



Rabbit-Proof Fence

Phillip Noyce, 94 mins, Australia, 2002

Education Resource

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RABBIT-PROOF FENCE

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Rabbit-Proof Fence

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Rabbit-Proof Fence is based on the true story of Molly Craig, her sister Daisy Kadibill and cousin Gracie Fields who, after being forcibly removed from their mothers in 1931, escaped from a mission settlement in order to find their way home. They make their journey by way of the 'rabbit proof fence', which once stretched the length of Western Australia.

Before Watching the Film

The Setting

Rabbit-Proof Fence begins in Jigalong in Western Australia's Pilbara region, with Molly, Daisy and Grace transported to Moore River near the Western Australian coast, from where they make their escape.

As a class, locate the girls' home, the mission on Moore River and the rabbit-proof fence the girls follow on their return journey.

The Stolen Generations

From the late 1800s to the 1970s, generations of children of mixed Aboriginal, and sometimes Torres Strait Islander, descent from across Australia were removed from their families and communities by government agents and church missions. This happened so that they could be raised as white children in residential institutions, training schools and farms, foster care and through adoption. Children were taken from remote communities, regional towns and big cities. For years, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families lived in fear that authorities would try to take their children. Parents often disguised or hid their children in order to prevent them from being taken.¹

Explore

It is important to introduce the history of the Stolen Generations with sensitivity to the ongoing grief experienced by individuals and communities. The *Learning about the Stolen Generations: The National Sorry Day's Committee's School Resource* has a range of information and activities designed to help teachers explore this distressing topic with their students: http://vaeai.org.au/uploads/rsfil/000386_fadc.pdf

Activity

- Read a personal account from someone who was part of the stolen generation, you can find many at: <http://www.stolengenerationstestimonies.com/>
- What did you learn from the personal account you chose?

¹ *Learning about the Stolen Generations: The National Sorry Day's Committee's School Resource*, p. 24 http://vaeai.org.au/uploads/rsfil/000386_fadc.pdf

The Historical Context

The events explored in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* take place in 1931, twenty-six years after the introduction of the Western Australian Aborigines Act in which all Aborigines were made 'wards of the state', with the Chief Protector of Aborigines becoming their legal guardian. This included the power to remove Aboriginal children from their parents.

A.O. Neville, who is portrayed in the film, was appointed to the role of Chief Protector in 1915, and oversaw the establishment of isolated self-contained settlements designed to separate Aboriginal children from their families.

Explore

- Guide your students through the specific history and circumstances dramatised in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Together as a class, find the answers to the following questions:
 - What powers did the Chief Protector have?
 - Who was A.O. Neville and what beliefs did he hold about Aboriginal people?
- Screen this clip from Australian Screen and use the Education notes to draw out the key ideas: <https://aso.gov.au/titles/features/rabbit-proof-fence/clip2/>
- Research the rabbit-proof fence.
 - How many fences were there in total? And how many kilometres did they cover?
 - Rabbits were an introduced species to Australia; what impact have they had on the land?
 - Find out where Moore River W.A is in relation to Jigalong; how far would someone have to walk to get home?

At places like Moore River Settlement, children were forced to learn 'white ways', and in the film when Molly, Gracie and Daisy first arrive at the Moore River Native Settlement, we see how they are to be assimilated through indoctrination.

- Ask students to find out more about how during this period of child removal, where Aboriginal children's identities and family connections were taken from them:
 - View this photo gallery of pictures taken at the Moore River Settlement; what do you notice in the pictures? What white values, religious or otherwise, do you think were forced upon Aboriginal children there?
<http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/647206467505/photographs-of-moore-river-settlement>
 - If you were taken from your family, and forced to live a different lifestyle, and told to change your whole belief system, how might you feel? Would you fight to get back home?
 - Look up the meaning of 'indoctrination'; what does it mean, and how might it differ from the meaning of 'assimilation'?
 - How important are family and place to you? How much influence on your individual identity do these things have?

After Watching the Film

Initial Responses

- What moments left a particular impression on you?
- What did you learn?
- What surprised or shocked you?
- Describe how your understanding of the Stolen Generations has changed

Character

Molly proves herself to be resourceful and determined, leading Gracie and Daisy towards home, all the way from Moore River. To do so, she must outsmart the tracker Moodoo, and find help from strangers.

- List the ways Molly managed to outsmart Moodoo, and what knowledge she draws upon to do so.
- Molly doesn't always know the way home; list the times she is helped by strangers.
- Sometimes we see point-of-view shots from Molly, Daisy and Gracie's perspective, especially when they encounter strangers – what do you notice about the angle of these shots? What does the angle of these shots say about how Molly and the other girls view these people or feel about them?

A.O Neville was a real life figure, and was Chief Protector of Aborigines.

- In an early scene, Neville plays a slideshow explaining his view of Aboriginal people, and his plan for them. Describe his plan.
- When reading a newspaper story about the three girls, what do the children who remain at the Moore River Settlement say every time A.O Neville's name is mentioned? Does this suggest Aboriginal people saw him as their 'protector'?

One of the most powerful minor characters is **Mavis**, an Aboriginal woman who, like the girls, was taken to the Moore River Settlement as a child.

- What do viewers learn about Mavis' situation after she leaves Moore River?
- How does Mavis's situation add to our understanding of the rest of the story?

Narrative Techniques

Narrative techniques are all about **how** a story is told and the tools and techniques used. In this film, director Phillip Noyce has told the story in a linear fashion; so that the events are told in the order they happened.

