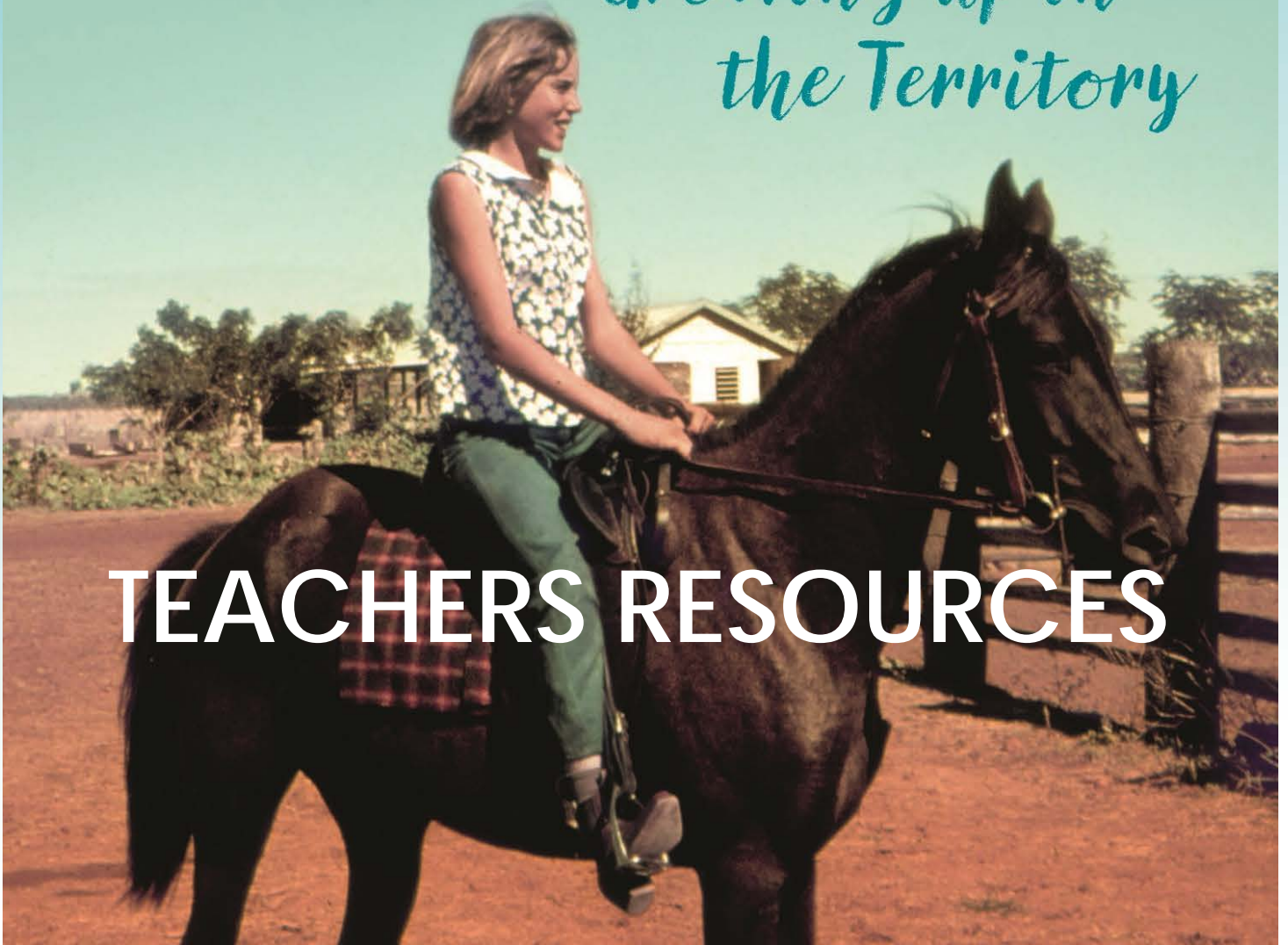


TONI TAPP COUTTS

MY  
**Outback**  
CHILDHOOD

*Growing up in  
the Territory*

TEACHERS RESOURCES



# MY OUTBACK CHILDHOOD GROWING UP IN THE TERRITORY

BY TONI TAPP COUTTS

## TEACHERS RESOURCES BY ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT

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# INTRODUCTION

'The 2819 square kilometres of bush that was Killarney Station was my playground and I loved every inch of it. There was always something interesting around every corner, be it a fat, juicy bush turkey that ended up on the camp fire for dinner, brumbies and wild donkeys disappearing through the bush, or a little waterhole where the snakes, goannas and kangaroos came to drink.'  
(p 34)

