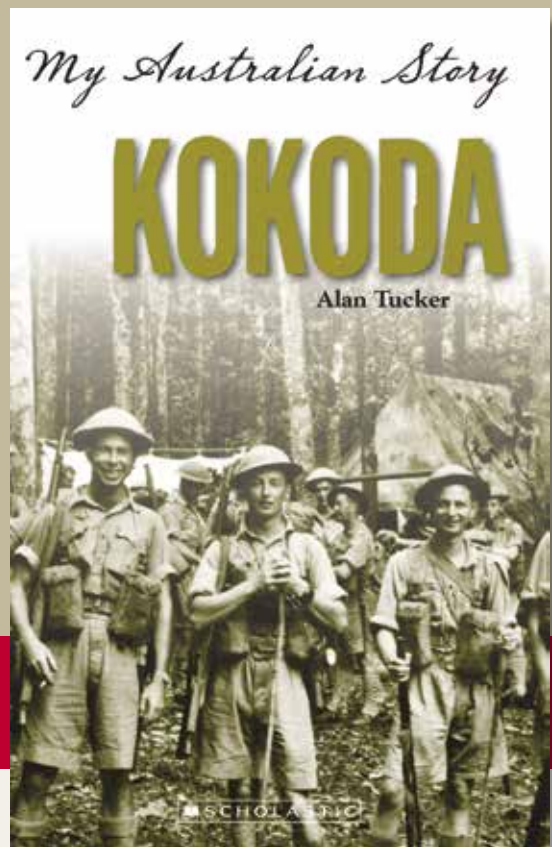


My Australian Story: Kokoda

By Alan Tucker

- War in the Pacific • Race, gender and class
- Women and families • Communication



Synopsis

The narrator of *My Australian Story: Kokoda* is 14-year-old Archie McLeod, who moves house with his mother from Melbourne to Townsville early in World War II.

Not long after Archie was born, Archie's father died from the effects of poison gas in World War I. Archie's brother Harold is in Egypt fighting in the North African campaign and his brother Des has joined the civilian militia. The war has scattered Archie's family and Des tells him he must keep a diary of the family's role in this war, because in one of the house moves they have lost the letters telling of their father's experiences in the last war.

Archie's mother has decided to move north because her older sister Dorothy and her husband Jim offer them some semblance of family life, and sharing the cost of living will make things easier for everyone. To Archie, this is also a chance to leave behind the bullying that he has suffered all his life. His speech difficulty robs him of the little confidence he has, and if he's lucky his mother will not make him start at a new school until next year.

Archie isn't lucky, however. Uncle Jim's mate Bluey says that Archie will never succeed with his slight physical build, and that he needs to eat more steak. The school bully, Beefy, torments him, so Uncle Jim starts to coach Archie in boxing and wrestling but he's no good at these violent sports. Like Beefy, Archie's brother Harold hit out at the world when his father died. Harold was in constant trouble with the police when he was younger, so the war provided an outlet for his aggression. But Archie is a different kind of boy altogether and life is tough for him because he is not stereotypically 'masculine'. Even if he was old enough, war would not be an option for him.

Despite the promise that those who enlisted in the militia would not have to serve overseas, Archie's brother Des is shipped to an undisclosed destination (probably New Guinea). While the war against the Nazis and Fascists in Europe continues, a new front has opened up frighteningly close to home. Japan is on the move and when its air force bombs the US naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on 7 December 1941, the United States declares war on Japan. Since World War I, Australia's major defence alliance has shifted from the UK to the United States, and as a result the Australian Prime Minister John Curtin announces that Australia too is at war with Japan.

While much of the narrative is devoted to the environment, the fighting, the waiting, the boredom, the suffering of Harold and Des at war, their letters are interspersed with Archie's observations of the changes war makes for the women and children back home. Women work outside the home in occupations they are experiencing for the first time, and Archie's mother enjoys the financial and personal independence this brings.



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Kokoda touches on the cultural changes that will eventually culminate in the social revolutions of the 1960s. Not all women will be happy to limit themselves to working in the home when the men return from war, tensions between black and white Americans are contrasted with the belief that all Australians regardless of skin colour work together harmoniously, and both foreshadow the civil rights movement that gathers pace in the 1950s and 60s.

Despite being small in number, and inadequately provisioned and equipped, the Australian troops survive the nightmare experience of jungle warfare by their determination, courage and teamwork. And back in Townsville, Archie finally stands up to his continued bullying by Beefy, confronts him and wins.

Des asks one of his mates to take his diary to his mother in Townsville, because he has a bad feeling about his chances of surviving. Just as the family begins to lose hope Des will return, he turns up unexpectedly, injured but alive. Des tells Archie he can't wait to get back to normal life in Townsville. When Archie protests that it won't seem very exciting, Des tells him the war has given him more than enough excitement for the time being.

An attack launched against the Japanese in Burma has the desired effect and distracts them from the New Guinea campaign. They begin to withdraw. The one wish Archie and his mother have now is that Harold will also return to them. After a month's silence, finally a letter arrives from Harold. He has been bayoneted and is suffering from malaria but is alive and improving. And when he arrives back in Australia, his mother rejoices that at last, even if temporarily, she has her whole family at home.

