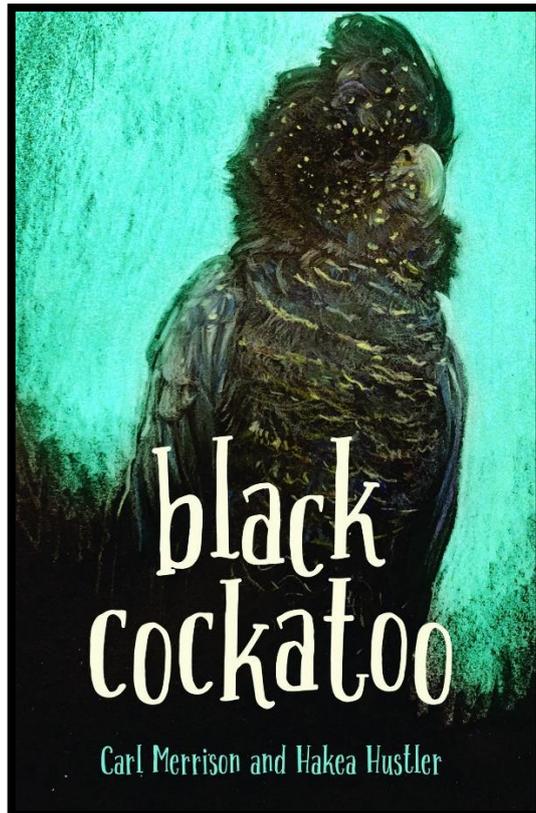


# Black Cockatoo

## Study Guide



### **Setting**

*Black Cockatoo* is set in a remote Aboriginal community on Jaru Country in the Kimberley. The town is not named- but the author grew up in Halls Creek which could be used to envision Mia's town. Jaru Country is remote- approx. 4 hours from Kununurra and about 8 hours from Broome right in the heart of the Kimberley. The dirt is red with iron ore and often dusty. The dry, landscape is broken by time-eroded hills, hidden waterholes and rivers. The setting would be powerful to Mia as an Aboriginal character as this is her traditional land- her Creation stories, song lines, ancestors are all related to this land. Mia's connection to Country is woven carefully throughout the text and is one of the reasons that she struggles with her growing sense of wonder about the wider world and the offer to 'school away' at a boarding school.

## Characters

**Mia** is the 13 year old Aboriginal protagonist. Mia, her brother and mother live with her grandparents; *jawiji* and *jaja*.

**Jy** is Mia's brother and the 15 year old antagonist. Mia struggles with the loss of a close relationship and growing conflict with her brother. He is a boy who has 'grown up hard'. He shows his anger, frustration through acts of cruelty to animals and defiance towards his family.

**Jawiji** is Mia' and Jy's grandfather on her mother's side. He is a respected Jaru Elder who had been born out bush and spent much of his childhood living the traditional way. He had met Rosa on a station when they were both teenagers. He had raised his family strong in language, culture and knowledge of their traditional lands. *Jaja* describes him as 'proper stubborn'.

**Jaja Rosa** is Mia' and Jy's grandmother on her mother's side. Rosa had been born and raised on a cattle station. She had lost her lighter skinned little sister during the Stolen Generation- something that still hurt her to talk about. Rosa found her culture and connection when she was older after being forbidden to speak language as a child.

**Katherine** is Mia' and Jy's mother. She is not mentioned much in the text on purpose- to subtly show that Mia's grandparents had more of a strong role in raising the children. When mentioned she is shown a women who respects her culture and father, and has a sense of humour.

**Diane** is Mia' and Jy's aunty. She has a good sense of humour and a warm personality. Mia and Jy would call her 'mum' as she is their mum's sister and as a sign of close relationship and respect.

