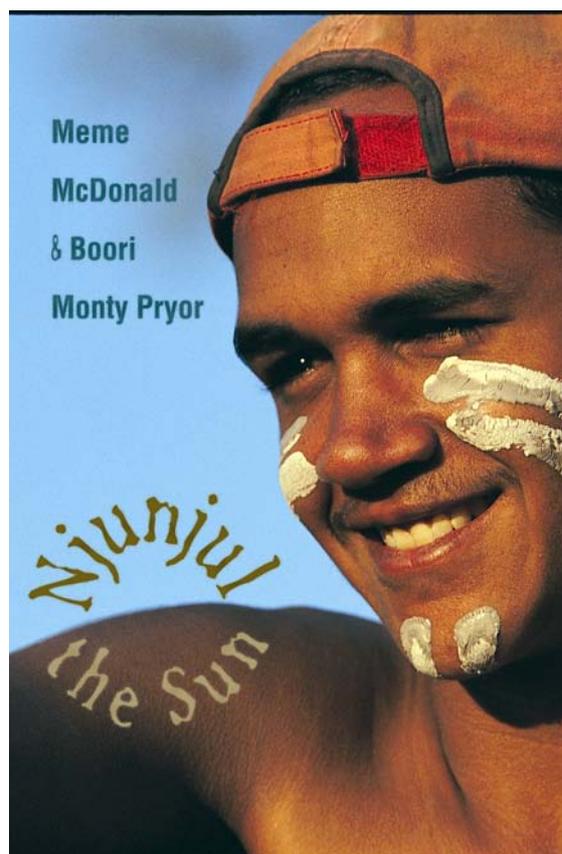


Teachers Notes
by **Dr Wendy Michaels**
Njunjul the Sun
Meme McDonald & Boori Pryor
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Recommended for ages 14+

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THE AUTHORS

Meme McDonald grew up in the bush in south-west Queensland, went to boarding school, lived in New York on an American Field Scholarship for a year, returned to Australia where she studied theatre and then helped to found one of Australia's first professional community theatre companies – WEST Theatre Company – in 1979. Her first book, *Put Your Whole Self In* (Penguin), was published in 1992 and became the Joint Winner, New South Wales State Literary Prize for non-fiction in 1993 and the Winner, Braille and Talking Book Award 1993. Her second book, *The Way of the Birds*, was shortlisted for the Wilderness Society Environment Award 1997 and adapted for animation, winning the Best Film (Class C) Cinanima International Animated Film Festival Portugal 2000. Apart from books, Meme has written articles, essays and short stories for publication.

Boori (Monty) Pryor is from North Queensland. His mother's people are Kunggandji and his father is from the Birri-gubba Nation. Like many Indigenous people, Boori's family has suffered much tragedy, with three of his siblings having committed suicide. But Boori made a choice not to be consumed by anger at the situation of his people – he says: 'If there's green in your heart, green will grow around you. If there's darkness in your heart, then that's what will surround you.'

Boori had been chosen by his Aunty Val to be the storyteller for the next generation. Boori is a performer, storyteller, writer and didjeridoo player. He travels all year round to perform for school students and adults, creating a link between Aboriginal culture and other cultures within Australia. Boori has played didjeridoo with the Brisbane Symphony Orchestra, at the Melbourne Wurundjeri Welcome to Michael Jackson, and in Sydney for the Pope at the Beatification of Mary McKillop. In 1993 Boori received an award for the Promotion of Indigenous Culture from the National Aboriginal Islander Observance Committee. His first book with Meme McDonald, *Maybe Tomorrow*(Penguin), is about the joy and pain he has experienced in his life and his hopes for the future.

Have students work in groups to research aspects of the background to the two writers and their other books. Allow time for students to present these to the class and for discussion of the kinds of life experiences that each might bring to the writing collaboration.

Meme McDonald says that she didn't 'plan to be a writer' that it just 'happened' to her. When she was studying photography she went to a pool where a group of older women doing exercises in the water captured her attention; their stories became the source of *Put Your Whole Self In*, which challenges us all to question the way we perceive our lives.

