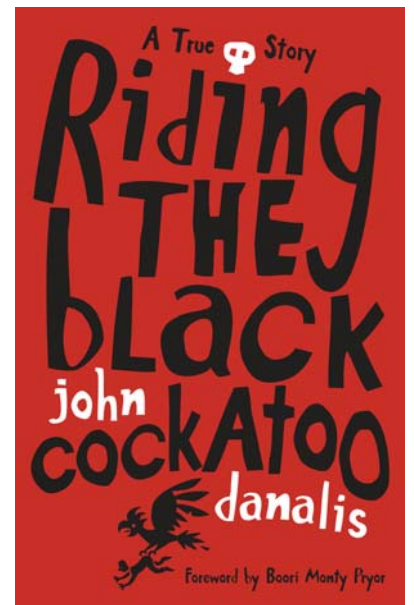


# Riding the Black Cockatoo

By John Danalis

June 2009 ISBN 978 1 74175 377 6 pb



John Danalis tells his personal journey toward understanding Indigenous Australians in *Riding the Black Cockatoo*. As a mature-aged student studying 'Indigenous Writing', Danalis mentions the Aboriginal skull christened 'Mary' that his parents kept on the mantelpiece while he was growing up. Painted yellow to keep it from cracking and used occasionally as a cigarette holder, the skull was one of many artefacts his father collected as a keepsake. The expressions of shock that this revelation causes amongst the students in his writing class, gives Danalis cause for reflection. Determined to return the skull to its rightful owners, the Wamba Wamba tribe of Northern Victoria, Danalis undertakes some serious research which forces him to confront his own stereotyped thinking. He becomes acutely aware that his knowledge of Indigenous life has actually been a limited, white man's view of history. As Danalis uncovers the bleak reality of black-white relations in this country, he also comes to appreciate the richness of Indigenous culture and spiritual life. While this journey ends in the physical return and burial of the skull, it also takes Danalis to a nadir in his life, fuelled by despair and depression. Ultimately, Danalis emerges with greater insight, new friendships and a profound sense of connection to the Indigenous people of this country.

## Potential in the Curriculum

This non-fictional account is almost a personal diary as it chronicles both the return of the skull and the personal journey of the author. It thus invites discussion about memoir, narrative structure and the use of metaphor and symbolism. The topical themes in *Riding the Black Cockatoo* lend themselves to debate, written responses and research projects. The book would be an invaluable text for Middle Years as well as senior students.

In **Humanities/SOSE/Current Affairs** this book could be used:

- as a starting point for discussions of the treatment by whites of Indigenous Australians;
- as a springboard for discussions on the concept of a victor's version of history;
- as a vehicle for the examination of Reconciliation and our progress towards this goal in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- as a springboard for exploring Aboriginal culture, spirituality and ritual;
- as the starting point of a debate about repatriation of human remains.

In **English/Media**,

- as an example of personal reflective writing;
- as the basis for discussion and writing on the themes of cultural understanding, tolerance and stereotyping;
- as a way into comparative analysis of the depiction of Aborigines by white Australians in film and literature over the decades.

Further reading for senior students could include *Home* by Larissa Behrendt and for Middle Years students could include James Molony's *Dougy*, *Gracie* and *Angela*

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In the classroom...

# Riding the Black Cockatoo

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you characterise the style of this narrative? What is the impact of this style on the reader? If the story were written in a different style, how might the reader's experience differ?
2. To what extent is history coloured by the perspective of the person who is giving the account? Can there be two versions of the one history?
3. What do you know about the traditional owners of the land where your school is situated? Investigate this. What, if any, is your responsibility toward these traditional owners?
4. What is a stereotype and to what extent do we tend to stereotype those whom we do not understand? How do we overcome stereotyping?
5. What new information have you gained from reading the book? What surprised you in the book? Discuss those points at which John Danalis exposes his own stereotypes or those of others (for example, pp. 11-16, 26-31, 112, 183-90).
6. Danalis writes about family traditions – his own and others. Discuss how we learn social attitudes such as racism. Are your own views about race the same as those of previous generations in your family and community? How and why might such attitudes change over time? Is there a link between racism and ignorance?
7. What are the struggles of Indigenous Australians today?
8. What is your view of the interventionist policies which have been implemented by successive white governments? Have they been effective? Do we have a right/obligation to impose such policies?
9. Is there a path to true reconciliation? Is an apology sufficient?
10. Danalis says that 'the main theme of this story is that individual acts of reconciliation have real potency'. Do you believe that this one individual action has made or will make a difference?
11. Do we have a right to collect human remains for study and display? What obligations do we have to the traditions of others? [See pp. 47, 175-77 (Jason's comments) and p.233 (Simon) on the issue of museums returning human remains to the communities from which they were collected.]

### **Additional resources for teachers and students:**

The book contains some photographs and images. Additional images relating to events in the book are available on the publisher's website <http://www.allenandunwin.com/default.aspx?page=656>

Curriculum notes written by Michelle Praver; discussion questions by Michelle Praver and A&U staff.

A librarian and English teacher for the last 27 years, Michelle has recently forged a new career in the world of book selling, advising schools and teachers about book choices which will enhance the curriculum. Michelle is a VCE English and GAT assessor, a member of the Victorian Premier's Reading Challenge selection panel, a YABBA committee member and actively involved in the Children's Book Council of Australia, Victorian branch. She also co-ordinates the CBCA Crichton Award for first time illustrators. Michelle is the mother of 7 children all of whom are avid readers!



FOREWORD

‘Just a white man who’s learned to listen, that’s all,’ says a Wik woman about John Danalis. Through listening comes this story about a skull called Mary, going home.

Some of it hurts. ‘Like a kangaroo – iconic in the wild but troublesome in our paddock’ is a reflection of me through the eyes of others. It puts a hurting on my heart so bad it makes the thought of death welcome. This is but one of the many ugly reflections in this amazing story that need to be read quietly inside then said out loud for all to hear.

But then there’s the proud-to-be-a-blackfella words, ‘You tell your old man how much the Wamba Wamba nation appreciates what he’s doing. Tell him I’d like to buy him a beer. We really owe you for this one. We owe you big time.’ Those words made the happy tears flow and mingle with the sad ones

to make a pool of healing *kilta* (salt water) for my heart to swim in.

Selfless in its search for sanity of the soul, majestic and poetic, *Riding The Black Cockatoo* is a nation's journey through its growing pains of race and colour. We lie within the pages of black on white. We belong to this story and it belongs to us. Thank you, John, for having the courage to search and find ways that will make us all better. *Waddamullie wadjabimbi*. Thank you, welcome.

{ BOORI MONTY PRYOR  
AUTHOR OF *MAYBE TOMORROW*  
MELBOURNE, MARCH 2009 }