

## These notes are for:

- Upper Secondary, Yr 12
- Students studying the HSC unit on Belonging

## Key Learning Areas:

- English
- History
- Art

## Example of:

- Picture Book
- Historical Fiction
- Timeline Mapping
- Illustration & Design

## Experience of:

- Connection with the Land
- Cultural Diversity
- Aboriginal History
- Post-settlement History
- Visual Literacy

## Values addressed:

- Belonging to community
- Belonging to country
- A sense of identity
- Respect for the environment
- Friendship across cultures
- Change and continuity
- Social justice

## Concepts:

- Indigenous Studies
- Australian History
- Australian Environment
- Place and Space
- Time, Continuity and Change
- Culture and Identity
- Civics and Governance

\*Notes may be downloaded and printed for regular classroom use only.

Walker Books Australia Ph +61 2 9517 9577  
Locked Bag 22 Fax +61 2 9517 9997  
Newtown, N.S.W., 2042

For enquiries please contact Melissa Hamilton:  
mhamilton@walkerbooks.com.au

Notes © 2009 Walker Books Australia Pty. Ltd.  
All Rights Reserved

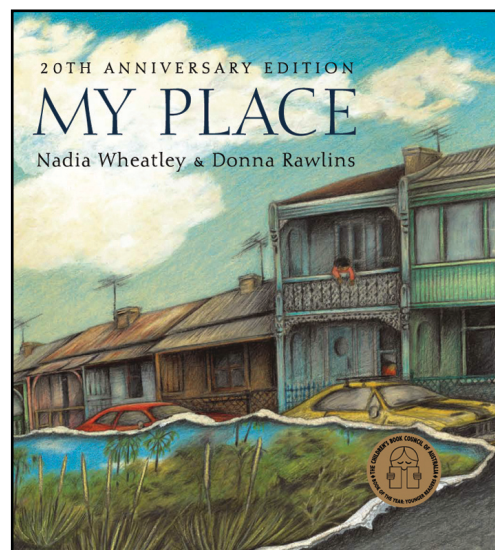
## My Place - Overview

### My Place

Written by Nadia Wheatley  
Illustrated by Donna Rawlins

*My Place* (hardback)  
ISBN: 9781921150708  
ARRP: \$29.95, NZRRP: \$34.99  
No. of Pages: 48  
August 2008

*My Place* (paperback)  
ISBN: 9781921150654  
ARRP: \$19.95, NZRRP: \$24.99  
No. of Pages: 48  
August 2008



## Outline:

**My Place** traces the history of one small part of Australia and the people who have lived there, from the Dreaming until the present day. As layers of time are peeled rhythmically back, alternating girl and boy narrators describe their homes, their families, their pets, and their special celebrations. The constant sources of renewal in the landscape are the big tree and the creek (or canal).

In the twenty years since its first publication, **My Place** has been used in both primary and secondary schools, and at tertiary level.

The book's particular focus on the twin themes of Belonging to Country and Belonging to Community make it particularly appropriate for students doing the HSC unit on Belonging in the NSW Year 12 syllabus. On each page a variety of text-types are combined, while the blend of fact and fiction and the backward movement of time challenge preconceptions about narrative in history.

## Author/Illustrator Information:

**Nadia Wheatley** began writing full-time in 1976, after completing postgraduate work in Australian history. She writes for adults as well as for children and her published work includes fiction, history, biography and picture books. Nadia's work reflects a commitment to multiculturalism, social justice and the preservation of the natural environment. Over a number of years she worked as a consultant at the school at Papunya, an Aboriginal community in the Western Desert.

**Donna Rawlins** is an illustrator, book designer and teacher who has specialised in making books for children for most of her working life. She has won many awards for her work and in 2003 was the recipient of the prestigious Lady Cutler Award, presented by the Children's Book Council of New South Wales, for her outstanding contribution to the children's book industry.

## How to use these notes:

These notes were prepared by Nadia Wheatley.

*My Place* works on many levels. These particular activities are closely related to the HSC topic of Belonging, part of the NSW Year 12 syllabus. Activities for primary and lower secondary are available to download from the Walker Books website, [www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers/Classroom-Ideas](http://www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers/Classroom-Ideas).

[www.walkerbooks.com.au](http://www.walkerbooks.com.au)

**Frequently asked questions:****To Nadia: Where did you get the idea for *My Place*?**

I usually get my idea for stories from place. Back in about 1980 I used to live near the Sydney suburb of St Peters, and on Sunday mornings I sometimes took my dog for a walk around the suburb's empty streets and deserted brickpits, and along the wasteland beside a filthy canal. When I realised that the water in the canal would once have been a creek, I started to imagine Aboriginal people living beside the fresh water for thousands and thousands of years.