Have students read this excerpt from the book and discuss the ideas that they think might have captured Meme McDonald's interest in these women.

In the pool everyone is vulnerable, stripped of familiar clothing, Layers of preconceptions are peeled off and left to one side, stiff muscles are stretched and aches, whatever their sources, are soothed. Bodies emerge freer. Attitudes are loosened. Changes occur.

Meme's comfortable white view of the world had previously been upended when she was living in New York and a black teacher identified Australia as 'one step up from South Africa'. She was also influenced by the words of Nugget Coombs, who sees white Australians as living in the land of the Indigenous people and who stresses the importance of 'knocking before entering'.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

Meme McDonald and Boori Monty Pryor have collaborated on five books. The first book was *Maybe Tomorrow* (Penguin), which received a special commendation Human Rights Award in 1998 and was shortlisted for the Information Book category of the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards.

The second book was *My Girragundji*, which won the Book of the Year Award for Younger Readers in the Children's Book Council of Australia Awards in 1999, was shortlisted for Best Children's Book, Queensland Premier's Literary Awards 1999, and was commended, Best Designed Young Adult Book, Australian Publishers Association 1988. *The Binna Binna Man* was Winner, Book of the Year, New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards 2000; Winner, Ethel Turner Prize for young people's literature, NSW Premier's Literary Awards 2000; Winner, Ethnic Affairs Commission Award, NSW Premier's Literary Awards 2000; and Winner, Book of the Year and Author/Narrator book category, TDK Audio Book Awards 2000. *Njunjul the Sun* makes up a trilogy with these two books.

Meme and Boori also collaborated on *Flytrap*, a book for slightly younger readers.

Meme records on her website how she met Boori when she was working with Joy Murphy Wandin, a Wurundjeri elder, on the welcome ceremony for Melbourne's Moomba Festival. She went to one of Boori's performances at a school, where like the students, she was totally entranced by Boori's storytelling, his dances and didgeridoo playing. She says:

'I searched the bottom of my bag for a pen and paper and started noting down Boori's phrases and ways of explaining complex issues. Much of what Boori had to tell had me laughing and crying at the same time. His voice was generous and well able to bridge the gulf of misconceptions between our cultures.'

After the performance she suggested to Boori that he should write a book but he said he was too busy doing performances. That's when she offered to help and he replied – 'Well, we could give it a go.'

Have students speculate as to how these two writers coming from different backgrounds could go about their collaboration on a book. What kinds of processes might they put in place to make it work? Have students locate a copy of *Maybe Tomorrow* (Penguin) and read some of it aloud. Is the 'generous' voice that Meme talks about in the above quote evident in the book?

COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES

Meme says that the process of collaboration involves hours of taped interviews, phone conversations and notes jotted down on café napkins, as well as help and guidance from Boori's family. At the back of all their books there are extensive lists of acknowledgements of the people who contributed to the books.

Have students examine the lists of people acknowledged in the books. Have them consider the implications of this for the way in which the stories have been created and published. Ask them to compare this with other publications in the library. Encourage discussion of the cultural context that would support collaborative story-making. Encourage comparisons with the kinds of story-making that occurs in other cultural and historical contexts. For instance, students might compare story-making in Shakespeare's time with story-making in contexts where the notion of the individual creative artist holds sway.

BRIDGING CULTURES

The collaboration between these two storytellers is unique in that it crosses gender and culture. Intercultural communication has become an important issue in Australia as well as in other parts of

the world, and finding ways to bridge cultures and increase understanding is an important issue for the future of the planet. Meme McDonald wrote an article for *The Bulletin* (Dec–Jan 2001) that explores this notion of intercultural communication and understanding. She quotes the words of Joy Murphy Wandin: ‘For any of us to belong, we need each other’s respect and acknowledgement.’ Have students discuss this notion in the context of their personal situations as well as in the context of contemporary Australian society. Do they agree with this statement? Encourage students to access the article on Meme’s website:

www.mememcdonald.com/books/bridgingculture.htm . Have them read and discuss the issues that it raises. Point out the ways in which the writer uses both Australian English and the Aboriginal language in her account of the welcome to country. Ask students if they have been to such a ceremony. Contact your local Indigenous community to find out about the country in which your school stands.

