

## Teachers Notes

### by Dr Susan La Marca

# Maybe Tomorrow

## by

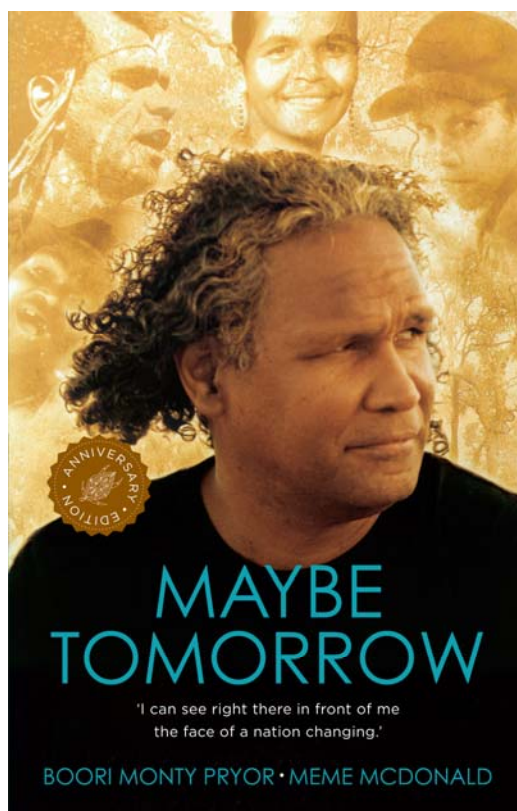
### Boori Monty Pryor and Meme McDonald

ISBN 9781742372440

Recommended for ages 13+ yrs

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Introduction .....	2
Style.....	4
Chapter quotes.....	4
Collaborative writing .....	4
Title and poem .....	5
Cover.....	5
Photographs.....	5
Autobiography.....	6
Themes .....	6
The recent past .....	6
Family.....	8
Relationships.....	9
Culture.....	9
Education .....	11
Sport .....	12
Storytelling .....	12
Perceptions.....	14
Surviving.....	17
12 <sup>th</sup> anniversary edition .....	18
Support material .....	19
Related reading .....	19
About the writers .....	22



# INTRODUCTION

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Boori Monty Pryor's career path has taken him from the Aboriginal fringe camps of his birth to the runway, the catwalk, the basketball court, the DJ console, and now to performance and storytelling around the country. 'You've got to try and play the whiteman's game and stay black while you're doing it,' his brother used to tell him.

With writer and photographer Meme McDonald, Boori leads readers along the paths he has travelled, pausing to meet his family and friends. He shares his personal and family tragedies, as well as his hopes, with humour and compassion. But this is more than a personal memoir. As Boori constantly emphasizes, he and his family are hardly unique: the patterns of their lives, both positive and negative, are determined by their Indigenous identity.

Boori's positive experience of his identity is based in family; in traditions of respect for elders, the land and the lore; in dignity based on personal behavior, not status and possessions; and in a musical and oral storytelling tradition that gives him a platform from which to speak with integrity.

His negative experience of his Indigenous identity is based in the shame, violence, ignorance and fear of a racist society. The shocking consequences for one family are a lesson for white Australians about the deep and daily damage that racism inflicts on people across our country.

First published in 1998, *Maybe Tomorrow* was a landmark book in Australia. A quick search on the Internet will reveal how often *Maybe Tomorrow* has been referenced in textbooks, bibliographies and books of cultural criticism. Speaking directly to other Australians, Boori explained the desperate need for respect and understanding of Aboriginal people and their culture.

The book's very existence is part of the hard work of reconciliation, because it is the result of collaboration between Boori Pryor, an Aboriginal Australian, and Meme McDonald, a descendent of the white invaders of Australia. On her website, Meme writes:

*Maybe Tomorrow is the first book that Boori Monty Pryor and I collaborated on. The book is in Boori's voice, written as if you were sitting down having a cup of tea with him; sharing his view on contemporary Australia, his experience growing up in North Queensland, performing in schools, and being a part of his large and much-loved Kunggandji and Birri-gubba family.*

*When I first met Boori and we discussed writing this book, I felt privileged to have this opportunity to learn about Aboriginal culture and Boori's family. Three years later, when we finished writing, I realised that I had been learning about myself, my sense of belonging in this country and a way to survive the challenges of life.*

– <http://www.mememcdonald.com/books/maybetomorrow.htm>:

Meme's experience embodies the promise Boori gives us in *Maybe Tomorrow*:

*To feel happy about yourself, you must feel happy about the place you live in. To feel happy about the place you live in, you must get to know that place. To get to know that place, you must ask the people who have lived there the longest, the Aboriginal people. We have the key that can open the door to the treasures of this land.*

The book earned a special commendation in the 1998 Human Rights Awards and was short-listed in the 1999 Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards for non-fiction.

Twelve years after its first publication, *Maybe Tomorrow* has been released in a new edition, revised and updated to include significant occurrences over the past decade, such as the Rudd Government's apology, the Intervention, the Sorry Walk over the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Boori's father's funeral and the Palm Island death in custody issue.

It is as relevant today as it ever was.

## IN THE CLASSROOM

Boori Pryor is an accomplished Aboriginal storyteller and dancer who spends a lot of time performing in schools as part of his own reconciliation work. *Maybe Tomorrow* exemplifies the art of storytelling and presents teenage readers with a different kind of text, based on lived experience and expressed in vernacular language. The quote from the cover blurb demonstrates this well:

*The other day this little one asked me, 'When did you start being an Aborigine, and how old were you when you started that?'*

*Like it was a career path or something.*

*I just cracked up laughing.*

There are a number of aspects of the style which students might enjoy exploring and which can give a good 'in' to the book: the conversational, vernacular style; the collaboration between Boori and Meme; the use of extracted quotes to head chapters; the title, cover and poem of the same name; the use of photographs; and the social value of autobiography.

