



### **WHEN THE WORLD WAS SOFT**

Written by JULUWARLU GROUP ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

Illustrated by ALEX MANKIEWICZ

**RECOMMENDED FOR: Ages 10–14 YEARS OLD (YEARS 5 & 6, YEARS 7 & 8 SECONDARY)**

**GENRE:** Graphic Novel

**THEMES:** First Nations culture and history and laws for living, creation, relationships, family

#### **CURRICULUM LEARNING AREAS:**

- Australian Curriculum Priority, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Histories and Culture
- Ethical Understanding
- English
- Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)
- Visual Arts

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## PLOT SUMMARY

Yindjibarndi believe all creation is written in our landscape and was sung long ago, filling our Ngurra (Country) with sacred meanings and deep religious significance. At the dawn of time, Ngurra Nyujunggamu, the world was soft as clay and the sky was very low. Our Creator, Minkala, sang the songs from which all life and Ngurra evolved. These are some of our stories.

*Our grandmothers and grandfathers sing our songs and tell our stories every day, just like our old people long ago sang songs and told stories to their children.  
And now we are sharing them with you.*

Dynamically illustrated by Alex Mankiewicz with striking artwork by members of the Juluwarlu Art Group, *When the World Was Soft* is a powerful gift of culture for young and old.

## ABOUT JULUWARLU GROUP ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

The following information is taken from Juluwarlu Group Aboriginal Corporation's website at [juluwarlu.com.au](http://juluwarlu.com.au).

'Juluwarlu's cultural recording and archiving project was started by Lorraine Coppin in the Ngurrawaana Community on the Yindjibarndi tablelands in 1998 with Elder Woodley King and his grandson, Michael Woodley, and was incorporated in 2000.

'Juluwarlu took its first steps in 1999. Until then, there had been no enduring agency in Roebourne that had taken up the work of recording local culture. That the work of cultural recording was being taken up by a new generation of Indigenous activists, and that they had successfully established a local archive and recording centre, was enormously significant.

'Juluwarlu's purpose is to collect, sustain and promote knowledge of Yindjibarndi culture – our Ngurra, wanda, and animals, our language, genealogy, mythology, social history, and biography to sustain our Yindjibarndi identity, self esteem, respect and other values we consider vital to our lives, our well-being and our culture future. We do this for our children and our future generations so that they too, are inspired to contribute to our Australian national community.

**'Juluwarlu's aim is to provide a sustainable, professional, institutional structure, which reinforces, engages and allows access to Ngaarda heritage, history and language, effectively empowering Aboriginal people in our cultural, artistic, social, economic, political and environmental pursuits.'**

## **LORRAINE COPPIN ON WHEN THE WORLD WAS SOFT**

‘Our stories are an oral history passed down from our Elders from generation to generation for over 40,000 years since creation time. Now Yindjibarndi people live on Country but also all over Australia and the world. This book provides a new form for us to continue to pass on these important stories as teachings. By sharing our stories in this book, we hope that people gain an understanding of First Nations people of Australia and recognise our identity as Yindjibarndi people.’

## **ALEX MANKIEWICZ ON WHEN THE WORLD WAS SOFT**

‘In 2021 – mid-pandemic border closures – I was asked to join a small film crew to shoot cultural sensitivity videos with seven Pilbara mobs. We spent three days on Country with the Yindjibarndi and around the fire one night, I was speaking to Elder Michael Woodley about depicting Yindjibarndi history (post-1788) in a graphic narrative format. He was intrigued, and after returning to NSW, I followed up and received a few accounts from the “settler” period with which to tinker. Then, Lorraine Coppin, founder of Juluwarlu Group Aboriginal Corporation, asked if I might depict their creation stories. It was a great, if daunting, honour to be asked. However, I wasn’t keen to render them in the usual picture book format, feeling it might overly simplify what are complex tales. An initial reading of the core material confirmed the stories’ depth so I asked if they’d be open to a graphic narrative/manga approach. The enthusiastic answer was yes. Not least because among other reasons, that would appeal to the Yindjibarndi youth who are familiar with manga/comics and so add a level of contemporary relatability to age-old stories. Sequential narrative is now a global visual language, not exclusively a Western one.’

