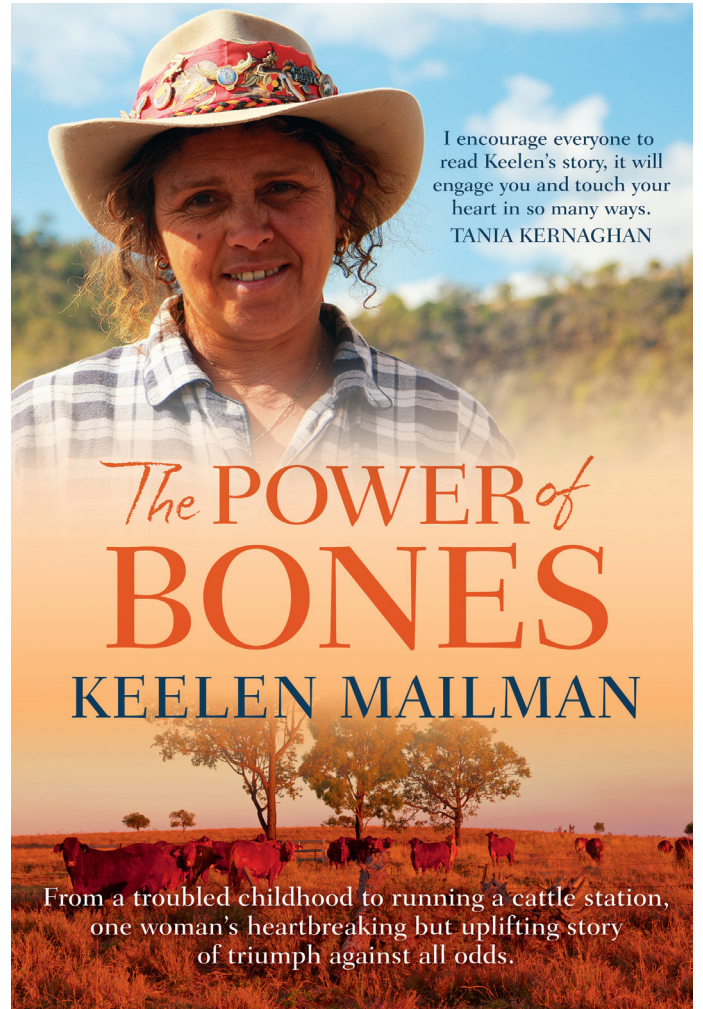


ALLEN & UNWIN



READING
GROUP NOTES

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About the book

It looked bleak and predictable for little Keelen Mailman: an alcoholic mother, absent father, the horrors of regular sexual and physical assault and the casual racism of a small outback town in the sixties. But somehow, despite the pain and deprivation, the lost education, she managed to absorb her mother's lessons: her Bidjara language and culture, her obligations to Country, and her loyalty to her family.

So it was no surprise to some that a girl who could hide for a year in her own home to keep her family together, run as fast as Raylene Boyle and catch porcupine and goanna, would one day make history. At just 30, and a single mother, Keelen became the first Aboriginal woman to run a commercial cattle station when she took over Mt Tabor, two hours from Augathella on the black soil plains of western Queensland. This is the heartland of Bidjara country, after all, the place her mother and grandparents and great-grandparents had camped on and cared for, and where their ancestors left their marks on caves and rock walls more than 10,000 years ago.

In this unflinching memoir, the warmth of Keelen's personality, her determination and her irresistible humour shine through as she recalls her extraordinary life.

About the author

Keelen Mailman was born in Augathella to a poor Aboriginal family with a history of alcoholism. Now she is the first female station manager for Mt Tabor, home to her native Bidjara people.

Reviews

'There will be readers who will view it as a study in the inherent racism that exists in some communities. Others will see it as a gender struggle that sees the triumph of women in a world dominated by men (in outback Australia). But above all this is a book that is a documentation of one person's triumph and successes against a myriad of odds that would be insurmountable to most of us.' – The Stringer

For discussion

- ☞ 'My heart is in this country. I am this country, and it is me.' (p.4). Discuss Keelen's relationship with the Australian landscape. What does the land give to her, and what does she give back?
- ☞ Keelen's mother offers the following advice to her children: 'The more you experience, the more you learn' (p.9). In what ways does this apply to Keelen?
- ☞ Discuss the personal significance of Keelen's talent and passion for running, both as a child and as an adult. Why do you think it is so important for Keelen to confront the woman who denied her the chance to compete in the running championships?

- ☞ What can readers learn from Keelen's honest depiction of domestically violent relationships? How does she eventually break free from this cycle of abuse?
- ☞ Discuss the importance of storytelling, both to Keelen personally and to her Indigenous culture.
- ☞ The theme of survival is prevalent throughout the book. What sacrifices and choices is Keelen forced to make in order to carry on?
- ☞ 'Australia is the most beautiful country in the world to me, but I say it's the most racist country in the world.' (p.169). Consider Keelen's statement. Did Keelen's story challenge your perception of racism in modern day Australia?
- ☞ What does Keelen learn from her mother? How does Keelen apply her experiences to her own role as a mother caring for the many children in her life?
- ☞ Discuss the significance of 'The Spirits' in guiding Keelen throughout her life.
- ☞ Further to her devotion to family and to her role as station manager, Keelen is also powerful Aboriginal role model. Discuss her achievements as a cultural and political leader for Indigenous Australians.

Suggested further reading

Love, Sweat and Tears – Zelig Bullen and Freda Marnie Nicholls

My Wild Ride – Fiona Johnson

Women of Spirit – Anne Crawford

Women of the Land – Liz Harfull

Further reading on the author

Keelen Mailman on the Richard Fidler show, ABC Local Radio:

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/04/27/3490383.htm>

The Power of One: Keelen Mailman at Mount Tabor Station, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*:

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/the-power-of-one-keelen-mailman-at-mount-tabor-station/story-e6frg8h6-1226884033642>