

The Land Down Under seen through the eyes of Bunna, a native Australian

Part one

Let me take you on a journey all the way to Australia, a continent that is often referred to as « the land down under », just because it lies in the southern hemisphere.

Just close your eyes and picture yourself in the Outback, sitting by a fire, didgeridoo music playing in the background...



Bunna, a native Australian

Now, I want you to listen to what Bunna has to say about his country. After all, he knows more about it than any official guide. For thousands of years, the Aborigine people were Australia's only human inhabitants. They were hunters and food-gatherers. Trained in the lore of the desert, they learnt how to live in harmony with each other and their surroundings. The laws of the tribe were passed down, from one generation to the next, through the storytelling of **the myths and legends of the Dreamtime.**

The Dreamtime is the time of the creation of the world. Its myths and legends do not only account for the origin of the deserts, the mountains, the plains, the water holes as we can still see them today, they also provide a philosophy that governs the lives of these native people. The saying « **As it was done in the Dreamtime, so must it be done today.** » dominates all aspects of Aboriginal behaviour.

Today, Bunna is ready to share some of **his secrets about some unique Australian animals.** As you know, Australia hosts amazing animals that cannot be seen anywhere else in the world: kangaroos, koalas, kookaburras, emus, wombats, platypuses, frilled lizards, ghost bats, lyre birds, etc.



Bunna, why is the platypus such a special creature for the Aborigines ?

a platypus

Well, first of all, the platypus *is* a unique creature : it has fur like a mammal, it lays eggs like a bird and it can swim like a fish. In the Dreamtime, the Creator had made these three different types of animal, and he found that he still had bits and pieces left so he joined them together to create Platypus. But then, the three groups of animal started to quarrel and fight because each one of them felt superior to the others. Platypus refused to join in their fight and told them they should respect each other's differences and live together in perfect harmony. They all agreed that it was a wise decision after all. That is why the Aborigines promised never to harm such a wise creature.

Bunna, can you tell us about the kangaroo. Why does it have such long hind legs ?



a kangaroo

Indeed, kangaroos are strange animals too : they have small heads and arms, large bodies and tails and long hind legs. One aboriginal myth explains how the first kangaroos came to Australia. They were blown to the Australian mainland by a violent windstorm. The kangaroos could not land, even though their hind legs had grown longer and longer in their attempts to touch the ground. But during a short lull in the storm, a kangaroo fell to the ground and hopped away. The hunters followed that strange animal because they thought it was good meat for the tribe. With great patience and skill, they learnt how to capture it.

Up to this day, kangaroos remain the largest and swiftest of all the Australian animals.



an emu

We all know the Emu is a flightless bird. Was it the case in the Dreamtime ?

No, a long time ago, the emu *did* have wings. It actually had enormous wings with bright feathers. Let me tell you how the emu lost her wings. Well, she came across a lake and was intrigued by it : she had only seen small water holes before as she came from the desert. She flew down to see it closer and the first bird she met was a kookaburra.



a laughing kookaburra

The emu greeted the bird but the kookaburra got upset because he was fishing and did not want to be bothered. He also thought the emu was rude since it was considered rude to say hello to a stranger without being greeted first. That is why the kookaburra decided to teach the emu a lesson. He challenged the emu by asking her to catch the fish herself if she wanted to eat them. Of course, the emu could not fish with her big wings and she grew desperate. So she begged the kookaburra to cut her wings for her ! All the other birds around them began to laugh because she looked odd and funny without her wings. The kookaburra was also laughing at her. The emu got so furious that she ran away as fast as she could. On her way back home, her legs got longer and bigger and stronger.

You can understand why the emu does not get along with the kookaburra and the kookaburra keeps laughing at the emu !



Australian ghost bat

Now Bunna, let's face it : some Australian animals are really frightening. Take the Ghost Bats for example. They are « vampire » bats feeding on the blood of large mammals. I am sure that you have many legends about them. Is that right?

Yes, there are many aboriginal myths about bats but let me tell you about Naradan. In the Dreamtime, Naradan was a bat-man : half man, half bat. One day, he felt like eating some honey. He found a hive in a tree and sent one of his wives with a stone axe to cut the hive and bring the honey back to the camp. His first wife got her arm stuck in the hollow tree, so the bat-man cut off her arm and she died.

How gruesome !

Well, wait until you know what happens next !

Naradan told his second wife to climb the tree, pull out the arm of the dead woman and return with the honey. His second wife obeyed but her arm became jammed and Naradan killed her.

The bat-man, ashamed of himself, returned to the camp. Soon everyone knew what had happened to his wives. The tribesmen were so horrified that they built a huge fire and threw the bat-man into it. As the flames rose higher and higher, the people saw a dim figure rise out of the fire and disappear into the darkness.

Naradan, now a bat, is so ashamed of his former behaviour that, to avoid being seen, he sleeps during the day and hunts for his food only when there is no light in the sky.

If I understand it well, this myth explains the fact that bats hide during the day and hunt at night by pointing to a shameful behaviour that should be punished by the lore of the Aborigines. It actually serves a didactic purpose. Am I right, Bunna ?

