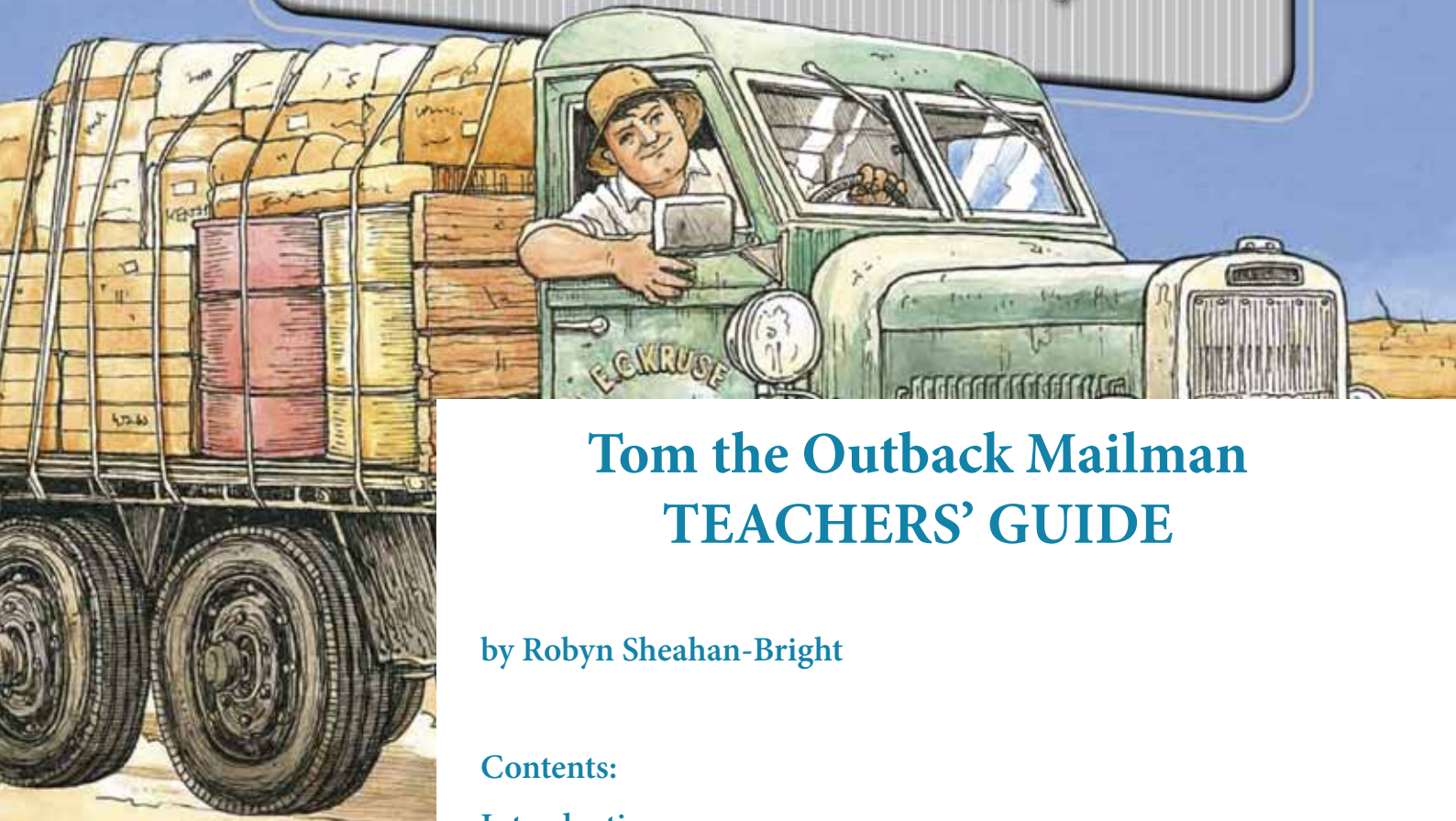


Kristin Weidenbach • Illustrated by Timothy Ide

TOM *the Outback* MAILMAN



Tom the Outback Mailman TEACHERS' GUIDE

by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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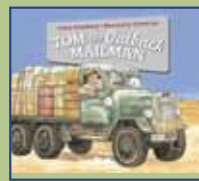
Bibliography

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TOM THE OUTBACK MAIL MAN

TEACHERS' GUIDE

Introduction

'Big Tom Kruse was a REAL AUSTRALIAN HERO. He delivered the mail to outback stations and towns.'

