

Tracks of the Missing

By Carl Merrison and Hakea Hustler

OVERVIEW

Deklan 'Dek' Archer and his mates arrive at school to a tense atmosphere. 'Old Mate', Mr Henry, who has lived in town for a long time, has been found murdered. He had been selling grog on the black market for years. To add to these worries, the Year 12s, who were on camp, are now missing. The police think there is a link between the missing students and the murder.

Dek and his friends are torn. Dek and Willum, his best mate, have an important football match that evening – professional recruiters are in town. Neither wants to let their coach down but they feel they must search for their friends. Deklan's grandfather, a renowned tracker with certain otherworld gifts turns up, and expects him to go bush. This choice will change Dek's life and family forever. A journey that moves deep in to an ancient country uncovers secrets and the past continues to call them.

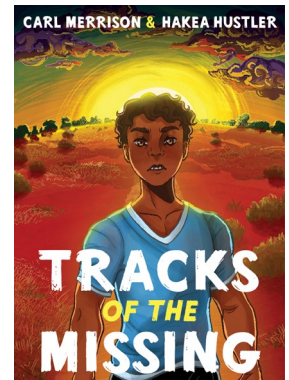
Both are tracking the truth but something is watching and hunting them.

- Compelling YA novel from the critically acclaimed authors of *Black Cockatoo*.
- Thriller dealing with murder, place, cultural obligation and small-town intrigue.
- A highly engaging mystery that unapologetically places regional Aboriginal teen issues front and centre.
- Main character's fierce determination & other world abilities will inspire readers.
- Strong social and cultural content.
- An outstanding contribution from two Australian voices, that will contribute to the ever-growing landscape of Own Voices.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR & ILLUSTRATOR

Carl Merrison is a Jaru/Kija man from the Kimberley with a passion for youth issues and voice. He is a youth mentor, football coach and program co-ordinator. Carl was runner-up for the 2016 WA Local Hero Award.

Hakea Hustler is an experienced English teacher who has taught around Australia including in remote Aboriginal communities. Hakea is committed to



Indigenous education with a particular focus on story as learning and empowerment. Together, Carl and Hakea's debut novella *Black Cockatoo* was published by Magabala Books in 2018 and was shortlisted for the Readings Children's Book of the Year, shortlisted in the CBCA Young Reader category, shortlisted for an ABIA award and selected as a feature text for the 2018 Summer Reading Challenge

THEMES

- Aboriginal Social Life and Customs
 - Law, Creation, Ancestors, Country, Elders, Community, Tracking, Bush Medicine, Bush Tucker
- Aboriginal Histories
 - Stolen Generation, Dispossession, Colonisation
- Respect
- Hope
- Sustainability

AUDIENCE AND WRITING STYLE

Tracks of the Missing is told from the first-person perspective of Dek, a 15-year-old Aboriginal boy on the cusp of manhood. His character develops from one absorbed by football and mucking around with mates to a young man who respects Law, Ancestors, and the traditions of his people. This journey, however, is embroiled in murder and the mysterious disappearance of a group of Year 12s on camp. A standout feature of this text is the interweaving of suspense and teenage angst with Aboriginal culture and customs; the latter help Dek to transition from adolescence into manhood. *Tracks of the Missing* also comments on the injustices of racial profiling, dispossession and racist policies that have devastated First Nations Peoples, whilst celebrating the strength and longevity of their culture. Due to its themes (including suicidal thoughts), context, and occasional use of explicit language, it is more suited to a Young Adult audience.



LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

This book and the classroom activities provided are primarily relevant to the following areas of the Australian Curriculum:

Learning area	Year level
English	Years 7-10; Also relevant to Senior English.

The appendix highlights relevant content descriptors and cross-curriculum priorities that relate to the text and classroom ideas provided.

