

## TEACHERS' NOTES

*Digger J Jones* by Richard J Frankland

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**Richard Frankland** is a Gunditjmara man who has worked tirelessly for the Aboriginal cause. He was born in Melbourne but grew up in Portland in south-western Victoria on his traditional lands where his grandfather taught him to lay eel traps and catch freshwater fish. He is an acclaimed singer, songwriter, poet, filmmaker and playwright. His first band *Djaambi* supported Prince on his Australian tour in 1991. In 2003 his play *Conversations with the Dead* was performed at Belvoir St theatre. It told the story of Jack, a young, ambitious Koori, well-connected in the worlds of black and white politics, whose mission required him to straddle the contradictions of both worlds. Frankland is a nephew of Captain Reg Saunders, who was decorated for bravery in the Korean War, and was the first Aborigine commissioned in the Australian Army. His award-winning film, *Harry's War*, commemorates the 3000 Aborigines who served in Australia's armed forces during the Second World War and the friendships they formed with white Australian soldiers. Richard has also served in the army and worked as a field officer for the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. 'I've been blessed with the gift of the Arts, and through that I've been working to raise awareness and achieve change for Aborigines,' Richard said in an interview. In 2004 he stood unsuccessfully as an Independent candidate for the Senate. *Digger J Jones* is his first book for Scholastic Press. Its publication is timed to coincide with the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 referendum that gave the Federal government the power to make laws for the benefit of Aborigines and allowed Aboriginal people to be counted in the census.

## SYNOPSIS

It's 1967 and Digger J Jones, a ten-year-old Koori boy, is keeping a diary. He's going to be eleven next birthday, about the age boys living a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle would disappear into the bush and be taught the knowledge needed to become a man. But Digger lives in Melbourne and his initiation takes place in the rough and tumble of life in South Yarra. 1967 proves to be an eventful year. It starts badly with the news of his older brother's death in the war in Vietnam. He's called names and gets into fights at school. Digger wins respect from his arch rival, Darcy. They're both secretly in love with a nun, which causes more friction. But eventually the death of Darcy's mum and the shared experience of loss and concern for a sick friend brings them together and they become mates. Digger's parents are involved in the struggle to support the Yes case in the referendum to secure equal recognition for Aboriginal citizens. This means meetings and marches and learning more about the fight to end discrimination. His new mate Darcy also gets involved. In May there's a win in the referendum but it doesn't prove to be an instant solution. Changes in the law don't necessarily translate into changes in the way people treat Aboriginal people. As Digger's mum says, 'They can have any law they like, but if people don't support it in their hearts, it don't mean nothing.'

The passing of the referendum gives the Federal government the power to pass laws to benefit Aboriginal people and for Aborigines to be counted in the census for the first time. Digger feels like he has become a full citizen in his own land for the first time and that he has grown from being a boy into a sort of boy-man.

## WRITING

While this is a very gentle story told from the perspective of a young boy, the background against which it unfolds is deadly serious. The issues that came to the fore in the 1967 referendum are still very relevant today. In an interview in 2004 Richard reveals the kind of experience that led to the writing of this book. 'When I was born the constitution stated that I was a second-class citizen of this country; not a real Australian ... Throughout my life I've witnessed racism of all kinds and watched injustice being taken out on my people for no reason. There is such a strong reason to change the negative attitudes that have been ingrained into society ...' Asked about his hope for the future of Australia he said, 'I hope that when my daughter grows up she will not have to face the discrimination and injustice that Aboriginal children today face.'

## DISCUSSION POINTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. The marches that Digger went on in the lead up to the 1967 referendum were organised by the Aborigines Advancement League. Can you find out more about this organisation or similar groups that operated in other states? You will find some useful information on the National Library of Australia's website [www.nla.gov.au/muragadi/foreword.html](http://www.nla.gov.au/muragadi/foreword.html)
2. Digger's dad told him that they were marching to stop discrimination and to enable Aboriginal people to become proper citizens of Australia. Do you think that the passing of the referendum put an end to discrimination against Indigenous Australians? Can changes to the law change the way people behave towards other groups in society?
3. Tom, the bloke Digger met at the Aborigines Advancement League meeting, says that he has been up north with the Gurindji people. What can you find out about the Gurindji and the Wave Hill walk-off? The National Archive of Australia has a fact sheet that will get you started [www.naa.gov.au/fsheets/fs224.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/fsheets/fs224.html)
4. Tom also mentions the freedom rides that were organised by a group of Sydney University students in the lead up to the referendum. How important were these in changing the attitude of Australians to discrimination against Indigenous Australians? For more information visit <http://freedomride.net/> or the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies has an excellent on-line exhibition at <http://www1.aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/freedomride/start.htm>
5. Darcy gave Digger a book of poetry as a present. What was the poet's name? What is her Aboriginal name? Do you know any other poems she has written? You can find out more about her at [www.bushpoetry.com.au/PoetsHome/PoetsVZ/WalkerKath/tabid/830/Default.aspx](http://www.bushpoetry.com.au/PoetsHome/PoetsVZ/WalkerKath/tabid/830/Default.aspx) You might enjoy reading *No More Boomerang* or *Ballad of the Totems*.
6. Digger talks to his father about his totem. Can you remember the story his father told him about the crow and the snake? What animal did Darcy decide was his totem? Why did he choose that bird as his totem? Is there an animal that you feel could be your totem?
7. Are most referendums to change the constitution of Australia successful? The 1967 referendum contained a second question about changing the numbers in the Senate and the House of Representatives. Was it successful? More information at the Australian Archive <http://www.naa.gov.au/fsheets/fs150.html>
8. If you want to use this book as part of wider Indigenous studies you might want to find out more about Scholastic Australia's Reconciliation series, a splendid resource for introducing an Indigenous perspective into the Primary curriculum. <http://www.scholastic.com.au/schools/curriculum/reconciliation/>