Tom the outback mailman had a run which was bigger than most. He was on the road for weeks at a time and travelled distances most postmen can only dream of. The obstacles he encountered were worse than most today as well. In cities, a postman might encounter an angry dog or a very hot day; Tom had to drive for miles and miles over extremely rough terrain and even over flooded rivers in order to deliver mail and supplies to people on his route!

This picture book tells the story of the real outback postman Tom Kruse, and how from 1936-1963 he traversed the Birdsville Track. It's a tribute to Tom, but it's also a tribute to the many people who don't think about how extraordinary their work might be, but who do it, because they know it's got to be done.

Australia is a country often confined by its sense of itself as an island peopled by coastal dwellers. So the vastness and the beauty of the interior often surprises those who visit or read about it. Many Australians live on the fringe of the continent but there are also many people who roam over enormous inland territory. Tom picks up several Indigenous people who have always traversed this environment, and have unique insights into it.

This story disproves the myth that the outback is an emotionally arid environment peopled by loners and eccentrics. The writer Kristin Weidenbach and the illustrator Timothy Ide show not only the diversity of the landscape but also the rich sense of community shared by the people who consider their neighbours to be anyone who lives in this vast interior with them.

Themes & Curriculum Topics

This picture book relates to themes and curriculum topics for upper primary or secondary school students in the following suggested areas:

Study of History, Society and Environment

- **Iconic Australian Heroes**

There are many individuals who have been revered in Australian cultural history for the place they have earned in the hearts of Australians. Not all of them, however, are widely regarded as 'great' men or women because of their public roles as politicians, ambassadors, scientists or revered cultural figures such as Dame Nellie Melba, Sir Robert Helpmann, Geoffrey Rush or Cate Blanchett. Some have been larrikins (Paul Hogan), and others notorious figures who have become heroes or anti-heroes (Ned Kelly), but some have been ordinary people who have done a job well, and even better than that. They've overcome amazing odds and fulfilled a role which has not been lauded but has been recognised by those who were lucky enough to have benefited from their efforts. Tom the outback mailman is one of them.

Activity: Research Tom Kruse's story by visiting websites such as:

'Tom Kruse MBE' <<http://www.southaustrianhistory.com.au/kruse.htm>>

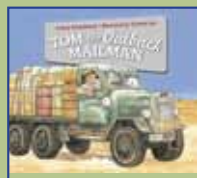
'Last Mail from Birdsville' <<http://www.lastmailfrombirdsville.com/index.htm>> This site includes information and sales of the double DVD 'The Back of Beyond Collection'.

Activity: Watch a film clip from 'The Back of Beyond' (1954) <<http://aso.gov.au/titles/documentaries/back-of-beyond/clip1/>> It includes footage of the 'real' Tom Kruse taken in 1954. There are educational notes on this website, as well, which teachers might use to stimulate further discussion of the messages conveyed in the film.

Activity: Watch the musical 'Tribute to Tom Kruse, the Birdsville Track Mailman' performed by Bill "Swampy" Marsh and David Hansford <http://www.fiveaa.com.au/video_tribute-to-tom-kruse-the-birdsville-track-mailman_112177>

Discussion Point: Tom Kruse is described as a 'real Australian hero'. Discuss this statement with reference to the meaning of the word 'hero' and with reference to how Australians define heroes.

Activity: Research the lives of other such ordinary heroes. Discover (via researching) heroes in your own suburb, town, city, state and nation.



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Discussion Point: Read about awards in Australia which honour bravery or contributions to science, culture or history. How worthy were some of these recipients, in your opinion?

Activity: Conduct a debate about heroism. What does it mean? Debate with reference to some revered or under-recognised figures.

- **Australian Outback**

Activity: What do students think of, when you say the word 'outback'? Brainstorm word associations and then discuss the impressions students have of the outback. (Teachers might also refer to: Steinberger, Kevin 'The Year of the Outback: What Constitutes the Outback?' in *The Literature Base* – Vol. 13 No. 1 February 2002 pp.4-10.)

