

Official Selection, Sundance Film Festival 2002

BASED ON THE NOVEL 'DEADLY, UNNA?' BY PHILLIP GWYNNE

# australian rules

M

Medium level violence, drugs use, adult themes

a film by **paul goldman**

## STUDYGUIDE

BY LIBBY TUDBALL

*AUSTRALIAN RULES* tells the story of sixteen-year-old Gary Black: average football player, budding wordsmith and reluctant hero. Gary helps his local Australian rules football team win the championship by accident, falls in love with a beautiful Aboriginal girl from the Mission, and becomes tangled in a terrible conflict with the people of his small, coastal town. *AUSTRALIAN RULES* is a story of unexpected love and the bravery of one young man in a town ready to explode.

AUSTRALIAN FILM FINANCE CORPORATION presents a TIDY TOWN PICTURES production in association with SHOWTIME AUSTRALIA, ADELAIDE FESTIVAL OF ARTS 2002, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN FILM CORPORATION and SBS INDEPENDENT. NATHAN PHILLIPS, LUKE CARROLL, LISA FLANAGAN, TOM BUDGE, SIMON WESTAWAY, CELIA IRELAND and KEVIN HARRINGTON. "AUSTRALIAN RULES" casting ANOUSHKA ZARKESH of Mullinars Casting Consultants, costume designer RUTH De La LANDE, re-recording mixer PHIL JUDD M.P.S.E., original music MICK HARVEY, editor STEPHEN EVANS, production designer STEVEN JONES-EVANS, director of photography MANDY WALKER A.C.S., line producer BARBARA GIBBS executive producers ANTONIO ZECCOLA and BRIDGET KIN, based on the novel 'DEADLY, UNNA?' by PHILLIP GWYNNE, screenplay by PHILLIP GWYNNE with PAUL GOLDMAN, producer MARK LAZARUS, director PAUL GOLDMAN





*Australian Rules* is adapted from Philip Gwynne's book, *Deadly Unna?* The book 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 takes a strong anti-racist stance.

#### CURRICULUM LINKS

*Australian Rules* will be relevant to students of Cultural Studies, Indigenous Studies, Australian Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Drama and Media Studies. The film is suitable for students from middle to senior secondary school and at the tertiary education level. Many of the activities are based on an integrated curriculum approach, drawing on English skills, as well as content understanding from other disciplines.

#### BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

##### Controversial reactions to the film

The making of the film, and its subsequent reception in South Australia, has been marked by considerable controversy. *Australian Rules* is partly inspired by elements of actual events that occurred in Point Pearce, South Australia in 1977, when a group of Aboriginal youths broke into a pub. Two were shot and killed by the hotel owner who confronted them during the break-in. The owner was not charged for the killing, as he was found to have killed the boys in self-defence. *Australian Rules* does, in fact, tell a very different story from

the 1977 tragedy. The town and characters' names are different, and the numbers of people involved and sequence of events are changed. The tragic shooting incident is a crucial element in the narrative, but only a small part of the film.

During the making of the film, the film-makers attempted to consult with the Point Pearce community. Not all issues were able to be resolved. However, this film is a piece of fiction, not a documentary. Had the film-makers been making a documentary of the incident, no doubt the film would be very different to what we see on the screen now. Some very important issues were raised through the consultation process however not all of these issues were able to be resolved. The film-makers have learned a great deal from this experience and would probably go about the making of the film in a different way if they were able to repeat the process. As well as raising awareness about dealing with different cultural sensitivities, this process has also raised issues about the rights of story tellers to interpret and pass on their own stories according to their ideas of integrity and honesty.

In spite of concerns from some groups, other Aboriginal people have been very positive about the film, including close family members of the boys who were shot. One of the Indigenous actors in the film, Kelton Pell, believes the film's story needs to be told, as it is one of loyalty and friendship in the midst of racism. *Australian Rules* was also warmly received by audi-

ences at the Sundance Film Festival in the USA, where it had its world premiere in January, 2002.

Journalist Rosemary Neill, (*The Australian*, 1 March, 2002) argues that *Australian Rules* is '... a courageous film that warns of the perils of bigotry. Attempts to ban it are misguided'.

*Australian Rules* is a study of a fictional small town where racism does exist, and where members of the local population, both black and white behave in dysfunctional ways. But the film does promote the view as Neill says, that '...meaningful reconciliation is a two-way street'.

#### AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

NOTE: Many of these activities could be completed either as oral or written tasks with the whole class, or in small groups or as individual work.

- Firstly, write down a few of your own thoughts about *Australian Rules*.
- Write a short description of your reactions to the film and then compare your descriptions with other class members.
- What do you think are the key themes?
- How would you describe the genre of the film?

The director, Paul Goldman says the film is,

*...about all the kinds of courage it takes to grow up in a country that still refuses to. It's about taking a stand, about the re-*



sponsibilities of manhood and nationhood. It's about relationships: between fathers and sons, mothers and sons, husbands and wives, blackfellas and whitefellas. It's also about the courage it takes to love. I wanted to make a film about this big secret country we live in.

...I planned the film to be an emotional hijack – light and frothy, laidback and joyous, but with some dark seeds sown in....

- What do you think Paul means when he says that the film is '... about all the kinds of courage it takes to grow up in a country that still refuses to'.
- Suggest why he refers to Australia as this 'big secret country'?
- Is *Australian Rules* 'light and frothy'?
- What are the 'dark seeds sown in'?

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.

- What do you think are the powerful messages in the story?
- How do you think an overseas audience might react to the film?

#### SETTING

*Australian Rules* is set in recent times in Prospect Bay, a shabby fishing village on the coast of South Australia. Blacky and his family live in 'The Port' where the whites live. Dumby lives out at 'The Point', the Aboriginal community.

- How would you describe the town?
- Why would so many of the 'shacks' have been built from fibro-cement and corrugated iron in these coastal communities?

In *Variety Review*, 29 January 2002, David Rooney says the film depicts the setting as

...a static community cut off from the world, representing but never overstating the typical small town fauna of faded, put-upon women and boozy bigoted men.

- What scenes in the film help to depict the film as 'cut off' and isolated?
- Which of the women could be described as 'put-upon'?
- Which of the men are 'boozy and bigoted'? How do they demonstrate their bigoted attitudes?

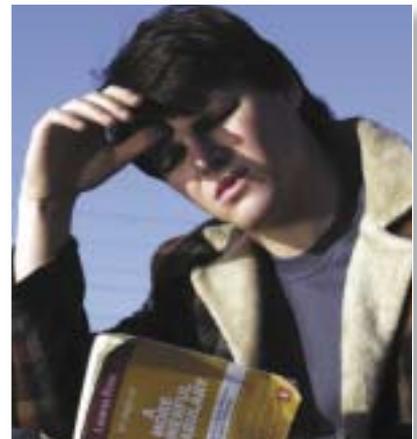
#### LANGUAGE

Many of the characters use colloquial, 'ocker' or slang language commonly used in Australia.

- What is meant by the expression Arks used when he said, 'don't drop your bundle over this' when Carol is arrested?
- Darcy says to Gary, 'pull up a pew'? What does he mean?
- List other expressions used in the film drawing on colloquial expressions.

Darcy is the epitome of an 'ocker' character.

- Do you agree? What is an 'ocker'?



- What are his 'gents' and how does he produce them?
- What advice does he give to Gary about tactics on the eve of the Grand Final?

#### THE BEGINNING OF THE FILM

At the start of the film, viewers see a football ground, and a pair of footy boots. We hear Blacky say, 'We've made the Grand



Final, the biggest thing to happen to this town since we won the second prize in the South Australian Tidy Towns competition'. The film begins as a wry football comedy.

- What impressions do you form about the focus of the film and what it is about at the start?
- How is the comedy generated at the start of the film?
- Arks could be described as the 'ultimate ocker'. Do you agree with this description?
- What impression do you get of Gary and Dumby at the start of the film?
- At what stage do you think the mood changes in the film?

#### EXPLORING THE CHARACTERS

The many characters in *Australian Rules* are strongly drawn and some even 'larger than life'. One of the strengths of the characterizations in the film is that they are so different and varied.

- Do you agree or disagree with these statements? Discuss these views with other class members, with reference to particular characters including Arks, Bob Black, Gary, Dumby, Clarence and Darcy.

Gary Black

Gary Black, or Blacky as he is known, is

the sixteen-year-old Goonya (whitefella) whose experiences are central to the film's story. Gary is the second eldest in a large rowdy family. Unlike the other boys, Gary reads voraciously and is obsessed with improving his vocabulary. When the Aboriginal player Carol is arrested prior to the championship final, Blacky is promoted to the key position of ruckman. Gary is central to the whole story of *Australian Rules*.

- Write your own description of Gary and then compare what you have written with other class members.
- Gary's two main friends are Pickles and Dumby Red. Explain the very different relationships Gary has with the two boys.
- Write a description of Pickles and Dumby Red as though you are expressing Gary's viewpoint about their characters and qualities.
- Why does Gary have problems with his father?
- Why doesn't Gary 'fit' with his peers and community? What makes him different?
- Why is Gary so upset about the Grand Final celebrations?
- Why was it so important to Gary to attend Dumby's funeral?
- Why do you think Gary and Clarence were drawn to each other?

- Do you think Gary was 'brave'? Discuss your answer with reference to various scenes in the film.

#### Dumby Red

Dumby is a Nunga (blackfella) who lives on the Aboriginal mission nearby. He is the star of the football team.

- Dumby could be described as the 'cool, charismatic Aboriginal kid'. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- Write your own short descriptions of Dumby and compare them with others in the class.
- Why do you think Dumby was cheated out of the 'Best on Ground' medal and it was given instead to the white coach's son?
- Why might Dumby have gone to the break-in at the pub?
- Why were Dumby and Gary such good friends?

#### Pickles

Pickles takes on the role of 'harmless deviant and anti-hero in the film'.

- Do you agree with this description of Pickles?
- What other words would you use to describe Pickles?
- Why is he in so many ways a 'sad character'?
- Why does Pickles try to 'white ant' or undermine Darcy?
- What might have motivated him to sabotage Darcy's business?

#### Other characters

Develop character descriptions for Gary's mother and father, Darcy, Clarence, Dumby's cousin, Pretty, Shirli, and Arks.

#### EXPLORING THE STORY

##### Training for the big game

It could be said that at the start of the film that the film-maker 'plays with the game of Australian Rules, and even makes fun of the team'. But the mood soon changes when the police arrive and take Carol Cockatoo away.

- What impressions do we gain of Arks' coaching ability?
- How does he try to 'pump the team up'?
- How does the mood change when the police arrive?
- Why was Blacky promoted to the ruck?
- How do we know that Pretty has grudges against members of the white

community at this early stage in the film?

#### Gary's family life

- How does Gary's mother try to keep some respectability and order in the household?
- How do we know she is interested in football tactics?
- Why do you think Gary is so frightened when his father asks him to cut the net off the propeller?
- Why does Bob call him 'a gutless wonder'?
- What sort of relationship does Gary have with his brother and other siblings?
- Why did Gary gather his siblings together and sleep in the garden one night?
- How would you describe the relationship between Gary's father and mother?
- What is the chocolate in the fridge symbolic of in Gary's house?
- Write a paragraph from Gary's point of view expressing his thoughts about his family life.

#### The Grand Final match

On the day of the Grand Final, it seems the whole town, black and white has turned out to watch the game.

- Why was Gary so frightened about being up against Thumper?
- Why did the Aboriginal players in the team arrive late?
- How would you describe Pickles' antics in the game?
- Why did it seem inevitable that Pickles would cause a fight?
- Who actually started to defend Pickles?
- Why does Gary call Dumby the 'Dark Prince of Premiership passion'?
- Why do you think Dumby passed the ball to his cousin when he could have goaled?
- Why did Gary's mother visit the rooms and how did she help the outcome of the game?
- Write a headline and report for the local newspaper describing the Grand Final match?

Or

- In pairs, develop an oral commentary on the game.
- How does the film-maker develop our sense that a relationship is developing between Gary and Clarence at this stage?



#### Presentation night

When Glen Bryce makes the Presentation night speech, he says that when you get out on the paddock, it doesn't matter where you come from.

- What do you think the audience felt about his views?
- In what ways did Pretty behave provocatively?
- Why didn't Dumby win the medal for Best on Ground?
- What was the reaction to this from Dumby, Gary, Pretty, and others in the hall?

#### The break-in at the pub

In the film, it appears that Dumby and Pretty might have been driven to the break-in as an act of frustration after being denied recognition for Dumby's performance in the Grand Final. We also learn that Pretty has been in trouble before.

- Who were the two drunk men in the bar?
- Do you think it was an accident when Bob Black killed Dumby?
- How did Bob feel about what happened after the event?
- Why are Clarence and Gary drawn closer after Dumby's death?
- Why did Bob get away with the killing?
- Suggest what might have been going through Gary's mind as the police interviewed his father outside their house.
- How thorough do you think the police investigation was into the incident?
- How did Gary feel after the loss of his mate?
- Why did Bob say to Gary, 'we have to keep tight on this and back each other up'?



#### Events after the shooting

- Why was Gary so unsympathetic to Darcy about the loss of his gents?
- Why does Clarence visit Gary at his home?
- Why does she tell Gary to shut up?
- How does Bob react when he finds Clarence and Gary together?
- How did Arks react to Dumby's death?
- What do you think the club was not going to do anything for Dumby's funeral?
- Why was it so important to Blacky for him to go to Dumby's funeral?
- Why was it symbolic that Gary took the chocolate?
- Why did he go to stay at Pickles' house?
- How did Gary's Mum react to the news that he planned to go to the funeral?
- How can you explain the various reactions to his presence from Dumby's family?

- How do we know that Dumby's father appreciates Gary's presence at the funeral?

Gary speaks to Dumby as he pays his respects. He says, 'You were deadly unna. You were Best on Ground'.

- What did he mean by 'deadly unna'?
- What else did Gary do to express his love for Dumby?
- Why did Gary's father say, 'You are no longer welcome in this house, not after today'?

#### THE END OF THE FILM

- What happened to Gary's father?
- Why would Gary and Clarence have felt they should leave town?
- What are the film's final images?
- Would you say that *Australian Rules* has a happy ending? Explain your answer.

#### EXPLORING KEY THEMES

Australian 'Rules'.

- After watching the film, talk about what 'Australian rules' you think are explored?

After discussing the previous question check your answers against these comments about the film.

*Australian Rules is about far more than a game of footy. The film explores social rules, of who should mix with whom, and black/white relationships. It also looks at 'rules' in different families and amongst peers.*

- As a class, discuss this statement fully.
- Earlier in the production of the film, it was mooted that the film may be called *Deadly Unna*, the title of the Phillip Gwynne book. Which title do you think is preferable and why?
- Could you suggest another title for the film?

#### Relationships

The film explores a complex range of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous members of the small town community.

- Why is Gary and Dumby's relationship so friendly and strong?
- Why does Gary call Clarence 'the supernova of soulful seduction' when they sit together under the pier?
- What draws the two together at various

stages of the film?

- What factors might make a character like Pretty feel so much hatred towards the white community?
- Which relationships change during the film?
- Make a list of other relationships in the film and discuss them in small groups.

#### Racism

In the film, it is clear that local Aborigines are a welcome and critical part of the football team, but most of the townspeople prefer that the Aboriginal people keep to themselves in their own area called the 'mish' or mission. Across Australia, by the 1970s, missions dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century were controlled by local Indigenous communities. Church or 'missionary organizations' were only likely to be living in those communities if this was by invitation of local Indigenous communities.

*Australian Rules* does provide very clear evidence of the kinds of racism that are still evident in Australia. Executive Producer of SBS TV, Bridget Ikin said,

*...we believe this will be a powerful film whose intention is to confront racism rather than shy away from it.*

- In what ways are Gary Black's actions a 'confrontation' of racism?
- What evidence do you see in the film of racist actions and comments from Gary's father, Pickles, the football club, Arks and other characters?

#### DEADLY UNNA? AND NUKKIN YA

Phillip Gwynne's first book, *Deadly Unna?* (1998), was largely autobiographical, a story told through the eyes of a white boy growing up in the 1960s. The adaptation for film has a contemporary setting and the storyline moves beyond the initial book, to contain many sequences that form part of Gwynne's second book *Nukkin Ya* (2000).

- If you have watched the film and read and studied the books, discuss the differences between the two.
- Visit the Puffin books site at <http://www.puffin.com.au> to read more about the books and find out more about Phillip Gwynne.
- Write a review of the two books and forward them to the 'Wrote a Review' section on the Puffin web site.

#### MEDIA STUDIES

- How can you describe the genre of the film?
- Goldman and Walker have used a chocolate filter over the lens to give the film a coloured wash and distinctive look. They say, '...It gives a golden haze, but it's not nostalgic, it still has a very contemporary, bold look.' As a class, talk about your views on how effective you think this technique is?
- Make a running sheet of various scenes in the film and discuss why the film-maker made the editorial and production decisions to include each sequence?
- In a class discussion, talk about various techniques the film-maker uses in the film.
- Select scenes to analyse and discuss the mood and feeling generated by the choice of location, music, voice-overs, images and sequencing.
- Write a review of the film for a daily newspaper.

#### FURTHER ACTIVITIES

There has been considerable progress in reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in recent decades, but the kind of racism explored in *Australian Rules* does still exist.

- How can you define reconciliation? What can you do to advance the cause of reconciliation in your school and community?
- Visit <http://www.austlii.edu.au>; [http://www.atsic.gov.au/default\\_ns.asp](http://www.atsic.gov.au/default_ns.asp) and <http://www.loreoftheland.com.au> to find out more about reconciliation and current Indigenous issues.
- In every state and territory of Australia, there are Indigenous communities often living in areas that were formerly missions of government controlled areas. Try to find out more about the past Indigenous history and current issues in your local communities.

Other excellent web sites to explore Indigenous issues:

THE JOURNEY OF HEALING RECONCILIATION SITE: <http://www.alphalink.net.au/~rez/Journey>  
YARRA HEALING: <http://yarrahealing.melb.catholic.edu.au>

AUSTRALIAN RULES WEB SITE: <http://palace.net.au/australianrules>

This guide was produced by ATOM. For more information about ATOM study guides and The Speakers' Bureau visit our web site: [www.metromagazine.com.au](http://www.metromagazine.com.au)

To order the Australian Rules Video contact: Australian Children's Television Foundation, Level 3, 145 Smith Street  
Fitzroy, Victoria 3065, Australia  
Tel (03) 9419 8800 Fax (03) 9419 0660  
email [info@actf.com.au](mailto:info@actf.com.au) [www.actf.com.au](http://www.actf.com.au)