Toni was five years old when her mother June Clements left an unhappy marriage in Alice Springs with her three children – Toni (born 1955), Billy (born 1957) and Shing (born 1960) – to stay with her mother Gladys Forscutt in Katherine. There she met Bill Tapp, a visiting grazier, and decided to join him on his pioneering adventure to develop the remote Killarney Station, which was over 300 kilometres out of Katherine. She had a further seven children with Bill – Sam (born 1962), Joe (born 1963), Ben (born 1965), William (born 1966), Caroline (born 1968), Daniel (born 1971), Kate (born 1973) – and they all became part of this incredible story.

Toni had an adventurous childhood growing up in the Northern Territory. She learned to help in the cattle yards, ride horses, stalk goannas, negotiate the climate and wildlife, and often slept under the stars. But she also learned from Old Dora and Daisy, the Aboriginal women who helped raise her and her brothers and sisters, and from the many Aboriginal men who managed the station. They taught her about bush tucker. They told her stories of 'devil devils' and the 'kadaitcha man'. And she learned to appreciate their deep connection to and respect for the land.

This is also a tribute to her mother and stepfather and to the pioneering spirit which helped them make so very much from so little. They went from living in a bough shed with a handful of workers in 1962, to employing forty people by the 1970s, and living in a brick home amidst a number of other dwellings connected by a beautiful garden. June also managed a shop on the station selling supplies. Their ability to 'make do' with what they had as they were building this 'empire' was one of the strongest impressions one gleans from reading this memoir. It is also a story which is peppered with tragedies and losses and therefore a testimony to the strength it takes to go on with life with fortitude.

Toni Tapp Coutts's memoir of her childhood in the Northern Territory has previously been published in a longer version for adults. This version introduces young readers to the aspects of her life which would engage their interest. Young readers are bound to be captivated by this true story of an extraordinary childhood.

## BEFORE AND AFTER READING THE MEMOIR

- Examine the cover of the memoir. What does it suggest about the themes?
- After you have read the memoir, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?
- After you have read the memoir, read about Toni Tapp Coutts in reviews and articles and use the notes below to examine the text more closely.
- Read further about any person who appears in this narrative.

## THEMES & CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes relevant to curriculum topics (Studies of Society & Environment, English Language and Literacy, and Visual Literacy) might be identified in this picture book:

## STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT (SOSE)

- **FORTITUDE AND RESILIENCE**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Toni's life both in Katherine and on Killarney Station was very rudimentary and often primitive. The family slept under a lean-to shed, which was open to the elements so that they literally slept beneath the stars; there was limited access to water, food supplies were infrequently delivered and monotonous, supplemented by bush tucker (see Ch 9), the heat was intense (and there was certainly no air-conditioning!), their toilet

was a hole in the ground, they were expected to help the men with tasks and there were many dangers. How would your students have coped in these circumstances?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'All the roads in the bush were bad and caused much damage to vehicles, so that walking – or 'foot falcon', as we called it – was a common form of transport, as was getting about on horseback.' (p 43) There are also several stories of being stranded when vehicles broke down, or rivers flooded, in this book. Such incidents demonstrate the resilience of these people, who simply accepted what happened rather than expecting someone else to solve their problems for them.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** There were many dangers on the station and healthcare was precarious. In Chapter 21 alone we are told of Toni's brother Joe's accident in a ute, Billy being electrocuted, deadly snakes, Caroline being bitten by a redback at age 3, and of their mother being bitten by a scorpion. June's brother Boko drowned in the Katherine River during the wet season of March 1963, when he was seventeen years old; Shing was burned by a camp fire (p 127); the rat plague occurred (p 144). Which incident did your students find the most confronting? Toni pays tribute to the intrepid Outback nurses, in particular Sister Eileen Jones, and the Flying Doctor Service is a lifeline. Research health services in the outback.