THE TRILOGY

Explain to the students that a trilogy is a series of stories that are connected in some way. The three books *My Girragundji*, *The Binna Binna Man* and *Njunjul the Sun* are a trilogy. Explain that in this trilogy the books are linked through the main character’s life. Time has passed and the boy has grown up a little in each successive book. In the first book, we meet the boy growing up between two worlds with a green tree frog (Girragundji) as his companion and protection against the school bullies. In the second book, the boy faces more than school bullies – he begins to face himself and his ancestry. He learns that if you forget where you come from you get weak. To stay strong you must listen to the old people with your eyes and ears – and your heart.

Ask students if they have read either of the first two books. Encourage those who have to share their responses with the class.

Select sections from the earlier books and read these aloud to the class – or invite members of the class to read them aloud. Encourage responses to the boy and his situation. Point out the first person narration and encourage discussion of the boy’s voice. What impression do the students have of this boy, from the excerpts that have been read?

THE DESIGN OF THE BOOKS

The powerful stories in the trilogy are complemented by the stunning design of the books. Display the covers and some of the photographs from each of the first two books in the trilogy. Encourage discussion of what these contribute to the story and character and how they position the reader. Point out that the photographs were taken by Meme McDonald herself. Have students examine some of them and discuss why the author might have chosen to use these to help tell this fictional story.

Have students write a short story based on some event or aspect of their own lives or the life of someone close to them, and select photographs (or shoot new photos) to use as part of the story. Allow time for students to redraft and revise their work and display the words and photographs together. Encourage discussion of the choices that the students made in presenting their stories.

FICTION OR NON-FICTION?

Ask students to distinguish the meanings of these terms. Encourage them to consider how blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction could become. You could point out that in much

contemporary biographical and autobiographical writing there are many fictionalisations of events, whereas fiction draws on factual material for its construction. You might want to encourage discussion of the way in which the photographs in the two first books, along with the first person narration, might suggest that these are factual stories rather than fictional stories. You might point out that the following statement appears in the front of *Njunjul the Sun*:

The main character in Njunjul the Sun is the same boy who has appeared in My Girragundji and The Binna Binna Man. He is now sixteen and, like all the characters in this book, is fictional.

Encourage discussion of why this statement has been included in the third book in the trilogy.

INTRODUCING NJUNJUL THE SUN

Show the front and back cover of the book and encourage discussion of students' first impressions. Focus on ideas in the blurb, particularly the statement:

'Your mind can go crazy, crammed with everyone else's thoughts, so you can't hear your voice on the inside.'

Have students discuss whether they have ever felt like this. Encourage them to share some of their ideas on this issue. Have students use this statement as the basis of a piece of writing in any form. Allow time for developing the writing and for sharing the finished piece.

CHAPTER BY CHAPTER DISCUSSION

'WHAT GOT ME ON THIS BUS' - CHAPTER 1

Have students read the first chapter. Encourage discussion of their impressions of the boy. Point out the reference to the frog – 'girragundji' who was 'eaten by a snake'. How do they respond to the 'big fulla'? Encourage discussion of what they would have done had they been in the boy's situation.

Have students work in pairs and use the sentence, 'I'm a brand new flash-fulla heading off down the highway to the big city' as the basis of a spoken monologue. The monologue should create a different character and situation. Encourage each pair to explore the ways of capturing a strong voice. Allow time for presentation of some of these monologues and discussion of the characters and situations they have created.

'MY GIRRAGUNDJI'S VOICE BACK WITH ME'- CHAPTER 2

Have students read chapter 2 and discuss their responses. What is the effect of the use the frog's voice at the end of the chapter? Encourage students to make reference to the first book in the trilogy, *My Girragundji*, and what the frog means to the boy. Point out the reference to the 'language I'm not knowing yet'. What do students think the boy means by that statement?

