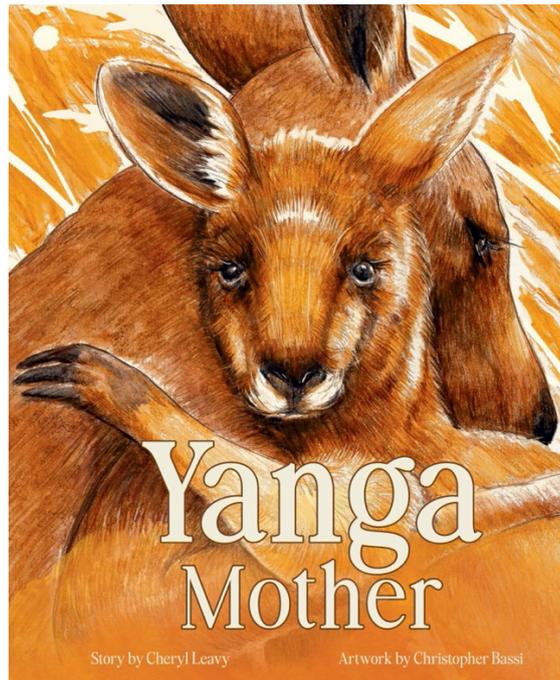


UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

YANGA MOTHER

Cheryl Leavy & Christopher Bassi



Teachers' Notes

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

ISBN: 978 0 7022 6831 1/ AUS \$24.99

Synopsis	2
Themes & Structure	3
Study Notes	3
Author/Illustrator Motivation	12
About the Author/Illustrator	13–14

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.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

SYNOPSIS

'Yilayi mardi! Look now, my people. Speak it. Out loud. Alive. Our Old People can hear you.'

Yanga Mother is a timely and poetic celebration of First Nations languages. This powerful bilingual story honours connection to Country and the unbreakable bonds of never-ending motherly love.

A celebration of family and love from a unique historical perspective, *Yanga Mother* carries an important backstory that shows us the enduring power of First Nations maternal love and matriarchs, and honours the Stolen Generations. As explained by the author in the additional end notes for older children:

'Yanga Mother is based on a story my grandmother, Beryl Wharton, told me about being stolen from her family in the 1930s. Long before she was taken away, her mother would sing to her 'Mother is cloud', and explain that if young Beryl ever found herself far away, she could look up and know her mother would be up there with the clouds, watching over her. When Beryl was a little girl, she was taken away from her parents and made to stay in the Girls' Dormitory at Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement. Then when she was only eleven years old, she was sent to work on a sheep station. Far from family and home, Beryl would look up to the sky and remember her mother singing the clouds into her memory and know she was not alone. Beryl's true home was on Kooma Country in the Murray–Darling Basin region. That Country has a lot of water and vast plains full of grass. Colonisers wanted to use this land to raise sheep, so they forced the people off their Country and, like Beryl, made them live on the fringes of town, work on stations for little or no wages, or sent them to live in faraway places like Cherbourg'¹.

Yanga Mother was originally a poem that was translated into Kooma. The author is passionate about sharing poetry and poetic reasoning with children and young people. In her own learning sessions, Leavy likes to engage children with their interpretation of what poetic phrases like 'Mother is sun mean and to have them create their own 'Mother is...' phrases.

Leavy was inspired to publish a children's book in Kooma during the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Languages as a key step in family and community healing. Leavy's grandmother was locked up in punishment for speaking language while on the mission at Cherbourg, at a time when it was Australian government policy to ban Aboriginal people from speaking their

¹ Leavy, C. 2024. *Yanga Mother*. St Lucia: UQP, Endnotes.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

language. As a result, she quickly learned to stop speaking in language, and by the 1980s there was only one recorded fluent native Kooma speaker still living. Leavy has been working towards revitalising the Kooma language, which is considered critically endangered.² She often works with linguist Peter Austin, who has an interest in Kooma language and provides support with the complex grammar of First Nations languages.

This gentle and heart-warming book not only honours connection to Country and motherhood but is an important step in revitalising Kooma language and culture.

