



# WURRTOO

The Wombat Who Fell in Love  
with the Sky

TYLISSA ELISARA  
ILLUSTRATED BY DYLAN FINNEY

TEACHERS RESOURCES



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## Teachers Resources by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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# INTRODUCTION

*It all began in a burrow. The fifty-fifth burrow of Bushland Avenue to be exact. If you were ever lucky enough to find this beautiful clearing on Kangaroo Island where the arching gum trees kiss, you'd know that Wurrtoo's home is the one at the end with the big red trapdoor and large gold doorknob. Can you see it?*

Wurrtoo the wombat lives a quiet and solitary life in his burrow on Kangaroo Island, hoping to one day travel to the mainland and marry the love of his life, the sky. When Wurrtoo inadvertently saves Kuula the koala from a bushfire, he acquires the adventure companion he didn't know he needed.

With Kuula by his side, Wurrtoo leaves the safety of his burrow and sets out on an epic journey or quest to cross the island, reach the mainland and climb to the top of tallest tree in the Forest of Dreaming. But it's fire season, and danger and strange creatures lurk behind every gum tree. To make it, the pair must face their fears together, learn the importance of friendship and discover the power of wombat wishes.

Tylissa Elisara, 2021 black&write! Fellow, draws on classic children's literature in the tradition of *Winnie the Pooh* and *Blinky Bill* as well as stories from her own Narungga, Kurna and Adnyamathanha heritage in this unique middle-grade novel beautifully illustrated by Dylan Finney.

## BEFORE & AFTER READING THE NOVEL

Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel's themes?

After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?

After you have read the novel, read about Tylissa Elisara in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.

## THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Humanities & Social Sciences (HASS), Science, English Language & Literacy, and Visual Literacy) might be identified in this novel:

### HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

<<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/humanities-and-social-sciences/hass/>>

### FIRST NATIONS CULTURE & STORYTELLING

**Key Quote:** “Nothing, Wurrtoo, I love the sky, but I don't believe there's just one single being up there. There's probably hundreds, like you or me. Maybe the sky is just like Country –”

“Like the country?” Wurrtoo interrupted, confused.

“No, like *Country* with a big C. You wouldn't like to be called the *wurrtoo*, would you?”

“No, I guess not. But I still don't understand what you're saying.”

Kuula leaned up on her elbows. “This land is not just your habitat,” she said. “Country is as alive as we are. Maybe the sky is in relationship with the beings up there like Country is with us down here. And not the type of relationship you're talking about – you can't marry Country!”

“Why not?”

“Because Country is for everyone, though it doesn't belong to anyone. It can't be owned or contained. Auntie explained it me like this: Country is like a giant community garden that we all



need to survive. No one owns a community garden – it’s for the community – but if we all look after it then we all get to enjoy it.” (pp 38 and 40)

*Discussion Point:* Wurrtoo’s favourite book ‘held stories of places as old as time’ (p 3) including a map of the ‘Forest of Dreaming’ (p 4). What does ‘Dreaming’ mean to First Nations people?

*Discussion Point:* “That’s not how family works,” said Kuula, seeming a little hurt. “Family isn’t always who you are related to. Auntie Swan came to me when I needed her most. That’s all that matters.” (p 30) Discuss concepts of family in First Nations cultures.

*Discussion Point:* First Nations names for stars (pp 40–41) are discussed. Research this further.

*Discussion Point:* Some places are sacred to First Nations people. “Wurrtoo,” he said, giving the firestick to the wombat and lighting another for himself, “you must be aware that this is sacred land. So we must first ask the old ones for permission to enter.” (p 151) Read more about the concept of places being sacred to First Nations people.

*Discussion Point:* ‘With that, he corked the bottle of lemon myrtle-ade, tucked it safely next to the wattleseed damper and muntre jam he’d packed in a basket that morning, and headed towards the front door with his picnic.’ (p 3) Indigenous foods are described here. Have your students ever tasted these foods or other native ingredients?

