

SYNOPSIS

Caught in a collision between the modern world of rap, football, street cred and the oldest living culture on earth, Lorrpu, Botj and Milika are three Yolngu teenagers who once shared a childhood dream of becoming great hunters together. But things have changed and their paths are diverging. Botj is walking on the wild side, a lost soul in search of a place to belong. Milika is more interested in football and girls than any of the traditional knowledge he is being taught. Only Lorrpu seems to care about the dream any more. Their paths are diverging, and he is the only one who can see it.

When Botj goes too far and finds himself on the wrong side of both black and white law, Lorrpu must weigh up his own future against saving his friend.

He persuades the boys to trek to Darwin to argue Botj's case with Dawu, a tribal leader. Leaving behind their community, they journey through the unforgiving wilderness of north-east Arnhem Land to Darwin.

To survive, Lorrpu, Milika and Botj must draw on the ancient bush knowledge they were taught as boys and, most importantly, the bonds of their friendship.

Yolngu Boy is about the search for identity, making the journey from adolescence to adulthood and the implications of belonging to a larger social group, whether it be a culture, a family or a group of friends.



Topic to think about in regards to the film

Dreams

All people, regardless of race or culture, have dreams. Our dreams can motivate us to strive to do better, but they can also cause frustration when they seem impossible to realize, or cause conflict when they are inconsistent with the lives of the people around us.

Activity

■ In small groups, students discuss what they feel to be the benefits or drawbacks of having a dream. A representative of each group reports the group's views to the class, and a class list of the pros and cons is developed.

Destiny, Choice and Alternative Outcomes

How much control do we have over the direction of our own lives? Most people like to believe that they control their own lives, that the choices they make will determine their futures. But our lives are also affected by factors that we cannot control, such as our personal circumstances (the time and place we are born, family background, etc.) and by the actions of the people around us. Many people also believe in the existence of a god or another higher power with the ability to affect their lives. Others believe in fate; that the course of some or all of their lives is predestined.

Activity - In pairs discuss and write down a few ideas about one of the following statements.

1. 'You can choose your friends, but not your family'.
How much does family background affect the type of person you are?
2. 'Fate was against me...' Consider times when circumstances had a beneficial or detrimental impact on your life.



Key Themes and Issues

rites of passage and personal growth

Our growth as individuals is not something that is measured in simple terms of physical development or progression in years. Personal growth is measured by our developing maturity. Unlike physical growth, personal growth cannot be expected simply to happen. It is something that happens in response to significant events in our lives.

The phases of growth that a person may undergo can be viewed as 'rites of passage'. Sometimes these rites occur in formally observed ceremonies that are intended to mark a new stage of life for the individual. They may also be more personal in nature, such as when a person encounters a challenge in their life that leads to increased self-awareness and growth.

Yolngu Boy explores the growth of Lorrpu, Milika and Botj as they make the crucial movement from childhood into adulthood. It shows that the process is not always easy and just as certain insights are gained, so too valuable things are lost along the way.

The film begins and ends with the boys participating in ceremonial rites of passage. In Lorrpu's dream at the start of *Yolngu Boy*, we see the initiation of the boys into the tribe, during their younger years. At the end of the film, we see Lorrpu and Milika participating in the ceremony marking their transition into man-hood. But the boys also complete a personal rite of passage by undertaking the journey from Arnhem Land to Darwin. They learn that sometimes the values that are important to them conflict with each other, and that sacrifices must be made. The choices the boys make between those values help determine their identities.

Questions:

1. How does the movie demonstrate the idea that our choices lead to our growth?
2. Students discuss what impact white Australia has on the boys' growth.
3. What celebrations and rituals do the boys participate in that mark a transition in their development?
4. How does the film demonstrate the inevitability of leaving childhood behind? You may wish to consider how the film highlights the positive and negative aspects of the transition from childhood to adulthood.