THEMES AND STRUCTURE

Themes covered in this book include:

- First Nations customs and beliefs:
 - Kinship
 - Community
 - Stories
- Impacts of colonisation on First Nations peoples
- Surviving colonisation and the Protection Act (referred to slightly differently in each state but the premise was the same - move Aboriginal communities onto controlled reserves and missions, remove Aboriginal children of mixed descent who could more easily be enculturated into white Australian culture)
- The enduring traditions and cultures of First Nations peoples as the custodians of the oldest continuous living culture in the world
- Identity and belonging
- Connection to Country
- The importance of language in maintaining identity, culture and connection to Country

STUDY NOTES**Background information for teachers**

Teachers are encouraged to understand the historical background of key references in the text in order to answer questions that may arise. Teachers can determine how much of this information should be presented to their students,

² Woodbine, R. 2024. 'Cheryl Leavy and what it means to her to be a First Nations Woman'. In *Tenderness for Nurses*, Podcast, <<https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/cheryl-leavy-and-what-it-means-to-her-to-be-a/id1704580631?i=1000653112881>>

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

and how, based on their particular classroom context. Below are some resources that may assist teachers' professional development around these topics. Sections of these resources may also be suitable to share with your class.

- *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 and its consequences.

<https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/discover/first-nations-cultures/community-history>

- *The Ration Shed Museum and Cherbourg Memory Project, Cherbourg*

Provides historical context to the Aboriginal settlement at Cherbourg. It began as 'Barambah', a settlement established by the Salvation Army in 1901, and was taken over by government in 1904. It became one of Australia's largest settlements and the government brought Aboriginal people from communities all over Queensland, displacing many people from their Country, endangering their languages and causing conflict between different tribes thrown together.

<https://cherbourgmemory.org/>

<https://rationshed.com.au/>

- *Connection to Country*

This BTN Special explains Connection to Country, land rights, Welcome to Country, seasons and bush foods:

<https://youtu.be/C9Oi6pJqYcs?feature=shared>

This Common Ground article also explains connection to land, plants, animals, totems and sustainability: <https://www.commonground.org.au/article/connection-to-animals-and-country>

- *Terminology*

Mardi – Aboriginal peoples of Western Queensland

Murri – Aboriginal people of Queensland

Everywhen – the concept of 'everywhen' is linked to First Nations notions of time and the Dreaming – very complex but essentially a belief that time is non-linear, that our past, present and future exist contemporaneously. See:

<https://www.commonground.org.au/article/the-dreaming>

- *Connections to History curriculum*

The book could also be used as part of a study of connection to place for Year 3 students in HASS, paired with the National Library of Australia's Digital

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

Classroom 'Time and Place' <https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/digital-classroom-year-3> .

This book could also be used to provide a personal First Nations perspective on the colonisation of Australia, in conjunction with the National Museum of Australia's digital classroom resource for Year 4: How did Cook's Endeavour Voyage change Australia forever?

<https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/learning-modules/how-did-cooks-endeavour-voyage-change-australia-forever>

Classroom activities

Before reading: consider the importance of language, family and Country

- Activity: ABC Kids Podcast, Little Yarns, Episode 'Kids in Yugambeh', 30 March, 2020:
<https://www.abc.net.au/kidslisten/programs/little-yarns/kids-yugambeh/12075438>
 1. Lie down and get comfy and listen to this podcast about how language and stories connect us to family and place.
 2. Go outside and explore, find a comfy spot to sit or lie and quietly observe the landscape or sky. Draw what you see, the shapes in the sky or mountains. Then come back together in a yarning circle and take turns to share your observations (either with group or partners as appropriate for your class). Collect drawings for classroom display.
 3. Discuss the podcast ideas – does anyone speak another language? Who has family far away in another place? How do they stay connected? How can language and stories help us remember our family and special places? How does language connect Aboriginal people to Country? Scribe/collect answers for classroom display.
 4. Hunter talks about learning from his uncle and about teaching his own daughter now that he is a dad. Have students draw a picture to represent the people important to them. Who is their family? Who protects them? Who teaches them important things in life? (adapt as necessary to be inclusive and incorporate trauma-informed practice depending on your context). Are all their important people living with them? Do any live far away? Invite students to display their pictures in the classroom display (they can keep it private if they prefer).
- Discuss the languages your students speak at home and other languages they may be aware of and create a mind map for classroom display.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Learn the language of *Yanga Mother*, using the glossary at the back of the book and the pronunciation guide on the UQP website:
<https://www.uqp.com.au/books/yanga-mother>.