Activity: Read other resources about the Outback. (eg 'Outback Novels: a List' in *The Literature Base* — Vol. 13 No. 3 August 2002 p.22.)

Activity: You might like to invite someone who has lived in the outback to address the class and even show them pictures of the environment to stimulate further discussion.

Activity: Make a list of words or concepts suggested in the book which relate to outback life (eg tucker, swag, gibbers, hunting dingoes). Use them as triggers for further discussion and research with the students.

Activity: The diversity of the population in the outback is evident in the final double page spread in the book. Australia's first inhabitants, Indigenous people, are depicted alongside people of a variety of both European and Middle Eastern backgrounds. Research the different ethnic groups who have arrived in the outback, and how and when they might have arrived there. For example read about 'Australia's Muslim Cameleers' and their interaction with Indigenous people in the area. <http://www.cameleers.net/?page_id=8>

- **Postal Delivery**

Discussion Point: Australia Post is a postal service which perhaps has confronted more challenges than most English language speaking countries. Even in the US where there are also vast distances to be traversed, the size of the population perhaps assists in the recompense for the cost of the delivery of packages to remote areas. What are the new challenges being confronted by postal services? Research this topic and discuss.

- **Geography and Climate of Birdsville Track**

Discussion Point: The Birdsville Track is widely known but many people have never visited it because it is so remote and difficult to traverse. Research the area, and its landmarks such as Sturt Stony Desert or the Birdsville Pub.

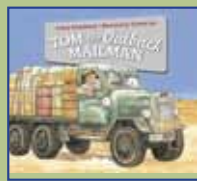
Activity: The map at the back of the book gives some idea of the topography of Central Australia and the routes covered by Tom on his outback mail run. Place names can also be used to trace the journey on the map. [See also **English Language and Literacy** below.]

Activity: Have fun making up quizzes about the Birdsville Track area. [See **BM 2** to get the students started on questions about what they've learned.]

- **Droughts and Floods**

Activity: Research the impact of the weather – rain, floods, drought, windstorms etc – on the outback and how people living there tackle such challenges.

Discussion Point: This book shows the dramatic change in the landscape when rain falls in this arid country. Research how droughts and floods have affected this region.



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• Social History

Discussion Point: This book is set half a century ago, and reveals to children how much has changed in the time. Students might be encouraged to discuss the differences between this representation of the past and the present eg. The time it took to send a parcel, and how letters, too were, sent by mail, rather than being emailed or 'tweeted' as messages are today. It also shows how frugal people were; they mended household items; they made their own clothes and darned socks; they 'made do' as Tom does in wearing 'trousers tied up with a piece of string'; they were less inclined to throw things away or to buy new things; not everyone had a car and sometimes they hitched a ride with friends; it was a much 'slower' era and in this book people evince habits to accommodate that slowness. They were perhaps more patient; and more resourceful as well? Discuss.

Activity: Invite students to make a list of the things they notice in this book which are different about life then, as opposed to now. Make another list of objects depicted in it which are not so common today.

Activity: Read other picture books about earlier eras. eg David Cox's *The Road to Goonong* (Allen & Unwin, 2011) or Catherine Farthing-Knight's *Days With Gran* Ill. by Annmarie Althaus (UQP, 1995) or Ian Edwards' *Papa and the Olden Days* Ill. by Rachel Tonkin William Heinemann, 1989) or Rachel Tonkin's *What Was the War Like Grandma?* (William Heinemann, 1995) or Ian Abdullah's *As I Grew Older* (Omnibus Books, 1993) or Corinne Fenton's *Queenie: One Elephant's Story* Ill. by Peter Gouldthorpe (Black Dog Books, 2006) or Gary Crew's *Memorial* Ill. by Shaun Tan (Lothian, 2003). Teachers may also be able to source *Picture Books tell our story: a social history of Australia: ideas for educators*: produced for the CBC 5th National Conference 2000 & Voices on the Coast– Youth Literature Festival, University of Sunshine Coast Library Gallery 2000 (Dromkeen, 2000).

