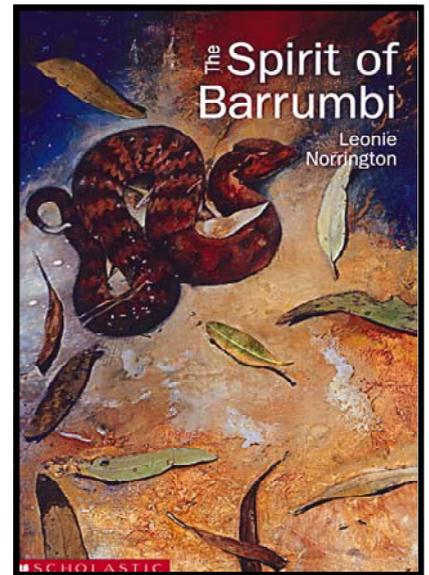


TEACHER'S BOOK NOTES

The Spirit of Barrumbi

Written by Leonie Norrington



The author: Leonie Norrington

Leonie Norrington's first novel, *The Barrumbi Kids*, was short-listed in 2003 for the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards and was an Honour Book in the Children's Book Council of Australia's Book of the Year (Younger Readers) Award. It was a remarkable achievement for such a new writer.

Leonie was born in the old Darwin Hospital in 1957, the oldest girl in an Irish-Catholic family of nine. When she was still very young the family moved to Barunga community, south of Katherine. They lived at Barunga for ten years while her father was the mechanic there and her mother taught at the preschool.

Leonie and her brothers and sisters grew up among traditional Aboriginal people and were looked after by Claire, an Aboriginal woman who taught them culture, and relationships ('things like the fact that you can't look at some people in the eye according to what relationship you have with them') and how to find bush tucker.

The children spent a lot of their time in the bush with Claire, and in the Aboriginal camps. They spoke Aboriginal English and Kriol, although their mother made them speak 'properly' at home. Their mother also taught them a love of books and stories and classical music.

Leonie left school to become a hairdresser, met her future husband when he came to Darwin to work after Cyclone Tracy, and married at seventeen. Later, now the mother of three sons, she worked in different sorts of farming jobs—working in nurseries, picking fruit. Then, when she was in her thirties, she went back to school at Humpty Doo and completed Year 12.

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The author cont...

After matriculating she did a journalism degree at the Northern Territory University. She wrote *The Barrumbi Kids* while working as a journalist for the *Litchfield Times*, a local newspaper.

The novel was accepted by Omnibus Books and published in 2002. In the same year Leonie was awarded a residency by the Varuna Writers Centre (which gave her 'time to write and write and write') and a

Developing Writers grant from the Literature Board of the Australia Council. She travels around the Northern Territory talking to schoolchildren, and is in demand around Australia as a speaker. Her distinctly Territorian viewpoint and life experiences give her a fresh and original voice.

Leonie is a passionate gardener (she has been a presenter on tropical gardening for ABC-TV's *Gardening Australia*) and has written a best-selling book on the subject, *Tropical Food Gardens*. She has also written a title for the Omnibus Solo range, *Croc Bait*, which she has dedicated to her baby grandson Sean.

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Although it may be read quite independently, *The Spirit of Barrumbi* is a sequel to *The Barrumbi Kids*. Essentially it continues the lives of the characters introduced in the earlier novel: two families at Long Hole community, one Aboriginal and one white, who are closely linked not by blood but by their commitment to each other and their land. Best mates Dale and Tomias have just left primary school, and Dale's older brother Sean and older sister Megan (Meg) are home from boarding school for the school holidays.

The Spirit of Barrumbi opens where *The Barrumbi Kids* finishes: in the community camp at Barrumbi, precisely at the point where the Dry breaks and the Wet season begins. Lying awake in his swag after a terrifying dream about Sean, Dale reminds himself where he is, and why: '*Remember, the rain was late? That's why we had to come to Barrumbi ...* The old people said it had never been this dry before. So the old lady Caroleena made them come to Barrumbi to do ceremony. To make the rain come. This is what they did in the old days. Every year the people came here to Barrumbi, to the deep waterhole hidden up in the hot dry escarpment between two sheer cliffs of stone ...' (Page 3)

Dale dreams that Sean has gone up into Death Adder Ridge, which is prohibited country, sacred country, to find a baby death adder. And, moments later, this is in fact just what Sean does do. He knows he is doing a bad thing, and makes sure that nobody sees him leave the camp, but his carelessness and lack of respect for Aboriginal custom triggers a huge backlash of outrage and resentment.