**Tobias** is Jy's cousin-brother and friend. Kimberley people generally don't call cousin's 'cousins' rather they treat their cousins like brothers and have very close ties to extended family- when pushed to explain the relationship they will explain that the person is their 'cousin-brother' or 'cousin-sister'. Tobias tries to help Jy play a trick on Mia by putting a snake in with her *dirrarn*. When they are busted by *jawiji* Tobias runs away.

**Roger** is the shopkeeper at the small town shop. He had moved to town decades ago with his wife. She had left town and he didn't have anywhere to go so never left. He is old and bitter. He makes Mia feel uncomfortable.

**Chris** is Mia's cousin-brother (as explained above) who lives out bush on a station farm. Chris calls Scotty 'unks' meaning uncle- Aboriginal people in the Kimberley address each other by their relationship to each other- so Scotty is probably Chris' young uncle or second-uncle (maybe one of his grandparent's siblings children). Mia and Chris seem to have a standing arrangement that he will bring her bush honey when he comes into town. He has a good sense of humour. He teases Mia about her 'promise husband' (some Aboriginal people still have allocated future partners traditional way out bush) and that he will need to defend her from the boys (this is a family role as an older 'cousin-brother').

**Scotty** is Mia's cousin-brother who lives out bush on a station farm. He brings Mia an old Aboriginal artefact- a spearhead- and tells her about where he found it and how they should go back with Elders 'proper way' showing his deep respect for culture and Country. He has a good sense of humour which he shows by role playing his battle with a snake.

**Extended family** are touched on briefly but not named throughout the text. Mentioned are the aunty who lends the cage and the uncle who delivers it, the aunties she asks to borrow money from in the kitchen, the aunty who she wished was working at the shops when she went to buy the lock, the old people that she used to go bush with and the unnamed uncles and cousins that come to collect her brother and grandfather for Law. These characters are carefully woven in throughout the text to show the large extended families that people of the Kimberleys have. These strong, extended connections come with responsibilities- including family roles and expectations (grandchildren can play games & be cheeky to their grandparents, son-in-law's can't speak to mothers, siblings are expected to step in to defend other siblings, cousins are treated like siblings, girlfriends of brothers are expected to help care for them like they do their boyfriend with food or housing but in return brother-in-laws are expected to help with gardening & hunting etc- they also have a fun, playful relationship, sisters are to be respectful and not say the name of older initiated brothers and more). This style of family structure has many benefits with raising a family and caring for each other as shown in the book- Mia is raised more by her grandparents than her mother, sharing resources such as the cage, always having someone to play with. These large families also mean that family members have a lot of these responsibilities- that they are expected to put above anything else. Mia mentions that 'nothing is really private in her house' (page 16) which could mean that many family members come and go- stay over or live with them. Aboriginal people are often effected by deaths of Elders and family members- and are obligated to attend funerals all over the Kimberleys to pay respect. In addition, these responsibilities and a strong sense of respect may mean that family members are expected to step into disagreements sometimes resulting in large family feuds. These subtle hints at extended family are meant to add appeal to Aboriginal readers who will understand the depth and deeper meaning behind the mentions.

**Mia's father and family** is only mentioned once on page 33. The reader is not given any clues to his background other than the fact that Mia hasn't been back to their Country since she was a toddler. On page 12 Mia mentions that no one in her family had 'left the west coast, let alone travelled oceans' so it can be assumed that he was someone from Western Australia- maybe an Aboriginal man from a different tribe/language group.

## Themes

**Freedom:** This theme is subtly woven throughout the text with Mia wondering if there is 'more' however the reader doesn't realise that she feels 'trapped' until the last chapter. In the final few paragraphs Mia reveals how she sees her small town as a cage and that she can travel away from her Country and still return any time she wants to be reconnected.

The reader is also asked to face a moral dilemma- free the durrarn to most likely die in freedom or keep it sad and caged. At what cost do we seek freedom? Is freedom worth it?