About the Author

Alan Tucker is an award-winning Australian writer and artist, best known for his information books and his meticulously researched historical fiction. He says:

'I was born in Adelaide in the summer of 1952. My father rode his pushbike to the hospital on the day I was born and lost his pay packet. Will he ever let me forget?

'I lived in Adelaide until I was 24 and studied at three state schools and Flinders University. Art was not part of my education at home or at school. It spontaneously generated when I was in my early twenties, about the time I moved to the first of three country towns. I have lived in the country ever since.

'My childhood home had very few books, but lots of talk about football, racing, tennis and cricket. My love of reading evolved when I finished study and for the first time could read for pleasure. My interest in writing and painting developed while I was on a working holiday in New Zealand.

'For the next twenty years I painted and wrote regularly in the back shed. I did not dream of exhibiting or publishing but simply enjoyed my hobbies and slowly developed a personal artistic style in which words, narrative and images combine.

'During my first exhibition of paintings in 1993 I was approached by Omnibus Books and asked if I would like to adapt my work for publication in a book. I said 'yes' and have been working on research, writing and illustrating (as well as teaching part-time at a secondary school) since then.'



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Shared Learning and Discussion Points

ASK YOUR STUDENTS:

- On a map of the Pacific, mark the following:
 - The long trip north that Archie and his mother take
 - Harold's first voyage to war and his redeployment to the Pacific war
 - Des's journeys
 - The invasions by Japanese forces
 - The location of attacks on Australia.
- During World War II in Australia there was no decimal currency and Australians used what was known as the Imperial Measurement system, which they had inherited from the UK. Challenge students to find out how to convert miles to kilometres and to convert these distances cited in the text to kilometres:
 - Archie and his mother travel 1800 miles from Melbourne to Townsville
 - Lae and Salamaua are 170 miles from Port Moresby
 - Mossman is 250 miles south of Townsville.

Ask:

When did Australia begin to change from the Imperial to the Metric system?

When was decimal currency introduced?
- The reasons for war are complex. Kokoda suggests that the obvious factors, such as an invasion or a bombing, are not the only ones and may not be the most interesting ones. Discuss with your students the role played in the narrative by:
 - Stereotypical masculinity
 - The inability to express feelings
 - Superficial judgments of, and prejudices about, others.
- Discuss the term 'segue' with your students. Fiction has become increasingly influenced by the techniques of film. Ask your students what is the effect of the juxtaposition of Des's letter with cousin Shirley's story on p 114. (The violence in war is not separate from the violence in suburban streets. Here, men in a group harass someone less powerful than they are. That is what happens in war, too, although on a bigger scale.) Outside this novel, what evidence do your students have of concern with community violence in Australia today? (News items on lack of respect for women in sexual harassment cases, alcohol-fuelled violence at various celebrations, sport and violence.)

The US and Japanese defence forces are described in *Kokoda* as professional, focused, well-armed and provisioned. Ask your students how the Australian forces are described in comparison (poorly provisioned and supported, poorly commanded, eg p 121, 128; but courageous despite small numbers, p 143; 'lacking', p 185).

Activities and Blackline Masters

ACTIVITY 1: CREATE A POSTER

How was Australian home life different in World War II? Use such books in the library as Jackie French's *Weevils, War & Wallabies* and *Rockin', Rollin', Hair & Hippies* and the internet as an inspiration to create a film or a poster about life for ordinary Australians at the time, focusing on one or more of the following:

- Rations and other restrictions in World War II
- Food and drink
- Clothes
- Houses and gardens
- Transport
- Schools
- Entertainment.

a. BLM Create a Poster

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ACTIVITY 2: COLLOQUIALISM CHALLENGE


As we learn in the text, in World War II Australia's defence alliance with the United States became more important than its traditional alliance with the UK. Along with that shift came an increase in American cultural influences on Australia. It's not surprising that for a writer such as Alan Tucker, the impact that this change had on our language is important.

From the following list of Australian colloquialisms in *Kokoda*, choose 10. Give the meaning of each one and say whether it is still being used by Australian speakers now.

- the Black Market, p 28
- a black-out, p 29
- more work than he can poke a stick at, p 37
- we fight above our weight, p 42
- snazzy, p 57
- biffo, p 62
- sure as eggs, p 63
- like a herd of Mrs Brown's cows, p 65



- between a rock and a hard place, p 76
- the Big Brass, p 77, 121
- he never misses a trick, p 78
- like a house on fire, p 85
- we're all in the same boat, p 105
- as keen as mustard, p 108
- a reccie, p 111
- dog eat dog, p 137
- lie doggo, p 149
- a war of attrition, p 154
- cut the mustard, p 206.

b. BLM-Challenge Template 

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ACTIVITY 3: COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Ask your students to list the stereotyped comparisons in the novel between Australians and Americans.

Racial divisions, p 73-74, 89/90; pomp and ceremony, p 74; national pride, p 75; respect for women, p 115; wealth, p 35; confidence, p 165; and lacking courage, p 194.

What evidence have you noticed outside this novel of American influences on Australian culture in your lifetime?

c. BLM-Compare and Contrast Template 

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