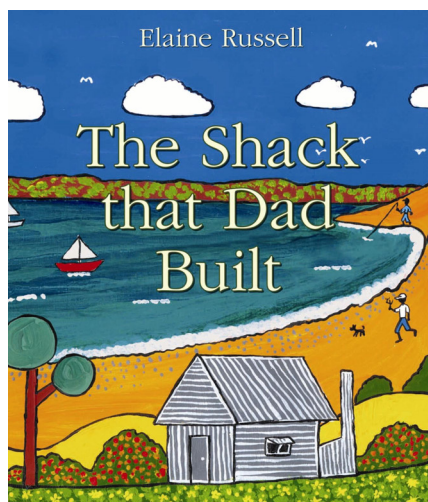


The Shack That Dad Built

By Elaine Russell



When Elaine Russell was five, her dad built the family a shack just outside the Aboriginal mission at La Perouse in Sydney. In *The Shack that Dad Built*, Elaine illustrates what life was like for an indigenous kid on the urban fringes. Her recollections range from the happy memories of hide-and-seek in the sand dunes and hunting for bush tucker to more bittersweet memories, such as her “Saddest Christmas Ever” (when the charity responsible for distributing presents to the local Aboriginal kids ran out of toys just as Elaine reached the head of the queue).

Elaine’s colourful, painterly illustrations vividly recreate these childhood experiences. This is a unique representation of urban indigenous life by the coast in the 1950s from a firsthand perspective.



About the author/illustrator



Elaine Russell was born in Tingha, northern New South Wales, in 1941. She spent most of her childhood on the Aboriginal mission at Lake Cargelligo, where her father was a handyman. In 1993, Elaine enrolled in a visual arts course and was finally able to realise her lifelong ambition to be a painter. Her work has been displayed—and is held by—museums and galleries around the world. In the 2001 Children’s Book Council of Australia Awards her first book, *A is for Aunty* (ABC Books, 2000), was shortlisted for the Picture Book Award and was an Eve Pownall Information Book Honour Book.

Learning Activities

This is a picture book whose vivid and detailed illustrations will appeal to students in the lower grades who are always fascinated by what life was like for children in past generations. There are also issues for the older students to examine, such as the housing of indigenous communities since white settlement and how this compares to traditional indigenous lifestyles, the relationships and interaction between indigenous and non-native Australians, and the need to live harmoniously with others. The activities below include suggestions for a range of ages.

- Discuss and list the reasons why people move house.

- Discuss the shack's lack of luxury. How does it compare to your home? Identify the phrases in the text that demonstrate pride in the shack. Does Elaine Russell's pride in the shack differ from the pride we might experience for our own belongings?



- Draw the shack as described in the book. Label the shack, including the dirt floor, the newspaper-lined walls and the tin roof. How does it compare to the materials used to build other houses, such as your own?

- Draw a matrix comparing the author's life to your own. Examine elements such as number of family members, housing, games played, food, cooking techniques, school, transport, earning pocket money, Christmas gifts, etc.

- Research and discuss gypsies. Who are they? Where do they come from? Do they still exist today? Discuss reasons why the gypsy family in *The Shack that Dad Built* might not have been welcomed by other people. What does 'my father extended the hand of friendship' mean? Were there similarities in the way indigenous people and gypsies were regarded?



- Elaine's father warned the children of the Little Hairy Men if they stayed out too late. What scary night creatures do our own parents talk about? E.g. bogey man

- Discuss the traditional method of passing on stories among indigenous people. How does it compare to Elaine Russell's visual and written representation?

- The Aboriginal people at La Perouse lived either in the mission or nearby in their own housing. Discuss what an Aboriginal mission is. Examine the illustrations in Elaine Russell's award-winning book *A is for Aunty*, which depicts the story of her childhood on an Aboriginal mission during the 1950s. Compare the differing lifestyles portrayed in each of her books.

- Examine and experiment with Elaine's use of vividly coloured illustrations. How has she managed to create a flattened style of illustration?