Yes, this is exactly the code we have to decipher if we want to live by the lore of the tribe and avoid punishment.



a ghost bat

Bunna, don't you have a less spooky story about bats ?

Here is another aboriginal myth about bats for you :

One man was the most handsome man on earth. He was also known to be the most arrogant man in the world. He always wanted to be the best and was always bragging. So, one night, the Gods punished him by transforming him into a black creature. He turned into a rat and wings started to grow on him. He flew away as fast as he could. He then came under a bridge where he slept upside down, waiting for the night to fall.

From then on, he has slept during the day and come out at night.

Bunna, thank you for sharing these secrets with us. I can't wait to know more about these Dreamtime heroes and the laws they established. We definitely have something to learn from these wise and imaginative creatures.

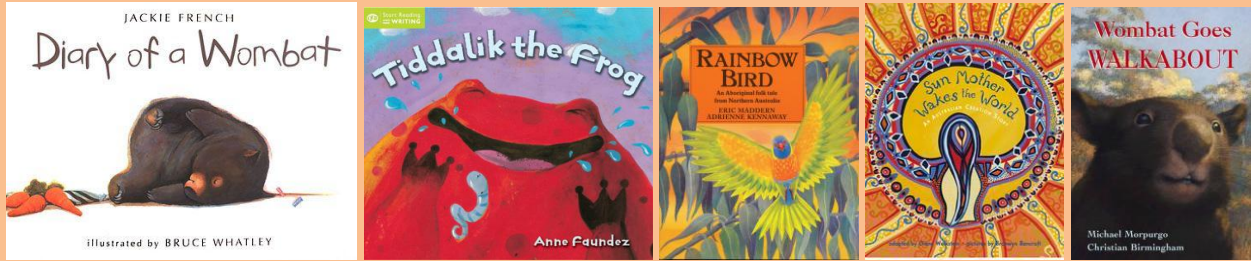
Next time, I will tell you how the kangaroo got her pouch, how the crocodile got his scales and how Ayers Rock - Uluru is its aboriginal name - was formed and many other stories.

To be continued...



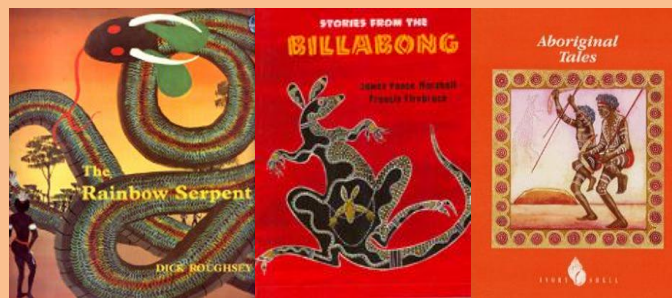
If you want to share these wonderful stories with your students, here are some suggestions :

A1 level :



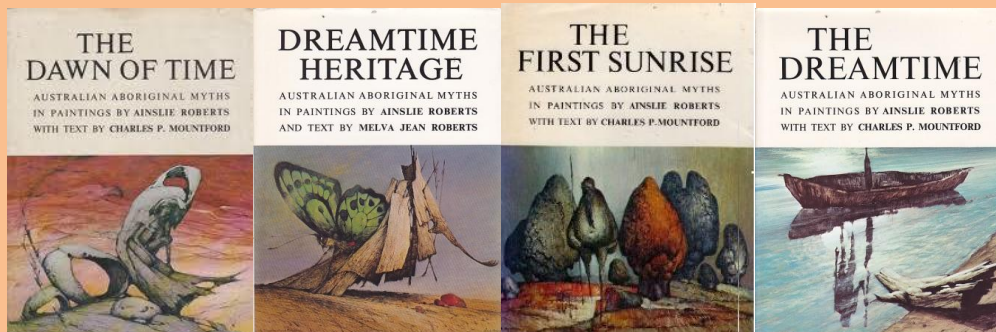
- Diary of a Wombat by Jackie French, Ed. HarperCollins
- Wombat Goes Walkabout by Michael Morpugo, Ed. HarperCollins
- Tiddalik the frog by Anne Faundez, Ed. Qed publishing
- Rainbow Bird, an Aboriginal folk tale from Northern Australia by Eric Maddern, Ed.F Lincoln
- Sun Mother Wakes the World, an Australian creation story, by Diane Wolkstein, HarperCollins

A2 level :



- The Rainbow Serpent by Dick Roughsey, Ed. HarperCollins
- Stories from the Billabong by James Vance Marshall, Ed. Frances Lincoln
- Aboriginal Tales, Classic Children's stories read and performed by Stan Pretty, Ed. Ivory Shell

B1/B2 level :



- The Dawn of Time, Australian Aboriginal Myths by Charles P. Mountford, Ed. Rigby
- The Dreamtime, Australian Aboriginal myths by Charles P. Mountford, Ed. Rigby

B2/C1 level :



- Aboriginal Stories of Australia by A.W. Reed, Ed. Reed New Holland
- Aboriginal myths, Tales of the Dreamtime by A.W.Reed, Ed. Reed New Holland