Aboriginal children were taken from their families under several Australian governments' policies of assimilation. Find out about what happened by using these topic headings to guide student research into the way these policies operated and the effects they had on Aboriginal people's lives.

### Stolen Generations

How were Aboriginal children taken from their families? Who took them and why? How were they kept separate from their communities? What was the effect on the parents and children? When did the policy of taking children from their families begin? When did it end?

### Kids in homes

Thousands of Aboriginal children were put into homes. Find out what these homes were like, including what the buildings were like, who cared for the children, what food they ate, how they were educated and how long they stayed there.

### Foster homes

Many children were fostered in white families, like Mary is in *Who Am I?* Find out about the experiences of some of these children. Did they feel like Mary did, lost and confused? Why was fostering into white families considered a good idea?

### Domestics and labourers

Those children who were strongly Aboriginal in appearance, for instance, if they had darker skins, were not fostered out but were trained to be domestics or labourers in homes like Cootamundra or Kinchela. Find out what these homes were like and what the children were expected to do. When did they have to go out and get work and what sort of jobs did they do?

### Rules and regulations

Although Aboriginal people were born and lived in Australia all their lives, just as their forebears had, they did not have the same rights as other Australians until the second half of the twentieth century. Find out about some of the rules and regulations that the government forced on them and how they discriminated against them. Did any other sections of the Australian community have similar rules controlling them?

### Aborigines struggle for freedom

Mary describes the Aboriginal Conference of 1938 at the end of her diary. This is just one event in the long struggle by Aboriginal people for greater rights in their own country. Find out about some of the important events that have occurred in this struggle. Place them on a timeline that runs from 1770, when Captain Cook first claimed eastern Australia for Britain, to today.

### Finding each other

Aboriginal families were systematically broken up, with children unable to have contact with their parents, brothers and sisters, or their extended families. What strategies were used to keep Aboriginal families from keeping in contact? How have some families managed to find each other again? What organisations exist to help Aboriginal families come together again? What has happened when families have found each other again after many years apart?

### Find out more

- *The Black Grapevine: Aboriginal Activism and the Stolen Generation*, Linda Briskman, The Federation Press, 2003. (Adult)
- *Aboriginal Heroes and Leaders*, Alex Barlow and Marji Hill, Heinemann, 2003. (Children)
- *Aboriginal Australia: Towards Reconciliation*, Robert Hillman, Echidna Books, 2001. (Children)
- *They Took the Children*, David Hollingsworth, Working Title Press, 2003. (Children)
- *Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales*, Nigel Parbury, Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs New South Wales, 1986. (Children)
- For more references, see *Who Am I?*, pp 172–3.

### Websites

- [www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/stolen\\_generation](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/stolen_generation)  
Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission.
- [www.alphaling.com.au/~rez/Journey/index.htm](http://www.alphaling.com.au/~rez/Journey/index.htm)  
Journey of Healing – National Sorry Day Committee.
- [www.daa.nsw.gov.au](http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au)  
NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

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## What do you think?

*Who Am I?* delves into the treatment of Aboriginal Australians under policies of assimilation, how those policies were carried out and the effects they had on Aboriginal families. The book can be used as a springboard to discuss the issues surrounding the Stolen Generations and how these issues still impact upon our society today.

- Look at the cover of *Who Am I?* What does each element, from the photo of the Conference to the handwriting, tell you about the story? Do you think that the cover gives a good indication of what Mary's diary is about? (Note: the girl on the cover is Anita Heiss's mother.) Why might Anita Heiss have chosen to give her book the title *Who Am I?*
- Why do you think that Aboriginal children were taken from their families? What was the government aiming to do?
- Mary is very confused about what is happening to her. People who say they love her and are doing what is best for her, like Matron Rose and the Burkes, do things that hurt her. Do you think they are doing the right or wrong thing by keeping her from contacting her family and friends?
- Sometimes governments and individuals think they are doing the right thing but as time goes on, these actions are proved to be harmful. Can you think of any other policies that have proved to be damaging to people in our society in the long run? How are these situations similar to the policies of assimilation? Are there any situations in our society today that you think could prove to be as harmful as this policy?
- Dot tells Mary that 'you have to walk in someone else's shoes to know what their life is really like' (p113) and that is why she thinks Aboriginal people should be able to write about their own experiences. How does *Who Am I?* help us to walk in someone else's shoes?
- There have been recent calls for the government of Australia to say 'sorry' for what was done to the Aboriginal people in the past. After reading *Who Am I?*, why do students think that Aboriginal communities might want the white community to make up for past wrongs? What form could that expression of regret take? Find out about Sorry Day, 26 May, and what it means to Aboriginal Australians.
- Many of us move house at one time or another in our lives. Mary has not only moved, she has changed families. When she is accused of stealing her teacher's purse, Ma Burke threatens to send Mary away. How do you think Mary feels about being moved and having to get used to new people, while knowing that the Burkes can send her away whenever they want to?
- Australia Day is a national holiday. What do students think it means to Aboriginal people?