**Animal Rights:** Animal rights issues are woven throughout the novella to challenge the reader. Many incidents mentioned in the book were witnessed by the authors and used as inspiration. Jy using birds as target practice with his shanghai page 1, meat eating at the family fire on page 9, the totem hunt vignette on page 10, the dead budgie story on page 15, Mia's knowledge of catching goanna on page 17 and page 22, the pup vignette on page 29, Jy racing grasshoppers on page 30, the caged durrarns trauma actions on page 37, Jy's tata lizards and cane toad snippet on page 37/38, mention of meat eating page 38, the snake incident on page 39, the snake story page 50, Mia wishing she was going out hunting page 52, Mia dreaming of what it was like for the durrarn in the cage page 56, the choice to let the durrarn go on page 57. Readers are left to reflect on and decide their tolerance or disgust to animal use and or abuse throughout the book- the spectrum of animal use or abuse subtly touched on throughout from station work, eating meat, killing feral pests such as cane toads to using animals as target practice or for cruel races. Mia's third person narrative shows her disgust at some of her brother's treatment of animals such as shooting down the birds and ripping off the grasshoppers wings to race them on hot sand. Mia is desensitised and accustomed to hunting for goanna, fishing and eating fresh beef.

The authors have shown how disenfranchised, angry young people and young people suffering from trauma and intergeneration trauma can mistreat animals as a way of feeling powerful, having control of something in their lives or letting out their anger. The reader is repelled by his actions with the help of Mia's responses to them.

Hakea Hustler was challenged by the way people in the Kimberley use animals when she arrived in the Kimberleys- live cattle trade stations, rodeos, treatment of stray dogs including culls and baiting etc. Carl Merrison had grown up with working on stations with family members, hunting and fishing. These varied viewpoints of both authors can be seen in the book- attempting to give a balanced and unbiased view on the harsh reality of life in the Kimberley and in doing so provide opportunity for reflection and learning about respect for animals too.

**Growing up:** This is a theme throughout the novella. Mia keeps reminiscing on how life used to be before Jy got older and stopped spending as much time with the family.

Maybe through these memories she is clinging to her own childhood instead of having to face the big decisions she must as a year 7/8 student facing schooling away at boarding school and leaving her family. Mia still clings to her innocence through a sometimes naïve and restricted third person narration. She doesn't elaborate on her time out swimming with her cousins and doesn't shared vignettes/join in stereotypical teenage activities like parties that her brother might be attending. She is more worried about the dirrarn, her brother, her family and her future than boys as she make clear on page 53. She is described as someone who "radiated optimism and hope" on page 40 as opposed to her brother whose "anger rippled under his scarred skin- the skin of a 15 year old who had grown up hard in red-ground country". The initiation to adulthood for Jy might be close when he is taken out bush for traditional cultural Law. These rituals and practices are sacred.

On the other end we see jawiji and jaja who are facing the prospect of becoming too old to maintain their authority and power. They are becoming worn out by the constant struggles and challenges that they face- including helping to guide Jy.

**Language and Culture:** Jaru and Aboriginal English words are woven in throughout the book paying homage and respect to the languages that help define Aboriginal identity. Many Aboriginal people- like Mia and her family- speak more than one traditional language, Aboriginal English or Kriole and English. At the time of invasion (1788) there were estimated to be over 250 Aboriginal languages and tribes. Aboriginal English is a distinct dialect. The novella aimed to raise awareness and allow Jaru people to see their language (or other Aboriginal readers to experience another of the diverse traditional languages or to allow gardiyas to appreciate and understand some of the Jaru language and culture). Mia and jawiji both express concern that Jy is rejecting culture and disrespecting cultural expectations (ignoring and defying Elders etc).

**Connection to land:** The deep and intense connection that Aboriginal people have with land is slightly touched on in the text. It is one of the reasons that previous Government policies had such a huge impact on Aboriginal peoples lives- removed from Country and forced to live on missions, stations or reserves on other tribes lands, cut off from their traditions, culture and song lines (songs that explain Creation, where to find clean water, how to travel the land, land boundaries etc). While this novella does not delve into these issues it is touched on when we learn that jaja was restricted to and raised on a station while jawiji grew up out bush the traditional way. Mia speaks of how her family have never left the west coast or travelled over oceans. She finally learns that she can leave Country but always find her way back- it is part of her.

