

Teachers Notes (Secondary)
by T. Martin & A. McBride

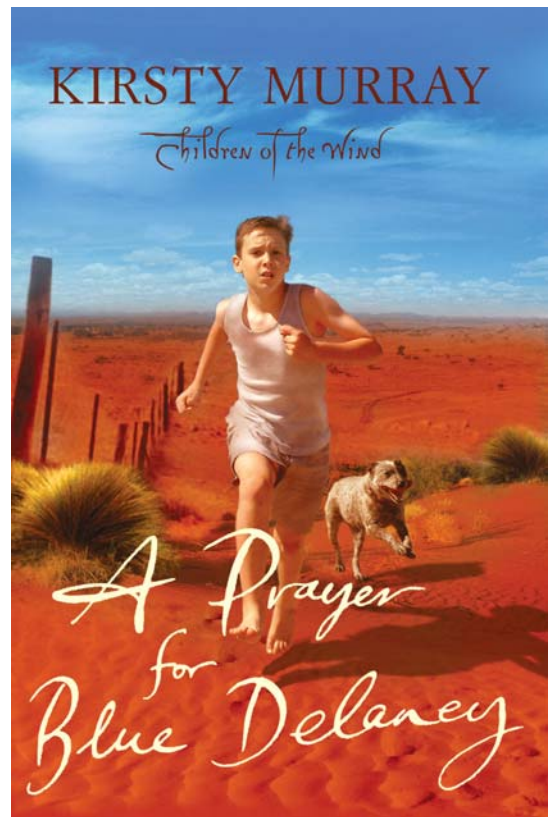
A Prayer for Blue Delaney
Kirsty Murray

ISBN 9781865087368

Recommended for age 10 – 14+ yrs.

These notes may be reproduced free of charge for use and study within schools but they may not be reproduced (either in whole or in part) and offered for commercial sale.

Introduction.....	2
Themes	3
Belonging.....	3
The stolen generation	4
Being Australian	4
English	5
Creative writing.....	5
Identity.....	5
Historical fiction	6
Drama	7
Studies of society & environment	7
Immigration	7
Society/history/politics.....	8
Further investigation	8
About the writers	9



INTRODUCTION

A Prayer for Blue Delaney follows the outback adventures of orphaned Colm, who runs away from the cruelties of Bindoon Boys' Home in Western Australia and goes in search of a family of his own. He crosses the wide outback through his travels, from the Western Australian gold fields (where he stays with an Aboriginal-Australian family) to Melbourne (where Colm is introduced to the theatre scene and the exciting Olympic Games). Colm's travels as a young child will contrast to modern children's experience of life, shedding light on a very different time, where schools were not necessarily a safe haven for learning, and where one could rely on the kindness of strangers. The similarities endure, however – Colm, like young readers, is making friends, finding his place in the world, trying to understand the cruelties and injustices of the world, and finding hope and joy in kind people and new friends.

This is a novel that makes history leap off the page, with vivid characters, strong emotions and page-turning action. *A Prayer for Blue Delaney* is the third of four interlinked novels, the Children of the Wind quartet, each of which can be read as a stand-alone story.

PLOT SUMMARY

'Don't worry,' said Bill. 'You can hide out here until you get your strength back. That is, if you don't mind an old man, a dog and a few ghosts for company.'

It is the 1950s. Colm McCabe is a ten-year-old boy living in Liverpool, UK, in a harsh and abusive orphanage, where he pines for his mother, who abandoned him five years earlier. The chance to emigrate to Australia and potential adoption does not excite Colm, who is desperate to re-unite with his mother. He is shipped to Australia under the orphan migrant scheme, however, and sent to another orphanage in Fremantle upon arrival. This orphanage proves no more welcoming than the Liverpool orphanage, with Colm and his friend, Dibs, experiencing abuse and hard labour.

Eventually Colm escapes the orphanage and heads to Fremantle, where he meets and is looked after by Bill Dare, an old travelling man, and his dog, Rusty. Colm accompanies them on a trip around the country, staying near Kalgoorlie and Boulder with Bill's friend Nugget and his partner Doreen, who introduces Colm to stories of Aboriginal lore.