- For younger classes, you may like to create word cards for memory games or other word games.
- Where possible, work with your local community to find out how to say the words or phrases from *Yanga Mother* in the local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Language, and any other important words to know in the local area. Create a poster with pictures to illustrate what you have found, comparing the local language to English and the Kooma language.
- Where possible, work with your local community to learn language out on Country, connecting to the local land. Help students make connection between language, land and culture.
- Resources that may assist in finding out about your local places and languages are listed below:
 - *ABC Place Names series, This Place*
<https://www.abc.net.au/education/digibooks/this-place/101750608>
 - *Gambay Languages Map* <https://gambay.com.au/>
 - *50 Words Project* <https://50words.online/languages>
 - *Marrin Gamu Project - collection of songs in language in a range of primary and early learning centres*
<https://marringamu.com.au/videos/>

As a group, you could discuss these questions:

- If there are many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages, do you think there are also many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and stories?
- How are language, culture and Country connected? Why is it special or important? How might language and Country be important to culture and identity?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- What are some things that we might be able to learn through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages?
- How do stories keep us connected to our families?
- How do we stay connected to important people in our lives when they are far away? What does it feel like to live away from an important family member? What does it feel like to be away from your home, or special places that you love?

Before reading: understanding historical and cultural context

- Explain to students: When Captain Cook came to Australia there were many years of negative impacts on First Nations people. There was fighting between colonisers and First Nations people over the ownership of the land. New diseases brought from England were introduced and had a terrible effect on First Nations people. The government decided to force all First Nations people onto settlements where government officials fed them, gave them work to do and educated children. This meant that First Nations people were moved away from their Country. In most of these settlements, the people were not allowed to speak their language and they could not go out and hunt for their normal food, they had to eat the food rations provided to them. They could not leave the settlement and the government did not want First Nations people to be out in the main community with other Australian people. At the time, some people said this would protect Aboriginal people. Many people now understand that 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. Explain that the author's grandmother was taken from her family to Cherbourg settlement. Share maps and information as appropriate for your class from the Cherbourg Museum resource linked earlier in this guide.
- Discuss where the author is from and where her grandmother was taken, and where the author is writing from, locating on the AIATSIS Aboriginal languages map: Kooma Country, Cherbourg, Yuggera and Turrbul Countries. Discuss in relation to where your school is situated.
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia>
Spellings are different and some groups are missing from the AIATSIS Aboriginal languages map due to limitations of the information available to the anthropologists at the time of creating this map. Remember that Aboriginal languages were originally oral languages and were not

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

formerly written down with English letters, so you will always find different spellings in different publications.

After reading: discussion points on the text

- Discuss the final page spread in detail. Consider how it brings together the key messages of the book – mother is cloud, mother is sky, mother is always following me and I follow mother.
 - What does it mean to say, ‘Mother is sun’? How does the sun make us feel? Why is the sun important – what role does it play in nature?
 - What does it mean to say, ‘Mother is sky’? How does the sky make you feel? Where is the sky? When the sky is covered with clouds, is it still there?
 - What does it mean to say, ‘Mother is cloud’? Do you think the clouds really go away? Maybe they are in the sky somewhere we can’t see them?
 - Which one is your mum? Sun, sky or cloud? Is there another part of Country that you think is most like your mum? Encourage students to complete their own ‘Mother is...’ phrase and share with the class.
 - What about you? Which part of Country are you most like? Encourage students to share their own ‘I am...’ phrase.
- Why is it comforting/powerful to look to the sky and see our family or ancestors? Do any of the students have stories about their family members being in the sky? (Please consider whether this discussion is appropriate within your class context.)
- Refer back to your pre-reading discussion about connection to Country and family in response to the ‘Kids in Yugambah’ podcast and your classroom displays. Read or paraphrase the notes for older readers about the author’s grandmother, and why she made up the story/song ‘Mother is Cloud’. Discuss how her grandmother would have felt being taken away, how her family left behind would have felt, how the song helped to maintain their connection even in a hard situation. Discuss how the connection to land and animals helps people feel connected to Country and to their family. Discuss how Country is with us all of the time. No matter where you go, you are never alone.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Explain to the students how the author today is learning her family's language, even though the government tried to stop them, as outlined in the synopsis of these study notes. View the video about the Kooma people's Indigenous Protected Area and how they are reconnecting to their Country through the land they own: *Welcome to Kooma Country, Kooma IPA, video by Local Land Services NSW, Through our Eyes Series 3*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8L6hdm6Wil>. Discuss the fact that although government took many First Nations people away from their families and off their land, many languages and cultures are still known and practised, revived and passed down today. Try to lead students to appreciate the strength and resilience of First Nations people and how powerful stories and songs are to keep culture and language alive.
- In appreciating First Nations continuous cultures, go back through the book and find words and phrases that refer to continuous, never-ending cycles. It may be appropriate and useful to first have students complete their own illustrations to these words and phrases. Discuss these words and phrases and build a shared understanding around continuity of stories, beliefs, connection to Country, culture and language.
 - 'Wandaguli yanga. There is always mother.'
 - 'Wandhandja-wandhandja. Everywhen.'
 - 'Wanduguli' (all the time, continuous)
 - 'Wandaguli yanga. There is always mother, no matter the distance between us in place or time. In the beginning she carries us, then we carry her, in our blood and in our hearts. We are forever connected.'
 - 'Mother is always close.'
 - 'We two are always together.'
- Ask students which is their favourite page in *Yanga Mother*? Why is this their favourite? Share with a friend.
- *Yanga Mother* was originally a poem which the author has adapted into a children's book. Work with the class and the school music teacher to adapt the story again into a class song. Discuss how the song provides comfort and warmth and reminds us of the safety of our homes and families. Note that this activity should remain as a classroom activity only, and the song should not be performed, recorded or shared without seeking permission from the author and publisher.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Ask students if they have a story, song or saying that their family uses to comfort them (or, if more appropriate, contact families and ask them to send in this information). Have students create their own picture book with illustrations for their special story/song/saying.

