

Teachers' Notes

for

PASTURES OF THE BLUE CRANE

Hesba Brinsmead

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Winner of the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year in 1965 *Pastures of the Blue Crane* has for forty years, although out of print for much of that time, regarded with affection and admiration. Now reissued with an attractive modern 'look' it will once again resonate with young people who, like the heroine Ryl, face the future with mixed joy and uncertainty.

What makes *Pastures of the Blue Crane* so special is the lyrical descriptions of landscape and place. Brinsmead's affinity with the land has produced some of the most beautiful descriptive writing in Australian books for children and young adults.

The story:

Ryl Merewether has not known the father who sent her at the age of three to live in Melbourne under the guardianship of a solicitor, so while she is surprised at learning of his death she is more surprised at learning that she has a grandfather. Robert Merewether's estate, to be shared by grandfather and grand-daughter, includes an old house on a run down farm in northern New South Wales. Before selling it they both decide to see it, and both – the grandfather returning to his birthplace, Ryl finding a sense of belonging and peace — choose to stay there, to 'do up' the ramshackle old weatherboard house and to restore the farm. The pair, so alike in temperament, rub into a family and settle into the community. By the end of the book the small family comprising Ryl and her grandfather Dusty has expanded in a most unexpected manner.

Characters:

Ryl is the product of a lifetime of loneliness, the only child at her exclusive Melbourne boarding school to remain there throughout the holidays; her only 'family' occasions the twice yearly visit to the solicitor's office marked by the lengthening of her legs and changing hair styles. Her grandfather wears his poverty in the op shop suit and old shirt oddly at ends with his highly polished boots. Both share green eyes and mulish characters. By the end of the first chapter readers feel they know Ryl, they would recognise her in the street, know why she acts as she does. They, like Ryl would probably avert their eyes from Dusty if they passed him on the street, yet feel the rightness of the small concessions each makes for the other on their train journey north. Here are two characters that stand out.

Setting:

The train ride north is a lyrical description of the Australian countryside. It is not unique in using the device of impressions from a train window but employs it so well that images

remain long after the book has been put down. Here's the train approaching Sydney, the personification of the town just right:

The train wailed into the mist-dappled lowlands, and factory buildings loomed by the rails, and a highway, keeping pace with them, became beaded with traffic. Soon Sydney reached out to take them into its sprawling suburbs, with their atmosphere of shabby devil-may-care. (p.37)

As the train comes closer to its destination the language of description becomes languorous, plants are named, become intimate. Place becomes important:

This was the land of the Northern Rivers, and great bridges carried the train across the Clarence, the Manning and the Macleay, their banks lined with mangrove swamps, and ferries plying slowly across yellow waters. There were times when the odd little train would stop for no apparent reason in the midst of wild, impenetrable jungle, a frenzy of lantana, groundsel, wild passion vines and tree-fern, with no sign of a railway station in sight. (p.39)

We are well anchored into the subtropics before we even reach Bundoora, prepared to find ourselves, like Ryl and Dusty at home in the enclosing greenness of the land.

Language:

Evocative words colour the most everyday of things: Jones the canary is said to be enjoying *the mountebank life* (p.40) of his train journey; Dusty arriving at his birthplace *put aside the years with their dower of disappointment and failure* (p.48); the board riders *sprang lightly into the water and took hold of their spindrift craft* (p.130). Characters are delineated as much by their language as by physical description and action. A lovely little vignette of a family setting off on a holiday at Surfers Paradise is conveyed entirely in dialogue (pp.40-41). The description of Ryl sitting with the dying old kanaka is carefully balanced between the everyday and an apt simile:

She longed to be home at Geebin, even longed to be sitting down to a meal of Dusty's everlasting chops and potatoes. Ki's face was closed and relaxed. He had sagged even lower in the bed, so that his body seemed like an empty coat falling from a peg, something old and worn and no longer needed. (pp.290-291)

Themes:

The question of racial discrimination is at the heart of the book, yet rarely intrudes into the story of Ryl's coming to belong to a family, a community and to the land. Ryl's early withdrawal from Perry, once she sees his tight curly woolen hair is quickly overtaken by an admiration for his beauty and his kindness. It is left to rich, indolent Glen to drop racist remarks and hints that not all as it seems.