The book is relevant to secondary school Indigenous Studies, English and SOSE. These teachers notes follow the pattern of an English curriculum, being divided into discussions of Style and Themes, but the discussion points raised and activities suggested will be relevant to other areas of study.

The following themes are investigated:

- The recent past
- Relationships
- Culture
- Education
- Sport
- Storytelling
- Perceptions
- Surviving

The 12<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition's foreword and afterword are used to investigate the irony of the title: 12 years later, has 'tomorrow' come? Is Boori Pryor more hopeful? How is progress achieved and change measured?

As this is a new edition, we can take advantage of the fact that the book has become well known. A list of support materials is provided, such as interviews with Boori and Meme and articles and essays about the book and about its value in the classroom.

Finally, a list of related reading includes fiction and non-fiction, memoirs, and stories of young people's strength against adversity.

## STYLE

*Maybe tomorrow* is constructed in the style of a conversation. It moves casually from one topic to the next, and though it has a structure based on Pryor's life and his experiences, it is more than this, being a record of the thoughts and views of a number of other family members and friends. The style of the language and how it is used is very real, succinct and powerful, often hard-hitting in confronting big issues or emotions. At the same time, Pryor, with McDonald's help, manages to create a sense that this is a sharing amongst friends.

McDonald calls the book 'time with a generous and humorous voice from this country' (p. 5), and it is this generosity of spirit and love of humanity, despite its ugliness at times, that gives the book its conversational style.

- Do you think this style of writing is easily achieved?
- Is it a result of the people, their gifts as storytellers, the partnership of writer and storyteller, or is it the strength of the stories themselves that give the book its heart?

## CHAPTER QUOTES

Each chapter begins with a brief quote from that chapter that summarises the content and feeling of that section.

Consider these in isolation:

- *What I'm talking about:*  
'To feel happy about yourself you must feel happy about the place you live in.' (p. 8)
- *Where I start:*  
'My main asset in the role I play as storyteller is that I'm not angry.' (p. 16)
- *Where I go from there:*  
'A lot of people have suffered and died for me to be able to keep these songs and dances.' (p. 43)
- *Away from home:*  
'You can't fall down. You fall down, you die.' (p. 77)
- *Finding my way back:*  
'All I need is to hear their voices' (p. 116)
- *No matter where you are:*  
'It overawes me that these birds will come out and dance with you even over the other side of the world.' (p. 155)

Do these quotes, in isolation, adequately represent the book? *Maybe tomorrow* is full of meaningful passages that offer powerful imagery and heartfelt feeling. If you had to choose one quote from anywhere in the book to sum up what the story has meant to you, what would you choose?

## MANY VOICES – THE COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

There is an excellent short video (23 minutes) on the collaborative writing process undertaken by Boori Pryor and Meme McDonald on *Maybe Tomorrow* and a range of other successful titles (*Boori and Meme: The Process of Collaborative Writing* (1999) VEA).

Viewing the video would be a useful introduction to collaborative writing but it offers more than this alone. The video provides a sense of the heartfelt and honest approach these two talented people have to the collaborations that have brought their two cultures, and people from these cultures, together.

The book was constructed from taped and transcribed conversations. It was then read first for approval by their elders (McDonald, 'The two of us' All about books, *The Age*).

- This is a book that involves a number of voices whilst revolving around a central figure.  
Is this a strength of the book?
- How do the sometimes extended views of others (e.g. Larry Walsh pp. 143 to 147; Pryor's mother p. 179; Chicky's story of Liam pp. 134 to 137) impact upon the structure, and therefore your reading, of the text?

## **TITLE AND POEM**

Bantick (*Canberra Sunday Times*, 1998) said; 'The title carries with it a lament for the past and a longing for the future.'

- Is this what it means to you?

Pryor states that the title comes from something his Auntie Pauline said to them when they were discussing the book. She could tell them 'deadly stories', she could tell them lots of things but, she says, 'maybe tomorrow'. Read over this passage (p. 116).

- What does Auntie Pauline mean? She can tell them but she won't? She can't?
- What significance does this phrase have for Auntie Pauline or Pryor and McDonald?
- What does it mean to you in relation to the text?

Consider the uncredited poem 'Maybe Tomorrow' (pp. 190-1)

- How does this poem relate to the text?
- What links can you see to Pryor's life and the struggles of his family?
- How does the poem make you feel? Hopeful, despondent?

Students could write their own short poem in response to the text beginning with the title prompt 'Maybe Tomorrow'.

## **COVER**

The cover of this book is evocative of relationships and past lives. Significant people from Pryor's life circle halo-like over his head. The faces are all different but their connection to him is clear. As one reads the book, the significance and the power of this image is made apparent.

Consider the use of colour: How do the choices made affect your reactions to the image?

Boori's black t-shirt becomes the backdrop for the text; again consider the choice of colours and how these work with the cover as a whole.

What other image is represented on the cover? How is this integral to Boori's story?

## **PHOTOGRAPHS**

The photographic inserts in the book play an important part as evocative and moving additions to Pryor's story.

Of particular note is the family photograph at the end of the second group of photographs. It shows happy, proud faces and a large and connected family.

Consider what information each photograph gives us about the subject of the photo, their family and the time at which the photo was taken.

## AUTOBIOGRAPHY

'Boori' is the name given to Pryor by his family (p. 187). It means 'fire'.

- How might this name relate to his life and his role within his and the wider community?
- Do you think it is an appropriate name for him?
- What other names would symbolically represent the man and his life for you?

McDonald (Bantick, 1998) mentions the need, in writing the book, to ensure Pryor's elders were heard, and to give voice to their story to an audience that may not know anything of them at all.

- Is this why many people choose to write about their lives, to have their story put before the community? Perhaps to educate? To spread an idea? To justify actions or views? To record what happened? Air your side of the story?
- Why do many of us feel a need to tell our story? Or the stories of others?