Learning from animals

- Review and unpack the information in the end notes about why the author chose the grey kangaroo as the motif in the book. Students could be given each part of the information to illustrate, or to act out in a play. Older students could create a PowerPoint or other multimodal text to illustrate each part:

'*Yanga Mother* honours dhugandu, the grey kangaroo, as family because, like mardi peoples, they also like to stay connected in social groups called mobs.

Yanga dhugandu, the mother grey kangaroo, is a great teacher. Her strong bond with her baby, which she keeps in her pouch for about eight months, teaches us that children thrive with the warmth of their parents' touch.

As her joey grows, yanga dhugandu always chooses to stay close, showing us that watching over baby as they grow keeps them safe.

Gumbarr, the female kangaroo, stay with their mothers forever.

The connection between siblings is also strong and starts from the very beginning of life. Bigger joeys often suckle beside their 'pinkie' siblings in yanga's pouch. As the joeys grow up and protect each other from getting hurt, their bond gets stronger.

We can all learn something from dhugandu about family, responsibility and safety. They teach us that our connections to each other are sacred.'

- After unpacking the above information about kangaroos, discuss: in what ways are kangaroos similar to humans? Why do you think the females always stay with their mothers, creating groups of grandmothers, mothers and granddaughters? Why are the siblings close? Compare to students' own experiences of family life with their siblings. What does the word 'sacred' mean? Why are our connections with each other sacred?

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

- Find out from local First Nations groups what animals are important in the local area. What are those animals' characteristics and what do they teach us about life, family and how to be in the world?

Extension activities/activities for older readers:

- Teachers should talk to an Aboriginal parent, staff member or member of local community about the book *Yanga Mother*. Do they have similar knowledge and experiences in their family as the author Cheryl Leavy? 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. 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.
- Using the knowledge you have about the author's family's experiences, write an information report or newspaper article about the impact of past government practices on First Nations people.
- Schools could connect with local First Nations community to establish a caring for Country program in their school, which includes learning about local plants and animals, their characteristics and what they teach us. This would be a large-scale community project. It is essential that it is conducted under the guidance of the local First Nations community, and time is taken to consult and plan, as what is considered appropriate in one context may not be in another. Here is an example of a program from Silkwood School, Gold Coast (conducted in consultation with local Traditional Owners): *Silkwood - Connecting to Country through Totems* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQLzkTewZtg>

Further resources for studies of First Contact and colonisation in upper primary school:

Year 4: 'Contact' can be found on the National Library of Australia Digital Classroom: <https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/year-4/first-contacts>

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

Year 5 'Convicts, Conflict and Confrontation' can be found on the National Library of Australia Digital Classroom: <https://www.nla.gov.au/digital-classroom/digital-classroom-year-5>