- **SELF-SUFFICIENCY OR 'MAKING-DO'**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The Tapp family learned to make the best of whatever they had to hand – from what they ate to how they managed their living arrangements. Some of their skills were learned from the Aboriginal people. They also knew the usual bush 'tricks' such as using curry powder to mask the smell and taste of rotting meat when food supplies were running low. Micko their (ex-army) cook established a vegetable and fruit garden, managed to feed all the workers, and was a master of making delicious meals out of nothing. What aspects of their life interested your students most?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The only entertainment was what they made themselves – riding horses, playing, singing country and western songs, dancing, and sometimes watching the films brought to them by the visiting Salvation Army minister, under the stars (p 77). Discuss with students the entertainment options available to people in remote communities.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Some of the characters in this narrative had very unusual ways of treating illness or keeping well. Old Bill Ardill, a resident at Gallagher's Bore, for instance:

'Every morning Old Bill ingested half a grain of strychnine – granules of dingo poison, similar to rat poison – as an all-round medicine and vitamin pill. This was called a 'heart starter' and it was common practice among the old drovers and bushmen to self-medicate with this poison. Old Bill swore by the remedy. It must have worked for him, because he was incredibly healthy and strong. Other common bush remedies included oil of cloves for toothache – this was a prized medicine – Bex powders, and rum, which was thought to remedy pretty much everything else. Old Bill also liked to boil up pots of green pig weed, which was apparently some sort of wild vegetable containing essential vitamins.' (p 71) What other remedies did your students find particularly interesting?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** When Toni is sent to boarding school in Warwick she flies for the first time and travels via her grandmother's home at the Gold Coast (p 150); she is shocked both by the luxury of the plane flight and that of her grandmother's residence. Both seem excessive to someone who has 'made do' with so very little for her entire young life.

- **CATTLE KINGS**

**ACTIVITY:** Bill Tapp got the idea of working a station from reading *The Cattle King* by Ion L. Idriess, the story of Sir Sidney Kidman. Research the lives of Bill Tapp and other cattle kings such as Kidman or Patrick Durack and his son Michael Durack.

**ACTIVITY:** Bill's mother arranged his first job for him on Elsey Station owned by Mr Thonemann in 1947. Research the history of that station and read Mrs Aeneas (Jeannie) Gunn's *We of the Never Never* (1908) about living on Elsey.

**ACTIVITY:** Killarney Station was established as a pastoral lease in 1953 by Eric Izon and Ivor Hall. Bill Tapp bought it in 1962 for £90,000 which was a record at the time. The Tapps went into receivership in 1991 and the latest sale in 2014 to the Jumbuck pastoral Company was for \$35 million. Research the history of this property and the issues involved in managing and financing such a huge enterprise.

**ACTIVITY:** Bill went droving on the treacherous Murrarji Track (p 14) in the early 1950s. Research this and other Travelling Stock Routes (TSR) in Australia.

- **LAND OWNERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Toni recalls Bill Tapp's obsessive kindness (p 78) and compassion (p 82) for animals and people. She records (in Ch 16) his careful breeding of horses and cows, and points out (p 103) that Elders GM opened in Katherine in 1968 because of the extent of Tapp's business. In 1969, Bill bought an 18-month-old Santa Gertrudis Bull: King Ranch Oregon for \$20,000 and a Quarter Horse stallion, Quarter Commando for \$12,000 (p 104) both record prices. These were to be the foundations of Killarney's excellent herds. What key aspects of Bill Tapp's management style did you ascertain from reading this book? Compare the points made by each student and discuss.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Read this passage:

'Bill Tapp was a workaholic and perfectionist, and he expected everyone around him to be the same. The men who worked for him were given a Sunday morning off to do their washing and the only other breaks taken were to

attend the Katherine Show or the Victoria River Downs Races. In return they were given an annual pay cheque and everything they needed to live while they were on Killarney.