They then travel further into the desert regions of Australia, living the life of itinerant labourers. Colm finds a photo of a lady in Bill's Ute, with the words "Blue Delaney" on the back. He carries the photo with him everywhere and dreams of meeting her one day, allowing the photo to take on a 'mother figure' role. He later discovers Blue is Bill's daughter, and that they have a fractured relationship.

Bill and Colm visit Mrs. Mahoney, an old friend of Bill's, in Pine Creek. Bill falls ill while in Pine Creek and is flown to Darwin. Colm follows with Mrs. Mahoney. Bill and Colm move on to Melbourne, where they meet up with Bill's daughter, Blue Delaney.

Colm lives with Blue, who finds him a school and encourages his musical talent. He makes friends with Keith, the child of Chinese immigrants, who dreams of becoming a musician one day.

Bill eventually passes away, but not before Colm helps bring about a reconciliation between Bill and Blue. Blue takes on Colm as her 'godson', looking after him as if he is her own child. Colm accompanies her to her work in the theatre, continues his schooling and lives with her in Williamstown.

THE CHILDREN OF THE WIND

A Prayer for Blue Delaney is a great stand-alone novel and is also the third book in the **Children of the Wind** quartet. The **Children of the Wind** quartet is made up of four novels

for 10- to 14-year-olds, dealing with the lives of four child immigrants to Australia from the 1840s to the present day.

<i>Bridie's Fire</i>	1848 - 1852	Published 2003
<i>Becoming Billy Dare</i>	1896 - 1899	Published 2004
<i>A Prayer for Blue Delaney</i>	1954 - 1956	Published 2005
<i>The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong</i>	2003 - 2005	Published 2006

The central child character of each story becomes the adult mentor of the child in the succeeding book. The sweep of time covered, and the buffeting of the winds of change, allow Murray to take in and link numerous themes beyond that of the Irish contribution to Australia:

- The lost child/parent
- Poverty and survival
- Change and continuity
- The search for identity
- The child moulding her own destiny
- Australian theatre tradition
- Organised child migration schemes
- Servant life
- 'Belonging' in an immigrant nation
- Mixed heritage - choosing our identity
- Working children
- Immigration
- Refugees
- Families - natural and made
- Economic migration and the globalised workplace

Settings include: Colonial Melbourne (Toorak and turn of the century Fitzroy), Victorian gold fields, rural NSW, Fremantle, the deserts of Western Australia and South Australia, the Dingo Fence, the Northern Territory, the Melbourne Olympic Games, Ireland, Hong Kong.

THEMES

BELONGING

Few of the children actually belong to any one place – they are either orphans, indigenous children taken from their parents or estranged from their families. Those that do 'belong' are not necessarily living with their biological parents eg. Doreen's kids are not all 'hers' and Lily lives with her grandmother, who maintains her Chinese culture while living in the heart of Australia.

- How do we know we belong somewhere? How do you feel when you know you belong?
- What does it feel like when you know you don't belong? What sort of things impact on this feeling?
- On the first day of Year 7, how did you feel about school? Did you feel you belonged? How do you feel about it now?

Blue and Bill belong to each other, in that they are family, but are estranged from each other, partly because Bill has always felt he doesn't 'belong' anywhere and so was absent for a lot of Blue's childhood.

- Do you know anyone who didn't grow up with their biological family? Do they still 'belong' to their family?

- Discuss the ability of humans to adapt: to new friends, new cities, new homegroups, new teams, new family situations. How do we build relationships? What sort of things do we do to make ourselves feel as though we belong?

Bill and Colm slowly discover that they belong to each other; this belonging transcends the fact that they are not actually related to each other. Can a 'family' be any combination of people who truly feel they 'belong' to each other?

'Not Clancy's boy', said Bill, 'but yeah, he is my grandson.' p. 135

'These are my big sister's kids and some of them are cousins and....well, they're all our mob, anyway.' p. 92

- Are there any non-family groups or situations where you feel you truly belong?
- Are there any people who 'belong' to your family that aren't actually related? How did you meet these people? What are the traits that allow them to feel like they belong in your family?

'McCabe and Delaney: what a team!' p. 243. Blue only begins to feel Colm and she belong together quite some time after they've been forced to live together and pretend they are family.

THE STOLEN GENERATION

Nugget and Doreen lose their children, who are taken by the police to be placed in an institution or with a white family [pp 106 – 115]. This is an important part of Australian history, and one which is still very much in the public conscience. The issue of mixed-race couples trying to hang on to their half-caste children might be a new angle for students to consider.