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In a paragraph that brilliantly encapsulates the different attitudes of white and Aboriginal people, the land itself is shown to be angered at the boy's unwanted presence in this sacred place:

Through the eyes of the peregrine falcon, the tongue of the death adder, the ears of the rock wallaby, the land watches Sean enter the ravine. He intrudes without identifying himself. He squashes a line of greenants as he slides down the banyan tree, leaving them half broken, screaming, glued to the trunk in their own blood, their legs twitching. He tramples a patch of moss, cracking the miniature pine trees, leaving their stems split and broken; he brushes aside a spider's web, breaking the golden threads, forcing the spider to run to safety. (Page 17)

Although he himself is unaware of their impact, it is Sean's careless actions that awaken the land's spirit and initiate the long Wet that brings near- tragedy to the people: 'Inside the rock, inside the soil, inside the trees, it stirs. Lifting, moving, swelling, slipping out as warm vapour through the cracks. Sucking up the panic, swallowing the tension. The air is suddenly thick and moist.' (Page 17)

The long, harsh Dry season is over. Dark clouds boil up. Heavy raindrops fall. And the Wet breaks with a vengeance.

Trapped in Death Adder Ridge, Sean is forced to seek shelter in the cave where the old men have gathered for ceremony. They are angry with him for his arrogant transgression, and keep him with them to teach him the right way. So Sean remains in the escarpment while everyone else goes home to Long Hole, ignorant of his fate.

Sean's father and Sandy, the Aboriginal mechanic who is Dad's best mate, attempt to drive back to Barrumbi to find Sean. Dale and Tomias secretly hitch a ride in the back of the four-wheel-drive, and discover two clues to what has happened: first Tomias finds Sean's boot in Chinaman Creek, and then the boys see his hawk, Sir Galahad. They call the hawk to them and find that a jess on one of his legs has been moved. Later, Dad finds scratched into the jess the words 'MUM IM SAFE—SEAN'. (Page 65)

Sean's parents try to keep secret the fact that their son has broken so serious a taboo, but the truth seeps into the community. As the Wet sets in, and the rain continues to fall, the old people sense that something is wrong.

The kids spy on a meeting at the workshop, climbing on old drums to peek over the wall: Dad and Sandy are sitting, heads down.

One old man's yelling at them, waving a spear, threatening to hit them with his fighting stick. He's

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yelling about water, the river; something bad's happening— maybe a flood, maybe someone will die. He's really angry because Dad and Sandy didn't tell him what happened at Barrumbi ... The old man says that he might have been able to do something to stop the flood if he'd known what happened. But now it's too late. All this rain, he says. Your family caused this problem. You causing this trouble. (Pages 97-98)

Dad tries to explain that what is happening is normal—it's just a big water Wet season—but the old people know better. 'The old man turns his face away from Dad, not wanting to listen to him. It's not just the rain and the rising water, you silly man, he thinks. It's the air. It's things you'll never understand. Something's wrong.' (Page 99)

The rain continues, the water rises, Bottom Camp is flooded out. Families line up one against the other: Caroleena is blamed for allowing Sean's family to go to Barrumbi, and Mavis, Tomias's mother, is blamed for not teaching Sean properly. And the spirit water tries to claim a human life for itself. Sean's brothers and sister, Dale, Jimmy and Lizzie, all have near brushes with drowning. And then the spirit water claims—or nearly claims—a victim: Sean's sister Meg. And the rain stops, and the waters go down.

And soon Sean comes home— 'changed utterly'. Is he a better person? Has he been brainwashed? We learn only that his experience has been at once brutal and dehumanising—and an extraordinary revelation. What happens to Sean, how it affects him, and how his family and friends react to it, forms the powerful core of this book. It introduces issues at the very heart of white/Aboriginal relations and reveals the depth of the cultural divide. There are no easy answers here.

Within the framework of Sean's story many incidents involving the other children show the progression of everyday life during the Wet. Dale, Tomias, Lizzie, Jimmy and Reuben, and the two older girls, Meg and her best friend Jeweleen, are all concerned for Sean's safety, but in the meantime they have fun. They go tubing on the flooded creek; Meg and Jeweleen do each other's hair and drink hot Milo; the boys race their bikes through puddles; the younger kids cake their feet with mud to make mud shoes.