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

Yolngu Boy encourages us to think about the many factors that influence our sense of identity – who we are and where we belong. The search for a sense of identity is at the heart of the journey undertaken by each of the three boys in the film. As Dawu, the tribal elder, tells Lorrpu and Milika during tribal council,

'You boys have got to remember who you are and what you want.'

Although they share a common culture as members of the Yolngu clan, each of the boys is developing a distinctive personal identity. The influences forming these identities have varied since they were young. In the film, we see glimpses into each boy's past, and insights into the forces that have shaped their development. The search for identity is an experience common to adolescents in all cultures around the world. It can be an exciting but also difficult time, as the teenager attempts to reconcile the multitude of influences on his or her life, such as personal goals, family circumstances, and cultural upbringing, to achieve a harmonious sense of who he or she is as a human being.

Key Themes and Issues

For Lorrpu, Milika and Botj, this search is made even more difficult by the impact of integrating both Yolngu and Western cultures into their lives.

Questions:

1. Australia is a country where children from many different cultures live together. Why can it be particularly difficult for adolescents who have grown up in one culture, but live among other cultural traditions, to find their identity? Have you or your friends experienced a tension between two cultures? What has been the impact on your/their identity?

FRIENDSHIP

Yolngu Boy is a powerful study of the friendship of the three boys, and of what it means to be part of a larger social group. Botj, Lorrpu and Milika have been friends since childhood. The bonds of their friendship are strong, but are being tested. The boys are making the difficult transition into adulthood and their individual circumstances and dreams may drive them apart.

Botj is losing his way in life, and many people in the boys' community appear to have given up on him. There is also social pressure on Lorrpu and Milika not to join Botj on his destructive path. But Lorrpu believes in Botj's potential and, as his friend, will not give up on him. Lorrpu knows Botj's future is at stake and Lorrpu will risk everything – even his chances of receiving ceremony – to save him.

During their trip to Darwin, Botj is able to redeem himself and find a connection to his Yolngu heritage and his friends.

When Botj gets to Darwin he is reminded of the circumstances that make him feel an outsider, alone in life. But Botj can never truly be alone because he is *a part of* his two friends, and they are a part of him – 'one skin'.



Key Themes and Issues

RULES, RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the film, each of the boys has to confront rules, rights and responsibilities, and make choices. Producer Patricia Edgar says *Yolngu Boy* is about:

'the multiple choices that all teenagers must confront – should you opt out or accept the responsibilities of adulthood? There is a moment in everyone's life when a choice has got to be made which can send you down one path or another, and in this film these three boys ... are at that moment in their lives.'

Lorrpu and Milika are being prepared for ceremony, a tribal ritual signifying that they have earned respect within the tribe, and can be trusted with knowledge and with the law. But when Botj's future is jeopardised, the boys learn that friendship brings with it its own set of responsibilities, which are not always consistent with the boys' other responsibilities.

Questions:

1. What behavior shown in the film is acceptable and unacceptable in the broader community? Does this reflect standards in your community?
2. Why do groups have rules? Why do particular cultural groups have different rules?

CULTURE

These are two definitions of 'culture':

'(Culture is) ... the skills, arts, beliefs, and customs of a group of people, passed on from one generation to another.' *Macquarie Dictionary*, 1989

'Culture embraces the beliefs, values, ideals, customs, languages, discourses, artistic products and symbols of a group ... The expression of a people's culture can be found in their traditions, memories, treasured materials and artifacts which can create a sense of personal and group identity.' C. Marsh (ed.), *Teaching Studies of Society and Environment*, Prentice Hall, Sydney, 1994.

A sense of culture is extremely important to many of the characters in *Yolngu Boy*, particularly Lorrpu. The film begins and ends with scenes of significant Yolngu ceremonies, marking transitions in the boys' lives. The importance of the boys' sense of tribal culture is also emphasised by the recurring visits throughout the film of 'Baru', the boys' crocodile totem and spirit ancestor, whom they are taught will protect them, make them strong, and guide them through life.