Small group discussions:

1. Discuss the concept of racial differences.
 - (i) Has Perry's general acceptance by the community been achieved by Ki's early withdrawal from his own Kanaka community? *'I no let him grow up in Kanaka place.'* (p.287)
 - (ii) How common is it still today to accept *dark* people if they are intelligent and act like ladies or gentlemen (see Ryl's explanation to Perry of her previous (and still?) approach to colour, (pp.166-167) but not if they are seen as a homogenous

- group as are the Kanakas lumped together as the native village on Greenbank Island. *All those great families of Kanaks chivvyng each other for standing room in their shacks...* (p.163, p.186) See also Ryl's earlier comment before she gets to know Perry, *He said he's going to uni, too. How can he do that? He said something about living with natives!* (p.120)
- (iii) Discuss Ryl's conclusion after a night of thinking about the revelation that she is part Islander: *After all, I'm no different from before. I'm still me, just as Perry's Perry. I'm just descended from a Samoan instead of from some Cockney convict!'o And I'm Australian!* (p.324) Compare it with Dusty's first thoughts when he learns Ryl knows about her mother: *Can't take a fine girl at face value. If she happens to have the least little drop of coloured blood in her veins — sure, they've got to tell her about it...* (p.326) Remember that you have two generations thinking about the same question.
2. Discuss the concept of racial injustice within the story. Robert Merewether chooses which child to keep on the basis of whether or not they look 'white' and, although he has provided for Perry by deeding his grandfather the property next to his own, he excludes Perry from his will. At the same time discuss the morality of these actions.
 3. Discuss the concept of political correctness. Use Dusty's and Ryl's discussion about labour on the cane fields as an example. Read pp.103 from '*course,*' *he said, 'they can't grow the cane they did, on account of not having any cheap labour... to ...So they was no worse off than a lot of white people.'* p.105 Take into account that **Pastures of the Blue Crane** was written 40 years ago when the White Australia Policy had only been dropped as government policy 20 years previously. Read the introduction by Clare Bradford.
 4. Discuss the concept of belonging:
 - (i) Ryl's belonging to a family, including finding out its history.
 - (ii) Ryl's and Dusty's belonging to a place – *we've put all of ourselves into this place* (p.258)
 - (iii) All of the characters belonging to a community
 - (iv) Ki's belonging to a people
 5. Discuss intergenerational relationships. Use examples of the relationships between Ryl and Dusty and Perry and Ki.
 6. Discuss historical aspects of Australia. **Pastures of the Blue Crane** provides a snapshot of an Australian community forty-years-ago. Compare and contrast ways then and now in which young people spend their leisure time; farming practices; housing.
 7. Discuss the significance of the blue crane

Group Activity:

1. Draw a map of Ryl's and Dusty's journey from Melbourne to Bundoora up the eastern coast of Australia. Mark in towns and rivers and highlight the map with descriptions from the journey that have been particularly apt/or draw the scenes using the author's descriptions. Also try and identify and mark places on the

journey where Ryl and Dusty have made tentative steps towards understanding one another.

Writing:

1. Write a haiku about one of the landscapes described by Brinsmead.
2. Read Brinsmead's description of the family on the train heading to the Gold Coast for their holiday. Note that it is just about all conveyed through conversation. Describe a group of people at a dance/sporting event/the beach or other venue using the same technique.
3. Write a description of a place that has particular personal significance.

Concluding class discussion:

Is there a place in literature today for 'modern classics'?

Do such works of literature add to our understanding of self and place in country/ community?