Rabbit-proof Fence Study Guide

Rabbit-proof Fence by Doris Pilkington Garimara

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Rabbit-Proof Fence by Doris Pilkington is the true story of the escape of three young girls from a settlement school they were forced to attend in Australia, over one thousand miles away from their families and homes. The three girls, along with many others, were mandated to be transferred to Moore River Settlement School, which was a school for half-caste Aborigine children. With the influx first of white raiders and pirates and then "peaceful" English settlers, there was a multitude of half-English children. The government considered these children a step above full-blooded Aborigine children and felt obliged to take them to schools where they could be educated. These youngsters were unceremoniously snatched from their families and carted off to these settlements.

Molly, at fourteen, was the eldest of the three girls who are at the heart of the story. She, along with her relatives Gracie, eleven, and Daisy, just eight years old, were dismayed and frightened by their fate. Molly, a free-spirited girl and natural leader, decided on the evening before the first day of school that she and her two friends would control their own destiny. In the morning, she announced to the other two girls that they would be escaping. They were running the risk of being recaptured and punished. Anyone who tried to escape was placed in the "boob" (jail), beaten with a strap, had their heads shaved and were given only bread and water for a week. Molly was told that no one had ever successfully escaped. But Molly was undeterred. She was determined that she and her little friends would return to the people who loved and cared about them.

Molly's father was a white man who was the inspector of the rabbit-proof fence. The purpose of the fence was to keep the over-population of rabbits in the eastern Australian regions from coming into Western Australia. Molly learned from her father that the fence was installed from north to south for almost the entire length of the country. She knew that once she and the girls found the fence that it would lead them home.

The girls set off with only bread crumbs in their calico bags. They walked barefooted through thick forests and wide heathlands. They faced ferocious animals, hunger, rough terrain, rain storms and oppressive heat and, worse of all, the constant threat of being recaptured by the patrols that had been sent out looking for them. They became very savvy—asking for food from farmers and then taking off in the wrong direction and then doubling back in case they were reported. They supplemented what food they were given by trapping wild animals and eating whatever bush tuck they could find. Molly had learned how to navigate through the countryside from her father, always keeping an eye on the position of the sun. The girls make it home to their families who, though stunned that they came so far, were very happy to have their daughters back home. The trek across Australia is one of the longest in the recorded history of the country and certainly the longest that was accomplished barefooted.

Chapter 1: The First Military Post

Chapter 1: The First Military Post Summary and Analysis

Kundilla woke up first at the camp. The others were still asleep, covered by their animal skin blankets. Kundilla would check the fish traps he set the night before. He liked this time in the morning so he could meditate and make plans without disruption. The day before, the family clans had gathered for the annual burning of the undergrowth, which served to flush out game including wallabies and kangaroos. The men would ambush the animals as they ran from the fire. Their skins were used for warm clothing against the severe weather.

By the time Kundilla returned with the fish, his wife Ngingana had already prepared the fire. She cooked the fish and called everyone to eat. Mardina, Kundilla's other wife, was breastfeeding their youngest child, Jalda. Her two teenaged sons, Wandani and Binmu, had been selected by tribal elders to become men. To her they were still her boys, but the elders had made their decision. Kundilla's three married sons and their families were camped nearby. Others in the tribe were also near. There were about sixty people in the tribe. Kundilla's plans were to move the group toward the mouth of the river so his people could enjoy crayfish, crabs, seals and other delicacies.

While children played and men readied their equipment for their move, there was suddenly a loud boom. The women grabbed their children and took them to safety. Kundilla gathered the adult men together. They knew that the sound meant that the white raiders had returned to steal their women away. These white men, called gengas by the Aborigines, made up the crews of American whaling ships; they were ex-cons and pirates who took the Aboriginal women to be used as sex slaves on their ships. When they were done with them, they were murdered and thrown into the ocean. Although the brave Nyungar warriors would try to defend their families, they could not match up with the raiders' firearms and swords.

When the white men had first come, they had presumably come in friendship. The Nyungar men were impressed with their ships and asked them to take them to Green Island where they could collect eggs. The whalers complied and took them to the island but they stranded them there without food or water. The crew returned and found the hiding place of the women and took six of them on board.

On this day in 1826, the loud boom the tribe heard was not connected to the cruel whalers. Major Edmund Lockyear and soldiers of the 93rd Regiment along with fifty convicts had been sent to establish a military base in St. George Sound (where present-day Albany is) to defend the Nyungar's against the pirates. Kundilla and some of the other men spied on them. They were stunned but relieve to see that it hadn't been the whalers that had come ashore. The men who were making a camp had red jackets,

were all pale-skinned and had different colors of hair. Kundilla concluded that they were no threat to his people.