Some time went by in my own life. As the year of 1988 approached, I became concerned about the kind of history that might be published in the Bicentenary. Would it simply tell the tale of Australians whose ancestors had come from Britain in the previous two hundred years? Or might it be possible to write something which included both a recognition of the land's traditional owners, and also the historical role played by culturally diverse immigrants?

Then one night, as I sat doodling little maps just for fun, I found myself drawing a rough version of the map that you can find on the first page of *My Place*, and writing the opening words that Laura says. Minutes later, I was drawing a picture of a girl sitting up in a tree and I was writing the words that are now on the last page of the book. At that point, I realised that my idea had turned into a story. Four days later, I sent a few pages in draft form to Donna. When she agreed to illustrate the book, I started to do the historical research necessary to use this tiny microcosm of Australia as a kind of window into the history of the macrocosm.

**To Donna: How did you go about illustrating *My Place*?**

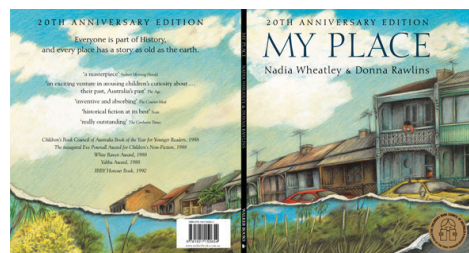
Nadia and I were drawn together as close friends and then co-creators because we shared so many ideas and beliefs about society and history. We were both drawn to the 'real' history of everyday people's lives, and we both felt very strongly that Australians, on the whole, had not properly acknowledged the traditional custodians of this land nor recognized or understood the wisdom of the indigenous people and their ancient culture. Nadia and I had spent a lot of time together 'heading towards' *My Place* before it evolved. We'd talked about many of what would become its themes as we discussed the various projects we were working on, Nadia in her young adult fiction and me in my community histories and my picture books (with Morag Loh). In fact, at the time, we were both independently cooking up books that were about a house and its changing residents over time. So, in a way, it wasn't a complete surprise when I saw Nadia's first draft, but it was certainly exciting!

Both of us became very involved in the research, spending many hundreds of hours together either in libraries or on the telephone, discussing every detail of the story and pictures. We discussed the landscape, the environment, immigration, family groupings, rituals, celebrations and work. We discussed farming, animals and food, hungry and lean times. We discussed politics, racism, religion, the current affairs of the times, employment and unemployment, economics, wars and peace. We discussed households, architecture, streetscapes, transport and clothes. We discussed family dynamics – the role and status of children.

By the time we were finished we'd left no stone unturned. And there was so much that we learnt that we couldn't fit into the book. Making a book, as we did with *My Place*, is certainly one of the most edifying and exhilarating collaborative experiences an illustrator could have.

**Before Reading *My Place*:**

A book cover aims to signal a book's genre and intentions. Look closely at the cover of *My Place* and discuss the following questions. You could do this as a guided research lesson in the library or computer room.



- What country is this story set in? Can you tell this from the top section of the cover image, or from the lower section, or both?
- Why do you think there might be an image of the bush under the layer of houses? What message might this visual subtext be trying to give about the contents of the book?
- Does the book look as if it is going to be fiction or non-fiction?
- What sort of country was once beneath your school? (eg Coastal scrub? Rainforest? Open woodland? Semi-arid grassland?) Was this landscape completely natural, or had it been managed or manipulated by generations of Aboriginal inhabitants?
- Where is your nearest natural source of fresh water? Was more fresh water available nearby, two hundred years ago?
- Do you know the name of the Aboriginal people whose traditional land your school is built on? If you don't know, can you find out? (A language map is a good resource.)
- What do the colours of the Aboriginal flag symbolise? Why is it important that it is flown right way up?
- Familiarise yourself with some of the technical devices and terms used in picture books
  - eg; the end-paper
  - the double-page spread
  - the border
  - the gutter (up centre of page)
  - the page limit (often 32pp but here 48pp)