• Values

Discussion Point: What values or qualities did this story suggest Tom had? What values are necessary to do this sort of work year after year, and what does this story reveal about Tom's values? Or about the values of the people he delivers mail to, year after year?

Visual Literacy

The visual text of a book works with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book's design and illustrations, as explored below:

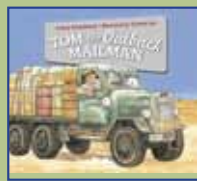
Activity: The **cover** of this book is an important part of its message. This cover image runs from back cover to front cover as a landscape painting. Tom is in his truck on the front, but when you turn to the back you observe all the people greeting him standing in front of the Birdsville Pub. What does the image suggest? The title is printed on a panel similar in colour and shape to the front of a truck. The truck is a 'gloss' image, whereas the rest of the cover image is in 'matte' finish. Discuss the details used in this design. Then create your own cover for this book.

Discussion Point: This book has no decorations or images on its **endpapers**, but the use of the ochre colour (of the sand dunes in the outback) as the colour of the endpapers is a deliberate choice which speaks to the reader about the content of the book. Some endpapers make use of a repeated motif or symbol. What image or symbol would you have selected as illustrations or images on endpapers for this book? Design your own endpapers.

Activity: The **half-title page** depicts Tom in a boat and the **title page** depicts Tom tying a load onto his truck. These are both strong images from the book. But perhaps another more abstract idea might have been used? Discuss with students the idea of using a symbol on the half-title or title page. Then have them create their own title page image for his book.

Discussion Point: The **format** of the book is **landscape** (290cmW x 250cmH). The **layout of the storyboard** is varied with illustrations sometimes encompassing the whole double spread (pp 14-15) while others depict a number of different scenes on the double page (pp 18-19). Why do artists vary format in this way?

Discussion Point: There are various inventive usages of **font** in this book. Eg Some key words appear in colour rather than black and white; some appear as capitals instead of sentence case (eg pp 22-3); on pp 12-3 there is a wonderful image of the font swirling in a circle made by the wheels of Tom's truck as it revs up in order to charge up and then down a sand dune. Discuss the use of fonts in this book.



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Discussion Point: Colours used are various pastel shades. How does colour convey meaning in this book?

Discussion Point: Discuss with students how paintings require planning, how an image is 'worked up' from these initial ideas, and how they might also use photographs, drawings and drafts in conceiving a finished artwork.

Activity: Timothy Ide has used pen and ink drawings overlaid with watercolour as the medium or style of art in this book. Discuss the medium and then invite students to create their own painting of Tom Kruse in a likely situation, using this medium.

Activity: Have students research Timothy Ide's work. An established children's books illustrator, this is his first picture book for Hachette, and Timothy also has wide experience as an artist. For example, his skills as a court illustrator have obviously enabled him to create portraits of people which are very astute and lifelike. [See **About the Illustrator** below.] Then have them write a précis of **ten interesting facts** that they have discovered about him.

English Language and Literacy

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:

Question: This story is told as a **third person, past tense account** of Tom's journey. Re-tell the story in first person as if it is being told by Tom or by one of the people on his mail run, and see how much this changes the story.

Activity: The story falls into the narrative convention or trope of 'the journey'. What elements of the story fit into this trope?

Discussion Point: This story also falls into the type known as a **cumulative tale**. It includes a sequence of events which effect the people on the mail run when the mail is late; they then encounter a **problem** ('At MULKA Poddy Aiston's Buckboard ran out of petrol'), and then the **climax or turning point** (of Tom crossing the river with the mail), and then the **resolution** (eg 'At the MULKA Store Poddy Aiston cranked up his car and rattled out of his shed.'). Discuss this structure and share other books which employ it.

Activity: **Active verbs** (such as harnessing, sewing, smashing, loaded, cut, dragged, rattled) are distinguished in this text by larger coloured type. Have students write a list of these verbs and then to write sentences employing the words.

Activity: Brainstorm with students some of the other **obstacles or problems** Tom might have overcome. Ask your students to write a story featuring one of these situations.