Christmas comes and goes without any presents—all the roads are flooded, so trips to town have not been possible—but Dad and the men at the workshop have a surprise for the kids: a pontoon for them to use on the billabong.

Dale makes a fascinating discovery when he and Tomias are helping to evacuate the old people from their flooded homes in bottom camp. It's an old tin trunk with medals and photos showing Aboriginal

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soldiers. Suddenly Dale's ideas about Aboriginal people are turned upside-down: there is so much he doesn't know about them. Details throughout the story provide glimpses into the past and hint at lives once lived differently.

They're only half way down the road when they meet a line of old people walking. Some of them carry rifles. These men were stockmen and, still proud of that tradition, wear jeans, checked shirts, riding boots and wide-brimmed hats. A couple of the old men are too proud to wear clothes. They carry spears over their shoulders, their hair is pulled back in headbands, ripples of ceremony scars run across their bare chests like ribs. They walk straight past the Toyota as if it's invisible.

(Pages 135-36)

Cultural Issues

Even more than *The Barrumbi Kids*, this novel deals with differences between Aboriginal and white cultures.

The white kids learn about language and bushtucker, and are taught to have respect for spirits and elders, but their attitudes towards Aboriginal traditions of behaviour are tempered by their Western upbringing. In Aboriginal law, for example, if any member of a family has committed a crime, the entire family is punished or ostracised. When Tomias realises that he shouldn't be friends with Dale until the trouble with Sean is over, Dale is left wondering: 'Tomias left us ... Does he reckon it's our fault too? Or worse, is everyone going to ignore us mob now?' (page 101).

Similarly, when Tomias retrieves Sean's boot from Chinaman Creek, he is less worried about Sean's possible fate than horrified because he might have touched 'a dead person's boot' and concerned that Mavis will punish him for such a breach of behaviour. For Dale the boot is just a boot, an indicator of what may have happened to his brother.

Central to the novel is the spirit water, which is seen by the Aboriginal people as an entity with great power. For the white children, it is equally impressive:

'Do you reckon that old man's talking about that flood spirit?' Lizzie whispers. 'You know, that one Mavis told us when we were little. That one what hunts for warm animals and sucks ya blood and stuff? So ya go all like grey and soft?'

'That's just a kids' story to keep ya away from the water.'

'But if it's that spirit, it will stay flooding till someone dies. Till that spirit gets itself a human body,' Lizzie goes on. (Page 101)

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They don't discuss their fears with their parents. When Dad wants the kids to help him launch the pontoon in the billabong, Lizzie realises that they can't tell him about their fears of drowning:

... What would they tell Dad? That Dale and Jimmy nearly drowned, and they reckon it was a spirit in the water trying to kill them, and they never told anyone? (page 117)

Landscape

The Barrumbi Kids is set during the Dry season. Its landscape is all yellow spear grass and blue sky, flame and smoke, searing heat and drought, culminating in the pressure-cooker atmosphere of the Build-up. The book encompasses the passing of a whole school year.

The Spirit of Barrumbi takes place over a much shorter period—the end-of-year school holidays—but once again the effect of the weather on how the people live, the structure of their lives, is profound. The atmosphere of this book is all dampness and saturation, driving rain, dripping rain, rain tinkling on roofs, sodden land, a milky expanse of slowly moving floodwater, the sudden shock of bright green spear-grass shoots. The wetness pervades everything:

And now it really rains, all week, heavy wild rain, falling in an endless stream. Everything's covered with moisture: clothes are damp, the floor slippery with condensation, the cushions covered with a film of mould. Opium River bridge is washed away. Long Hole river's right up across the causeway. The old ladies have seen signs of crocodiles at the billabong so the kids can't play on the pontoon. It's too cold anyway to go swimming.

The kids sit in the boys' bedroom huddled around Jimmy's radio, listening to music crackle from the tiny speaker. They're sick of being wet. (Page 129)

In stark contrast with the sodden community, the steep escarpments around the Barrumbi waterhole (significantly known outside the community only as Missionary Rock Hole) have nobility and magnificence. Like the culture of the Aboriginal people, this outback landscape is harsh and unforgiving, but steeped in spiritual power.

Notes for Teachers

The people

One of the most difficult things for the white people in this novel is how to reconcile their own instinctive feelings with their respect for Aboriginal attitudes. Crucially, this is shown in the scene where Sean's father talks to the young helicopter pilot about the 'touchy business' of rescuing Sean.

