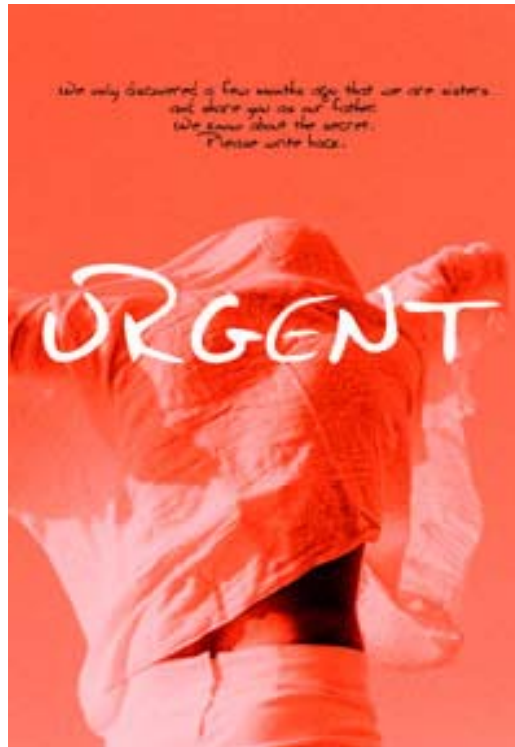


TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

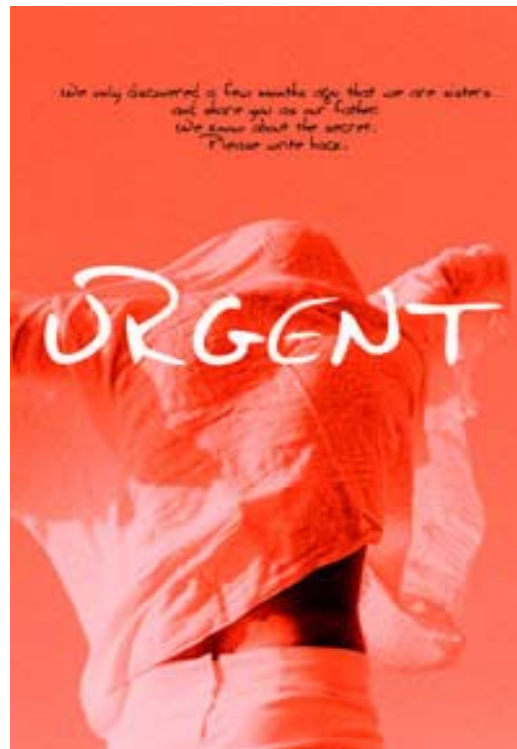


URGENT

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1. SYNOPSIS

Urgent is a book about how Indigenous people have been treated and mistreated since white settlement in 1788. The central figure in the book is Albert Thompson, a 37-year-old Aboriginal man living in remote Queensland. Despite his relative youth, Albert is plagued with chronic illnesses that are common among Aboriginal populations: diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity and depression. Due to his ill health and poor prognosis, Albert wants to get in touch with his three daughters. Each girl has a different mother and Albert (through a letter written by his sister Betty) suggests that Adele, the eldest daughter, use an Aboriginal service called 'Link Up' to locate her half sisters.

Urgent is a book of fiction – these characters don't actually exist, but the problems facing Aborigines in the book do. The book is a compilation of fictional diary entries, letters and statements from Albert's three daughters. Albert is presented as a gifted poet and artist, and the book contains poems expressing his emotions – both joys and frustrations. There are also excerpts of historical documents and writing used to explain aspects of policy – both past and present – that have impacted on our Aboriginal communities. These include the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; the 1997 formation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Declaration for Reconciliation; and the 1995 Bringing them Home National Enquiry (an enquiry into the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families occurring right up to the 1970s – what we refer to these days as the 'Stolen Generation').

As Adele starts the process of finding her half sisters Christine and Rachel, many secrets are revealed to each of them. None of the girls realise that they have half sisters. Sixteen-year-old Christine knows she was adopted and that her birth mother was Aboriginal, but becomes more confused about her identity, even though she finally knows her father's identity. Fourteen-year-old Rachel receives the greatest shock though. She discovers the father who has brought her up is not her biological father, and feels that her mother has deceived her. Also, she has never considered that she may be Aboriginal, and just assumed that she shared an Anglo-Australian background with her mum

and dad. These young women must come to terms with the changes in their beliefs and expectations, and must make a decision about whether to communicate with Albert before it is too late.

2. AUTHOR/S

Unlike most other books, there is not just one author of *Urgent*. It is a collaborative effort by Dr Leanne Rowe and young people involved with the Wathaurong Aboriginal Cooperative. Dr Leanne Rowe worked as a doctor in an Aboriginal health service in Far North Queensland, and was immensely moved by her interactions with her patients and the multitude of health and social problems they experienced. As the afterword reads, 'A core group of teenagers, Joleen Ryan, Megan Torpey, Julia Torpey, Tegan Watson and Zac Brennan, wrote the story and encouraged over 30 other young Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to contribute personal accounts of their lives as well as poetry, artwork and photography. The characters in the book are fictional but the stories are true.'(p.170)

3. STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Urgent is not a straight or linear narrative like many books. It also contains many perspectives and voices. Some of the pieces in it are letters, others are diary entries, and there are poems and pictures. Albert's poems jump backward and forward in time, often expressing his feelings for the women he loved, and his feelings for his daughters. One of the most powerful pieces in the book is Albert's story of being removed from his family at the age of four, titled: 'All I Wanted To Do Was Play' (p.134). This is told in a simple first person narrative style, which makes it all the more powerful and heartbreaking.

