



The burnt stick

One night, when the young moon had risen and they were sitting around the fire, Charlie Warragin, the head stockman, looked at John's mother and said, 'Liyan, I have heard they are coming to take away your son in the morning.'

John Jagamura felt his mother become very tense, her fear flowing into himself. She held him tighter in her arms and cried, 'Who is coming to take him away? Where will they take him?'

'The Big Man from Welfare,' said Charlie Warragin. 'I have heard he is travelling with the police truck to all the camps in this part of the country, and taking the light-skinned ones to the Fathers at Pearl Bay. He was with the mob at Richmond Downs the day before yesterday. He will be here tomorrow.'

'When will they bring my son back to me?'

'He will not be coming back,' said Charlie Warragin. And the old man, Jabal, who knew much and taught the law to the young men, agreed. 'They will bring him up in the ways of the white man. It will be many years before he can return, but his life will never be the same.'

'They cannot do this thing!' cried Liyan.

'They can, and they will. It is the law of the white man that says so.'

'I will tell the Boss ... tell Mrs Grainger. She will stop them.'

'She will be able to do nothing.'

'I love my son! This is his family! They cannot come to take him away!'

'They have been coming from the day he was born,' said Jabal.

by Anthony Hill
from *The Burnt Stick* (Viking)

Teaching notes for The Burnt Stick

Text form:	Realistic narrative
Medium:	Book
Field:	An Aboriginal child is taken away from his mother
Tenor:	Narrator to general audience
Mode:	Written

OTHER RESOURCES

Paper for draft writing.

Research books that detail laws and rules relating to Aboriginals.

INTRODUCING THE UNIT

Tell students that this extract comes from a novel called *The Burnt Stick* written by Anthony Hill.

WHAT DO YOU FEEL?

Make sure students write a personal response and not a retelling of the text. Invite students to share their responses with partners or in a small group. Discuss the text clarifying the meaning of terms: 'the light-skinned ones', 'the Fathers at Pearl Bay', 'the Big Man from Welfare', 'the mob'. Read students the sentence written by Margaret Dunkle, in *Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, as a preface to the book, *The Burnt Stick*:

'Anthony Hill weaves his story with simplicity and a spare understatement that brings the loss and heartache close to home.'

Ask students what they think the term 'spare understatement' means. Ask them whether they agree with Margaret Dunkle's statement based on the extract that they have read from the novel. Ensure that students recognise that literary texts can be interpreted in different ways. Have students share their opinions about the events in the extract. Encourage students to listen and respond constructively to the comments and opinions of others.

CREATING DEPICTIONS

The nouns that represent people mentioned in the extract are: John; John's mother, Liyan; Charlie Warragin; the Big Man from Welfare; Mrs Grainger; the Boss; Jabal; and the Fathers at Pearl Bay. Ask students to draw a literary sociogram to show the nature of the relationships between the people.

In their depictions students should express the emotion attributed to each person, not portray the scene described in the extract. When students have frozen in their depictions ask some members of the group to contribute thought and speech bubbles. Alternatively observers can contribute the thought or speech bubbles, enabling the students to gauge the effectiveness of the depiction on the viewer.

POINT OF VIEW

Students are to continue this extract starting from the complication when 'The Big Man from Welfare' arrives to take John away. They should plan their narratives carefully working with the different stages of the narrative in a flexible way. They must describe the complications, series of events and the resolution but in an order that suits the storyline they create. Provide time for a writing conference and encourage students to revise, edit and proofread.

RESEARCH THE FACTS

This novel is a realistic narrative. Although the events in the novel are fictitious, the central idea is factual, based on those that could have occurred. Ask students to research this topic. Ensure they are familiar with strategies, such as skimming and scanning, and know how to use library technology. Help them to critically evaluate information from different sources.

FOLLOW-UP/EXTENSION

- Encourage students to read the whole novel *The Burnt Stick*.
- Ask the librarian for other literary texts that portray contemporary issues relating to Aboriginals e.g. *The Girl with No Name* by Pat Lowe.



What do you feel?

How did you feel as you read the extract? Write your response on the lines below.



Talk with a partner about the text. What do you think it might be about? Discuss the terms: 'the light-skinned ones', 'the Fathers at Pearl Bay', 'the Big Man from Welfare', 'the mob'. What do you think these terms mean? Write your conclusions on the lines below.

The 'law' is mentioned twice in the text. What do you think the term means each time? Talk with a partner and write your answer.

What is meant by: 'They have been coming from the day he was born'?

NA 4.1 NSW 3.1 Communicates and interacts confidently for a range of purposes and a variety of audiences to express well developed, well organised ideas dealing with more challenging topics.
NA 4.4 NSW 3.2 Interacts in different sized groups using effective communication skills and strategies and listening attentively.
NA 4.5 NSW 3.5 Reads an extensive range of texts with fairly complex structures and features, justifying own interpretation of ideas, information and events in the response to themes and issues.



Creating depictions

List the nouns that represent people in the extract.

Create a sociogram which shows the relationships between these people. This sort of diagram is called a sociogram.



Show your diagram to a partner and explain it.

A **depiction** is a still picture created from human bodies and some props. Now, work with a group to create a depiction of the people in your diagram.

Create a second depiction to portray the scene where 'the Big Man from Welfare' comes to take John away.

Write a caption for each of your depictions.

Depiction 1:

Depiction 2:



NA 4.3 NSW 3.4 Controls and evaluates structures and features of spoken language. Interprets meaning and develops and presents ideas and information in familiar surroundings.

NA 4.5 NSW 3.5 Reads an extensive range of texts with fairly complex structures and features, justifying own interpretation of ideas, information and events in the response to themes and issues.

NA 4.7 NSW 3.8 Identifies the structures of different texts and with assistance discusses the grammatical structures and features that shape readers' and listeners' understanding of texts.



Research the facts

This is the preface to the novel, *The Burnt Stick*:

Although the incidents described in this story are mostly fictional, they are based on a central fact. It was the practice by the authorities in many parts of Australia, until as late as the 1960s, to take Aboriginal children of mixed parentage away from their mothers, and to have them brought up either in institutions or with foster parents.

–Anthony Hill, Canberra, 1994

Visit the library to research the laws relating to the practice mentioned in the preface.

In which Australian states did the practice occur?

When did the practice cease in each state?

What factors contributed to having the practice stopped?



Could the events described in the preface occur today? Write your opinion and the reasons for your opinion.