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Notes for Teachers cont...

The pilot doesn't know that Barrumbi is a sacred place: if it was *his* child who was lost, he implies, he would just fly in to rescue him without a second thought. But Sean's father, who has made his life within the Aboriginal community, must make a choice between his feelings as a father and his knowledge of what is right in Aboriginal eyes. Is his choice the 'right' one? Compare the decision he makes here with his furious, self-despising reaction when Sean returns home (pages 183-84). This would make an excellent topic for debate.

- Aboriginal lives have been severely dislocated by white settlement. *The Spirit of Barrumbi* shows another side to this: that white people, in trying to protect Aboriginal lifestyles and attitudes, can also be compromised and forced to make sacrifices.
- Discuss the Aboriginal system of kinship, where people unrelated in a conventional sense call each other 'sister' or 'mother'. Show how, in this novel, kinship aligns people on opposite sides regardless of their feelings for each other.
- What is the significance of Dale's discovery of the medals and photographs in Old Copper's tin trunk? Research the role of the Aborigines in the Northern Territory during the second world war. Describe the relationship between the black soldiers and their white officers at this time. Would this relationship be different now?
- Compare Aboriginal and Western attitudes towards elderly people, as shown in this novel.
- Compare Aboriginal and Western attitudes towards women, as shown in this novel.

The natural world

- At the beginning of the novel Sean is a keen student of biology. How does his spell in the cave with the old men change his attitude to the natural world? Why, when he receives his Christmas present, does he hope that it's not the microscope he has long wanted?
- Compare Western scientific knowledge with Aboriginal knowledge. How do they differ? Can the two be reconciled?
- Research the seasons in the Northern Territory. How do they affect people's lives? Compare the Dry season as portrayed in *The Barrumbi Kids* with the Wet as described in *The Spirit of Barrumbi*.
- Talk about 'bushtucker'. List all the foods mentioned in the book.

Culture

One of the most striking things about both *The Barrumbi Kids* and *The Spirit of Barrumbi* is their deep grounding in Aboriginal spirituality. Leonie Norrington says: 'I have been influenced by two forms of spirituality. My mum's brand of Irish Catholicism, with its emphasis on the magic of the

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world and the spiritual way of being in it; and ... strict Aboriginal spirituality, with its rigid rules and laws. We all grew up with great respect for the spirits of the land and sacred places.'

- Show how the Aboriginal people's deep beliefs dictate how they behave and how they live their lives. Discuss similar beliefs in other cultures (eg those of Native American peoples).
- Discuss the importance of the land and the concept of people belonging to land and being responsible for it. Talk about the meaning of the place called Barrumbi.
- Sean's mother suffers because she cannot come to terms with not knowing what has happened to her oldest son, but Caroleena is sure that the old ceremony man will 'sort it out'. Caroleena makes an altar for Sean (pages 85-86), to keep him safe. Think about all the different things the women put on the altar, and why they might be spiritually significant.
- Think about the following as they are described in *The Spirit of Barrumbi*:
(a) Corroboree; (b) Christmas.

Style

Leonie Norrington's style is extremely accessible but also very rich and complex. Discuss some of the elements of her writing that make this such an interesting and involving book.

- The descriptions of people and places are particularly vivid. Look at the use of sensory images that help the reader to visualise exactly what is being described. Think especially of the ways in which water (whether rain or flood or river) is described.
- The spirit water is given some human features: it is seductive, beguiling, and insistent. How successfully has Leonie depicted it? Discuss the spirit as part of the structure of the story, from its introduction in Death Adder Ridge on page 17 to its final appearance on page 158.
- The story is told largely from the children's point of view. Look at the language and see where the grammar and expressions reveal this. How different might the story have been if it were told purely from the author's point of view?
- Look at the ways in which the story gains immediacy—eg the use of the present tense, and the use of 'stream-of-consciousness'. How different might it have been if it were written in the past tense?
- Much of Leonie's writing is lyrically beautiful. Find some passages that seem especially appealing—very often these will be descriptions of the natural world—and analyse their appeal.
- Although some serious subjects are dealt with in the story, they are often shown in an extremely funny light. Talk about how humour can be used to illuminate such unfunny things as bigotry and racism, or defuse a sense of danger. What are some of the funniest moments in the novel? What is their effect on the rest of the story?