‘Juluwarlu Group Aboriginal Corporation is a cultural and arts organisation so from the start the idea of introducing each of the tales with one of its artist’s views of Country was a way to emphasise the different ways to show Country and story.’

‘As each tale was drawn in the sequential format, it felt essential to not only keep it true to the language rhythm and core lesson, but to depict Yindjibarndi Country in an evocative yet thoroughly identifiable, specific way. While being mindful of those parts which are spiritually private, internet photos helped here and there with detail. But the time spent on Country with Elders and other custodians ultimately made the renderings of the images and stories possible – both visually and in connection to spirit, to the immanent feel of place.’

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION AND ACTIVITIES

It is strongly recommended that before work on *When the World was Soft* begins teachers and librarians read **ACARA'S Guiding principles for promoting and implementing the Australian Curriculum cross-curriculum priority**.

## ENGLISH

- Before reading, discuss the title, cover, and blurb of the book. Ask questions, such as:
  - What do you think a creation story is?
  - Are you familiar with any creation stories?
  - The blurb mentions '*Our grandmothers and grandfathers sing our songs..., just like our old people long ago sang songs and told stories to their children.*'. Why do you think it is important for older people to pass on information to younger generations?
  - Why are songs a good way to pass on information?
  - Why are rules important for a society?
- Comprehension Questions for Ngurra Nyujunggamu: Creation
  - What is the name of the creator in the Yindjibarndi story?
  - What was the first thing the creator did?
  - What did the Marrga create?
  - Who did Minkala and the Marrga first choose to manage the land and creatures on it?
  - Who was next chosen as custodians of the land and creatures?
  - What happened at the first Birdarra Law Ceremony?
  - Why were the Yindjibarndi chosen to carry the law and the Burndud Song cycle?
  - Minkala and Marrga retreated from the world and their presence has disappeared. True or False?
  - Look at the images on page 20 and describe how Minkala and Marrga's presence is felt in the Ngurra (Country)?
  - What is the name of the site of the first Burndud ceremony?
- In a whole class discussion talk about other creation stories and the similarities that exist between them. For instance, in Christian, Jewish and Muslim creation stories:

- There is one super powerful being who creates everything. Christians call this being "God," Jews use the terms "Hashem" or "Adonai," and Muslims "Allah."
- Earth, the sky and oceans are created by the super powerful being.
- Humans are created and given a 'paradise' to live in.
- They will live a good life if they follow the super powerful being's rules.

Compare and contrast these stories with the creation story told in *When the World Was Soft*.

- Visual Literacy: In graphic novels, the combination of text and image forms a powerful storytelling duo, where words and pictures work together to convey a richer and more immersive narrative than either could achieve on its own. Look at the image on page 19 and discuss how the images here work with the text and enhance it. What are the images telling us that the words do not?
- Look at the photo of the rock engraving of Marrga on Hooley Station on page 84. Does the existence of this rock engraving make the story of *Ngurra Nyujunggamu: Creation* feel more real?

### **Jarburrungu Wangangga Garranyga: Wedgetailed Eagle, Crow and Black Kite**

- Comprehension Questions:
  - Why was Wangangga (Crow) considered the most perfect creature?
  - Who was Wangangga's uncle?
  - Who was Wangangga's aunt?
  - What did the three birds do together?
  - What did Jarburrungu and Wangangga always bring back from hunting?
  - What did the law of the land forbid Wangangga and his aunt to do?
  - How did Wangangga trick Jarburrungu?
  - What did Jarburrungu change himself into to escape?
  - How was Wangangga punished for breaking the teachings of Birdarra Law?
  - How will Wangangga forever be known?
- In what way might the story of *Jarburrungu Wangangga Garranyga* be described as an *allegory*? What do you think the moral of this story is? Why do you think the story was considered important by the Yindjibarndi and was passed down from generation to generation?