Consider other autobiographies, or biographies, alongside *Maybe Tomorrow*.

- True stories of people's lives are a very popular genre. Often, they outline struggles or crises. Why are they so popular?
- Is there a link between autobiography and the eons-old craft of oral storytelling?

Pryor has his own childhood scars, as well as a raft of tragedy and joy in his adult life, that is documented in the pages of *Maybe Tomorrow*.

- Do you think the process of writing this book was cathartic for him or for his community?

In a very interesting discussion with a German woman, Pryor recounts how they explore what white culture might have given to the Aboriginal community. The woman suggests the power to write (p. 191).

- How important is the skill in our modern world?
- Could Pryor's story reach as many people in any other form?
- What other media could powerfully convey his story?

## THEMES

### THE RECENT PAST

The history of the Australian Aboriginal people is vast and most of it is not the topic of this text, but a great deal of *Maybe Tomorrow* touches on events from the recent past and how these have affected the lives of Aboriginal people today.

Pryor says that during his adolescence,

*Aboriginal people weren't regarded as Australians. The struggle for my people even to be regarded as human beings was intense, let alone having the right to vote. There were many lives lost leading up to this point in time when, in 1967, a National Referendum was held, and finally Aboriginal people were recognised as Australian citizens with the right to vote. (p. 44)*

1. Pryor's story in *Maybe Tomorrow* could be used as the impetus for a research study into the history of Aboriginal people since the arrival of settlers.

Particular attention could be paid to the white man's perception of Aborigines. How were they perceived throughout the history of white settlement?

Emphasise the need to consult primary sources to build up a picture of these perceptions over time.

2. The 1967 National Referendum that Pryor refers to would make an interesting study. Consult the historical documentation to uncover the various views held at this time.
  - Interview anyone you may know who remembers the referendum. What do they recall of the community feeling and of their own views?
3. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century the image of Aboriginal people as uncontrollable drunks permeated much of white society. It would be relatively safe to say that this image was foremost in the minds of many.

On pages 57 through 59 Pryor addresses this perception. Read over these passages.

- Is his view of how most would perceive the two men he describes accurate? Why or why not?
  - Pryor says that Aboriginal people have 'a lot of good reasons to drink.' (p. 59) What are these reasons?
  - What is meant by Pryor's brother's statement – 'It's just that city blacks have been raped longer than country blacks' (p. 63)
4. Pryor suggests that, 'People find ways to avoid facing the truth....' (p. 69). The stock responses - 'We didn't do it', 'It happened two hundred years ago', 'You're not full blood anyway' or 'You came from somewhere else anyway' are not unusual.
    - What other excuses or views, often based on limited research or questionable evidence, have been used throughout history to justify the treatment of, and the assumptions made about, Aborigines?
  5. Pryor says, '...the Queensland Act that was in force right up until 1971 dictated how every aspect of your social and economic life as an Aboriginal person was run.' (p. 77).
    - This absolute control of an individual's life is difficult to comprehend. Can we have an adequate understanding of what this means?
    - How can a group operating under these measures of control thrive?
    - Can you think of any other groups around the world that have faced similar responses 'to avoid facing the truth' or suffered similar absolute control of their lives?
  6. Pryor also considers the recent history of government agencies that work with Aboriginal people, saying,

*...the way things are structured at present is that there are industries within the country which are built on us staying down, out and dependent on handouts. This has been going on since invasion day. This is the way governments have kept us powerless.* (p. 104)

Gary Foley said, 'If all the blacks died tomorrow, then the next day there'd be a long line of white people queuing for the dole.' (p. 105)

Uncle Peter tells Pryor stories of being treated as if he was a 'performing animal' (p. 105) brought out to dance for visitors, but then not allowed to paint up or dance when they wanted, only to perform on command – 'we were only black when they wanted us to be'. (p. 106)

- Do you think these controlling structures were set up with the best of intentions? Were those who established them merely misguided, or intentionally destructive?
  - Can you think of other groups, both within Australia and internationally, now and in the past, that were treated similarly? For example, Pryor feels a strong kinship with the situation in Ireland (p. 171).
7. Pryor documents the results of a commission into deaths in custody, in which his family was involved, where, despite sensible and helpful recommendations being made, none were implemented. (p. 142)
- Why do you think this happened?
8. Past events are often remembered differently by individuals. As discussed later in these notes, perception, and the preconceived ideas we bring to issues and ideas, can impact upon our views. Pryor's cousin highlights this with a question he puts to a group of white people about their own recent past - Could you forget ANZAC day? A day such as this conjures up strong feelings about loss and sacrifice, and the day itself is seen as symbolic of much of what Australia is, and claims to stand for, by many within the community. Pryor goes on to question that if we consider ANZAC day as important to Australians, can we not understand that Aborigines cannot forget the massacres in their past? (p. 165)
- Is this a fair comparison?
  - Have the atrocities suffered by the Aborigines ever been viewed by you in this light before?

## **FAMILY**

Family is central to Pryor's life and a central tenet of his community. He finds strength in his family in times of need. Family, to him, is perceived slightly differently to the manner in which it is understood by many white people. Pryor explains how he is part of a strong, extended family group. Pryor says, 'being part of the group is all important' (p. 17). Pryor's mother (p. 124) and father (pp. 27, 49-50) are a constant source of support to him.

He goes on to say that, 'Having a strong family unit as well as extended family, we drew strength from each other in the difficult times' (p. 45) and 'I am the vehicle and my family are the spirits that drive that vehicle. Individuality, that isn't important.' (p. 128)

Place is also part of this family focus, Pryor says, 'Yarrabah has always been my strength' (p. 116)

- Is this vastly different from other communities? Are the ties different, stronger, and more meaningful? Why, why not?

Pryor also teaches the young that the elders of the community are also relatives and that in today's world, teachers, too (p. 52), are crucial role models. The young need strength, wisdom and advice in order to beat temptation.