The conditions might sound harsh, but when you don't have to worry about where you're going to sleep or how you're going to eat, life is a lot less stressful. These men worked hard, for sure, but Bill Tapp also took his responsibilities towards them – towards all of us – seriously.' (p 32) What opinion did you form of Bill Tapp's treatment of his workers?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** What techniques or beliefs did Bill Tapp derive from listening to the local Aboriginal people who worked for him?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Eusey Station, Bill's first place of work, is a pastoral lease once operated as a cattle station but is now owned by the *Mangarrayi* Aboriginal Land Trust and managed by Max Gorringer and his family. The Mabo legislation has seen many outback land holdings returned to traditional owners. Research this topic more fully.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Wave Hill Station (also mentioned in this book) is where the Wave Hill Walk-Off or Gurindji Strike of 1966 by Aboriginal workers for better pay and conditions, led by stockman Vincent Lingiari, took place. It resulted in the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*. The moment was famously symbolised when PM Gough Whitlam poured a handful of sand into Vincent Lingiari's hand in 1975 when the Gurindji



people were given back a portion of their land by the Vestey's, owners of the station. This story is also told in the iconic song: 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody. Research this strike and its outcomes further.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Fire management techniques are discussed (pp 43–5). Coutts says that these days controlled burning is practised. Research this topic further.

- **INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND RIGHTS**

**ACTIVITY:** The Arrernte people of this region had, as Coutts points out, lived in the Alice Springs area for 40,000 years. Research their history and culture.

**ACTIVITY:** The Gurindji people had lived 60,000 years in the area near Killarney. Research their history and culture.

**ACTIVITY:** Research the European history of the area (see pp 4–5) and how that changed the lives of Aboriginal people in the region.

**ACTIVITY:** 'Bill Tapp said to me much later that when he arrived at Elsey Station he was upset to discover the difference in conditions between the white workers and the Aboriginals. The Aboriginal people lived in humpies and were dished out limited food and tobacco for smoking, with no access to toilets, showers or a laundry to wash their clothes, and they were not invited to eat anywhere near the white people. He'd never experienced anything like it and he didn't like the injustice of it. He felt it wasn't fair, even though he lived in only slightly better conditions, a shed when he was at the station and swags most of the time. He thought the Aboriginal people should be treated the same as him.' (p 14) Research this topic further.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** What does the following passage tell you about the relationship between white and Indigenous people? Were they equal? What sort of power balance existed? What difference was there between whites' and Aboriginals' abilities to advance?

'During the first years at Killarney, the Aboriginal Affairs Department paid the cattle station owners forty cents a week welfare payment as compensation to the pastoralist to support an adult Aboriginal woman and her child. It was the expectation that the station provided everything to the large extended family of the Aboriginal stockmen. This included all food, clothing and housing. We were all living in third-world conditions and with little income that came in sporadically on the delivery of a truckload of bulls to the meatworks. My mother told the department: "We are all living on the

smell of an oily rag – how are we expected to maintain an adult person on forty cents a week? It costs forty cents for a cup of coffee in town.”

Mum was a great mentor to the Aboriginal women, trying to lift their health standards and get the kids to school. She wanted everyone to achieve in life and never held anyone back, whether they were her own kids or other people in the camp. We were all in it together.

We all, black and white, lived in the same harsh conditions with poor housing and sanitation, water shortages, and lack of decent food, while working long hours in extreme weather conditions. We were also working towards a common goal: making life easier for everyone who lived at Killarney.’ (p 31)

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Because so many of the workers were Aboriginal people like old Dora and her son Banjo Long, his wife Daisy, Dora’s son Georgie, and Dora’s daughter Nita, the Tapp children were taught traditional skills and given ‘skin names’. They were told stories about the ‘kadaitcha man’ (p 50), ‘debil-debils’ and ‘boogie men’. This sharing of Indigenous culture was quite an honour, and one which Toni valued highly. There are many examples of Aboriginal beliefs in this work. For example, Banjo is known as a ‘rain man’ (p 117). Aboriginal death ceremonies were also respected on the station (p 75). Bill Tapp took his Aboriginal workers for an annual trip to Wave Hill to visit Aboriginal relatives and conduct initiations and marriages (p 120). Toni also recalls that on Gallery Hill there were caves in which paintings and bones resided (p 130). She says that they never touched the paintings or the bones out of respect. Discuss some of the cultural rituals revealed in this memoir.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Toni and her family were also introduced to ‘bush tucker’ by old Dora and Daisy and other Aboriginal people, and found most of it satisfying, e.g. ‘Though I have had the pleasure of eating goanna, wild turkey, buffalo, wild bulls, lizards and a variety of birds, I have been grateful that grasshoppers are not a culinary delight I have had to eat again.’ (p 42) or ‘Racing madly to the conkerberry tree, we’d eat the juicy red berries that turned our tongues purple. Then we’d skip over to the wild orange, which we called “coolinyukka”, its fruit the size of a golf ball with a soft red-orange centre, and bush bananas hanging from a vine. There was always a good supply of little dry berries called “dog’s balls” and the small wild onion known as “brolga tucker”. We would dig around the edge of billabongs for white ochre because the women needed it to paint themselves for their ceremonies.’ (p 47) They participated in goanna kills and feasts (p 51). They also learned bush remedies such as: ‘The bloodwood tree’s crystallised red sap was kept in an old tobacco tin and mixed with hot water to use as dysentery medicine.’ (p 56) Research bush tucker and bush remedies and how they are being used today.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'These were the times before Aboriginal people were able to legally drink or buy alcohol, when clap sticks and didgeridoos played through the night at the camp. This was also the time of segregation, pre-1967 when Aboriginal people were given the vote. It was against the law for a white person to cohabit with or marry an Aboriginal person. The result was the Stolen Generation, a law that forcibly removed children of mixed blood from their predominantly Aboriginal mothers and placed them into orphanages and church-run institutions.' (p 29) Research these topics further.