CLASSROOM IDEAS

- The opening passage of *Tracks of the Missing* creates an immediate sense of tension and suspense. How have the authors used language features to achieve this?
- The old man who has been found dead, Mr Henry, is known for 'sly grogging our communities' (p2). What is meant by this term, and how has this impacted the community?
- Why is the tension around school likened to 'the build-up to the rain, waiting for something to burst' (p4)? How else could it have been described?
- Why has a character such as Officer Thomas been included in *Tracks of the Missing*? What point are the authors making about prejudice, stereotypes, and racial profiling?
- On p9, Dek says, 'I had felt bitterness at some of the outsider teachers that think they know it all but don't even bother learning our culture, or the ones that think I'm too dumb to be anything'. Throughout the text, Dek comments on the 'whitefellas' who come to his community without learning Aboriginal ways, while he has respect for others who have immersed themselves in the community more authentically. Categorise the minor characters into those Dek respects and those for whom he has little respect. Why has *Tracks of the Missing* included a mixture of these characters? How do Grandfather's attitudes towards these people help Dek to differentiate?
- What examples are there throughout the text of different rules and standards for white and Indigenous peoples? How do these differences underpin some of the themes of the story?
- After learning of the missing 12s, Dek begins to worry that 'blood could be on my hands' (p10). Why is he so reluctant to share this information with anyone, especially his Grandfather? How would the story have been different had he confessed this at the start of the story? Why did the authors decide that Dek should withhold this information?
- In the role of Dek, write two reflections about the impact of missing the football trials on your future – one towards the beginning of the story, the other at the end. How are these two reflections different from one another?
- Who is responsible for the death of Michael's brother? Discuss as a class.
- In Chapter 2, Dek imagines himself going to prison, commenting that it is 'not really an unlikely scenario' (18). Why does he feel this way?
- Why does Dek feel that Officer Thomas is 'looking right through my skin into my bones' (p20)?
- Dek and Jenny have feelings for one another. Why is their relationship 'forbidden' (p33)? After finishing the novel, do you think this relationship is something Dek will pursue? Why?
- Why does Dek say of James, 'there was so much he just couldn't know' (p36)?
- Discuss the 'rage that grows inside' Dek described on pp40-41. What feeds this rage?
- Using evidence from the text, explain the respect that Dek feels for his mother.
- Reread p51. How does this passage explain the injustices that have occurred against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the hands of European settlement and government policies? What have been the consequences of these wrongdoings? In what ways is *Tracks of the Missing* a metaphor for these?
- Michael's mum was stolen and 'only found her way back to Country a few years before Michael was born' (p52). What does 'finding her way back to Country' entail?
- Dek says that 'Culture way we are meant to listen to our Elders' (p52). What evidence is there throughout the text that Dek does this?
- On p53, Dek says: 'Hope. I cling to it.' Discuss the importance of hope in *Tracks of the Missing*.
- Grandfather and Dek both have the 'sense' (p53). What does this mean? What examples are there of this throughout the text?
- What role does guilt play in Dek's thinking? For what does he feel guilty about?
- Dek can tell that Grandfather is 'thinking deeply about our ancestors, our culture, our history' (p54). What do we learn about these things by reading *Tracks of the Missing*?
- Discuss what is meant on p63 by 'Aboriginal people [not being] classified as 'people' according to the Constitution'. When did this change? Why did it take



CLASSROOM IDEAS CONT.