Interspersed with the stories are quotes and information from Aboriginal Elders and politicians about the concerns of Aborigines, which continue right into the present. These include major health and mental health issues, homelessness, lack of access to education and health care, and the ongoing trauma for those affected directly and indirectly by past government policies that resulted in the Stolen Generation.

4. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Albert Thompson: We first meet Albert as an extremely unwell 37-year-old Aboriginal man. He lives alone in an isolated shack at the end of a dirt road through a dense rainforest. When Dr Jason Fitzgerald visits him (Albert does not like to attend hospital due to previous experiences of racism) he finds that Albert has passed away. Through Albert's poetry in the book, we learn much about him; in particular his sensitivity, depression, and his shattering experience of being a member of the Stolen Generation when he was removed from his family at age four. It seems that the pain of this event has pervaded Albert's life and may well be the reason behind his lack of self-care and inability to maintain relationships.

Adele Thompson: Adele is a feisty 18 year old who is proud to have completed her VCE, despite educational obstacles she has faced as a young Aboriginal woman. She is now studying at her local TAFE College. She is proud that she and her mother are part of the Wathaurong community in Geelong. When she receives the letter from Great Aunt Betty, she is nervous about finding her half sisters, but feels an obligation and sense of duty. She has ambivalent feelings about her father, who she visited two years previously. She found it hard to understand his lifestyle, and his views, and was relieved when the visit was over.

Christina Williams: Christina is a sixteen-year-old girl. Only a few years ago she discovered she was adopted and that her birth mother, Therese, was Aboriginal. After some communication from Therese (Christina cherishes these letters and keeps them under her bed with her birth certificate), Therese died. Christina has had difficulties at school, and writes 'I have been to six different schools and now I am at secondary college and it is hard making friends' (p.48). Her mother is not keen for Christina to meet up with her half sisters and says 'the past is dead and you should respect that and let it stay that way' (p.48). But Christina is keen to further understand her identity. She forms a bond with Adele which enables her to write to Adele and tell her things she has told no

one before and that are deeply troubling her. She writes to Adele: 'Knowing I belong to your family makes all the difference' (p.121).

Rachel Roberts: Rachel, at just fourteen, is the youngest of the sisters. She had no knowledge of her Aboriginal heritage, and is devastated to find that her father is not her biological father. She feels betrayed and confused. As an only child, she lives in a large house and attends a private school. Rachel has been quite sheltered from societal problems, and feels intimidated by the worldliness of her half sisters upon their meeting. After the initial shock of discovery, Rachel is much more open to hearing about Aboriginal experiences, and is more alert to racism, though she is reluctant to share the truth about her heritage with others at school for fear of taunts and 'not belonging'.

5. QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES/POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- In a group, make a list of the issues affecting the Aboriginal communities in the book, as well as others that you are aware of. Many of these are listed in the fictional letter written by Dr Jason Fitzgerald on pages 18–21. Which issues seem most important and pressing to you?
- On p.36, Adele writes in her diary: 'My strength comes from my family links and kinship, my extended family, the respect I have for the elders, my friends, my role models, my culture, the land, my spiritual beliefs, and our traditions. My pride comes from my sense of identity, my aspirations, my feelings of responsibility, my sporting achievements and creativity.' Write a paragraph about where your strength and pride comes from, listing at least three sources.
- The first chapter of the book is titled 'The Dandelion Theory'. On page 38, Albert describes and draws what he means by this in a letter to Juliet (Adele's mother). What do you understand by his 'Dandelion Theory' and how does it fit with Albert's life and the lives of his daughters?

- Each character in the book experiences problems with 'belonging'. When Rachel discovers her Aboriginal heritage she is overwhelmed and confused. She writes: 'I feel as if I am not myself like I've just met myself for the first time. I feel awkward and clumsy. Who am I? Who do I really belong to?'(p.64) Which groups do you feel you belong to? Are there some you don't like to admit to because of racism, teasing or negative perceptions? Are there groups that you don't want to belong to?
- Pick one of Albert's poems in the book that you particularly like. What does it mean to you? What does it express, and does it use metaphors or simple language to do this?
- The book is titled *Urgent* and the package that falls from Albert's hands in the opening scene is also titled *Urgent*. Because of Albert's declining health, getting in touch with his daughters is urgent, but what else could 'urgent' refer to in this book?
- On p.156 Rachel writes to Adele and Christina saying that she doesn't want to see them again, and says 'Everything about having an Aboriginal history is sad.' Imagine that a few years have gone by and Rachel now feels more at ease with her history and heritage, and wants to recontact her half sisters. Imagine what she might want to say, and write a letter to Adele and Christina pretending you are Rachel.
- On Wednesday February 13, 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to all Indigenous Australians, in particular the Stolen Generation, for the actions of previous Australian governments and their assimilation policies. Titled 'National Sorry Day', the speeches in Parliament were broadcast nationally and internationally. Watch a DVD of these speeches or read them, and then discuss the content in groups, noting down your reactions. In groups, discuss whether this apology is effective. Do you agree with everything that is said or is there more you would want to say to Indigenous Australians?