*Discussion Point:* ‘He watched as families of birds, from all different species, surfed the strong wind channels together. These creatures had a special relationship with Sky Country, just like the fish had with Sea Country, and he had with his burrow. He was so high up that he could see everything all at once and it finally became clear to him: the land, sea, and sky were all connected. It was all Country! The sky wasn’t something he could possess or contain; it was part of something much larger than himself – and much larger than his burrow could ever be.’ (pp 155–156) Research the concept of ‘Country’ in First Nations culture.

## WOMBATS

*Key Quote:* ‘Now, Wurrtoo wasn’t any old common wombat. No, he was a hairy-nosed wombat, a most beautiful species. It wasn’t just his nose that was hairy – his whole body was covered in silky grey fur!’ (p 2)

*Discussion Point:* The hairy-nosed wombat is a creature with distinct characteristics. Research and write a summary of what you discover about these animals.

*Discussion Point:* Read other books that feature wombats and compare how they are portrayed in them, for example, Jackie French and Bruce Whatley have collaborated on a series of picture books about wombats.

*Activity:* International Wombat Day is celebrated on 22 October each year. Celebrate with students by reading this book and engaging in wombat-related readings and craft activities.

## MAGIC & WISHES

*Key Quote:* “Er . . . Auntie?” Wurrtoo said, holding the hot drink in his paws.

“Yes?” she responded, eyeing him sternly.

“Kuula said you could tell me the difference between wishes and magic. Aren’t they . . . the same thing?”

“I can see your confusion,” the swan tutted. “In some ways, they are similar. Both want for something out of reach. When the brain states the impossible and the heart still hopes anyway, that’s when a wish is born.” (p 90)

*Discussion Point:* Discuss the concept of magic and how it relates to wishes or to the imagination.

## RITE OF PASSAGE

*Key Quote:* ‘Then she called after him, “You can’t keep building that burrow forever, you know – or you will never live!”’ (pp 19–20)

*Discussion Point:* What does Wurrtoo learn about growing up and maturing in this novel?

*Discussion Point:* What attributes does Kuula model for Wurrtoo, in demonstrating a better way of engaging with life?

## BRAVERY & FACING FEARS

*Key Quote:* “He remembered his mother telling him that being brave meant doing things that scared you. He had been avoiding doing just that for so long. But that fire had certainly scared him and yet, he’d managed to put it out. He had saved Kuula. And she’d called him a hero. Perhaps he did have courage somewhere in him after all!” (pp 22–23)

*Discussion Point:* What made Wurrtoo brave enough to rescue Kuula?

*Discussion Point:* What is a ‘hero’?

## DIVERSITY

*Key Quote:* “Yes!” Wurrtoo interrupted, ‘I think the night is so much more beautiful than day!’ “Neither is more or less, both simply are. Though too often the night is feared, forgotten, hidden away while the day is favoured. Have you ever wondered why some creatures who aren’t nocturnal are afraid of the dark? Were they born that way, or were they taught to fear the night rather than embrace it for its equal worth? After all, difference and diversity is everywhere, and is what makes our world all the more beautiful.” (pp 85–86)

*Discussion Point:* Why is it important to acknowledge diverse cultures?

## FRIENDSHIP & LOVE

*Key Quote:* “But I could not have gone on without sharing all these adventures with you, my friend . . . my best friend.” (p 110)

*Discussion Point:* What is the basis for the friendship which develops between Wurrtoo and Kuula?

*Discussion Point:* Both have lost their families. Is their friendship also based on a search for family?

*Discussion Point:* Is it likely that one day, Wurrtoo’s love for Kuula might prove to be romantic as well?