Allegorical stories have been told for thousands of years across multitudes of different cultures. *The Tortoise and Hare* is by an ancient Greek storyteller named Aesop, while *The Three Little Pigs* is a German folktale from the nineteenth century. Choose a famous allegorical story and compare and contrast it to *Jarburrungu Wangangga Garranyga*.

- Visual Literacy: Close-ups of eyes are often used in graphic novels for dramatic effect, especially in moments of heightened suspense, tension and emotion. Find examples where close ups are used in the story of *Jarburrungu Wangangga Garranyga* and explain why you think the illustrator chose that precise moment in the story to use it.

### Nyinkara the Stoneman

- Comprehension Questions:
  - What is the spirit of Nyinyart?
  - Who is Nyinkara and why did Minkala create him?
  - Nyinkara turned the Yindjibarndi into his personal slaves. True or False?
  - What sort of things would Nyinkara make the Yindjibarndi do?
  - What happened to them if they displeased him?
  - Who did the elders and young men turn to for advice about what to do about Nyinkara?
  - What was the trap they set for Nyinkara?
  - What did Nyinkara fall into when he toppled down the hill?
  - Yindjibarndi believe that white rocks are what part of Nyinkara?
  - What did Minkala give the Yindjibarndi as a sign that he would never create another Nyinkara?
- Do you think graphic novel elements made this story more exciting than if you had heard it told as a song or story? Why/Why not?
- Visual Literacy: Find examples of these graphic novel elements in the story:
  - Sound Effects – onomatopoeic words written in stylised fonts to represent sounds.
  - Motion Lines – drawn around characters or objects to indicate movement or action.
  - Splash Pages – full illustrations used for significant moments in the story.

- Foreground and Background – elements in the foreground are closer to the viewer, while the background represents the distant environment, creating a sense of depth.
- Colour Palette – colours are chosen to evoke a particular mood or atmosphere.

### Jiruna Yuya: Pelican and Quail

- Comprehension Questions:
  - Why did Jiruna need to go to wundu (the river)?
  - Why couldn't Jiruna leave her manggurlarra (children) alone?
  - Who did she ask to look after her manggurlarra while she was away?
  - How did Jiruna transport the gawingarli back home to her manggurlarra?
  - Why did Yuya become very angry with Jiruna?
  - What is a thamayi?
  - How did Yuya punish Jiruna?
  - What happened to Jiruna?
  - Why do the Yindjibarndi call the area near Ngamararri Malarni?
  - What lesson do you think this story teaches us?
- Transform *Jiruna Yuya Pelican and Quail* into a written story. Follow the language style used and expand the text to include elements of the story that were conveyed by the images. Try to capture the setting and characters (not just how they look, but how they feel, act and react, what they are thinking) into your story.
- Visual Literacy: Colour  
According to Alex Mankiewicz, the illustrator of each of the creation stories, they used a palette that stays within a range found in traditional Aboriginal painting and, equally important, that reflected the landscape, light, flora and fauna of the Pilbara - Yindjibarndi Country. Furthermore, 'Each story too had to have its own palette - to differentiate them quickly flipping through, but also to establish the various parts of Country it takes place in, and often different mood.

How do the colours used in *Nyinkara the Stoneman* and *Jiruna Yuya: Pelican and Quail* reflect the mood of each story?

## Bunggaliyarra: Fallen

- Comprehension Questions:
  - What did Minkala sing into the night sky?
  - What is the Yindjibarndi name for the Pleiades Star formation?
  - When did Bunggaliyarra fall from the sky into the sea?
  - What drew them from the water?
  - What did Bunggaliyarra do while travelling over Country?
  - Why did the Marrga men chase Bunggaliyarra?
  - How did Bunggaliyarra transform Country?
  - What happened to them once they leapt into the water?
  - Who dances upon them?
  - How did Bunggaliyarra return to the sky?
- The creation stories in this book tell of times long ago. Did the mention of an event – the building of the Harding Dam in the 1980s – surprise you? If so, did it change the way you responded to the story?
- Look at page 65 featuring a whole page image of the Marrga chasing Bunggaliyarra down the hill transposed on a map of Ngurra (Country)? Why do you think the illustrator chose not to use panels at this particular point in the story? How might you break up this part of the story into five panels? What would be included in each panel?

