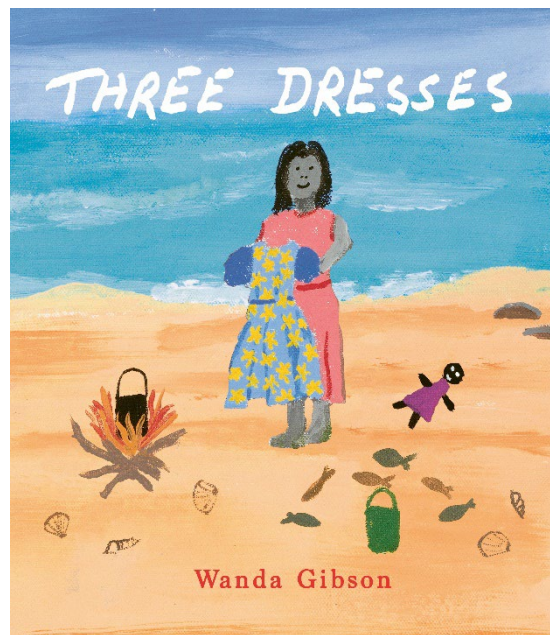


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THREE DRESSES

Wanda Gibson



Teachers' Notes

Written by Cara Shipp, a practising teacher,
in context with the Australian curriculum

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SYNOPSIS

'Take three dresses ... one to wash, one to wear and one spare.'

When Wanda Gibson was a little girl, her mum would tell her this as they packed to go on holidays. Wanda grew up on Hope Vale Mission in Far North Queensland, and her family were allowed only one short break away from work each year. At their special spot at the beach, they camped in the sandhills, cooked fresh fish on the fire and swam in the ocean.

Beautifully illustrated with Wanda's paintings, this heart-warming true story celebrates family time, connection to place and finding joy in the simple things, like your favourite three dresses.

THEMES

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander customs and beliefs:
 - Kinship
 - Community
 - Stories
- Impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders
- Surviving colonisation and Protection Acts (in Queensland The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897)
- Life on Aboriginal missions
- Identity and belonging
- Connection to Country

STUDY NOTES**Connections to Australian Curriculum: Humanities and Social Sciences**

- *Three Dresses* gently introduces conversation points for primary-aged children about Australian history and life on Aboriginal missions
- It would work well paired with the short story collection *Heroes, Rebels and Innovators: Inspiring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from history* by Karen Wyld and Jaelyn Biumaiwai in a Year 4 exploration of colonisation. The Wyld and Biumaiwai stories (*Patyegarang*, *Bungaree* and *Tarenorerer*, for example) present Aboriginal perspectives of early resistance while Wanda's portrayal of life on – and off – the Mission offer insights into the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- More simply, *Three Dresses* could be used in conjunction with the National Library of Australia digital classroom [Time and Place](#) in a Year 3

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exploration of connection to place and the ways First Nations Australians are interconnected with Country/Place.

Background information for teachers

Teachers are encouraged to understand the historical background of key references within *Three Dresses* to correctly answer any questions that may arise. Teachers can determine how much of this information should be presented, and how, based on their classroom context.

- *Language to be explained, verbally or with pictures, to promote understanding:*
 - ‘Mayie’ (p. 4): food. Mum and Dad would take mayie on the two-day journey for the family to eat.
 - ‘A spell’ (p. 8): a rest. When the family travelled by foot, they would ‘sit down and have a spell’.
 - ‘Gunyah’ (p. 10): a hut or tent-like structure made from wood and leaves. Often very sturdy and waterproof.
 - ‘Billycan’ (p. 10): a metal container used for boiling water, making tea or cooking over a fire. Dad uses a billycan and some felt from his hat to make a kerosene lamp.
 - ‘Forty-four-gallon drum’ (p. 28): Wanda and her sisters would push half a forty-four-gallon drum to the water to boil their dresses and bedding.
- *The Protection Era and Missions*
The State Library of Queensland provides an overview of colonial government legislation that has impacted First Nations people, including the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 (Qld), and their consequences: <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/discover/first-nations-cultures/community-history>
- *Hope Vale and the Lutheran missions*
Lutheran missions did not wipe out Aboriginal languages but preserved them. This was controversial with the government of the day and even lead to conflict over whether the government would continue to fund them. Today, Lutheran missions’ recordings of language, along with anthropologists’ records, are used to revive languages in communities.