However, the traditional Yolngu culture is not the only culture represented in the film. *Yolngu Boy* depicts a community in which the traditional culture is juxtaposed with modern Western culture. Strong symbols of Western culture are present football, CD-players and modern music, alcohol, cars, aeroplanes, and the baseball caps worn by many of the kids.

Lorrpu, Milika and Botj are affected by both Yolngu and Western cultures. Many young Australians have multicultural backgrounds and, like the boys in *Yolngu Boy*, this influences their daily lives, their sense of identity and direction in life.

Questions:

1. Suggest one example from the film where an element of Western culture has mixed with the Yolngu culture in a positive way.
2. Ask students to list the tribal knowledge the boys use in the film. For example, the songlines the three boys sing which teach them the geography of their area, their hunting abilities (including their use of body paint as camouflage), and the medical treatments Lorrpu uses to help Botj's arm to heal.
3. Students discuss the significance of the Yolngu traditions seen in the film including initiation, dance, song, body painting and decoration, bush foods, making the rope, putting the bones in the fire for the old people.

CHARACTER PROFILES



The characters Lorrpu, Milika and Botj are of central importance to the film. Although they have been life-long friends, each boy has a very different personality and goal in life. The film uses these differences, highlighted as Lorrpu and Milika attempt to save Botj, to explore its major themes.

Lorrpu

Lorrpu believes strongly in the traditional ways of his people. He looks forward to his upcoming 'ceremony', when he will become a man and find his place in his tribe. He is also troubled by his friend Botj's abandonment of his tribal beliefs. The only thing Lorrpu believes in as strongly as his tribal culture is his bond of friendship with Milika and Botj.

The importance to Lorrpu of these two beliefs is encapsulated by his dreams: when Lorrpu dreams, he can see himself and his friends as children, wading through the water at low tide, the sun warming their skin, great hunters in the making. It is an image of the boys not only following their tribal customs, but also operating as a harmonious unit, not yet divided by time and circumstance – one skin, one blood. To save his friend, Lorrpu will risk everything else he values in life.

CHARACTER PROFILES

Milika

Unlike Lorrpu, Milika isn't overly interested in traditional Yolngu life, preferring to dream of a future as a professional football player. For him, the outside world beckons seductively and he relishes the trap-pings that material success can provide, such as his Discman and CD collection. Indeed, the first thing Milika does on arriving in Darwin is to purchase a new pair of football boots! Milika has lost respect for Botj since Botj has stopped behaving responsibly, but still shares a strong bond of friendship with Lorrpu.

Botj

Botj is caught in the conflict between two very different worlds – the world of his traditional culture and the white man's world both with their different laws.

Lorrpu's dream at the start of the film shows Botj as the childhood leader of his friends, a protector, skilled in the hunting techniques of his tribe. But by the time Botj first rejoins his friends in the 'real time' of the film, as a teenager, he is at war with himself and his community. Botj is addicted to sniffing petrol, and has fallen into a destructive lifestyle which has left him with only one more chance to establish a peaceful and constructive life in his community.

Starting afresh is difficult, though, when Botj feels like an outsider in all aspects of his life. He is forbidden from seeing his mother, who is frightened by his destructive past. The prevailing attitude in his community seems to be that he will end up a hopeless drunk like his father, living among the 'long grass people', a collection of lost souls in Darwin. And he will have a difficult task proving to the tribal elders that he is ready for 'ceremony', without which he can never truly have respect and a place within his tribe. Botj only has his two childhood friends to rely on, but even that relationship seems to be changing, now that Lorrpu and Milika are preparing for ceremony – soon they will be men, while Botj remains a boy. This separation from those around him leaves Botj feeling confused, angry and defiant.

As the boys return to their childhood patterns of behaviour during their trek to Darwin, Botj rediscovers the person he used to be, regaining his sense of tribal history and connection with the land, and finding peace within himself. Lorrpu acknowledges this change by recognizing Botj as the leader of their group once again.

But, just as childhood must eventually be left, the boys must eventually end their isolation and return to society, to face the consequences of their actions.