Activity: The **place names** used in the book (such as Ooroowillanie) are typically Australian in their rhythmical and complicated spelling. Such Australian place names have been celebrated in many songs, poems and texts. For example, listen to the song 'I've Been Everywhere Man' written by Geoff Mack and made famous by Lucky Starr in 1962, and later by Rolf Harris. [See Lyn Nuttall's 'Poparchive: the Blog' for details <http://poparchivesblog.blogspot.com/2005/06/obscurities-forget-em-we-want-ive-been.html>] Or read Steven Herrick's poem, entitled 'Towns I'd like to live in' which begins 'I'd like to live in/Wee Waa/Woy Woy/ Wagga Wagga/Walla Walla' (*Poetry to the Rescue* UQP, 1998, pp. 47-8). Have students make up their own poem using names of towns which are near where they live, and anchored in an original story idea of their own.

Activity: Students might make a list of the place names and explore their origins. eg Some might be Aboriginal words for the area. (See for example 'Mungerannie' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mungerannie,_South_Australia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mungeranie,_South_Australia))

Activity: Write a longer list of other similarly unusual placenames in Australia (which have repeated letters or syllables like these), particularly in the area in which you live.

Activity: Invite students to write a brief explanation for the following phrase: 'come rain or shine'. Then write a list of other metaphorical expressions such as this.

Activity: Test your students' comprehension by having them answer some quiz questions. [See Blackline Master 2 below.]

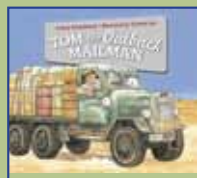
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Activity: Have students research Kristin Weidenbach's work. This is her first picture book, but she has published two biographies. [See About the Author below.] Then have them write a précis of ten interesting facts that they have discovered about her.

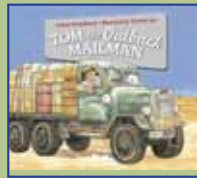
Creative Arts

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

- **Improvise a scene** from one of the paintings included in this book. Try to convey the emotions which the illustration suggests to you.
- What **music** would you select to convey the ideas in the various scenes in this book? Try to be creative and combine both classical and contemporary music in your selection. You might break the class up and ask them to choose a song to go with each section in the narrative, and then combine them in a musical 'narrative'.
- **Create a model** of something in the text, using papier mâché, fimo polymer clay, or plasticine.
- Then use that model as the basis for a **diorama** of one of the paintings in this book.
- **Create a tourism promotional poster** advertising a trip to the Birdsville Track. (Have a look at how such trips are promoted by the companies that operate them.)

Further Topics for Discussion & Research

- **Compare this book to others** about outback journeys such as *Are We There Yet?* (2005) by Alison Lester; *To the Top End* (2011) or *All the Way to WA* (2011) by Roland Harvey; or about the landscape of the interior such as *The Sand Swimmers* (1999) by Narelle Oliver and *The Story of Rosy Dock* (1995) by Jeannie Baker. You might also read Christine Harris's *Audrey of the Outback* series and her website for Teaching Activities. <http://www.christineharris.com/Kids/AudreyoftheOutback.aspx>
- **Use the Birdsville Track as a theme for a class project.** Organise a display of books about the area, and display the students' written and visual responses to their research.
- Invite an upper primary level class to create a **Book Trailer** based on this book. Visit websites with instructions to assist you in this activity. Eg 'Book Trailers' The Learning Place Ipswich District Teacher Librarian Network <<http://learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=41987>>
- Conduct a program on the Outback for upper primary students using **Lessons Plans** such as, for example, 'Australia, Land of the Outback Lesson 4' <<http://learningtogive.org/lessons/unit6/lesson4.html>>
- **Conduct a Unit on the Indigenous People** living in the area through which Tom Kruse travels.



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Conclusion

Tom Kruse was an outback hero beloved by the people who waited for him to deliver the mail. This book tells a warm story of the sense of community shared by those on Tom's route, and of Tom's resourcefulness. It's also an exciting tale which children will find highly entertaining.