Pryor's Nana Susie could speak language, her Aboriginal language, but never did. (p. 190)

- Why?

The Pryor family approach members of the Gribble family (whites) to inform them that they are related. (pp. 121-123)

- How is this information received?

Most importantly for Pryor the publication of this book showed his family as human, a family, not just statistics or numbers (p. 170).

- Do other members of the wider community feel they are perceived as statistics first and a family second? Why does he feel this way?

## RELATIONSHIPS

In an article in *The Age* titled 'The Two of Us', McDonald quotes Bill Bryson:

*Aboriginal and white Australians can walk side by side without seeing each other, they seem to live in parallel universes.* ('All About Books' section, May 9, 2005)

McDonald claims that when she and Pryor work together they are reaching for 'common ground', a 'shared humanity', 'seeing into each other's world across a cultural divide.' She says:

*We like to think our writing is about creating respect for each other, for ourselves, and for the difference between our cultures.* (McDonald, 'The Two of Us' All About Books, *The Age*, May 9, 2005).

- Do you think Bryson has captured the essence of the relationship between white and Aboriginal Australians?
- Is this the relationship portrayed by McDonald and Pryor through their collaboration?
- Is this view reflected in the text of *Maybe Tomorrow*?

In the foreword to the 1998 edition, McDonald said that this book is, 'many conversations woven together as one. It's an opportunity to listen'. She also acknowledges her own need to 'just listen' to Boori when he had an audience in the palm of his hand (p. 4), a need she felt so strongly she put her pen aside and listened.

- How crucial is listening to any relationship?
- What makes a good listener?
- Has 'Australia' 'listened' to the Aboriginal community?

Pryor describes learning from teachers what he needed to survive in the white world and from his family the tools he needed to survive in the black world (p. 49)

- Are there any tools that are necessary for both worlds?
- We are all part of one humanity. Why are the needs or skills of each culture different? Or are they?

The tenuous relationship between white and black culture, as represented by much in the book *Maybe Tomorrow*, is, at times, problematic. Pryor says, 'What I have had to watch is that the white culture does not swamp my black heart.' (p. 50)

Despite this Pryor lives in both worlds – 'Respecting both, I pay homage to both' (p. 50). But there is still a tension – down south he is 'tense and alert' but at home he feels he can relax. (p. 127).

- Why?

Forming a relationship is a two way interaction. Pryor, despite his excellent efforts, cannot do the work of making connections alone; he needs the wider community to make an effort for any healing relationship to be reality. He says, '...we need white people to heal, for us to heal, see? These young people are the light' (p. 154) and 'reconciliation has to start from within yourself' (p. 165).

- Is the community ready or able to listen and heal?

## CULTURE

McDonald discusses the difference between on time and being 'in good time' (p. 2).

A trivial, but basic, cultural difference between two cultures, perhaps – but in other explorations of what working with Pryor has brought to her life, McDonald acknowledges his culture's profound effect on her life. McDonald experienced a mind-shift about her own culture and her views on the culture of Aboriginal people when visiting Pryor's family. She told one journalist:

*When Boori first took me to Yarrabah, the reserve where his mother's family came from, to walk on that land and see everyone there whose ancestors have been there for thousands of years, I cried. I wasn't feeling sorry for Aboriginal people, I was crying because I felt sorry for my people, because of what we had missed out on, this amazing culture, this amazing sense of belonging to the land, of understanding it and we just didn't get it.*

Pryor strongly suggests that one of the most powerful aids to healing is a clear understanding of Aboriginal culture and an unfettered embrace of all that this culture embodies. He says, 'If people can see the beauty of Aboriginal culture, which is this country, then this will be a much happier place' and 'To be happy about yourself you must feel happy about, know, the place you live in'. He goes on to say, 'To get to know that place, you must ask the people who lived there the longest, the Aboriginal people. We have the key that can open the door to the treasures of this land' (pp. 13-15). This place, from which we learn and receive nourishment, is crucial to Pryor (pp. 97, 124).

Getting to know place and culture is tied to respect, an attitude that Pryor addresses on more than one occasion in the text. He says, 'There's three things that you have to remember. Three things that you have to do in life; Respect your elders. Respect each other. And respect the things that are living around you.' and that 'if you are in the bush and you don't listen, then you die' (p. 17)

Pryor claims that 'disrespect comes from being sanitised' (p. 34).

These are very powerful statements.

- Do you feel that white culture is too far removed from the world Pryor describes to make a valid connection? Why or why not?

The text of *Maybe Tomorrow* makes it clear that the culture Pryor is describing is rich and more complex than many may realise. Pryor makes it clear that there are a range of different cultures among Aboriginal people in Australia. The common thread is always 'respect for the land and the living things' (pp. 29, 160), but there are as many as 700 different Aboriginal groups across the continent with, potentially, a similar number of different customs and cultural practices.

Pryor says that, 'Aboriginal culture was intense, it was very strict and it was very strong' (p. 18).

This is, perhaps, not the description one would expect when one calls to mind the way Aboriginal culture is often portrayed in the media.

- Did *Maybe Tomorrow* challenge your views of Aboriginal culture? How?

Read over the poem written in the Birra-gubba language and translated into English (p. 100)

- What does it tell you about the person who wrote it?
- How do they view their culture?

- What do they see as the issues facing their culture?

Consider the links between religion and culture mentioned briefly by Pryor (p. 177)

- How have the two been linked, for good and bad, in the recent history of Aboriginal people?

Pryor acknowledges the questioning of David Suzuki – What is a successful culture?

Suzuki sees a successful culture as one that keeps going (p. 72), is sustainable.

- Is this Aboriginal culture? Western cultures?
- What has, and, will, stand the test of time, in your opinion?