- **WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** When June left her husband and marriage in 1960 she had virtually nothing. In those days, 'The men controlled all the finances and did not have to support the family.' (p 4) How have things improved for single parents?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Nana Gladys Forscutt's work was in a soft drink factory (pp 6-7) and her house was always full of relatives needing a bed and food. Her ability to do such physically taxing work and to fulfil so many domestic tasks as well gives some idea of the extra demands made of women.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'And while I wasn't brought up to believe that I was of lower status than my brothers – certainly not by my mother – I did feel quite competitive about wanting to be as good as the boys. And the expectations on me were that I should be good at everything, even though I was a girl and I was meant to be staying home and helping Mum. I wanted to do the same things that the blokes were doing, which was mustering and galloping around and learning to drive. But I didn't like changing tyres or killing snakes – I was happy to let the men do that! ... Mum wanted her girls to be treated the same way as her boys.' (p 37) Toni is one of the 'baby boomer' children who were taught to value their independence and to seek educational and work equality.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Nita was bound by her people's marriage laws and was married to Bill King Langandi at Montejinni Station, an older man, when she was just a teenager; he already had two wives, Mabel and Eileen, who were Nita's elder sister.

- **TREATMENT OF AND REARING OF CHILDREN**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'Some of the things Billy and I got up to were outrageous. In retrospect, they were probably quite dangerous. No one would let their kids do those things now. But we learnt survival skills and hand-eye coordination, as well as an ability to move quickly, which stood us in good stead for sporting activities. These were life skills that would prove to be very useful for all of us. And we all survived our childhoods, so we must have been doing something right.' (p 38) Later in the book Nita is injured and so are other children. Discuss how children's lives have changed in the last 60 years since Toni was a child.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Education in remote stations was delivered by governesses, via Correspondence School, by establishing one-teacher-schools, and by sending older students to boarding schools. Toni received a bush education before being sent to Darwin to school at age nine with Billy to stay with Aunt Pat and Uncle Rex for a year. She was later sent to Aunt Sue and Uncle Barry in Katherine for half a year and was dux grade 6. She came home again to a governess and schoolhouse before being sent to Scots College Warwick where she stayed for four years and grew to enjoy some things about boarding school life. Returning to Killarney Station always felt like heaven to her, though (p 153), and so she came home without completing grade 12. Have things changed for people in remote areas today?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** 'There was no special cooking for kids – or anyone. We all ate the same thing, which was beef, and there were always lots of big stews, so I guess that was the soft food for the kids. All the little kids chewed on rib bones for their teething rings.' (p 54) Compare this to how we make special organic baby food, order from 'kids menus' at restaurants and often cater to any whim which kids might have with regards to their eating habits.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** These kids made use of their imaginations in play; they didn't need skateboards or iPads to occupy their time:

'We had very busy lives entertaining ourselves. We would spend days playing make-believe in the old cars at the dump, making car noises, crunching gears and doing skids around imaginary corners. We dressed imaginary wounds and broken legs and drove furiously to town to save someone's life. We would muster cattle into the yards, brand them and load them onto the trucks to take them to town to the meatworks, and go shopping to pick up the stores. We made old milk tins into stilts by piercing a hole in each side and attaching a long wire handle to lift the tins in unison with our

feet. We made up songs and chattered constantly in Pidgin English. We made a whole village out of old bits of tin and fencing wire tied to the side of a car or a tree and little paths and tracks between the houses. We found old wooden boxes and lined them with empty food packets and tins in the kitchen. We used hubcaps for a washing-up dish and jam tins for cups.' (p 65) Discuss this topic further.