**Respect:** Respect is a huge thing for people in the Kimberleys- it is a vital element of culture and family structures as well as interactions in everyday life. This theme is introduced very early in the book when Mia challenges her brother by saving the dirrarn- on page 7 she mentioned how culturally as her older brother 'she owes him a certain amount of respect'. When jawiji says 'you need to respect our past' on page 13

he is speaking of Creation stories and cultural meanings- both the dirrarn and the jiyirr are linked to the coming of the rains. Mia listened respectfully to her grandmother telling her stories on page 34. Jawiji is a 'respected lawman' (p52)- meaning that he was initiated and was respected for his knowledge of culture, language and Law. When Mia reflects that 'some of the boys will return men' (p53) this will mean that she will owe them a different type of respect- she will no longer culturally be allowed to say her brothers name and will need to listen to what he says.

Jy's disrespect of his grandfather particularly would have been a huge thing for the characters- and explains why Mia is concerned about it throughout the text and why her grandparents were up late at night talking about it in chapter 9.

**Trauma and intergenerational trauma:** Mia's grandparents and family were victims of Government policy- in particular Jaja who had her sister stolen as part of the Stolen Generation and being made to live on a station mission restricted from practicing culture and speaking language. Inter-generational trauma is where whole families and their future generations are affected by the negative events that happened to the earlier generation. While some of the negative affects of this are not shown in the book- Katherine's relationship breakdown, her limited involvement in the story (and maybe her children's lives) and grandparents concerns may be linked to this idea.

The authors do not elaborate on why Jy may be rebelling and acting out. Is he being a hormonal teenage 15 year old boy who just doesn't want to spend time hanging out with old people and his younger sister? Or is he experiencing trauma? The authors provide some hint to it- playing cards on page 13, bullying on page 22, funerals page 25, losing pets page 29, the struggles of living two-ways page 34, parties or family feuds page 38, possible physical violence/domestic violence hinted on page 40 with mention of scars- these hint at possibilities of some bigger social, community or family issues just behind the scenes in the novella such as potential gambling, bullying issues, alcoholism, family feuds and fights, domestic violence. The authors did not want to focus on the negatives and wanted to portray the strengths in Aboriginal culture and communities over the negative, however when digging deeper into Jy's rebellion these issues are hinted at subtly to give us clues.

### **Symbols/Motifs**

- The building storm
- The cage
- The dirrarn's freedom

### Plot Overview (Spoiler Alert)

Mia saves a *dirrarn* black cockatoo from being killed by her brother. It is revealed at the family BBQ dinner that the *dirrarn* is Mia's *jarriny* totem animal. As a storm rolls in *jawiji* points out that Jy caused it due to killing the birds. Mia borrows a cage off her aunty to care for the bird. She visits the local shops to buy a lock and is hit by a rock that her brother threw leading her to feel sad about the loss of closeness that she once had with him. Mia loses sleep worrying for the *dirrarn* and doesn't want to go to school. She arrives just in time for class and spends her time daydreaming about her pet dog that had died when she was younger. At lunch she feels upset when she sees her brother torturing grasshoppers. She helps her grandmother peel potatoes and watches her grandfather carve- she reflects on culture. Time passes and one day Mia was returning from swimming with her cousin-sisters to find her brother and cousin trying to put a snake in the *dirrarn* cage. Later that night Mia wakes up to get a drink and overhears her grandparents talking. The reader learns snippets of her grandparents' pasts and about their feelings about Jy's recent behaviour. Mia's farm family members come in from out bush to spend breakfast with them and to take the men out bush for Law. Mia falls asleep under a tree and dreams that she is the *dirrarn*. This gives her a new empathy for his situation. She realises how she can feel free.