- Would there be as much suspense in the film if viewers knew the outcome before watching the film?

As Noyce tells the story, he cuts between two very different worlds: Molly's world, and A.O Neville's world.

- How does this editing decision affect our understanding of the story?

- What aspects of the story does this contrast between the two different worlds and points of view highlight?
- How does our growing understanding of A.O. Neville affect our response to Molly, Daisy and Gracie's journey?

Give your students the interpretative tools to 'read' the film by introducing them to the techniques used by the filmmaker to tell the story.

- Brainstorm with your group how writers tell stories in novels.
- Now brainstorm how filmmakers tell stories. What elements are **used to tell a story in a film?**

Some likely responses might be: vision, music, and acting. Others might include colour, editing and camera angles.

- Ask students to think about how all these elements help tell the story, or assist in the telling of a story in place of words on a page.
- Watch some short scenes with them and ask them to focus on particular elements.

Different lives, different worlds

Compare locations in the film. Focus on: Molly's family camp, as it is seen in the opening minutes of the film, the Moore River Settlement, and A.O Neville's office.

Watch the opening scene and ask students to respond to these prompts in small groups. (Ask them to note down their responses so that they can share their discoveries with the rest of the class.)

- Describe the music. What kind of atmosphere does it help create?
- Describe the movement of the camera; is it steady, or unsteady? How does the camera movement make you feel?
- Describe the colours. Are they dark or bright? How do they affect your response to this setting?
- Describe the acting. What are the actors communicating about the characters? How does the acting affect your impression of the children's life at the camp?

Watch the scene where Molly, Gracie and Daisy are taken from their family

- Describe the position and movement of the camera, and discuss its effect and impact.
- Describe the acting. What do you think the characters are feeling?
- Describe the music, the sounds, and the dialogue. What does what we hear add to this episode?
- What feelings is the director trying to evoke? What does he want the audience to feel?

Look at some images of the Moore River Settlement, particularly those shot inside the buildings.

- Describe the colours. Are they dark or bright? How do they affect our response to this setting?
- What does the lighting communicate about this world? How does the use of light affect our response?

Watch the scenes that take place in Neville's office.

- Describe the office in as much detail as you can
- Is there much natural light?
- What does this setting say about A.O Neville? How does it reflect his character?

Establishing connection

Rabbit-Proof Fence is very much a film about identity and connection; connection to family, and connection to land or place.

- Watch the opening scene again; how is Molly's connection with both family and land established early on in the film?
- Make note of when you see an eagle, what is the significance of eagles in the film?
- Molly is able to get herself, Gracie and Daisy away from the tracker Moodoo and home by using her knowledge of the land. Describe the moments she does this, and what knowledge she uses?
- Watch the scene when Molly finds the fence. How is her deep connection with her mother shown, and what techniques are used? Think about music, and how the different shots are edited together.

Costume

Costume is really important, as it can say a lot about characters, and what they are going through.

- What are the girls given to wear when they arrive at Moore River Settlement? Describe the use of costume in this place and what it communicates about the purpose of Moore River.
- Describe Mavis's costume and how it connects with her time at Moore River. What does it communicate about her current situation and experience?
- How does A. O. Neville's costume add to your understanding of his character and what motivates him?

Post-script

At the conclusion of the film, the director has included a 'post-script'.

- What do we find out, and why do you think the director included this information instead of finishing with the 'happy ending'?

Themes

Identity and Belonging

Rabbit-Proof Fence is a story about the characters' determination to get home to their family, and the way they resist those who say they can't be together. Along the way, we see the film is very much about identity and belonging, with the identities of the girls intertwined with their family and the area they are from.

- Describe the attempts made at Moore River Settlement to alter the identities of Aboriginal children. Give examples.
- Consider the character of Mavis. What does her life tell us about what the children at Moore River Settlement can expect from their future?
- Describe how we are shown that Molly has a strong connection to, and understanding of, country.

Paternalism

Paternalism describes an organisation, like a government, limiting people's rights, liberties, and free will for what the organisation believes is in those people's best interests.

- Describe how paternalism was at work in regards to the characters in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*
- Describe the portrayal of A.O. Neville in the film. Do you think he thinks he is 'doing good' and is really acting as a 'protector' of Aboriginal people in Western Australia? Explain.
- Like Molly, many children escaped or attempted to escape places like Moore River Settlement, and trackers and police were often sent out to 'catch' them. What does this tell you about the actions of governments that encouraged the practice of removing Aboriginal children, and individuals like A.O. Neville who supported these practices?

Further historical context – Bringing Them Home Report, and the Apology

As part of their study, students can also look at not just when the film was set, but when it was made. The Bringing Them Home Report was released five years before the film, with the Rudd apology coming six years after it was made. Both these events and the film could be said to show a change in awareness and attitude towards Indigenous Australians and what many of them suffered.

- With your students, watch this excerpt from then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3TZOGpG6cM>
 - As a class, discuss how viewing and studying *Rabbit-Proof Fence* has influenced your understanding of this speech.

- Explore the Apology using prompts from: *Learning about the Stolen Generations: The National Sorry Day's Committee's School Resource*
http://vaeai.org.au/uploads/rsfil/000386_fadc.pdf
- Five years before *Rabbit-Proof Fence* was made, a report was conducted into the Stolen Generation, and the effects on those who were taken from their families.
 - Students can find a breakdown of the report on Wikipedia, and might like to present some of the report's findings to the class
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bringing_Them_Home