The military outpost lasted five years after which it was disbanded. The soldiers were bored and lonely and the commander felt they weren't sufficiently armed to withstand an attack.

Chapter 2: The Swan River Colony

Chapter 2: The Swan River Colony Summary and Analysis

Bidgup and his younger brother, Meedo, were hunting in the tribal land of Yellagonga, leader of a peaceful tribe. The young men had just slain a kangaroo and Bidgup was hauling it on his shoulders. Just then Yellagonga had called a meeting of his people. He was warning them about the approaching gengas. Just a few days before, Captain Fremantle had approached several Nyungar tribesmen, asking for their permission to give their land an English name. The men didn't understand a word he said. Fremantle tried sign language, but to no avail. Finally, he assumed that the men might know what he was talking about and declared that the region would from that time on be called Western Australia. As he spoke, he looked up and saluted the British flag. Captain James Stirling was on his way on the HMS Challenger—the large boat was filled with settlers.

In June 1829, the first British settlers arrived in a heavy rainstorm. Their possessions, including furniture and clothing, were all being soaked as the sailors toted the items from the ship to shore. The newly arriving settlers were disappointed with the conditions they found in their new land. Captain Stirling had made a slight "miscalculation." In his eagerness to reach the land of the Nyungars and take position of its half a million acres, he crashed his boat when he spotted Captain Charles Fremantle's ship, the Challenger already anchored. He thought another commander had beat him to the land and would become its Lieutenant Governor instead of him. Fremantle had indeed taken ownership of one the land and named it Swan River Colony.

Chapter 3: The Decline of Aboriginal Society

Chapter 3: The Decline of Aboriginal Society Summary and Analysis

The English settled in and were told they could claim any land that they liked. The wealthier and more influential people had first choice. They were encouraged to continue the customs of the English culture. The Nyungar people saw the writing on the wall. They could see that their society was being destroyed and that their land was being stolen from them. The hunters in the tribe were having trouble because much of the land was now fenced off. When they tried to cross the fencing, the white men would threaten to shoot them.

Since their food supply was being cut off and hunger was a growing problem, several tribal hunters speared one of the white men's sheep. The men were arrested, tried for breaking English law and sentenced to prison. As they were taken away on a ship, their families wailed and cried for them. The men were never seen again. Of the Aborigines who were taken prisoners during these early years, some were freed after their sentence was served, some were dropped off in strange lands and couldn't find their way home and others remained unfairly jailed. Members of the tribe would be arrested for the things they had always done—their laws and practices were being superseded by those of the settlers. It soon became apparent that the settlers would be allowed to break their own English laws if Aborigines were the victims. The tribesmen fought back at first, but the weapons of the white settlers were far superior to their spears. Soon, the Nyungar accepted the reality that they would have to comply with English law.

The white settlers were pushing further and further into their land. To break their spirit, the settlers created laws that prevented the Nyungar from performing their dances and ceremonies which were crucial to the perpetuation of their way of life. The settlers preferred hiring Aborigines for jobs requiring labor. They were strong and good workers and they could pay them much less than they could their own kind. The English established an annual distribution of blankets to the Aborigines once a year, on Queen Victoria's birthday. The land of the once proud Aborigines had been stolen by these men who in return gave them a blanket once a year. The Aboriginals were grateful people and were happy to get even this small token.

Chapter 4: From the Deserts They Come

Chapter 4: From the Deserts They Come Summary and Analysis

By the 1900s, Western Australia was prospering. Mining and agricultural industries were growing. To meet export demands, the white settlements were encroaching further upon the land of the tribal natives. Laws were passed to favor the settlers against the Mardudjara tribes. The settlers co-habitated well with the tribesman, evening teaching them to be stockmen and domestic helpers. They easily earned reputations as excellent horsemen and cattlemen and were loyal and efficient domestic helpers. As generally harmonious as relations were, the fact remained that the settlers were taking the traditional land of the Aborigines. Conflicts arose and there were incidents of violence—including murder and rape. One notorious incident involved Mardu tribesmen attacking settlers who had violated their sacred land. Several white men were killed and, in retribution, a group of white settlers killed several Mardu. The Mardu realized quickly their weapons—spears and boomerangs—were no match for the white man's guns.

After the white men had finishing digging their intended number of wells, they packed up and left. The Mardu felt free then to migrate south through the desert to East Pilbara and Wiluna and other regions where food was plentiful and the people would have shelter. The distance would give them protection from the white settlers. But soon the migrating tribes saw new evidence of the white men, who were droving herds of cattle south to Wiluna. The rockholes that the tribes depended on for water were taken over by the herders. Like other Aborigines, the Mardu saw the white man as spirit devils and did not think of them as human.