## Barrimirndi: Water Serpent

- Comprehension Questions:
  - What is a Yardiyarra?
  - What did the two Yardiyarra do that angered Barrimirndi (the water serpent)?
  - How did Barrimirndi discover what the two Yardiyarra had done?
  - What did Barrimirndi create as he carved out a trench that became Yarndanyirra?
  - How did the people know that Barrimirndi was near?
  - How did the woman react when they saw Barrimirndi?
  - What happened to the two Yardiyarra?
  - What brought Barrimirndi back to punish the entire camp?



- Where does Barrimirndi reside today?
- What rule or rules for living do you think this story teaches?
- Define the term 'perspective' and explain how the illustrator has used it to heighten the drama of the eggs being stolen in the top-right panel on page 71.
- Look at the smoke coming from the fire built by the two Yardiyarra on page 71. Turn the page and explain how the smoke connects to what happens next in the story. Why do you think the illustrator chose to move away from panels and use a double-page spread at this point in the story.
- What is the mood created by the final image on page 81? How has the illustrator created the mood here? How does it contrast with much of the story that precedes it?

## HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

- Research the following:
  - Locate on a map of Australia the area of land where Yindjibarndi live.
  - How long is it estimated that Yindjibarndi lived in this area?
  - Describe the area's climate and landscape.
  - What sort of challenges might the area's climate and landscape pose for inhabitants?
  - What major river runs through Yindjibarndi Country?
  - What industries exist in the area?
  - What are some challenges that Yindjibarndi people face in preserving their culture and land today?
- The story ends with a reference to Long Mack, the building of the Harding Dam and the destruction of Mandirrinha. Research the reasons why the dam was built and its long-term impacts on the areas around it. Find out who Long Mack was and the efforts he made to stop the building of the dam.
- Write an account of what happened at the Juukan Gorge in 2020 and whether another similar event could happen in the future.

## VISUAL ARTS

- Why do you think the book's creators decided to include photographs and images of Yindjibarndi artwork to a graphic novel retelling of creation stories? How might the stories be read without the photos and artworks?

- What do concentric circles often represent in Aboriginal artworks? With this in mind, why do you think that Mary Watson's *Yurra (Sun) Thulu* was chosen as the first Aboriginal artwork we see in the book? Why might Judith Coppin's *Waterholes* have been chosen as the final image on the book's back endpapers?
- Read *Bunggaliyarra Fallen* and discuss how the colours and elements in the painting that precedes it, *Yarndanyirra Mayalarri (Pleiades)*, are reflected and repeated in the chapter.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Juluwarlu Group Aboriginal Corporation** is based in Roebourne and Ngurrawaana Community, in WA's Pilbara region. Its purpose is to collect and promote knowledge of Yindjibarndi culture – our Ngurra, plants and animals; our language, genealogy, mythology, social history, and biography – to sustain our Yindjibarndi identity, giving self-esteem, respect, and other values we consider vital to our lives, our well-being, and our culture's future. We do this for our children and our future generations so that they too, are inspired to contribute to our Australian national community. Juluwarlu's cultural recording and archiving project was started by Lorraine Coppin in the Ngurrawaana Community on the Yindjibarndi tablelands in 1998 with Elder Woodley King and his grandson, Michael Woodley, and was incorporated in 2000.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Alex Mankiewicz** is an illustrator and artist who specialises in graphic journalism. Based in Kyoto and Byron Bay, Alex has lived and worked in France, the UK and USA, and has been shortlisted twice in the Comic Arts Awards of Australia, and recognised by Australian & New Zealand Illustration Awards and American Illustration. Alex was commissioned by Juluwarlu Group Aboriginal Corporation to create a graphic novel interpretation of the Yindjibarndi cultural stories that appear in this book. Time spent on *Country with Elders* and other custodians, while with an unrelated film crew in 2021, made the renderings of the images and stories possible – both visually and in connection to spirit of place.