An integral part of past government policy in the treatment of Aboriginal people involved physically removing them from their culture. Pryor says that, on the reserves, his family were punished for trying to maintain their culture (p. 45). He states that separation from one's culture contributes to confusion and that, 'That confusion reigns supreme within your mind. It just doesn't let you have faith in yourself.' (p. 46)

- Can you imagine being separated from your culture? Your places of worship, your cultural practices, your home?
- How much of our identity, who we are, is tied up in these things?

One of the most heart-warming aspects of Pryor's story is his passion for sharing his culture with others. He encourages questioning and listening in an effort to understand and learn. He says:

*Don't ever be scared to ask a question. It doesn't matter if it is demeaning, racist, silly, ignorant, stupid, any question at all....All anyone has to do is ask. The hardest thing, though, is to have the courage to stand up and ask a question. A question is very different from a statement. (p. 73)*

- What does he mean by this?
- How are a question and a statement different in his eyes?

Pryor also says, 'what they haven't been told is there is a great deal of Aboriginal culture that they can feel part of...[they need to] ask then listen' (p. 102)

## EDUCATION

Read over Pryor's view on education – his wish for a 'special room' (pp. 97-9).

- Could this work?
- What are your views on his dream?

On pages 99, 100, 107 and 108, Pryor begins two sentences with the word 'Imagine' in his discussion of the kind of education he would like to see in this country for all young people.

This evokes the famous song 'Imagine', by John Lennon, about world peace. Play the song to the students and discuss the similarities, differences and attitudes of Pryor and Lennon.

What is an idealist? The dictionary describes an idealist as

'a person who cherishes or pursues high or noble principles, purposes, goals, etc.'

'a visionary or impractical person' and 'a person who represents things as they might or should be rather than as they are.'

- Is there a place for idealists in our modern world?

Pryor shares two examples. First, a year 12 student in America who knew very little about the indigenous people of her own country, Australia, had only been aware of bad images. But she made a point of learning more when she came home (p. 101). The second concerns a student teacher from Canada who was expected to teach Aboriginal studies from a book, with no preparation, in a situation where no one else knew any more than was expressed in the text (p.102).

- Does this ring true with your own experience of education about Indigenous culture and history?
- What is needed?

## SPORT

Throughout the text the importance of sport of many kinds in Pryor's life is noted. Keeping oneself fit and sober (p. 46), aiding concentration (p. 47) and mental and physical discipline (p. 111) are all important to him. He also notes how sport can bring groups of kids together, describing how a ball immediately engaged McDonald's visiting son with Pryor's younger family members (p. 153).

Pryor had an easier time of it at school because he was good at football and other sports, and this ability helped him to feel good about himself, and have faith in his abilities. Pryor says, 'Football was a way of having equality in the community' (p. 46). Sport's importance in Pryor's life cannot be underestimated; he describes his reaction to verbal abuse demonstrating the many lessons that sport gave him:

*I used to imagine them bashing me over the head with a big stick with every single word of abuse they could think of written on it. By not reacting and concentrating on my game and just playing football, I'd take their stick away, I'd disarm them, I'd take their weapon off them. Then they are the ones who became weak. (p. 48)*

Pryor also uses sport as a metaphor for various aspects of his own journey. For instance, he describes his performing in schools after his brother Paul's death as changing lanes in a track race; moving from the lane he was in to Paul's lane to carry on what his brother had begun (p. 14). Sport is often used as a metaphor for life: it plays an important role in the lives of many people.

- Explore the stories of other sportsmen and women. Search for examples of their sport offering them, and others, an example of how to live life, or as a support for their own personal journey.

Sport is the medium through which many white Australians connect with Aboriginal people. Research an Aboriginal sportsperson – Cathy Freeman, Michael Long, Nova Perris-Kneebone, Nicky Winmar and Adam Goodes could begin the list. The students will be surprised, perhaps, at how many they know.

- Consider the relationship this Aboriginal sportsperson has with their culture and the role that sport has played in their personal development. How these sportsmen and women are perceived by the wider community would also be worth considering in the context of the text.

## STORYTELLING

When McDonald is attempting to persuade Pryor into working with her to write a book on his life, she acknowledges that Pryor was 'swamped by teenagers wanting more of the strength he had to offer that made them feel good about themselves.' (p. 4)

- Why do his stories make them feel good?
- Do you think his work is important? Relevant? Why?

Pryor says, 'I keep doing this work in schools because it's my way of changing things, of making it better.' (p. 185)

Pryor says, 'My strength is that I am a storyteller, a communicator' (p. 21); 'a link' (p. 115); 'one link in the chain' (p. 186). He says, 'When I'm telling a really good story I'm fully, totally, absorbed in it' (p. 24).

- Can anyone tell stories effectively?
- Does Pryor have a special gift?

Pryor feels it is Paul telling the stories through him. Even his mother recognises Paul in his storytelling. Pryor says:

*I am the driver of the vehicle but a lot of people jump on and push me. They push me along and pull me up. Sometimes I put too much into it, to make things better, and that's why I got so sick I nearly died one time there. I have to keep some space for me, too.* (p. 75)

There is no doubt that Pryor takes a 'psychological beating' (p. 114) from this work, investing, as he does, so much of himself in his audience and the stories.

Describing how storytelling connects him to his audience, he says:

*They will open up their hearts and their minds and you go in there and that's a really nice place to be. You can do all these wonderful things in there you know.* (p. 21)

He sees the story and the audience together as a 'lump of clay' that can be shaped (p. 23): 'Your telling of the story is caressing their inner self' (p. 24). Pryor's investment in the process is unquestionable.

- Is this why he is so successful?
- Is there power in the stories themselves?

For Pryor, 'It's from the land we are on. To hear stories from and about your own country gives you a strong sense of belonging' (p. 24). It is also about a respect for place and for animal life (p. 33).

On page 25 Pryor talks as if this knowing and belonging is open to all.

- Do you feel that it is?
- Did you feel differently before reading *Maybe Tomorrow*?