The missionaries at Hope Vale learned and taught in the Guugu Yimithirr language. This could be why Gibson is a fluent speaker when many Aboriginal people in heavily colonised areas today are not:

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‘Lutherans have always placed much emphasis on learning and using vernacular languages, holding strongly to the tenet that language is the mirror of a people’s soul. In all their mission fields they invested much energy into acquiring and recording local languages, in systematising their phonetics, and translating bible texts and hymns.’¹

- *Understanding Woorabinda:*

Woorabinda is where Wanda Gibson was born. A history of Woorabinda is available on the [Queensland government website](#). It exemplifies the way in which Aboriginal people were controlled and moved around the country and how this severed family and cultural connections.

In World War II (WWII), Aboriginal communities were moved from North Queensland coastal areas in fear that they would divulge Australia’s secrets to the Japanese². The Hope Vale community was moved to Woorabinda and placed with Aboriginal groups from other countries. This was devastating for the Hope Vale community as the relative social isolation of Hope Vale had kept the community mostly disease-free:

‘They were taken by train to Rockhampton and from there to Woorabinda, under guard with fixed bayonets. They were deeply traumatised by this experience. In one month 28 of them succumbed to dengue fever, altogether sixty died in the seven years spent at Woorabinda.

‘The social isolation in which Cape Bedford people had been held marked them out from other Woorabinda residents who came from all corners of Queensland.’³

Hope Vale is still a strong Aboriginal community today. They were ‘allowed to return’ after WWII but had to find their own way back. In 1950, they re-settled but the site was moved 20km from the original site due to water contamination. The site became the first to come under Aboriginal control in a deed of grant in trust and has an Aboriginal local council. Visitors need a permit to visit and camp there. Wanda Gibson lives on the land that her father cleared for them during the 1950 re-settlement.

¹ <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/qld-mission/cape-bedford-mission-hope-vale-1886-1942>

² <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/qld-mission/cape-bedford-mission-hope-vale-1886-1942>

³ <http://missionaries.griffith.edu.au/qld-mission/cape-bedford-mission-hope-vale-1886-1942>

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Classroom activities*Before reading: understanding historical and cultural context*

- Explain to students that there were many years of negative impacts on First Nations people after Captain Cook came to Australia. Colonisers and First Nations people fought over the ownership of the land. New diseases were introduced from England that had a terrible effect on First Nations people. The government decided to force all First Nations people away from their Country and onto settlements where officials fed them, gave them work to do and educated their children. In most of the settlements, people were not allowed to speak their language and or go out and hunt for their normal food, they had to eat the food rations provided to them. They were not allowed leave the settlement because the government did not want First Nations people to be out in the main community with other Australian people. This was done in the name of protection, to stop wars and massacres taking place, but many say it was a form of control and it moved First Nations people out of the way for the British settlers to take over the land. The Hope Vale Mission, where Wanda Gibson lived, was a little bit different from these settlements: the managers learned the local Guugu Yimithirr language and spoke it when teaching the children each day and they allowed the families to leave the mission for a holiday at Christmas time.
- Read the author's statement at the back of the book. Locate key places on the [AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia](#): Gangulu in Central Queensland and Guugu Yimithirr (written as Guugu-Yimidhirr) and Cape Melville (written as C. Melville) in Far North Queensland. Note that Woorabinda is on Gangulu, Wadja and Barada Kabalbara Yetimarala land. Spellings are different and some groups are missing from the AIATSIS Map due to limitations on the information available to the anthropologists at the time of creating the map. Remember that Aboriginal languages are oral languages and not really meant to be written down with English letters, so you will always find different spellings in different publications. Also note that Cape Bedford Mission on Guugu Yimithirr land was the first mission in the region and is also known as Hope Vale.
- Look at the book cover and discuss the dresses. In what ways do they present a different picture to the history we have just talked about?
- Wanda collaborated with fashion label Magpie Goose on a dress collection featuring her artwork. You can hear Wanda speak about the

