

# Wurrtoo: The Wombat Who Fell in Love with the Sky

AUTHOR

**TYLISSA ELISARA**

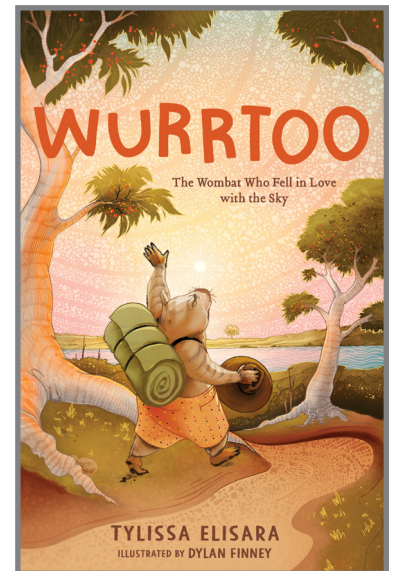
ILLUSTRATOR

**DYLAN FINNEY**

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## SYNOPSIS

*It all began in a burrow. The fifty-fifth burrow of Bushland Avenue to be exact. If you were ever lucky enough to find this beautiful clearing on Kangaroo Island where the arching gum trees kiss, you'd know that Wurrtoo's home is the one at the end with the big red trapdoor and large gold doorknob. Can you see it?*

Wurrtoo the wombat lives a quiet and solitary life in his burrow on Kangaroo Island, hoping to one day travel to the mainland and marry the love of his life, the sky. When Wurrtoo inadvertently saves Kuula the koala from a bushfire, he acquires the adventure companion he didn't know he needed.

With Kuula by his side, Wurrtoo leaves the safety of his burrow and sets out on an epic journey to cross the island, reach the mainland and climb to the top of tallest tree in the Forest of Dreaming. But it's fire season, and danger and strange creatures lurk behind every gum tree. To make it, the pair must face their fears together, learn the importance of friendship and discover the power of wombat wishes.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tyliissa Elisara is a children's social worker who lives and works in Meanjin (Brisbane) with her husband and children. She descends from the Narungga, Kurna and Adnyamathanha people of South Australia and was born and raised on Mamu Country in Innisfail, Queensland—a heritage, alongside her Irish ancestry, that she proudly regards as a long legacy of storytelling. Tyliissa is studying a Master of Writing, Editing and Publishing at the University of Queensland. *Wurrtoo* is her first novel.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Dylan Finney is an Australian-born graphic designer and artist. He is a proud descendant of the Yanula and Mara clans, and also has English and Irish heritage. He lives on Darkinjung land. His work explores identity and culture—inspired by people, places, animals, light and colour. Dylan lives on the NSW Central Coast.

Find out more about him at <https://dylanfinneyart.com/about>.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright AM operates justified text writing and publishing consultancy services, and is widely published on children's literature, publishing history and Australian fiction. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History*

of the Book in Australia 1946–2005 (co-edited with Craig Munro) (UQP, 2006). In 2011 she was recipient of the CBCA (Qld) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award, in 2012, of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children’s Literature, in 2014, the QWC’s Johnno Award. In 2021 she was appointed a member of the Order of Australia.

## STUDY NOTES

- Examine the cover of the novel. What does it suggest about the novel’s themes?
  - After you have read the novel, examine the cover again: what does it suggest to you now?

## HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES (HASS)

### First Nations Culture and Storytelling

- Wurrtoo’s favourite book ‘held stories of places as old as time’ (p 3) including a map of the ‘Forest of Dreaming’ (p 4). What does ‘Dreaming’ mean to First Nations people?
- “‘That’s not how family works,” said Kuula, seeming a little hurt. “Family isn’t always who you are related to. Auntie Swan came to me when I needed her most. That’s all that matters.”” (p 30). Discuss concepts of family in First Nations cultures.
- First Nations names for stars (pp 40–41) are discussed. Research this further.
- Some places are sacred to First Nations people. “‘Wurrtoo,” he said, giving the firestick to the wombat and lighting another for himself, “you must be aware that this is sacred land. So we must first ask the old ones for permission to enter.”” (p 151). Read more about the concept of places being sacred to First Nations people.
- ‘With that, he corked the bottle of lemon myrtle-ade, tucked it safely next to the wattleseed damper and muntrie jam he’d packed in a basket that morning, and headed towards the front door with his picnic.’ (p 3). Indigenous foods are described here. Have your students ever tasted these foods or other native ingredients?
- ‘He watched as families of birds, from all different species, surfed the strong wind channels together. These creatures had a special relationship with Sky Country, just like the fish had with Sea Country, and he had with his burrow. He was so high up that he could see everything all at once and it finally became clear to him: the land, sea, and sky were all connected. It was all Country! The sky wasn’t something he could possess or contain; it was part of something much larger than himself—and much larger than his burrow could ever be.’ (pp 155–156). Research the concept of ‘Country’ in First Nations culture.
- Discuss the concept of magic and how it relates to wishes or to the imagination.
- Why is it important to acknowledge diverse cultures?