Pryor says, 'My main asset in this role I play as storyteller, is that I'm not angry.' (p. 24)

- How does not being angry help Pryor in his work as a storyteller?
- He is an exceptional man to not feel angry. Should he? Would you?

Storytelling for Pryor is not just about words. Far from it: storytelling is a mixture of words and dance, ritual painting and actions that bring the story to life for the audience. Pryor sees dance as ritual – a tool for communicating beyond language barriers (p. 30) that is sometimes linked to painting. He claims 'Stories, dances and paintings teach you.' (p. 31)

Discussing dancing in his *judda jah* with nothing else but paint on, Pryor says, 'When I say paint, I mean this ochre that comes from the earth. When I put it on, nothing can touch me...my shield...my plate of armour' (p. 43)

The example of the Honey Dance (p. 31) shows that the art continues to evolve as it incorporates elements about the different honey bees brought to this country by white settlers.

The children that write to Pryor often draw for him, demonstrating that they are listening and understanding his messages. Pryor says, 'I need them to heal for me to heal, you know what I mean? They are the light that shows me the way through that room of darkness' (p. 40).

*I keep all of these gifts locked in my heart, inside me, inside here. Each one is really precious to have. So, when the anger comes at you and it's really powerful, for me, all I do is jump back inside. It's like a big tent. ....It only takes one or two seconds and I'm in there. I always have this place inside my heart and all I do is jump in there, and when I come back out the sun is shining. (p. 76)*

- What is the room of darkness?
- Why are the gifts sent to Pryor so important to him?

Pryor notes from both his work in schools and as a DJ, that music eases troubles (p. 87); that you can 'quell their anger with music' (p. 96).

- Is this true in other situations?

Not all of Pryor's performing experiences are pleasant; sometimes he is faced with a difficult audience and he describes this in the text (p. 61). He reacts by continuing to give of himself and his culture (p. 62). In these intense situations he calls on the strength of his family.

- What gives you strength in difficult situations?

## PERCEPTIONS

How we perceive things can be a powerful influence on what we do and say. But perceptions are not always based on fact. Sometimes, the facts can be hard to discern and, on other occasions, facts may be manipulated. In *Maybe Tomorrow*, Pryor explores a number of times when perception plays an important role. His discussion makes it clear that we must always be critical and questioning of any assumption, and attempt to see alternative points of view.

Pryor suggests that the words we use can alter our view of an object, place or event. There is no doubt that there is power in terminology. The following are all discussed by Pryor, some on more than one occasion:

- Missions or Concentration camps (p. 55)
- Settlement or Invasion (p. 55)
- Abo (p. 64-5)

Consider the different feeling that various words engender. Describing the places Aboriginal people were sent to live as either missions or concentration camps evokes vastly different views of what these places were and how they were run and why.

Can you think of other occasions when the descriptive word used affects how something is perceived? For example, there are a number of words currently in use within the community and media reports to describe refugees – refugees, asylum seekers, illegal aliens, non-citizens and queue jumpers, to name a few.

Pryor also notes how place names that carry bad associations can also be offensive. For instance:

- Townsville is named after a slave trader (p. 80)
- Dalrymple's hotel is named after a man known for killing Aboriginal people (p. 80)
- Area of Townsville known as 'the other end' (p. 77)

Pryor goes on to say that the name Black Gin Creek is 'like calling a creek 'white slut creek'. He suggests that names like this are akin to expecting a Jewish person to live on a street called 'Hitler Drive' (p. 81).

Do we underestimate the power of names and also the words we use to describe events?

As part of this discussion, Pryor also considers the changes to what Aboriginal people have been called by the white community over time (p. 141). He comes up with the following in order of their use:

Savages

Natives

aboriginal

Aboriginal

Koori

Indigenous

- Why did these name changes occur?
- What does each word imply?
- Do you think there is power in how we choose to name people or things?

Perceptions about the history of white settlement in Australia are also questioned by Pryor, and he rightly gives us other interpretations that cause the reader to reflect. As an example, Pryor discusses one version of white settlement describing heroic explorers 'discovering' a harsh land (p. 54).

- How does this view sit next to the many tens of thousands of years of Aboriginal culture in Australia? A land that met their needs and that they acknowledge as the centre of their culture; not a 'harsh', inhospitable place at all.
- Are you aware of similar descriptions of white settlement in books and other media?

Should they all be questioned? Or, again, is this a matter of perception? Napoleon Bonaparte is quoted as having said that **'History is the version of past events that people have decided to agree upon.'**

Assumptions based on race are also made about people. Pryor describes a situation where there are two drunks one white and one black, on a bench. How we see these two people and their respective stories will depend on how we perceive them.

Read over the passage in question (p. 58).

- Do you see truth in Pryor's description of how people would respond?
- Why or why not?

Unlike other factors that an individual can change about themselves, what Pryor says is true - 'Your blackness is always there' (p. 16).

- Do you think this means that, as Aboriginal people, Pryor and his family are judged before they have said or done anything?

- How must this feel?
- Are there other groups within our community who are similarly burdened?

Pryor describes the work of two women educators. They ask questions before working with the children to discover their knowledge and perceptions about Aboriginal people, and find many of the students ignorant of most aspects of Aboriginal culture (p 28).

- Is this still the case 12 years on?
- Conduct similar surveys of other students or family members to gain an insight into their knowledge and views. Are you surprised by the results?

Pryor also engages with the question 'Who is a 'real' aborigine?' Is this, too, a matter of perception?

Some suggest that people are not Aboriginal if they are not living traditionally. This can lead to children doubting their Aboriginality and a 'confusion of identity' (p. 37); a feeling of being 'between two cultures.'