Colm is distressed and confused by this turn of events – what meaning does it have for children now?

- Why was it an important and necessary step for Prime Minister Rudd to have said 'sorry'? Or do you feel that it wasn't a necessary thing to do? Can we truly apologise for actions of previous generations? Does it have any meaning?
- Discuss the importance of knowing that someone who hurt you regrets it. Does this make it easier to take? Why is 'sorry' such a powerful word? Can you think of a time when 'sorry' has made things better?

BEING AUSTRALIAN

He felt it was growing inside him, this love of the desert [p. 133]

As the tram rumbled towards the city [of Melbourne], Colm felt he was no longer in Australia. Australia was desert and sand, mulga and saltbush, the blood-red heart of the centre or the pale gold of the west, not a place of bustling cities. [p. 187]

As a country, Australia is particularly identified with its natural landscapes. It is arguable that Colm's attachment to Australia is inseparable from his attachment to Bill, and that it is their shared experiences in the iconic Australian outback that cement these attachments.

- Do you feel strongly about any special Australian landscape? Why? What associations does it have for you?
- Does Blue Delaney feel less Australian because she lives in the city?

Nearly everyone in the book (and in Australia) has come from 'somewhere else'. We are a nation of contrasts and varying backgrounds. And yet we 'belong' here. What does this mean when we analyse the history, customs and culture of our country?

- How have we built our Australian culture out of the mixture of so many cultures? Does our culture truly reflect the wide variety of all Australian people's experiences and history?
- Are there any special customs or holidays that you celebrate? Are these celebrated nationally as a country, or only by a select group of people? (i.e. Chinese New Year).

ENGLISH

CREATIVE WRITING ACTIVITIES

- Choose a passage and rewrite it from Colm's point of view. Use the phrase "I felt" at least twice.
- You are the superintendent for a group of orphanages. Write a report for orphanages outlining the standards that need to be met. What do you think are important standards?
- Write a media release advertising the book to bookshops and libraries.
- Write a letter to Lily, describing the theatre and your life in Melbourne (as Colm).
- Choose one of the following mediums and write a book review as appropriate:
 - radio programme;
 - school newsletter;
 - newspaper;
 - publisher's catalogue

IDENTITY

What's in a name?

Names can indicate our heritage, but can also be misleading. Lily Yen Lin is Australian-born and acts like any outback kid – but she also shares her granny's Chinese culture. Doreen Malloy is a classic Irish name – but Doreen is an Aboriginal Australian.

- What country do the following surnames come from?
Delaney, McCabe, Malloy, Cassidy, McGinty, Mahoney, O'Connor

Sometimes people change their names as part of their personal journey towards an identity they can accept. Patrick Delaney took the stage name Billy Dare, and kept it forever. However, his wife and daughter kept the Delaney surname. Blue Delaney was christened 'Brigid' but only Joe uses that name for her – and he uses the Italian version, Brigida.

- Brainstorm all the information that can be gleaned from names: clan, family, place of origin, place or role in family, father's/mother's name, time period, social rank, parent's lifestyle/inclinations/friends etc.
- What do you know about your own name? What national, family and personal heritage does it reflect, if any?
- Would you change your name if you could? Why?
- If you had to take a stage name, what name would you choose for yourself?

Aussie! Aussie! Aussie!

At the Olympics, Colm isn't sure who to barrack for: the Australian or the Irish runner.

Initially, Colm is not even aware he has an Irish name [p. 10] and he later realises he doesn't know if he was born in England or Ireland [p. 76]. On the ship to Australia, he discovers a fellow-feeling with the Irish orphans. However, at Bindoon he can't sing with the Irish boys because he can't speak Gaelic. The Australian boys at Clontarf tell him he sounds 'like a bleeding whinging Pom. Last thing we need around here is another pack of you lot' [p. 21]. Both Tommy and Bill Dare are strongly anti-English. Bill's love of Henry Lawson's poems demonstrates a long-standing Australian republican tradition – 'She's not *my* bloody Queen' [p. 65] – that points to a contradiction in Australian identity: a large part of our identity is built on our English heritage; yet an equally large part is built on rejecting that heritage.