- **NORTHERN TERRITORY ENVIRONMENT**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The climate and weather of the Northern Territory is unforgiving. White people know two seasons – 'the Wet' and 'the Dry' but Aboriginal people observe six seasons. (In one memorable scene (p 119) it rains fish!) Research the Northern Territory climate further.

**ACTIVITY:** Research the various forms of flora and fauna of the Northern Territory, particularly those mentioned in this memoir. (Make a list of those you notice in the text.)

- **FAMILY, FRIENDSHIPS AND LOVE**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The bonds between Bill Tapp and his adopted and birth children were strong, as was their commitment to their mother, June. What forged such strong bonds between them?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Toni details the friendships she made with Aboriginal people on the property. Toni's best friend was Nita who was lost to her when she was forced to enter an arranged marriage. Discuss the various friendships which are presented in this memoir.

- **COMING OF AGE AND RITES OF PASSAGE**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** This is the story of Toni's childhood and adolescence. What aspects of this rite of passage to adulthood are universal? What aspects are different?

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Study the writing style employed in this narrative, and examine the following sub-topics:

- **NARRATIVE PERSON, NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND TENSE**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** This is a first person account of Toni Tapp Coutts' experiences. How might it have differed had it been written as a third person account or by one of her siblings such as Billy?

- **LITERARY DEVICES AND WORD PLAY**

**ACTIVITY:** This memoir includes many examples of evocative language describing the conditions, e.g. 'The spider webs rustled around your ears and the toilet creaked in the wind and sighed with the heat.' (p 9) Find other examples of the use of literary devices in this memoir, using the table below to identify examples.

SIMILE	
METAPHORS	
PERSONIFICATION	
WORD PLAY	
OTHER	

- **HUMOUR**

**ACTIVITY:** Humour in this novel consists of Outback bush humour and also Aboriginal humour. Bush 'tall tales' include that of the goanna which got away (see pp 66–7) and the story of Shing who was given a school exercise by her mum in which she was to mark right and wrong answers with ticks or crosses and then drew tiny little cattle ticks in the relevant boxes! (p 142). Identify techniques by which humour is provoked. Add quotes to the following table:

SARCASM	
IRONY	
EXAGGERATION	
BLACK HUMOUR	
OTHER	

- **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: 'Things that wouldn't have made sense to people who lived in

houses and towns made perfect sense to us.' (Ch 9, p 53)

Ending: 'And I wasn't really looking forward to leaving that life behind to move down south for school.' (Ch 23, p 147)

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

b) *Suspense* is the key to any narrative's structure. This memoir asks questions at key points in the narrative: How will June support her children? Will Bill Tapp succeed in establishing his station? How will the family endure these hardships?

- **SETTING**

**ACTIVITY:** Choose a passage that describes the locale vividly for you. Discuss the passage with the class.

- **CHARACTERS**

**Major characters:** Bill Tapp is a 'larger-than-life' hero in this memoir:

'The first time I saw Bill Tapp I was five years old and he was standing in the doorway of my nana's house. He was hard to miss: he stood six feet and two inches, sported a big black moustache and a ten-gallon hat, dark moleskin trousers, a blue long-sleeved shirt and riding boots. Around his hips he had two leather belts – one a bull strap for catching wild bulls and the other a bandolier with a row of silver bullets – and a black Luger pistol jutting out of a holster, just like in the cowboy movies. No wonder my mother fell for him straightaway.' (p11)

Other major characters include Toni's mother June Clements (nee Forscutt) Tapp; Toni's siblings, Billy and Shing; Aboriginal worker Banjo Long; his mother Dora; wife Daisy; brother Georgie; and Nita, Dora's youngest daughter;

**Minor Characters:** The other Tapp children: Sam, Joe, Ben, William, Caroline, Daniel, and Kate; Gladys Forscutt, Aunty Sue and Uncle Barry, Aunty Pat and Uncle Rex, Micko, Bill Ardill, Beth Marsh (the governess) who marries a stockman named Dave Mills; Captain Victor Pedersen, Salvation Army Minister; Cloud, an Aboriginal worker; Freddy Holtze, a brother-in-law to Nancy Holtze, who came to Killarney as a housekeeper; Boko, a brother of June's; Jim Forscutt, another brother; Sandy Shaw a part-Aboriginal head stockman.