Consider the following examples of perceptions from the text:

- ❖ Pryor describes a young girl who has asked questions and thought deeply as 'an Aboriginal person in [her] heart' (p. 39). Is being Aboriginal about how you feel or think?
- ❖ 'Angry' kid – approaches Pryor's performance with preconceived views on Aborigines (p. 63)
- ❖ Pryor says that he knows our stories, our dances, but we don't know his – so who is the slow one? (p. 66)
- ❖ Pryor never imagined he would meet white fullas who could not read or write (p. 82)
- ❖ '...double standard meant that I had to be squeaky clean' (p. 89)
- ❖ Auntie Val: 'You see, the whiteman is taught from a very young age that white is very special. White is pure and everything to do with white is good. Look at white people's storybooks. Everything good is white, like princesses, brides and angels. Everything evil is black, like witches and death. Now that has come down for generations.' (p. 104)
- ❖ Grandmother told the kids over and over never look into the white's eyes – they can pass their evil on to you. (p. 119)
- ❖ Cathy Freeman's effect on perceptions and views (pp. 167-8)

Pryor was considered not the 'right' black for a Perth nightclub (pp. 92-3) after they had incorrectly assumed he was a black American and then found otherwise. When he turned up for the job they would not employ him. Pryor fought this and received a payout and an apology (p. 94).

- What does this tell us about the perceptions of the nightclub owners?

After this happened, Pryor shared his pain with a holocaust survivor – he felt safe, listened to, understood (p. 94).

- Are there similarities between their respective stories?

There is an extraordinary amount of power in the perceptions that we form, regardless of whether these perceptions or assumptions are based on fact. Pryor says, 'If you tell anyone for long enough that they are hopeless, then they become hopeless.' (p. 103). As an example of words ruling reality, despite what may or may not be true, Pryor's friend, the teacher Vince Toohey, says to Aboriginal people, 'Don't be arrogant. Don't be ignorant' (p.

71). One could take this to mean don't assume, don't approach someone or something with preconceived perceptions.

Fear is also tied to how and why we arrive at poor perceptions of others. Pryor says:

*There is truth in the saying that the things that scare you the most are the things that you don't know much about. (p. 41)*

## **SURVIVING**

*This is my way of fighting,  
The old people used to fight in a different way.  
They fought with spears.  
Then, my parents fought to stay alive in the reserves.  
My brother just bent under the numbers.  
He took everyone on at once and lost.  
I'm fighting in a different way.  
And I'm surviving.*

(p. x)

Consider the imagery used by Pryor in this piece.

- Can one have a fight without two willing combatants? Compare the conflict Pryor is alluding to with other conflicts throughout history.
- What is Pryor's way of fighting?
- What does 'bent under the numbers' mean?
- Can surviving ever be enough? Is it natural to want more?

At the very beginning of the book, pages 9 to 12, Pryor outlines the many sad, premature, deaths that have occurred in his family: losing Nick (p. 137), Paul (p. 132 onwards) and Kim to suicide, and his nephew (p. 134) in a car crash. In describing why, Pryor says,

*'It became too much for him. And he hanged himself.'* (p. 11)

*'As time went on the shadows became heavier. She had no place to breathe any fresh air into her body.'* (p. 11)

Dealing with these tragedies, along with the misrepresentation by police and media, is like a 'cesspool, a whirlpool' (p. 140), a 'whirlpool of negativity' (p. 141).

How could such young, talented, vibrant people get to such a point in their lives that ending their life becomes an option?

Pryor says,

*When I speak about the deaths of these four special people who died in four very bad ways before their time, it's not to make people say, 'Oh poor little blackfulla' or to make us look like victims. What I want people to do is to really sit down and ask, 'Why did these people die?' Because it is an important part and structure of this country. I'm not just speaking about my family. Most Aboriginal families I know have lost one or two people in the same way. As an Aboriginal family you expect that. You really do expect that. These four people had so much to give. Not only as Aboriginal people but as human beings.* (p. 12)

- These are powerful and moving words. How is Pryor able to continue with these issues and events on his mind?

Pryor claims to gain his strength to go on from family, from his passion for performing and from what this work does for his people and his country (p. 12-13). He says that, 'Anger

and hate will destroy you' (p. 66). Auntie Val, who works with young people in trouble, says they are 'full of anger' and that they need to 'heal their identity' (p. 103).

Pryor says that to deal with anger,

*You have to become soft like a pillow, so the anger has somewhere to land. Then eventually, the anger will peter out and not hurt itself or you. Hard against hard means you just bruise each other. To be soft, you have to become bigger than the issue itself. My amazing mother does this all the time.* (p. 74)

Pryor says that you must "become bigger than the issue itself." But there is no doubt that overcoming the issues in play is far more complex and difficult than many can imagine.

Pryor discusses ways of learning the different skills necessary for survival. He says that stories told to scare children had the purpose of keeping them safe by encouraging them to respect nature and its rules. He says, 'You see, as a young fulla you learn not to go in front. Always walk behind your dad or your elders in the bush. You don't do anything unless your elders tell you' (p. 19).

In a wider sense, Pryor sees three areas of learning that the kids must embrace in order to survive - learning about culture, school learning and learning how to protect yourself from the authorities (p. 54).

- Is this what would be expected from most young people? Are there just too many and varied things to be learned?

Pryor says, 'As a blackfulla, you can't fall down. You fall down, you die' (p. 115) and that 'being on the reserves meant you had to watch your culture and your people die slowly' (p. 121) because the 'pride has been kicked out of them' (p. 129).

Paul Fourmile, Pryor's cousin, says, 'I'm happy when my people die. They have no more pain. They rest in peace then. Us that are still alive, we got that pain of fighting for our survival all the time.' (p. 124)

Larry Walsh, exploring deaths in custody (p. 143), says, 'Separation is still one of the worst punishments in many communities' (p. 145)

- These words and descriptions are akin to what one would expect to find in the account of the life of a prisoner or a slave. Are there other examples of similarities between the experiences of the Aboriginal people in *Maybe Tomorrow* and such groups?

## **12<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY FOREWORD AND AFTERWORD**

At the time of the book's first publication, in a range of supporting interviews and articles, McDonald said one of the messages of the book was the possibility of a 'positive future' (Bantick, 1998).