- so long for this to occur?
- On pp67-69, the text addresses ‘racist [assumptions]’, unequal pay and employment opportunities and land rights, with Dek saying it ‘makes me mad when whitefellas just say it wasn’t them or not their fault’ (p69). Choose one of the issues raised in *Tracks of the Missing* on which to write a feature newspaper article.
 - Why does Grandfather say, ‘you don’t change people like that with conflict and words ... You got to show them with actions; you got to rise above’ (p79)? Write a reflection that further explores this statement.
 - Dek asks in a mocking tone ‘what did the ancestors tell you today, Grandfather?’ (p83). How does Grandfather respond? Why does Dek feel a little ashamed? What does this share about the importance of respecting knowledge?
 - Explain Grandfather’s trust in the ancestors. How does his knowledge and understanding make Dek feel? Reread p92, on which Dek speaks about how lucky they are to still have a connection to Creation. Why, later, does Dek feel connected to ‘Country, to Creation’ when Grandfather sings one of the songlines (p93)? How are such connections pivotal to Dek’s Aboriginal culture?
 - Explain the intergenerational trauma affecting Aboriginal people (see pp104-105). What have been the long-term consequences of this?
 - View footage of Kevin Rudd’s Apology or read the picture book *Sorry Day* by Coral Vass and Dub Leffler. Why does Dek say ‘it made me have hope the day Kevin Rudd said sorry ... I knew that sorry was only the start of the journey’ (p105). What else needs to happen on this journey?
 - What clues do we get throughout the text about the Lightfoot’s presence? Why does Dek feel as though he and Grandfather are being hunted?
 - How are the examples of ‘roos being hunted by graziers and cattle trampling the land used to represent the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples from their Homelands and the impact of European settlement on Country?
 - How does Dek liken live cattle exports to the historical treatment of Aboriginal people (see p120)?
 - How does *Tracks of the Missing* share the importance of language(s) in many First Nations’ cultures?
 - Dek wishes he could ‘reverse time’ (p137). Have you ever felt like this? Share in a reflection.
 - What is the role of ‘The Lightfoot’ (see p143 and p149)? How does this aspect of the story share the importance of Law?
 - What leadership qualities does Dek show when he and Grandfather find the missing mob? How do these qualities help him later?
 - Why is Dek so bitter towards Hannah? How are her actions symbolic of white colonisation?
 - Why does Grandfather offer himself as a sacrifice to the Lightfoot? Why doesn’t the Lightfoot accept?
 - Why does Dek find it so hard keeping the Law (see p171)?
 - How has Dek developed from the beginning of the text to the end?
 - How is the Dreaming connected to the story of *Tracks of the Missing*?
 - Chapter 21, entitled *Law*, is very short, yet extremely powerful. What does it share about responsibility, honour, and power?
 - What does Dek mean when he says, ‘I can walk in both worlds now’ (p189)? Describe each of these worlds.
 - What is the role of Elders in *Tracks of the Missing*? Use evidence from the text to support your thinking.
 - Create a dramatisation of the scene between Dek, Ms Wilson and Officer a Thomas from Chapter 1.
 - Why does Dek apportion some of the blame around Michael’s brother’s death on himself? Is he justified in thinking this way? Discuss.
 - After finishing *Tracks of the Missing*, reread the first few pages of the text. Discuss how the book has been structured to weave together the past, present, and future.
 - What role does the death of Michael’s brother play in Dek’s life, and in the broader story of *Tracks of the Missing*? How might his death have contributed to Dek becoming a Lightfoot?
 - Using evidence from the text, discuss the role that respect plays in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures?
 - The authors use figurative language to enhance the text. Analyse their use of such language, and the contribution it has on the narrative. Examples include:
 - There is a suspense in the air ... like lightning about to strike p1
 - Her voice is tight and crisp like a crow’s, mouth drawn hard like a line p6
 - My mouth is dry but my hands are wet p6
 - A sick knot begins to tighten in my belly p7
 - The policeman snarls, reminding me of a dingo about to pounce p14
 - Something doesn’t feel right. Like a word trying to push its way to the tip of my tongue. p32
 - I hold onto that like a life jacket p38
 - If I am too still sometimes a darkness creeps over me trying to drag me down p40
 - My heart literally hurts with guilt p42



CLASSROOM IDEAS CONT.

- ... mouth spitting out words like they taste bad p50
- Insect bites swell up like marbles p82
- That scream sounds close enough to be in my skull p95
- My legs feel like they could melt into the red desert ground p126
- The morning sun sends warm rays of light dappling through the thick bush p164
- I flop like a dead weight in the Lightfoot's arms p171
- In what ways does *Tracks of the Missing* address the importance of responsibility and consequences?
- What have you learnt about Aboriginal cultural from reading *Tracks of the Missing*?
- Discuss the importance that many of our First Nations' cultures place on Ancestors and Creation.
- As you read *Tracks of the Missing*, discuss the many aspects of First Nations culture that you have learnt about throughout the text.
- Retell the message conveyed in *Tracks of the Missing* in the form of an artwork, poem, or performance.
- Discuss how the authors have made this story engaging. How have they held readers' interest using character development, plot tension, and Aboriginal culture?
 - Create a story graph to map the plot of *Tracks of the Missing*.
 - Dek refers to Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, a book that proves the existence of permanent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' settlements, as well as agricultural and aquacultural farming. Cross-reference this, or *Young Dark Emu*, as a companion text to *Tracks of the Missing*.

APPENDIX – LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Year	Curriculum Area
7	English Literature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619)• Discuss aspects of texts, for example their aesthetic and social value, using relevant and appropriate metalanguage (ACELT1803)• Recognise and analyse the ways that characterisation, events and settings are combined in narratives, and discuss the purposes and appeal of different approaches (ACELT1622)
8	English Literature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore the ways that ideas and viewpoints in literary texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts may reflect or challenge the values of individuals and groups(ACELT1626)• Explore the interconnectedness of Country/Place, People, Identity and Culture in texts including those by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authors (ACELT1806)• Recognise and explain differing viewpoints about the world, cultures, individual people and concerns represented in texts (ACELT1807)
9	English Literature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Interpret and compare how representations of people and culture in literary texts are drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1633)
10	English Literature <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts (ACELT1812)• Compare and evaluate how 'voice' as a literary device can be used in a range of different types of texts such as poetry to evoke particular emotional responses (ACELT1643)

Cross Curriculum Priorities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; Sustainability