'Me and the nun'

Have students re-read the interaction between the boy and the nun. Encourage discussion of their responses. How does the nun's presence at this point relate to the boy's situation? Point out the advice that the boy gives the nun: 'Sometimes you gotta go away from where you wanna be, just so you can get strong enough to go back there.'

'The big city of Sydney'

Examine the final pages of this chapter with its description of Sydney juxtaposed with the photographs. Note the references to the 'belly of the beast' and the 'tunnel' – images that will recur later in the story. Encourage discussion of how the writers are setting up a kind of premonition of what is to follow for the boy during his time in Sydney.

Encourage students to make a list of their predictions as to what will happen in the rest of the story from these opening chapters.

'PRETENDING I'M A LEGEND NOT A LOSER' – CHAPTER 3

Have students read chapter 3. In this chapter we meet the boy's uncle and aunt. Encourage students to discuss their impressions of these two characters. How do they respond to the Guru man? Encourage discussion of the advice he gives: 'You gotta put something in before you get something out.' Encourage students to set up a polarised debate on this issue drawing on their own personal experiences as well as any examples from film or literature that support their ideas. Have students keep a record of the ideas expressed in the debate. Have students select one or two of these ideas and write and give a speech.

'GOOD-GO! M'UNCLE'S SOUNDING LIKE A WHITEFULLA NOW' – CHAPTER 4

Have students read chapter 4. Encourage them to discuss the incident with the 'bulleymen'. How do they account for the different responses of the boy and his uncle?

In this chapter we also see the beginning of a complication that is going to set the boy back for a while. Encourage students to consider the kind of character that Rhonda is and what her role will be in the development of the story.

'YOU'RE JUST EARNING YOUR STRIPES WITH THE MOB DOWN HERE' – CHAPTER 5

Have students discuss the incident in which the boy is beaten up and the response of the aunt and uncle. Note that this chapter ends in a similar way to chapter 2 – with jokes, laughter and acceptance.

'I'M GETTING SLACK AS' – CHAPTER 6

In this chapter we see the beginning of a downhill slide for the boy. How do students account for this? Why does he seem quite happy 'hanging with what I got'?

Have students look closely at the last section. Point out the image of the aunt 'bossing those dishes around like a mob or kids cutting up rough at school'. Have students write the interior monologue that the aunt might be thinking at this point in time.

'THAT LOST FEELING' – CHAPTER 7

Have students read this chapter. Look closely at the scene on the platform. What has happened for both the aunt and the boy to lead them to this situation? Have students work with a partner and write a playscript for the scene that preceded this incident.

Examine the photographs used in this part of the book. How do they contribute to the sense of drama? Have students work with a partner to create a story board for a film version of this moment. Remind them to include sound/music as well as visuals and dialogue.

Allow time for sharing ideas.

'BEING BLACK IS BEING POLITICAL! WE DON'T HAVE A CHOICE' – CHAPTER 8

Have students read chapter 8. In this chapter the boy overhears a conversation that affects the way he sees himself. Discuss the way in which the authors have constructed this chapter so that we are able to have the boy's immediate thoughts on the conversation that he is overhearing. Have students work in groups of three. Have each group develop a script for this scene that allows the audience to see and hear the uncle and aunt as well as asides to the audience from the boy. Allow time for the development and presentation of some of the scripts. Encourage discussion of how the reader's feelings shift during the interaction between husband and wife, black and white.

'SPACE TO THINK' – CHAPTER 9

Have students read chapter 9. This chapter is pivotal in the boy's journey. Encourage discussion of the incident in the school and what it means to the boy. Have students examine the questions asked by the white children and the responses that the boy gives. Ask students to consider how they might have responded in such a situation.

Point out the last sentences of the chapter: 'I know what they're given me, but. They've given me back a part of myself.' Encourage students to discuss the implications of this for the boy in his situation. Imagine that he were to write a diary entry reflecting on the events in chapter 9. Have students take on the role of the boy and write that entry – trying to stay as close as possible to the voice that the authors have constructed for him. Allow time for preparation and sharing of their work.