- Does your national identity come from being born in a particular country, or from the language you speak and songs and poetry you know? Does it come from the way you look, or from particular manners and ways of behaving that you pick up without realising? Does it come from your conscious political choices?
- How much of our national identity is positive (i.e. based in our attachment to our country) and how much is negative (i.e. based on antagonism to others)? Is it just as important to know what you *aren't*, as to know what you *are*? Discuss both positive and negative aspects of the love of one's country.
- What role does your national identity play in your personal identity? How important is national identity to Colm compared to other aspects of his personal identity?

Strength of character

Despite puzzling over where he comes from and where he belongs, Colm demonstrates that he has a strong character, right from the opening scene when he is five. He is true to himself, even while wondering who that self is.

- List the events in the novel that demonstrate Colm's strength of character. (To help you get started, read pp. 1, 8, 30-31, 48, 74, 109-110.)

HISTORICAL FICTION

Kirsty Murray has written:

I believe the dearth of Australian historical fiction for children compounds the problem of kids perceiving Australian history as essentially boring. For a nation of immigrants to gain a strong sense of identity we need narratives that we can relate to, set in landscapes with which we can identify.

It might be interesting to explore with your students their attitudes to historical fiction and to Australian history.

- How do they respond to Kirsty's comments, above?
- Which characters and events in the book do they believe were:
 - Real historical characters or events?
 - *Based on* documented historical characters or events? (and can they name them?)
 - Created from the author's imagination and general knowledge of history?
- If they enjoy history, what do they like about it?
- If they find Australian history boring, why do they think this is so?

- Is it important for us to have a strong sense of Australian identity?
 - Why?
 - What role does history play in national identity? Think of positive and negative examples.
- What role does history play in our individual identities?

Despite Kirsty Murray's lament for the dearth of Australian historical fiction, it should be possible to find some in the school and local library for use in individual reading extension activities or in literature circles for groups or the whole class. Most libraries will subscribe to The Source, an on-line listing of books maintained by *Magpies*, the children's literature magazine - www.magpies.net.au , which can be searched by genre. Many Australian children's authors have written at least one historical novel set in Australia, including Allan Baillie, Errol Broome, Brian Caswell, Garry Disher, Ursula Dubosarsky, Kerry Greenwood, Sonya Hartnett, Peter D Jeans, Wendy Macdonald, David Martin, Sophie Masson, James Moloney, Robert Newton, Michael Noonan, Judith O'Neill, Jenny Pausacker, Beth Roberts, Bill Scott, Ivan Southall, Eleanor Spence, Colin Thiele, Alan Tucker, Ethel Turner, Nadia Wheatley and Dorothy Williams.

32-page picture books can be used to quickly identify the main characteristics of the genre, if necessary. Examine the following by Gary Crew, illustrated by two of Australia's top book illustrators:

- *Bright Star*. Illustrated by Anne Spudvilas. Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1997 (set in 1871 Australia)
- *Pig on the Titanic: A True Story*. Illustrated by Bruce Whatley. HarperCollins, 2005 (set on the Titanic)

DRAMA

- You are adapting the novel for the stage. Write up a cast list – which characters would you include/not include?
- Write a character description for one of the characters (to give to auditioning actors).
- Divide the class into groups and give each group a different section of the novel to map out some scenes for the play. What scenes from the book would you include in the play? Would you need to condense the book in any way? Leave anything out? As a class, decide where you would put the interval.
- You are the set designer. Working with your group's scene map, decide which sets your scenes require. How would you represent the orphanage? The desert? The old asylum? Blue's apartment?
- Write a synopsis of the play for the theatre programme.
- Choose which character you would like to play. Write yourself a monologue from an important section in the book. How does your character see this situation?
- Draw up a design sheet for each character. What costume pieces would they require? Keep in mind the era; what would poor children have worn in Colm's time? What sort of clothes would Blue have worn to the theatre?

STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

IMMIGRATION

- What is your family history? Did any of your ancestors come to Australia as a child, like Colm? Under what circumstances? How did you end up in Australia? Make a class map showing where each student's family emigrated from. Is anyone in your class an Indigenous Australian? What area of Australia did their family originate from?
- Map Colm's journey on a world map from Liverpool to Australia and then around Australia with Bill. How far do you think he travelled in kilometres? (Clues: pg 87, 116-8, 129, 134.)
- Create a mind map: How and why have people migrated to Australia? Some suggested guiding questions: What would make your family move from one place to another? Historically how have people come to Australia? How has this changed? Do you know of any restrictions on people leaving one place for another? What is meant by the term *refugee*?
- Immigration word list: opportunity, famine, discrimination, dispossession, oppression, racism, sexism, employment, health, environment, war, destruction, family reunion. In a graph, students can locate the meaning and use the term in a sentence to show understanding about the causes and effects of migration.
- Why did Chinese people immigrate to Australia in the late 1800s? Research the particulars and try to find specific information about a family who moved here in that time. Where are their descendants now?

SOCIETY/HISTORY/POLITICS

- The book raises the issue of the Stolen Generation (chapters 16 & 17). Investigate the history of this issue. Does anyone in the class know anyone that was affected by this program?
- Can you think of any more injustices/double standards?
 - in the book?
 - in your school?
 - in your life?
 - in the wider world?
- Are such unfair practises more common now, or in Colm's time, do you think?

FURTHER INVESTIGATION

Resources for students

<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw/issues/v9n4/buti94.html>

Visit this site and answer the following questions:

- What sorts of children were sent out to Australia?
- List 3 reasons this program was seen as a good idea.
- List 5 places the children were sent in the world.
- Were most of the children orphans?

<http://netk.net.au/AbuseCases/GoodwoodBrenda.asp>

Read Brenda's story and discuss the following:

- Who should be held responsible (if anyone) for Brenda's treatment in the orphanage?
- What sorts of punishment did Brenda receive, and what for?
- What sort of work did Brenda have to do at the orphanage?
- Discuss Brenda's wish for an apology in relation to the Stolen Generation.

Resources for teachers

http://shop.atmitchell.com/product_info.php?products_id=261

<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/stories/s62941.htm> - This could be an interesting piece of video to watch with the children. An 'orphaned' boy being reunited with family.

<http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/sp/childmigrantuk.htm> - background for teachers.

Music, theatre and poetry

Music, theatre and poetry all play a role in this novel and could be starting points for extension activities.

Colm is born with a talent for music. At first music comforts him (eg. his humming when in trouble) but after kind adults recognise and foster his talent, it becomes a means of expression and communication.

Bill Dare turns out to have been a famous stage actor in his day and his daughter, Blue, is involved in the New Theatre. What do students know of Australia's theatrical history?

The poetry of Lawson and Yeats is quoted and could be explored further, especially in the context of national identity.

Children of the Wind

Keen readers could read all four books in the Children of the Wind quartet: *Bridie's Fire*, *Becoming Billy Dare*, *A Prayer for Blue Delaney* and *The Secret Life of Maeve Lee Kwong*. They might like to construct a 'family tree' of the principal characters, as it is revealed over the course of the quartet. This would take in non-biological as well as biological relationships.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

KIRSTY MURRAY

In addition to the four Children of the Wind novels, Kirsty Murray has written 3 junior fiction novels: *Zarconi's Magic Flying Fish* (Allen & Unwin, 1999), *Market Blues* (Allen & Unwin, 2001) and *Walking Home with Marie Claire* (Allen & Unwin, 2002) as well as several non-fiction titles. To find out more about the author, go to

<http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=311&author=217> and visit her website at <http://www.kirstymurray.com/>.

Kirsty Murray says: "I hope to empower children with a sense of the significance of their own personal role in history ... I believe the dearth of Australian historical fiction for children compounds the problem of kids perceiving Australian history as essentially boring. For a nation of immigrants to gain a strong sense of identity we need narratives that we can relate to, set in landscapes with which we can identify...Stories that deal with the immigrant experience, with the struggle to adapt to a chaotic new world are particularly relevant to contemporary children, living in a world of rapid change, a world where they will be obliged to reinvent themselves many times over."

TROY MARTIN

Troy Martin has been teaching for five years, previously in rural NSW, and currently at Callaghan College - Wallsend Campus. He spends his time watching sunsets, walking, listening to music, reading and writing. He lives on the central coast of NSW with his wife and two hyperactive dogs.

AMELIA McBRIDE

Amelia McBride is a Literature and Arts Management graduate and a keen writer. She lives in Geelong, Victoria, where she works with a number of community theatre companies as a director, stage manager, producer and actor. She has two dogs, two cats, and a passion for reading - particularly 19th century British fiction.