- Has there been positive change in the ensuing 12 years since the original publication?

The quote that appears on the front cover – 'I can see right there in front of me the face of a changing nation' – is also on the front of the 1998 edition of the book.

- Does this statement mean something different now?
- What has changed?

'You can't go back and rearrange what happened. All you can do is make it better and make amends for what happened. The way to that is through listening to each other.' (p. 41)

- Do you think there is more 'listening' taking place now?

For Pryor, this book is a smothered voice now heard (p.192). He describes how the positive, powerful responses to the book here, and also in other countries (pp. 194-7), have shown him and his family that there are people who want to listen.

Pryor's father said, 'you fight a better fight than me with this book.' (p. 198)

- Do you think the book's publication and good reception has made a difference to Pryor's family? To the wider community?
- Is there good reason in reissuing an anniversary edition? Why, why not?

Towards the end of the afterword Pryor discusses the occasion of the Prime Minister saying 'Sorry' (p. 201). He includes in the book some of the texts that friends and family sent him after this historic event.

- What sense do you get of Pryor's reaction to the 'Saying Sorry' event? And the views expressed in the texts messages (p. 202)?
- Why does he save them, every one, to his mobile phone?

## SUPPORT MATERIAL

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----- *Boori and Meme: The Process of Collaborative Writing* (1999) (video), Video Education Australia, 23 minutes.

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**Meme McDonald's** website: <<http://www.mememcdonald.com/>>

**Ridge**, Judith (2006) 'Stories to Make Mountains Start Breathing' in *Horn Book Magazine*, March/April 2006.

**Dwyer**, Anthony (2003) Interview with Meme McDonald and Boori Monty Prior to be found at:

<[http://www.papertigers.org/interviews/archived\\_interviews/mmcDonald\\_bmpryor.html](http://www.papertigers.org/interviews/archived_interviews/mmcDonald_bmpryor.html)>

## RELATED READING

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**Crew**, Garry (1995) *No Such Country*, Mammoth.

**Danalis**, John (2009) *Riding the Black Cockatoo*, Allen & Unwin.

**Eaton**, Anthony (2001) *A New Kind of Dreaming*, UQP.

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**Lucashenko**, Melissa (1998) *Killing Darcy*, UQP.  
**McDonald**, Meme & Boori Pryor (2002) *Njunjil the Sun*, Allen & Unwin.  
**McDonald**, Meme & Boori Pryor (1998) *My Girragundji*, Allen & Unwin.  
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**McDonald**, Meme & Boori Pryor (2002) *Fly Trap*, Allen & Unwin.  
**McDonald**, Meme (2007) *Love Like Water*, Allen & Unwin.  
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**Norrington**, Leonie (2007) *Leaving Barrumbi*, Omnibus Books.  
**Spillman**, David & Lisa Wilyuka *Us Mob Walawurra*, Magabala Books.

#### **Autobiographies / Memoirs**

**Albert**, Trish. (2008) *Fighting for Rights*, Port Melbourne: Rigby.  
**Birch**, Reginald (2003) *Wyndham Yella Fella*, Broome, W.A.: Magabala Books.  
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#### **STRENGTH AGAINST ADVERSITY**

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**Evans**, Alywyn (2004) *Walk in My Shoes*, Penguin.

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**Ung**, Loung (2000) *First they Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*. Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins. (Living under the Khmer Rouge regime.)

**Yen Mah**, Adeline (1999) *Chinese Cinderella: Story of an Unwanted Daughter*, Penguin

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**Freedman**, Rod *Noel Tovey* [videorecording]. Study guide:

[http://www.filmaust.com.au/programs/teachers\\_notes/8887ausbio\\_tovey.pdf](http://www.filmaust.com.au/programs/teachers_notes/8887ausbio_tovey.pdf)

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**Weis**, Bob (2006) *Women of the Sun 25 Years Later* [videorecording] a film by Bob Weis. [Australia]: Generation Films, 2006.

## ABOUT THE WRITERS

### BOORI MONTY PRYOR

**Boori Monty Pryor** was born in North Queensland. His father is from the Birrigubba of the Bowen region and his mother from Yarrabah (near Cairns), a descendant of the Kungganji and Kukuimudji. Boori is a multi-talented performer who has worked in film, television, modelling, sport, music and theatre-in-education.

Boori is also an accomplished didjeridoo player who has performed solo with the Brisbane Symphony Orchestra. He has performed in many schools throughout Australia, Europe and Asia.

Boori has written several award-winning children's books with Meme McDonald, including *My Girragundji*, *The Binna Binna Man* and *Njunjul the Sun*.

Boori lives in Melbourne, but spends much of the year on the road. His stories are about finding strength within to deal with the challenges without, and his skill is to create positive visions of the future for both Indigenous and white people.

### MEME MCDONALD

**Meme McDonald** is a graduate of Victorian College of the Arts Drama School. She began her career as a theatre and festival director, specialising in the creation of large-scale outdoor performance events. Since then she has worked as a writer, photographer and, most recently, on film projects. Meme's 2007 novel, *Love like water*, was shortlisted for the CBCA Book of the Year Award for Older Readers.

### DR SUSAN LA MARCA

**Susan La Marca** is a secondary school teacher-librarian. Her PhD, completed in 2003, explored how a teacher-librarian creates a reading environment.

Susan works for the School Library Association of Victoria (SLAV) and edits their research journal *Synergy*. She is also an associate editor of the journal *Viewpoint: on books for young adults* and editor of a number of books on reading and school library design. She is the co author, with Dr Pam Macintyre, of *Knowing readers: unlocking the pleasures of reading* (2006).

As well as being the Children's Book Council of Australia awards judge for Victoria for 2006/7, Susan works as a consultant and writer in areas related to reading and teacher-librarianship. She has presented in these areas both nationally and internationally.