About the Author

KRISTIN WEIDENBACH is the author of bestselling *Mailman of the Birdsville Track: The Story of Tom Kruse* (2003) and *Rock Star: the Story of Reg Sprigg* (2008). She is a PhD immunologist who switched to a writing career after completing postdoctoral research at Stanford University in California. As a science writer Kristin has written for Science magazine and for publications from Harvard and Stanford Medical Schools. Her magazine articles have been awarded prizes from the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education and from the Association of American Medical Colleges. She has also written for *Outback* magazine and *Australian Geographic*. Information from the SA Writers Centre website. <<http://sawriters.org.au/general/kristin-weidenbach>>

About the Illustrator

TIMOTHY IDE lives in Adelaide, South Australia and is widely published as a court illustrator and magazine and newspaper artist as well as a book illustrator. Visit his website for further details <<http://www.theartoftimide.com/>>

About the Author of the Notes

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright has operated justified text writing and publishing consultancy services since 1997, and is widely published on children's and young adult literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. She manages publishing projects, including the APA's biennial Residential Editorial Program (REP), and judges several literary awards. She was the founding director of the QWC (1991-7) and a co-founder of Jam Roll Press. Her books include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946-2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro, UQP, 2006), and *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky 100 Years of Queensland Writing* (co-edited with Stuart Glover, UQP, 2002). She is a member of the ASA Board, IBBY Australia committee, and president of the Curtis Coast Literary Carnivale Inc Committee. In 2011 she was recipient of the Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland.

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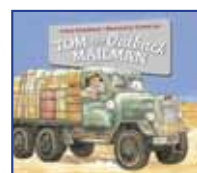
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BLACKLINE MASTERS

BM1: CREATE A COLLAGE PICTURE OF TOM



Use a range of materials eg foil, cardboard, craft paper, feathers, newspapers, magazine images, to create a portrait of Tom. Then write something in a 'speech bubble' to go with the picture.



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BM2: TOM'S OUTBACK TRAVELS QUIZ

Answers these questions by either reading or interpreting the art and text in this picture book, or by researching further.

Q1. What do the initials 'E.G.' in Tom Kruse's name (printed on his truck door) stand for?

A1. _____

Q2. What model truck did Tom drive?

A2. _____

Q3. How many brothers and sisters did Tom have?

A3. _____



Q4. How many days did it take Tom to drive from home in Maree to Birdsville and back?

A4. _____



Q5. What did Jack the Dogger hunt for?

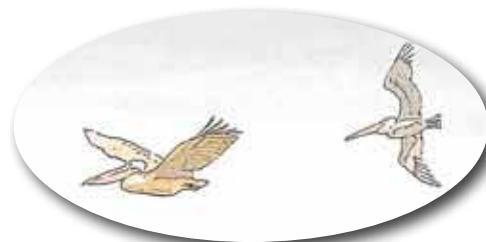
A5. _____

Q6. Which birds arrived when the creeks turned to flood?

A6. _____

Q7. Who did Tom contact to provide him with a boat?

A7. _____



Q8. Who was the Strzelecki Desert named after?

A8. _____

Q9. What year was the Birdsville Pub established?

A9. _____

Q10. How often does the Cooper Creek flood?

A10. _____

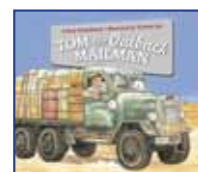
Q11. How long is the Birdsville Track?

A. _____



Q12. Mail is now delivered by plane in a round trip from Port Augusta in South Australia to Glengyle Station in Queensland. How long is that route in kilometres?

A12. _____



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Answers: 1. Esmond Gerald, 2. Leyland Badger, 3. Eleven, 4. Seven, 5. Dingoes and rabbits, 6. Pelicans, 7. The Postmaster General, 8. It was named after the Polish explorer Pawel Edmund Strzelecki by Charles Sturt another explorer (Sturt Stony Desert nearby was named after him), 9. 1884, 10. Every twenty years or so, 11. 500 kilometres long, 12. It is a 2,500 kilometre round trip.

BM 3 COMPLETE THESE PHRASES

Several three word phrases (including the word ‘of’) used in this book could be used in language extension activities.

	2 Words	1 Word	Alternative Word	Alternative Word
1.	Piece of	String		
2.	Bags of	Mail		
3.	Crates of	Food		
4.	Drums of	Petrol		
5.	Boxes of	Beer		

Can you create your own two word phrases from these:?

	2 Words	1 Word	Alternative Word	Alternative Word
1.		Milk		
2.		Birds		
3.		Cows		
4.		Tea		
5.		Books		