## SCIENCE

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/science/>

### ENVIRONMENT

**Key Quote:** “My lagoon isn’t as grand as it normally is,” he said with a sigh. “We’ve had an incredible drought, as I’m sure you’ve both noticed. No matter how hard I try to care for it, everything is slowly withering away. Unless we get some rain soon, the fire season will be terrible and there will be nothing left.” (p 58)

**Discussion Point:** Discuss the meaning of the words *endangered* and *endemic* (p 112) as they relate to animals.

**Discussion Point:** Bushfires are the manifestation of environmental challenges, climate change and sometimes environmental mismanagement. They occur in this novel a number of times. Research bushfires in Australia and how they are being prevented or responded to by authorities.

**Discussion Point:** Edible Australian plants are mentioned throughout this text. Research and discuss with your students. You may also wish to begin a school garden in which to cultivate such plants.

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>

### NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE & TENSE

**Discussion Point:** The novel is told in third person past tense, but begins and ends in second person. How might it have changed had it been written in first person from Wurrtoo’s perspective?

### GENRE

**Discussion Point:** The story employs the trope of a quest. “Can you believe it? He made it! This once nervous and fearful wombat had crossed both land and sea to reach his goal. Wurrtoo was too tired to realise it, but he had just achieved an extraordinary feat – one which I doubt any animal has achieved since.” (p 140) Discuss the quest as a trope in this novel. What features of a quest did you observe in the plot and characterisation?

**Discussion Point:** This novel has been compared to classic works such as *Blinky Bill* and *Winnie the Pooh*. It might also be compared to Ruth Park’s *The Muddleheaded Wombat* and series. What similarities or differences do you find in these texts?

### LITERARY DEVICES

**Activity:** Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel, using the table below to identify examples.

Simile	‘He was so surprised that his eyes looked like two great big pavlovas on Christmas morning.’ (p 12)
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<b>Metaphors</b>	'His stomach turned into a boggy billabong' (p 10)
<b>Personification</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

## HUMOUR

*Activity:* Identify techniques by which humour is provoked, and add quotes to the following table:

<b>Irony</b>	
<b>Exaggeration</b>	
<b>Other</b>	

## STRUCTURE

The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of key narrative features used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:

a) *Strong beginnings and endings to chapters* are one way of structuring a narrative, for example: Beginning: "Hi!" The snake said with a toothy smile.' (Chapter 5, Snake Lagoon, p 53)

Ending: "Let's go fight some hogs." (Chapter 9, The Yamuti, p 112)

Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

b) *Suspense* is the key to any narrative's structure. What were the suspenseful elements of this novel?

## SETTING

*Discussion Point:* Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices, for example: 'Up close, the Sky River was magic. The water was as flat and clear as glass, and millions of bright white stars flowed beneath its surface, giving it its milky appearance. Wurrtoo was speechless; no words could describe its beauty. He got down on his knees, reached towards the surface, and dipped in a single claw. The stars scattered like fish.' (p 162) What devices are used in this quote?

*Discussion Point:* Read this description of Snake Lagoon: 'The water was shallow and brown, surrounded by craggy rocks and shrivelled shrubs, half of which appeared blackened and burned. As the trio crossed the lagoon over a little wooden footbridge, Kuula looked down at the water. It was littered with withered branches and stinky fish skeletons.' (p 57) What does this description suggest about this place and what senses are appealed to?

*Discussion Point:* Choose any of the places that Wurrtoo travels to and describe it in your own

words based on what you've read in this novel.

## CHARACTERS

**Major Characters:** Wurrtoo, a hairy-nosed wombat; Kuula, a koala.

**Minor Characters:** Auntie Swan, Kuula's auntie; Larrikin of Larrikin Lagoon, a kookaburra; Paitya, a snake; the Admiral, a New Zealand fur seal; Fluffy and Homer the seals that accompany Wurrtoo and Kuula from the Admirals Arch to the Remarkable Rocks; a Yamuti; Eddie, a short-beaked Kangaroo Island echidna; Eddie's friend Artie, a Kangaroo Island dunnart; Mr and Mrs Woylie, woylies on the mainland.

*Activity:* Write a character study on one of these characters using key quotes and events which give a clear picture of them and demonstrate their nature.

*Question:* Which character was most intriguing and why? Which minor character would you like to have heard more about?