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inspiration behind her artwork on the Magpie Goose YouTube video [Wanda Gibson - Family Washing](#).

After reading: further understanding historical and cultural context

- Share with students what happened when Cook arrived in Cooktown, near Hope Vale from the [Hope Vale Shire website](#): 'The Guugu Yimithirr first came to prominence in 1770 when they engaged with Captain James Cook and his crew on the good ship Endeavour. As is well known in history the Guugu Yimithirr hosted Captain Cook at present day Cooktown (Gungarr) for 7 weeks. During this time he not only had to repair the Endeavour he also met the Guugu Yimithirr people and engaged in dialogue along with Joseph Banks and Sydney Parkinson. They gathered a word list of the Guugu Yimithirr language and from this encounter the Guugu Yimithirr have been immortalised in the English language by giving the name to that giant hopping marsupial – Gangurru – Kangaroo.'
- View the creation story of the Endeavour River, named by Captain Cook, which is called Waalumbaal Birri by the Guugu Yimithirr: [How Mungurru the rock python formed the Endeavour River | View from the Shore | ABC Australia](#).
- The State Library of Queensland blog post [Talbot Family Treasures Wall: Wanda Gibson artworks](#) explores a series of artworks created by Wanda Gibson in response to Cook's arrival. About *Burning the Pigs*, Wanda explains that Cook set up a pig pen but the local Guugu Yimithirr people didn't know what it was for or who owned it and so burned it down. About *Twelve Turtles*, she says Cook and his men came to shore after a day's fishing with turtles they had caught and killed. They did not know that in Guugu Yimithirr law turtles are sacred and there are specific rules about how to kill them. In both instances, there was violence due to Cook's men and the Guugu Yimithirr not understanding each other's language or cultures. Share the paintings and discuss their stories with the class to build an understanding of the two perspectives of Captain Cook and First Nations people.
- View photographs of Hope Vale community and compare these to Wanda Gibson's artworks in *Three Dresses*:
 - <https://tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au/listing/product/hope-vale/>
 - <https://www.hopevale.qld.gov.au/>

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- Summarise the key points of the Woorabinda story and discuss with students.
 - How would this have caused a loss of culture and language for First Nations people?
 - What conflicts and challenges would have been caused for the people thrown together in the mission or reserve?
 - What would it have been like for Wanda's parents to be moved to Woorabinda away from their home at Hope Vale?
 - Note, Common Ground has an article explaining connection to Country: <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/connection-to-animals-and-country>.

After reading: discussion points on the text

- Compare the first page spread of the family at the church to spread where the family are hunting on the beach (p. 11) ('The next day, we'd run down to the beach and see what we could catch to eat'). Discuss that the family appears happy and well in both paintings. Ask students in which one they feel the family are happiest and why they feel that. Discuss how, and to what extent, the paintings show connection to Country.
- Discuss the page spread where Mum and Dad are sharing stories of their childhoods and Wanda is thinking about how hard mission life is. What do we notice about the colours and mood in these paintings? Why is it important that Mum and Dad tell these campfire stories?
- Which is your favourite page (or pages) of *Three Dresses*? Why is this your favourite? Share with a friend.
- Mayie figs are bush tucker in Far North Queensland. View and discuss this painting [Mayie fig and wild ginger](#) by Wik-Mungkan and Yidinji/Djabugay artist Heather Marie Koowootha (Wundjara). What similarities and differences do you notice in this painting compared to Wanda's art works?
- Discuss the fishing practices Wanda describes, with spear and woomera. Talk about the fish they mention catching – stingray, shark, silver bream, whiting and snapper. What do students know about these fish? Is anyone in the class a keen fisherman? [Fishing the Wild, Episode 2](#) (minute 7.35 to 13.00) shows Yolngu people from Arnhem Land explaining the spear and woomera and catching fish at night.

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- Wanda remembers that her family often had nothing to eat but their rations of damper and syrup, meat and sweet tea. Make damper as a class or, if possible, have a local Aboriginal service provider make damper and discuss its place in Aboriginal history and cultures. Ask students to consider the difference between the fresh wild figs and fish eaten that were eaten on holidays compared to the rationed damper. Would mission inhabitants be receiving all the daily nutrients they needed? How healthy would they feel?
- Teachers should talk to an Aboriginal parent, staff member or community member about *Three Dresses*. Do they have similar knowledge and experiences in their family to Wanda's? Would they like to share their story with the class (understanding they may not want to share personal or painful details)? Prepare your students for the visit and have them think of questions they would like to ask. See the [QCAA guidelines](#) on working with guests.
- Create a class book and explore the local Country, history and stories of your local Aboriginal community. Research Elders and Stolen Generations survivors to honour their stories and celebrate their achievements.
- Use a Y-chart to brainstorm what Wanda would have seen, heard and felt on her visit to the beach. Remember she notices the seaweed smell and the sound of the waves. Students use this y-chart to write a poem or draw their own image about Wanda's holiday.
- Ask students how they would describe the relationship between Wanda, her mum, her dad and her siblings? How do the illustrations help show this?
- Discuss how Wanda's family face the hard life that they have on the mission. Consider how they may think positively and look forward to their holidays at the beach.
- Using the knowledge that you have about Wanda and her family's experiences, write an information report or newspaper article about the impact of past government practices on First Nations people.

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Further resources for Upper Primary studies of First Contact and colonisation

- (Year 4) [First Contacts](#) National Library of Australia digital classroom
- (Year 5) [Convicts, Conflict and Confrontation](#) National Library of Australia digital classroom
- [Defining Moments in Australian History](#) National Museum of Australia online exhibition, including a timeline beginning 60,000 years through to the claiming of Australia in 1770.
- (Year 4) [Defining Moments in Australian History](#) 1770 education resource [Cook claims Australia](#)

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

The idea for *Three Dresses* came from Wanda's collaboration with an Aboriginal owned and led clothing label, Magpie Goose. Wanda's artworks were printed on a collection of dresses in the style of those that she used to receive for Christmas each year. They reminded her of her family holiday to the beach where Wanda and her family would walk for two days to the coastline carrying everything – food, blankets, hunting, cooking equipment, and their three dresses.

At the end of the book there is an Author's Note written by Wanda with information for younger readers about her life experiences on Hope Vale Mission, her artwork and how this picture book came to be published.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wanda Gibson is a Nukgal Wurra woman of the Guugu Yimithirr people (on her mum's side) and lives in Hope Vale on the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. Her dad is a Yuuethawarra man and his country is around Cape Melville. Both of Wanda's parents were Stolen Generation and were brought to Cape Bedford Mission when they were ten or twelve. Wanda is a master weaver – she weaves baskets, birds and fish from dried grass. She is also a painter and completed a Diploma of Visual Arts at Cairns TAFE in 2014. Through her paintings, prints and weaving, Wanda passes on knowledge about culture and traditional materials. Her work is regularly exhibited in and around Cairns and Cooktown and is represented in the collections of the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, and the Cairns Art Gallery, Queensland. She is represented by the HopeVale Arts & Cultural Centre, Queensland. Wanda has five kids, eleven grandkids and five great-grandkids.