## Orientation – Reading the written and visual texts of *My Place*

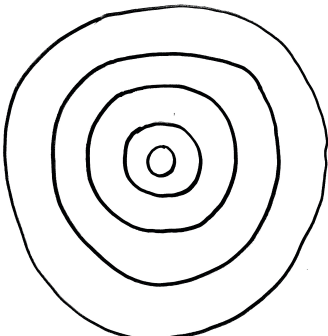
- Some people like to start reading *My Place* on the first page. Others prefer to start at the back and move forwards through time. Does the story change, depending on your starting point? Try to draw a diagram to show the movement of time in the book.
- The language used in *My Place* seems to be very simple. What is the purpose of this? Who is the intended audience? Does the writing style make the reader feel included in the book?
- Look at the four text blocks on every spread (double page). What are the four subjects they always cover? Why do you think the author may have chosen to keep repeating the same elements?
- Look at the borders and the gutters. How has the illustrator used these to divide sections of the story? Compare and contrast the design and layout of *My Place* with other picture books and graphic novels.
- Look at the placing of the written and visual text forms. Is it important that the written text is always incorporated into the illustrations?
- Look at the map on every spread. What elements of the landscape can you always find? What might the big tree and the creek be symbolising? Where does the water in the creek/canal go? Does every child-narrator have a mental-map of the same amount of land? Which child uses the most land?
- How many narrators are used in *My Place*? Does a first person narrator engage the reader more directly than a third person narrator? In regard to other texts which you are currently reading, what type of narrator do they use – first person or third person? Are different forms better for different purposes? Which sounds more ‘true’? Why?
- Refer to the ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ section of these notes. Nadia Wheatley, in her description of *My Place* uses the terms “microcosm” and “macrocosm”. What do these words mean? Can understanding a microcosm help us get a big picture?
- If you had to catalogue *My Place* for a library, would you put it into fiction or non-fiction? Why? Can fact and fiction be blurred to create a meaningful text?

## Belonging

Students in the NSW English Stage 6 Area of Study: Belonging are required to explore the concept of belonging and reflect on their own ideas and experiences. For a detailed description on this area of study visit the following website:

[http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus\\_hsc](http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/syllabus_hsc)

Generally, we develop a sense of belonging through interacting with places and people. Reading *My Place* is a way of focussing on ideas of Belonging to Country and Belonging to Community over a span of Australian history from traditional time until today.

- You can use the stories of the narrators as a way to start thinking about how you and your family belong to your own part of Australia, and to the neighbours around you. Then you can put these ideas into a broader context of the whole society. As a way of taking stock of the ways in which you feel yourself to belong, take a few minutes to brainstorm the following exercise:  
  
Copy this diagram of five concentric circles onto a large sheet of paper, increasing the scale. (Don’t worry about making the circles look perfect: be as rough as you like.)  
  

- Put your own name in the inside circle.  
In the next circle, list the people whom you regard as family (not necessarily blood relatives).  
In the next circle, list your friends.  
In the next circle, express your sense of community. List any organisations (eg school; sports teams) to which you belong. Do you belong to any other groups (even informal ones)? Do you have a sense of belonging to your neighbourhood?  
In the next circle, list the places where you feel that you belong. Your room? Your home? A special place outdoors? In the last circle, express something of your spirit. How do you feel connected with other people and the world?  
Put this aside somewhere private, and have a look at it again, when you have done some of the following work on Belonging.
- Do the same exercise in reverse. Think of places where you don’t feel that you belong, and groups to which you feel you don’t belong. How does it feel when you are excluded from a place or community?



## Belonging to Country

- Compare the 1988 and 1788 spreads of *My Place*. List the things that Laura and Barangaroo have in common. Compare this with the differences in their life experience. Look at things such as:

family  
food  
shelter  
land use  
occupations  
games  
happiness  
freedom  
restrictions  
sense of pride

Now compare the opening words that Laura uses with Barangaroo's opening words. Do they say exactly the same thing? What does it mean when Barangaroo says: 'I belong to this place'?

- What do Aboriginal people mean when they talk about 'belonging to country'? Is it the same as being an Australian citizen?

Try to find some words for 'country' from different Aboriginal languages. You'll find that the same word is often used for 'home' or 'campsite', and also for 'environment' or 'habitat'. What does this use of language tell us about a sense of belonging?

- Discuss the following questions in small groups or as a whole class:

Do you feel that you belong to the place where you currently live?

Do you feel that you belong anywhere else as well?

Where do your parents feel that they belong?

Where did your grandparents/great-grandparents belong?

How long does a person have to live in a place before she or he feels that they belong there?

To belong to a place, do you need to own a piece of property there?

To belong to country, do you need to be born there? How can Australians get a sense of belonging to country, if they live in the city?