A half-caste Aborigine, Harry Phillips, rode up to a group of Mardu on horseback. The Mardu tribesmen had never seen a horse and were frightened. The man knew their language and led them to a pastoral station called the Talawana Station, where there was an abundant supply of food. Also at the station was discarded clothing, which Phillips told them to use. The English apparently were appalled by their naked bodies. The Mardu did not understand why anyone would want to cover his natural body. They had always roamed the countryside naked except for an ointment they used in rituals and to disguise their scent while hunting. But the desert dwellers complied and actually had fun with the clothing, parading in front of each other with their strange coverings. The smallest man in the tribe tried on the largest pair of pants to hoots of laughter. The waist came up to his armpits. No one wanted to wear the clothing, but they knew that in order to stay in the the pastoral station, they would have to please the English.

After several months at the station, the group decided to move on. They packed food for the the trip and planned to walk east until they came to the rabbit-proof fence. After finding the fence, their journey would be an additional two days. But fear was growing among the Mardu and more tribes decided to seek safety and protection at the government outpost at Jigalong. Word spread about the violence and murders. The

Budidjara people became very concerned. Although their land was not presently being threatened, they decided to take make a safe, conservative choice and travel southeast to the rabbit-proof fence. When they reached the fence, they followed it to Savory Creek.

The rabbit-proof fences were installed in 1907 as a response to the overpopulation of the rabbits that flourished in the hot arid land. In Western Australia, the fence was nearly 1,200 miles long. The concept behind the fence was that it would prevent the large population of rabbits in the eastern states from entering Western Australia. But the theory was wrong-headed because there were more rabbits in Western Australia than in the southern regions. The rabbit-proof fence became an important landmark to the indigenous peoples who knew to follow it to Jigalong and safety.

Chapter 5: Jigalong, 1907-1931

Chapter 5: Jigalong, 1907-1931 Summary and Analysis

Jigalong was established as a government depot in 1907 and served as the base for the many men who were responsible for the repair and maintenance of the rabbit-proof fence. The superintendent of the depot was also named Protector of Aborigines. Older desert people appreciated the safety of the depot and had grown tired of roaming and hunting for food and of fearing for their lives while they slept. The younger desert people were skeptical but complied to the wishes of their elders. Jigalong became an important safe-haven for the nomadic tribes who had virtually become only semi-nomadic.

Maude, a sixteen-year-old, was bright and had become a reliable domestic worker. Through her work with the settlers, she became fairly fluent in English. Maude became sexually involved with an Englishman, Thomas Craig, who was the rabbit-fence inspector. Maude was soon pregnant and had a daughter who Craig named Molly. Molly grew into a pretty little girl and was supported by her father. The child was isolated, however; due to her light skin, the other Mardu wouldn't play with her. Eventually, two other Mardu women who had half-caste children arrived at Jigalong. Molly became friends with the girls, who were named Daisy and Gracie.

The government noted that the children who were part-white were mistreated by others in the tribe. They made the treatment of these half-caste Aborigines an issue and decided to move them to special settlements specially set up for the children of white men. Patrols were sent out to locate and take these children from their families and tribes. One morning, a patrol officer came to take Molly, Gracie and Daisy away to the school at Moore River Native settlement. Initially, Daisy was hidden away and couldn't be found and the man took only Molly and Gracie. Tears were streaming down the faces of the families and the girls as they rode away in the officer's car. The officer patrolled the area and finally located Daisy and placed her in the car with the other girls and two Aborigine women who were ill and were being taken away for proper care. The three finally drove away from their relatives. The mothers and grandmothers were wailing and striking themselves to display their despair.

Chapter 6: The Journey South

Chapter 6: The Journey South Summary and Analysis

At Marble Bar hospital, the constable left off the two Aboriginal women who were ill. He handed the three girls over to Constable Melrose, who in turn put his wife in charge of them. After spending several nights locked up at the Marble Bar police station, the girls then traveled with another constable by train to Port Hedland. The girls were then turned over to Captain Freeman, who would take them by ship to Fremantle. The girls were frightened by the ship and sailing on the ocean, but the crew was kind to them and went out of their way to make the trip interesting for the girls and to make them feel safe.