National Museum of Australia's 'Defining Moments' online exhibition includes a timeline dating back to 60,000 years through to when Cook claimed Australia in 1770: <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/defining-moments-timeline>

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Yanga Mother is a story that was held in my grandmother's heart, then in mine, for about a hundred years. I remember the first telling over seemingly endless cups of tea and questions answered about life at the girls' dormitory at Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement in Queensland. Of all the many stories my grandmother shared, the story of how her mother made sure she would not feel alone if she was sent away to work at a station was the one that I felt I had an obligation to tell. Her mother would sing 'Mother is cloud' and explained that if Nan ever found herself far from family and home, she could look to the clouds and know her mother was watching and would soon follow.

Yanga Mother is told from the perspective of dhugandu, the grey kangaroo. Dhugandu are exceptional mothers, caring for one of the most vulnerable babies in the animal kingdom. The mother and female joey stay together forever as part of the mob and older siblings protect the younger ones. I hope people reading the story to young children will explain, as my grandmother did, how much of an honour it is to be family and to be part of the mob.

Acknowledging the bond of family and exploring it with each other is a powerful way to practice vulnerability and empathy at any age, and these are the fundamental tools we need for truth-telling and healing.

ILLUSTRATOR MOTIVATION

It has been a joy to have contributed to this important and deeply moving story of immense loss, immense love, and the matrilineal lines that bind us by my friend Cheryl Leavy. I come from a family of strong Torres Strait Islander women, who have held our family together through time and over generations, from my mother to my grandmother and all my ancestors before. I have grown up aware of the strength of their love and live my life gratefully; carrying with me a deep respect for all that they have done to make life happen for me and our family.

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

To speak to the journey that we've shared on the making of this book would be to say that it has been generative in all the most beautiful ways. Made up of hours of studio visits and telephone calls between Cheryl and myself, sharing our own experiences of love and loss, and thinking through the many layers that make up Blak love and Blak life.

From the beginning, the characters of the grey kangaroo were an important way of telling this story. Planning the illustrations for this book was a process of paying close attention to the many ways that we might see ourselves in them. I'm drawn to the opening image where we have standing in the grass a mother with her joey in her pouch. She has just turned her gaze towards the reader as if to say, 'I'm aware of you and I'm ready to take action.' It's in this moment that I see an embodiment of the idea that asks many mothers to be ready to make choices that are often impossible and against all odds to ensure the safety and best life for their families. I'm hoping that throughout the book these moments become more familiar, and dance between the playful; for example, capturing the dynamism and beauty of a bounding mother in full stride with joey in close pursuit, to quiet moments of tenderness between mother and child; where joey seeks refuge in mum's pouch or the two of them lay resting together in the shade out of the hot day's sun.

Using various techniques in drawing and painting, I also gave the book permission to become an artistic exploration of mark-making and colour. Capturing the softness in a kangaroo's fur would be contrasted by the harsh shadows thrown by an intense Western Queensland sun. Colour plays an important role in the book and, by using reference images taken by Cheryl on Country, I was able to capture the light, heat and golden glow of the sun across the land and through the clouds as it sets over Kooma Country. From these images, I was also able to explore and make gestures towards the landscape figuratively as well as metaphorically through the myriads of colours that one will see splashed as painterly washes throughout the book. All images were made from hand sketching, coloured pencils, watercolours, digital collaging ... and of course, love. With that said, I hope that this book becomes an opening for readers young and old to reflect on the importance of sharing stories that celebrate Blak expression and honour the telling of our own stories in our ways. A process I'm happy to share that has always been at the heart of making this special book.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cheryl Leavy is from the Kooma and Nguri Nations in western and central Queensland. She is an award-winning poet and writer who loves to tell stories that celebrate First Nations culture, history and Country. *Yanga Mother* is her

UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND PRESS

first picture book and her second, *For You Country*, is forthcoming with UQP. Cheryl loves her job as a writer because it gives her endless opportunities to work with friends to make beautiful books together.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Christopher Bassi is an artist of Meriam, Yupungathi and British descent. Working with archetypal models of representational painting, his work engages with the medium as sociological and historical text and as a means to address issues surrounding cultural identity, alternative genealogies, and colonial legacies in Australia and the South Pacific. Chris's recent work will be included in the Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition, *Primavera 2023: Young Australian Artists*.