- Read the words on the very last spread of *My Place* out loud. Is it important that this is the first time that anyone in the book has used direct speech? What are the colours symbolising? How does this connect with the book's cover and first spread?

- What does Barangaroo's grandmother mean when she uses the phrase: 'For ever and ever'?

Is she only talking about time, or is she talking about space as well? Discuss the following questions:

In what other contexts is time measured in terms of space or vice versa?

What is the current scientific estimate for the length of time in which Aboriginal people have lived on the continent of Australia?

In what way do some Aboriginal people have a different view from the scientists?

- Working from the back of the book, and looking at the maps and landscape as well as reading the written text, how does the environment of this small piece of country change? Discuss the following questions:

What happens to the water in the creek?

What happens to the air?

What foods are produced here?

How does transport change over time?

Make a timeline showing what happens to the Big Tree and the creek, and the general state of the environment.

- Over time, how do the families of the main characters get food, or support themselves to buy food? Make a list of occupations that the children's parents follow. What chores and jobs do the children do?
- Being mindful of the location of local sources of fresh water, discuss where Aboriginal people may traditionally have camped in your area. Discuss the seasons. Might different camp sites have been used in the hot time and the wet time?
- Make lists of plants and animals (including fish) that Aboriginal people would have eaten in your area. The local history librarian at your municipal library may be able to help you. You don't have to be specific about names.
- Physical evidence of post-settlement history can come in the form of town planning, subdivision, architectural styles, public buildings, monuments, graveyards etc. Make a list or take photographs of some examples from your area.
- As you walk about the place where you live, can you get a sense of other people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who have lived there in the past? How does this affect your own sense of belonging?



**Belonging to Family and Community**

- As you read through *My Place*, think about how the characters belong to each other, both at the level of family, and at the level of neighbourhood or community.
- Trace the history of some of the *My Place* “dynasties” who live in the place for more than one decade. eg Barangaroo’s family; Sam and Sarah’s family; the Owen family; the Müller family; Evelyn’s family; Bridie’s family; Michaelis’s family.
- How much do you know about your own family history? Can you trace where they have been living for the last three or more generations? Make a timeline, perhaps including copies of family photos.
- As well as the main narrators, *My Place* contains many ‘background’ characters in the form of family members and neighbours. Choose a character who is close to your own age, and write about 500 words in the first person describing their sense of belonging to community and place. For example;
  - 1988 Laura’s older siblings Terry and Lorraine
  - 1978 Sofia
  - 1968 Michaelis
  - 1938 Bridie
  - 1918 Eddie
  - 1878 Minna
  - 1869 Wong Ga Leck
  - 1848 Maryann
  - 1818 Sarah
  - 1788 Bereewan
- Carefully reading the map-text as well as the other text, how do the main characters and their families interact with their neighbours and community?
- Does sharing a language or cultural background (including religion) create a special community bond?
- Thinking of the microcosm shown by the *My Place* maps, discuss how large or small a community or neighbourhood can be. Can people on the other side of the world be your neighbours?
- Is *My Place* just a series of happy stories, or does the text also hint at senses of not-belonging? Discuss the following questions:
  - To whom did Sam belong in 1798?
  - What was the relationship between Johanna (1848) and the Owen family?
  - Who is in Rowley’s family (1898)?
  - How does the state of the economy affect community in 1938?
  - Does Michaelis’s mother have trouble adapting to her new community (1958)?
  - Why does Laura’s family (1988) move from the country to the city?
- Using evidence from the *My Place* stories, discuss whether urban Australians in the past interacted with neighbours and community more than they do today. Use the following questions to help you in your discussion.
  - Did Australian children in the past have more freedom to explore the neighbourhood than children today? Why?
  - How many people do you know in your own neighbourhood?
  - Do you ever visit your neighbours’ homes?
  - Do you or your family ever socialise with neighbours?
  - Do you and your neighbours rely on each other for small tasks?
  - Do you or your family members belong to any community organisations?
  - Do people need to belong to an organisation in order to belong to community?

The activities and questions provided in these teachers’ notes can be used in a variety of ways, so that all aspects of reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing may be covered. Some possible uses might be:

- Students to discuss questions in groups
- Students to choose a question of particular interest to present a talk to the class
- Students to write answers to questions and then share with the rest of the class
- Students to debate their answers to the questions
- Students to create presentations (in answer to questions) that can be displayed in the class or library

For more information on Walker Books teachers’ resources visit  
[www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers](http://www.walkerbooks.com.au/Teachers)