## WRITING TASKS

*Activity:* Write a diary entry by Kuula about her first encounter with Wurrtoo.

*Activity:* Write a poem in ballad form describing Wurrtoo's epic adventure.

*Activity:* Several of the places Wurrtoo and Kuula travel to are examples of alliteration: Remarkable Rocks, Admirals Arch, Platypus Portal. Create an alphabet of possible imagined places named like this, for example, Gruesome Gully.

*Activity:* Test your students' comprehension by asking them to make a list of all the animals Wurrtoo encounters on this journey.

## VISUAL LITERACY

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/the-arts/visual-arts/>

*Activity:* Dylan Finney's illustrations in this novel are lively and humorous. Invite students to create a drawing of the two friends in a similar style of illustration.

*Activity:* Create a graphic novel interpretation of an incident in the novel. [See **Bibliography.**]

*Activity:* Design a new cover for this book.

*Activity:* Draw a map marking all the places the two friends travel through on their adventure.

*Activity:* Wurrtoo refers to his plant encyclopedia and the plants they encounter on their journey such as the kurti tree, or wild peach or quandong (pp 90–91). Research native Australian plants and invite each student to contribute to an illustrated plant encyclopedia.

*Activity:* Create a book trailer for this novel. [See **Bibliography.**]



## FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Kuula looked at him blankly. "Okay, firstly, my auntie is the only animal I know who has seen the mainland. If such a forest existed, she would have mentioned it. Secondly, Auntie says that magic is no good. She says there's always a downside."  
'I meant to say real-life *miracles*.'" Wurrtoo replied.' (p 16)
2. 'He had never considered what he would actually do once his work on the burrow was finished. Although he longed to marry the Sky, he knew the island was a treacherous place, a vast landscape of rugged terrain that crawled with monstrous beings.' (p 20)
3. 'He felt the happiest he'd ever been, but at the same time he was the most worried he'd ever been. It was a strange combination, both these emotions at once.' (p 35)
4. 'He imagined himself and Kuula sitting around his grand old table, sharing their lunch. This last thought gave Wurrtoo the strength he needed to go on.' (pp 136–137)
5. 'The emotions kept coming. First disappointment, then anger, then sadness. Then came grief, loss and lastly humiliation. Poisonous humiliation, spitting its venom and turning his warm blood to stone.' (p 156)
6. 'Why did he leave her behind? Why had he not followed her to the ends of the earth? Now look what had happened – she was gone, and it was all his fault.' (p 169)

## FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. **Compare this novel to other junior novels and picture books** which feature wombats. [See **Bibliography**.]
2. **Design a poster to advertise this book.**
3. The **title of this book is a Narungga/Nharangga word for wombat**. What other title might the book have had?
4. **Debate any of the topics** covered in these notes, or suggested by the novel.
5. Locate and study any **poetry** which features wombats. [See **Bibliography**.]

## CONCLUSION

*Wurrtoo* is an adventure story which draws on First Nations storytelling and culture to create a new and exciting narrative of a wombat on an impossible quest who nevertheless finds exactly what he is searching for.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Tylissa Elisara** is a children's social worker who lives and works in Meanjin (Brisbane) with her husband and children. She descends from the Narungga, Kurna and Adnyamathanha people of South Australia and was born and raised on Mamu Country in Innisfail, Queensland – a heritage, alongside her Irish ancestry, that she proudly regards as a long legacy of storytelling. Tylissa is studying a Master of Writing, Editing and Publishing at the University of Queensland. *Wurrtoo* is her first novel.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Dylan Finney** is an Australian-born graphic designer and artist. He is a proud descendant of the Yanula and Mara clans, and also has English and Irish heritage. He lives on Darkinjung land. His work explores identity and culture – inspired by people, places, animals, light and colour. Dylan lives on the NSW Central Coast.

See: <https://dylanfinneyart.com/about>



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM** operates *justified text* writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2005* (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature, in 2014, the QWC's Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia.