

Australian Rules

A feature film for Secondary and Tertiary students

About the film

Australian Rules is the story of 16 year old Gary Black – average football player, budding wordsmith and reluctant hero. It is set in a remote South Australian fishing town in the week before the biggest event to occur in the town for a long time: the Football Grand Final. Gary helps his local team win the championship by accident, but celebrations turn to violence when Gary's Aboriginal best friend, Dumbly Red, is denied the "Best and Fairest" medal because of the racism of local officials. In a night when the town's long-simmering racial tensions boil over, Dumbly Red is shot and killed and Gary, making a courageous personal stand, confronts the insidious racism in the town and his own father.

In *If Magazine*, August 2001, Jo Litson describes *Australian Rules* as,
...a funny, sad, scary and poignant story with a powerful message; a moving ode to reconciliation.

Australian Rules offers a rich examination of identity and 'manhood' in Australia, and a powerful study of race relations. *Australian Rules* is adapted from Philip Gwynne's book, *Deadly Unna?* which won the Children's Book Council of Australia's Book of the Year for Older Readers Award in 1999, and was highly praised for its reconciliation message. The film is a story of mateship and love that is both confronting and sensitive. The story clearly takes a strong anti-racist stance.

- **Why *Australian Rules* should be viewed and studied.**

Australian Rules will have relevance to students of Cultural Studies, Indigenous Studies, Australian Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Drama and Film and Media Studies. The film is suitable for students from middle to senior secondary school and at the tertiary education level. It has wide potential as a classroom resource, providing a rare and valuable first hand account of indigenous issues. *Australian Rules* encourages the development of detailed and balanced understandings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but also issues and concerns we all share.

Film is a powerful medium through which to confront and motivate young people to think critically about indigenous issues. Teachers often admit to feeling inadequately prepared to design and deliver teaching and learning activities about these issues. So films opening up these themes are of considerable value, particularly if they are able to celebrate stories of reconciliation as well as face unpleasant truths. *Australian Rules* also lays bare the stresses of family and social life in a fringe rural seaside community, where many of the young people are bored and aimless and others, like Gary Black, simply don't fit into local social mores.

Australian Rules explores many themes highlighted in current national and state curriculum framework documents. The National Statement on Studies of society and environment for Australian schools (Curriculum Corporation, 1994), states that students should study the '*complex web of human relationships and structures*' and,

'When students consider people and their actions ...they investigate and analyse the values and beliefs that influence them. As social and environmental participants themselves, students learn to subject their own values and actions to careful scrutiny'.

The document also encourages students to explore social justice issues such as ‘...concern for the welfare, rights and dignity of all people... and commitment to redressing disadvantage and to changing discriminatory and violent practices. These values contribute to students’ understanding of what is involved in achieving a fair and just society’. (*Curriculum Corporation, 1994 p.5*)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are also core in all curriculum documents, and students should study, ‘the impact of social and institutionalised racism and violence, now and in the past...and ways of achieving social justice’. (*Curriculum Corporation, 1994 p.6.*)

In an article for *Australian Screen Education*, December 2002, Libby Tudball describes how students respond to the important issues in the film:

“After watching *Australian Rules*, student audiences are ready to laugh about the ‘light and frothy’ side of the film. But they also develop very strong views about the ‘bad seeds’, and are ready to debate the big issues. They are incensed that Gary’s father appears to get away with his violence, and they are heartened by Gary’s humanity. It is a film that provides rich classroom discussions on issues that matter in the Australian community.

It is important that students watching the film are provided with classroom discussion and activities that fully explore the complex reasons why ‘dark seeds’ such as racism, prostitution, domestic violence, and family breakdown do occur, and what can be done to mediate and solve these issues”.

Libby Tudball notes that through confrontation with the grim realities in the film, the students should be able to see positive pathways.

“The film contains scenes depicting violence, but they are all integral to the narrative and characters. The level of violence is low in comparison with many other films frequently viewed by senior school students, and the film does explore issues that young people do have to deal with, sometimes personally. The fact that Gary Black is able to survive his father’s violent acts physically and emotionally, and break through the latent and blatant racism in the town to value and celebrate his relationships with Dumby and Clarence, means that student viewers are left with positive messages. The message is that race is an irrelevant measure for friendship, trust and love”.

What other themes does the film explore?

Libby Tudball points out that *Australian Rules* is a powerful study of ‘Australian characters’ in small town life. “The local butcher and football coach, Arks, and Darcy, the ‘gents’ producer, are both caricatured ‘Ockers’, whose characters and colloquial language should be richly analysed in the English classroom. There is great scope for students to debate the reasons for the development of these kinds of characters in Australian society, and the slim boundaries between reality and fantasy in these kinds of small town folks’ behaviours. Students should be challenged to debate whether characters such as Arks and Darcy really do exist today, and if so, is it only in rural areas? Does *Australian Rules* perpetuate small town myths, or are the characters and issues just as likely to occur in urban areas?

The film is also a study of how hard it can be for individuals like Gary Black to survive in a community where they are different from family members, their peers and the people who are central to their life. Gary Black is the second eldest in a large rowdy

family. Unlike the other boys, Gary reads voraciously and is obsessed with improving his vocabulary, and clearly does not fit the mould of other young people in the town in many ways. There is in fact a great deal of scope for students to study the whole range of characters and their relationships". (Libby Tudball, Lecturer in Education, Faculty of Education, Monash University).

Two other highly recommended articles about *Australian Rules* appeared in *Metro Magazine* No.134. "Playing by the Rules" by James Brown is an in-depth interview with Nathan Phillips, the actor who played Gary Black, and "Australian Rules" by Anna Dzenis, explores the production issues and aesthetics of converting the book by Phillip Gwynne to film. To obtain these and the article by Libby Tudball contact ATOM or visit. (<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>)

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