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## To make and do

- Make a list of the rules and regulations written about in *Who Am I?* that Aboriginal people were made to follow, the things that they weren't allowed to do and the things that they had to do.
- Dot helps Mary learn about her people and supports her so that she feels less alone. Make a list of the things that Dot teaches her and the ways in which she supports Mary.
- Mary and Toni are put down by other people for being, respectively, Aboriginal and Italian. List three ways in which others denigrate them and three ways in which they try to maintain their pride in themselves in the face of this abuse.
- Mary has a very difficult time as a child, but she is also resilient. There are many things that make her happy. Talk about what being resilient means with the students and have them make a list of all the things that make Mary happy.
- Mary writes songs that express how she feels about herself. Have students write their own short songs or poems about something special about themselves.
- Break the class into small groups and have each group choose a scene to turn into a small play. Act the play out in front of the class. After each play, the class could briefly discuss what it showed about the relationship between the characters in it.
- Imagine that Dot's friend was able to find Mary's mother for her. Write some entries from Mary's diary describing how she and her mother get in touch. What happens next?
- Watch *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the story of Molly Craig, her cousin and her sister, three Aboriginal girls and their escape from a children's home near Perth to be reunited with their families. Discuss what happened to the children.
- Write a poem about being one of the Stolen Generations, from the point of view of either one of the parents or children that were separated from each other.
- Write a Sorry Declaration, starting with 'I'm sorry that . . .' This could either be a statement of being sorry from one of the characters in the book, or a statement from the student saying that they are sorry that bad things happened in the past.



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BLM 1.1

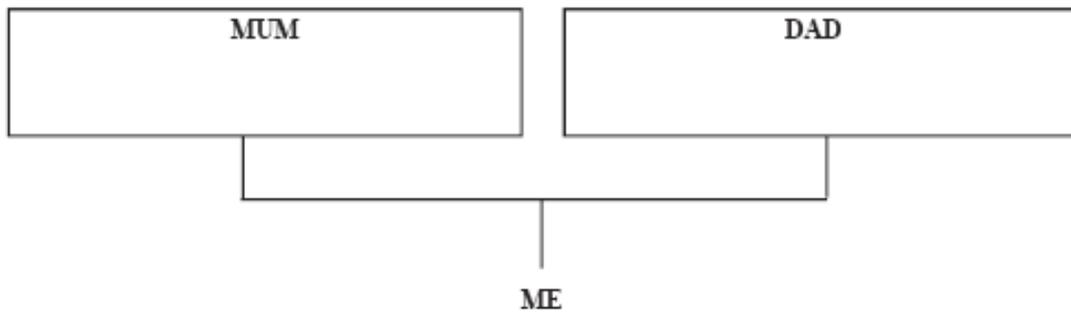
## MY STORY

# FAMILY TREES

Use these little twigs to build the branches of your own family tree.

Mary has had to say goodbye to many of the people in her families.

On your own tree, write down a few words that say what you would miss about each of the people if you had to say goodbye to them. Don't forget to decorate your tree.



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**MY STORY**

BLM 1.2

# ‘MY MUM WAS REALLY BEAUTIFUL’

Mary was taken from her family when she was only about five years old.

Even though she finds it hard to remember her real family, she still longs to see them.

Find these quotes in the book and, in your own words, describe what Mary might be feeling when she writes each of them.

Thursday, 4th February: ‘I used to write letters to my mum and dad, just short bits to say hello and to tell them I’m OK and that I love them. The sisters would read them and they said they’d send them but I never got a letter back so maybe Mum and Dad never got them.’

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Sunday, 1st August: ‘... it made me think about everyone’s birthdays and especially my real mum’s. I feel bad thinkin’ about her all the time cos the Burkes have been nice to me even though they get angry when I talk about the Home or my other family.’

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Saturday, 3rd April: ‘And Mum, can you tell me something? Do you still love me?’

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Sunday, 9th January: ‘I ran really fast after Dot and grabbed her around the waist and said she couldn’t do that to me, cos everyone was always leavin’ me or goin’ away, like my real mum...’

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Friday, 30th July: ‘I thought my mum stopped comin’ to see me cos she didn’t love me any more or cos she got too upset or cos she was dead, like Matron said about the parents of the other kids. But maybe she never came back cos she thought I wasn’t there any more, or worse, maybe she thought I was dead.’

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Wednesday, 26th January: ‘Maybe she’ll find my real mum for me and tell her I’m not dead, that I just have a different name and am livin’ in the Hives and that I’m being an Aborigine too.’

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BLM 1.3

**MY STORY**

# STEREOTYPES AND REAL PEOPLE

Ma Burke says that Mary is not allowed to talk to Aboriginal people 'cos good people were white and bad people were the others'. Mary learns that lots of white people think that Aboriginal people are generally bad.

In the two columns below, make two lists, one of the good things Mary learns about Aboriginal people and one of the bad things she hears people say about them.

**'Real people'**

**'Stereotyped people'**

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**MY STORY**

BLM 1.4

**CARING FOR KIDS:**

Mary is looked after by lots of different adults in her life. Some of them lose contact with her and some of them think that they are doing the right things for her when they really aren't. Pretend you are each of these people, and write a little bit about what they might think about Mary being taken from the home where she was born, and what they would like to do for her.

Mum

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Dad

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Matron Rose

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Ma Burke

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Pa Burke

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Miss Foster

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Dot

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BLM 1.5

## MY STORY

# THINGS IN COMMON

Mary often feels out of place and different but she makes friends in the home and when she is living with the Burkes. Using this table, write down important things about Mary's character in the column with her name on it, such as, likes to sing, Aboriginal, called names, etc.

Choose two of these characters and write down important things about them in the other columns:

**Dot, Sophie, Marj, Toni, Johnny or Sam.** Underline their names with different coloured pencils, say red for Character 1 and green for Character 2.

Using the pencil you underlined Character 1's name with, circle the things in Mary's list that she has in common with that character. Using the pencil you underlined Character 2's name with, circle the things that Mary has in common with that character.

To find out who Mary has most in common with, count up the number of circles you have made with each colour. Do you think that she was most friendly with that character or not?

MARY

CHARACTER 1: \_\_\_\_\_

CHARACTER 2: \_\_\_\_\_