'THAT BACK-HOME NAME FROM THE PLACE I BEEN BORN' – CHAPTER 10

Have students read the final chapter. Encourage discussion of their responses to the resolution of the story. Encourage discussion of the way in which the boy's issues about himself as a human being, as well as about his cultural identity, are brought to a satisfactory conclusion.

REFLECTING ON THE BOOK

Have students think back over the book and discuss how the experience of the boy is similar to, or different from, their own experiences of adolescence.

INFLUENCES IN NJUNJUL'S JOURNEY

Encourage students to discuss the people and events that are significant in Njunjul's journey – e.g. the nun, his aunt, his uncle, the local gang, Rhonda, the children in the school. How do these various characters contribute to the process of accepting responsibility for his own life? Encourage discussion of the ways in which the boy's Aboriginal identity complicates the process of establishing his own identity. Have students select one of the characters in the book and write an account of how that character might have influenced Njunjul's life. Allow time for re-reading of the appropriate sections of the novel and drafting of the writing. Encourage sharing of these pieces of writing and discussion of how the character's perceptions might be similar to, or different from, Njunjul's.

FINDING A VOICE

The voice of the boy is consistent over the three books of the trilogy, although the voice matures as he grows. Have students look closely at the ways in which the language is used to construct the character of Njunjul. Point out the aspects of Aboriginal English that establish his identity and background and the aspects of 'teen language' that position him in a contemporary social situation.

Have them look closely at the other voices that are recorded through the dialogue and the different ways in which they speak. Have students take a section of the novel and rewrite it from another perspective – e.g. a third person narrator. Point out that they will need to consider how to vary the language to create the story from this perspective without interrupting the reader's empathy for the boy. Allow time for experimentation, sharing of the reconstructions and discussion of the effects.

LEARNING THROUGH STORIES

Pryor says that 'we need our stories to help us find our balance'. Have students consider how this applies to Njunjul and to themselves. Consider the authors' use of the storytelling performance in the primary school as a means of Njunjul focusing on who he is and how he will live his life. Why is this an effective resolution to the narrative problem that the book poses? How will Njunjul implement the philosophy that he has now adopted? Have students work in pairs and write a short epilogue to the book. Encourage them to look closely at the language so that they can capture Njunjul's voice.

LISTENING

Have students re-read the scenes in the primary school. Point out how Njunjul is forced to listen not only to his uncle, but also to the children as they ask him questions. Pryor says that 'one of the problems in Australia today is we don't have leaders who listen'. Do students agree?

Encourage students to consider how important listening is – particularly in situations of tension or conflict, and even more so in situations of intercultural communication. Point out that listening carefully can help to alleviate the terrible misunderstandings that occur, particularly between people of different races and religions. Njunjul has to learn to listen to his inner voice, and sort out the many competing voices inside his head. Have students write a story about a fictional character who is learning to listen to his/her inner voice. Allow time for planning and writing and sharing of the finished stories.

HUMOUR

Have students re-read the sections of the story that are humorous – e.g. the nun's jokes, the jokes with the aunt and uncle. Encourage them to talk about the role that laughter plays in their own lives and in the lives of the characters in the story. Have the students collect other jokes or find other examples of humour in stories. Examine how the language used in these examples encourages.

LEARNING TO LOVE YOURSELF

In an article by Martin Flanagan in *The Age* (23 March 2002), Pryor was quoted as saying that 'the hardest thing you'll ever do in your life is learn to love yourself. Our aim was to create something everyone could find a way into, and through that find a way into themselves.' Have group discussions about whether the two authors achieved their aim in *Njunjul the Sun*. Have groups present their ideas to the rest of the class. Have each student write about how the book has touched them personally.

AWARDS

The previous books by McDonald and Pryor have been award winners. Assume that the publishers will also be nominating this book for awards. Have students take on the role of judges of the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Award for Older Readers. Have them draw up

a set of criteria for judging books, then ask each student to use those criteria as the basis of a report on *Njunjul the Sun*. Collate all the reports and share the results. Is this book a winner?