**ACTIVITY:** Draw up a character chart and find key quotes which give a clear picture of any of these characters, and isolate events that demonstrate their natures. Then write a brief character study of the person using the quotes and events to illustrate the points made in your summary.

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

- **GENRE**

**ACTIVITY:** Memoir is a genre which is a collection of memories of moments or events that took place in a subject's life. Discuss this work in terms of the conventions of memoir-writing.

- **WRITING TASKS**

**ACTIVITY:** Write an acrostic poem using the letters in OUTBACK.

**ACTIVITY:** Write a short memoir of your own life beginning with your birth (as Toni Tapp Coutts does) choosing incidents which might interest readers.

**ACTIVITY:** Write a diary entry as if written by June Clements Tapp about her move to Killarney Station.

**ACTIVITY:** Write a letter as if it was written by Toni Tapp Coutts to her mother while away at boarding school.

- **VISUAL LITERACY**

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

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

**ACTIVITY:** Create a book trailer for this memoir. [See **Bibliography.**]

# FURTHER QUOTES FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'It was a very free way of living – if we didn't wear clothes there weren't clothes to get dirty, so Mum didn't have to wash as much, which was fine by us.' (p 23)
2. 'They kept their strict family protocols in rapidly changing times.' (p 29)
3. 'In the meantime, we could run wild and have fun; we could learn about the land and what it could provide us with; we'd live through the seasons and learn how they affected everyone. Basically, for me I just lived each day as it came.' (p 73)
4. 'More fences were built to contain the cattle and more houses built to accommodate the people.' (p 92)
5. 'The cattle yards were central to our existence on the station. They were our school and our playground, where we learnt not only about cattle and horses but also about people, respect and hard work.' (p 105)
6. 'We kids learnt about the cycles of life on Killarney.' (p 112)
7. 'Nita's fate had been set by ancient traditions before she was even born.' (p 129)
8. 'Life certainly could be precarious for the kids of Killarney.' (p 132)
9. 'I loved being busy, loved helping the adults with the many tasks that had to be done. I wanted to be like the adults – they were our role models.' (p 146)
10. 'The only thing I knew was that I wanted to be home where I truly belonged, with my family on Killarney cattle station.' (p 155)

# FURTHER ACTIVITIES

1. Compare this novel to other outback memoirs [See **Bibliography**].
2. Design a poster to advertise this book.
3. The **title of this book** is self-explanatory. What other title might the book have had?
4. Debate any of the topics covered in these notes, or suggested by the memoir.
5. Read picture book memoirs and compare them to this text. [See **Bibliography**.] Then choose some incident or section in this novel and create your own picture book version of it.

# CONCLUSION

This Outback memoir is a stirring account of a life lived in extraordinary circumstances. The postscript revealing that the Killarney Station is no longer owned by the family made the contents all the more poignant. Toni Tapp Coutts has written a lyrical evocation of a time and a place, and of the people who were so precious to her whilst growing up. This is a story of an Australian girlhood to join other classic rites of passage experienced in remote parts of our vast country.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in the Northern Territory, **Toni Tapp Coutts** has had a varied career, from living on cattle stations, riding in campdrafts and barrel racing, to owning a variety store in outback Borroloola and a dress boutique in Katherine. Her first memoir, *A Sunburnt Childhood*, was published in 2016 and quickly became an Australian bestseller. Toni is a leader in her community of Katherine. A board member of the Northern Territory Writers Centre and coordinator of the Katherine Region of Writers group, she has been an elected member of the Katherine Town Council for more than ten years. Toni recently co-published with Simone Croft *What a Woman!*, a collection of 56 stories from women in the Katherine region. A mother of three and grandmother of three, she lives in Katherine with her husband, Shaun. Visit her website for further information:  
<<http://tonitappcouths.com.au/about/>>

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