### Wombat

- The hairy-nosed wombat is a creature with distinct characteristics. Research and write a summary of what you discover about these animals.
- Read other books that feature wombats and compare how they are portrayed in them, for example, Jackie French and Bruce Whatley have collaborated on a series of picture books about wombats.
- International Wombat Day is celebrated on 22 October each year. Celebrate with students by reading this book and engaging in wombat-related readings and craft activities.

### Rite of Passage

- What does Wurrtoo learn about growing up and maturing in this novel?
- What attributes does Kuula model for Wurrtoo, in demonstrating a better way of engaging with life?

### Bravery and Facing Fears

- What made Wurrtoo brave enough to rescue Kuula?
- Discussion Point: What is a ‘hero’?

### Friendship and Love

- What is the basis for the friendship which develops between Wurrtoo and Kuula?
  - Both have lost their families. Is their friendship also based on a search for family?
- Is it likely that one day, Wurrtoo’s love for Kuula might prove to be romantic as well?

## SCIENCE

- Discuss the meaning of the words endangered and endemic (p 112) as they relate to animals.
- Bushfires are the manifestation of environmental challenges, climate change and sometimes environmental mismanagement. They occur in this novel a number of times. Research bushfires in Australia and how they are being prevented or responded to by authorities.
- Edible Australian plants are mentioned throughout this text. Research and discuss with your students. You may also wish to begin a school garden in which to cultivate such plants.

### ENGLISH LANGUAGE & LITERACY

- The novel is told in third person past tense, but begins and ends in second person. How might it have changed had it been written in first person from Wurrtoo's perspective?
- The story employs the trope of a quest. "Can you believe it? He made it! This once nervous and fearful wombat had crossed both land and sea to reach his goal. Wurrtoo was too tired to realise it, but he had just achieved an extraordinary feat—one which I doubt any animal has achieved since." (p 140). Discuss the quest as a trope in this novel. What features of a quest did you observe in the plot and characterisation?
- This novel has been compared to classic works such as *Blinky Bill* and *Winnie the Pooh*. It might also be compared to Ruth Park's *The Muddleheaded Wombat* and series. What similarities or differences do you find in these texts?
- Find examples of the use of literary devices in this novel using the following examples:
  - Simile
  - Metaphors
  - Personification.
- Identify techniques by which humour is provoked. Create a table with following headings and add quotes that fit each category:
  - Irony
  - Exaggeration
  - Other.
- The structure of the story can be analysed in terms of the following key narrative features, which are used to engage the reader's attention and to shape the work:
  - Strong beginnings and endings to chapters are one way of structuring a narrative, for example:  
Beginning: "Hi!" The snake said with a toothy smile.' (Chapter 5, Snake Lagoon, p 53)  
Ending: "Let's go fight some hogs.'" (Chapter 9, The Yamuti, p 112)

Which other opening or closing sentence was particularly gripping, in your opinion?

- Suspense is the key to any narrative's structure. What were the suspenseful elements of this novel?
- Description in setting can be evoked via a complex range of literary devices, for example: 'Up close, the Sky River was magic. The water was as flat and clear as glass, and millions of bright white stars flowed beneath its surface, giving it its milky appearance. Wurrtoo was speechless; no words could describe its beauty. He got down on his knees, reached towards the surface, and dipped in a single claw. The stars scattered like fish.' (p 162). What devices are used in this quote?
- Read this description of Snake Lagoon: 'The water was shallow and brown, surrounded by craggy rocks and shrivelled shrubs, half of which appeared blackened and burned. As the trio crossed the lagoon over a little wooden footbridge, Kuula looked down at the water. It was littered with withered branches and stinky fish skeletons.' (p 57). What does this description suggest about this place and what senses are appealed to?
- Choose any of the places that Wurrtoo travels to and describe it in your own words based on what you've read in this novel
- Write a character study on one of the major or minor characters, using key quotes and events which give a clear picture of them and demonstrate their nature.
- Which character was most intriguing and why?
  - Which minor character would you like to have heard more about?
- Write a diary entry by Kuula about her first encounter with Wurrtoo.
- Write a poem in ballad form describing Wurrtoo's epic adventure.

**SCHOLASTIC TEACHING NOTES**

- Several of the places Wurrtoo and Kuula travel to are examples of alliteration. Create an alphabet of possible imagined places named like this, for example, Gruesome Gully.
- Test your students' comprehension by asking them to make a list of all the animals Wurrtoo encounters on this journey.

**VISUAL LITERACY**

- Dylan Finney's illustrations in this novel are lively and humorous. Invite students to create a drawing of the two friends in a similar style of illustration.
- Design a new cover for this book.
- Draw a map marking all the places the two friends travel through on their adventure.
- Wurrtoo refers to his plant encyclopedia and the plants they encounter on their journey such as the kurti tree, or wild peach or quandong (pp 90–91). Research native Australian plants and invite each student to contribute to an illustrated plant encyclopedia.

AUTHOR OF NOTES

**DR ROBYN SHEAHAN-BRIGHT AM**