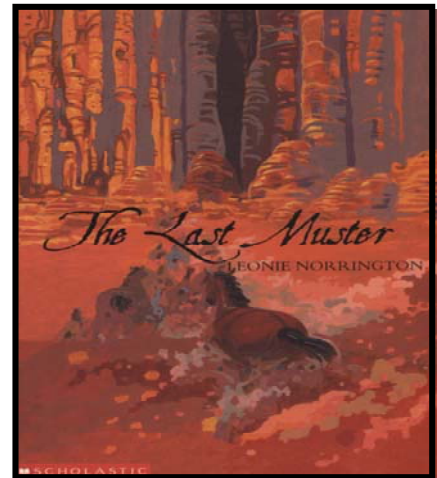


TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The Last Muster

Written by Leonie Norrington



Synopsis

Best mates Shane and Red live on Turkey Flat, a huge cattle station in the Kimberleys. Shane's great-grandfather founded the property in 1900; Red, granddaughter of the head stockman, Old Lofty, is descended from the Aboriginal people whose land this once was. One day the teenagers come across an unknown part of the stone country, a lush, magical hidden valley that is home to a herd of wild horses led by Roman, a magnificent stallion quarterhorse. The deep spiritual power of the valley has a profound effect on Shane and Red. Afterwards they discover that it holds the spirit of Jandamarra, an Aboriginal hero who rebelled against the white settlers 100 years ago.

Shane achieves his aim of trapping and taming Roman, but his triumph is shattered by the news that the American company that owns Turkey Flat is planning to evict him and his family - and Lofty and Red too. Determined to avoid the eviction, Shane and Red contact a Land Rights lawyer and find that Lofty may have a right to native title if he can prove his association with the land. Shane's mum produces old station diaries which show that Lofty was indeed born on the station - and reveal other secrets besides.

Riding Roman, Shane takes his father up to the stone country to show him the magical valley and to find the rest of the valuable herd of mares still hidden up there. Now, with Roman and the mares, Shane's family can make a new life around a stud herd of horses. But the question of Land Rights, and information contained in the station diaries, have cast their shadows. Did Shane's great-grandfather steal the Turkey Flat land from its rightful owners? And what exactly is Red's heritage? These questions are left open.

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Writing Style

Leonie Norrington's hallmark style is warm, personal and idiomatic, and allows the reader a sense of real connection with her characters. We see events through their eyes, and the use of the present tense gives everything great vividness and immediacy. Sights, sounds, colours, even smells are all described in detail and often with great lyricism, conveying exactly the distinctive qualities of the Kimberley region. Leonie's characters speak the authentic language of the outback: laconic, often ungrammatical, with a peppering of local words and expressions. The Aboriginal characters, particularly, speak a form of English in which Kriol words (mightbe, giveit, myall, gammon) feature prominently.

The multi-layered storyline is given strength and continuity by its references to Aboriginal spirituality and by the use of powerful interconnecting symbols: blood, water, the red of the Kimberleys, hunting and herding (cattle, horses, people) the timeless strength of stone and rock. Central to it all is the wild stallion Roman, whose story echoes the story of Jandamarra and who, like the Aboriginal people, finds himself hunted and trapped. The special empathy of Aboriginal people and animals is a recurring theme.

Author inspiration

Leonie Norrington lives at Noonamah in the Northern Territory. She was brought up in an Aboriginal community and has intimate knowledge of and a strong interest in Aboriginal lifestyle and culture. And as one of her three sons is a rodeo rider, she has impeccable sources for her information about horses! Leonie approached the Bunuba people of the Kimberley region for permission to use the story of Jandamarra and some of their language.

Editorial comment

What we loved about this book was its richness of themes: it's an exciting adventure story, a wonderful story about horses, a story about Aboriginal self-determination and a discussion on how people relate to each other and to their land. It's also a moving love story that describes both the developing love of Shane and Red, and the love of Shane for his wild stallion. The characters are real and credible, and once again Leonie has given us a vivid, authentic portrait of a little-known part of Australia that makes the place so real that you feel you know it. Aboriginal spirituality, questions of ethics, Aboriginal and white relationships and the shadows of history add many layers, all cleverly woven into the gripping storyline.

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Notes for teachers

The Last Muster contains a range of themes and issues suitable for class discussion. Some of these are:

- White settlement and Aboriginal dispossession; foreign ownership of northern cattle stations (the wheel turns full circle)
- Land Rights, including Mabo and the Wik decision
- The story of Jandamarra, seen by white people as a criminal and by Aboriginal people as a hero
- Interracial relationships, including the position of mixed race children and the treatment of Aboriginal women