After five days, they arrived at Fremantle. They were given raincoats, calico bags and combs and mirrors. A tug boat that would bring them closer to shore was anchored by the large ship. Gwen, the stewardess on the ship, accompanied them ashore. The girls were astonished by all the activity in the port city. They had never seen so many white men in their lives! As they took everything in, the girls transformed from scared, shy abductees to young, excited tourists. Next, the girls were transported by car to Perth. Another half-caste girl, Rosie, joined them for this leg of the journey. The capital city of Perth was even more bustling and frightening. As a loud tram neared them, they jumped, never having seen such a vehicle before. The girls would stay the night at a girls' home and be taken to Moore River Settlement School in the morning. They met some older half-caste girls who were excited that they would be returning home soon. But as it turned out they, and many like them, did not get to return home for many years.

Chapter 7: The Moore River Native Settlement, 1931

Chapter 7: The Moore River Native Settlement, 1931 Summary and Analysis

After they arrived at the school, they were led by an attendant named Miss Evans to a dormitory where they were told they could choose any bed they liked. The lavatory consisted only of buckets that they would have to empty. Molly noticed that the windows had bars on them and that all the doors were locked with chains and padlocks. The three girls were so scared and cold that they huddled together in one bed. The next morning, they met the other girls. Martha Jones, a friendly girl who looked to be about fifteen, offered to show them around. All three girls immediately took to Martha.

At breakfast, boys from their dormitory joined the girls in the dining room. Another girl, Polly Martin, joined them for a walk around the grounds. Although Molly missed her red desert home, she and the other girls were fascinated with the lush grounds and swirling creeks. When they returned to the school grounds, they heard a faint voice asking for something to eat. Martha explained that it was Violet Williams who was locked up in a small building call the "boob," her punishment for swearing at her teacher. Punishment for trying to run away was a whipping with a strap, seven days in the boob, only bread and water for sustenance and a shaved head. No one had ever successfully escaped.

Back in the dormitory room, the other girls warned the new arrivals to speak English or they'd be punished. That night as Molly contemplated what kind of life they could have in this dismal place, she knew that she, Gracie and Daisy would have to escape.

Chapter 8: The Escape

Chapter 8: The Escape Summary and Analysis

The first day of school was in early August 1931. Molly was determined that she and Gracie and Daisy would never attend. That morning, she told them to gather their things—they were escaping. They would find their way back to Jigalong. The other two girls were astonished—it was way too far to walk. But Molly convinced them. All they had to do was find the rabbit-proof fence and follow it north. After all, her father was the rabbit-proof fence inspector. He had told her it ran the length, north to south, of the country. Soon they were outside and on their way down a sandy slope toward the river. They traveled up river quite a way until they found a spot that was shallow enough to cross. Molly felt comfortable leading the other two younger girls. She had learned to navigate through all sorts of terrain from her father. She had a keen sense of direction and knew to keep an eye on the position of the sun. The terrain was rugged and dense. It was cold and wet and the girls were uncomfortable but did not complain.

The girls finally made it out of the mud and swamp and came to the heathlands, where beautiful flowers of every description flourished. They were making good progress when they suddenly heard heavy footfalls coming their way. They hid in a thicket and remained silent. Then they saw the beast; it was a Marbu—a sharp-toothed, flesh-eating evil spirit. The elders had always warned the children to watch out for them. Later, when the episode was retold, it was felt that what the girls actually saw was just a large Aboriginal man and that the girls had let their imaginations get away from them. That night they dug out an abandoned rabbit burrow big enough for the three of them to sleep in. Molly figured no one would look in a burrow for them. Molly shared crusts of bread that she had furtively taken from dinner the night before.

The next morning, Gracie caught and killed a rabbit, but there was no way to make a fire. She was scared of the Marbu and very hungry. She wanted to return to the settlement. Molly coaxed her to push on, promising they would find food. To their surprise and delight, they ran into two Mardu hunters. The men warned the girls that someone was probably trying to find them. The hunters had killed a kangaroo and gave the girls its tail. They also gave them salt and some matches. That evening, the girls built a fire and cooked the tail. They slept comfortably by the fire. The next morning, Molly and Gracie each caught a rabbit. They ate one that night and saved one for the next day's breakfast.

On that day's trek, the girls were frightened when they encountered two huge black kangaroos that were standing up and fighting each other like men. The girls made a wide berth around the animals—they did not want to be attacked by the huge, angry beasts. A short while later, Molly ordered the girls to climb in a tree and stay there until further word. Molly had heard the sounds of a plane which circled overhead, looking for the girls. The scouting plane finally gave up and turned back. Molly waited until she was sure it was safe before they moved on.

The girls next came to a farmhouse where Molly directed the younger girls to ask for food while she stayed on watch. Mrs. Flanagan opened the door and immediately knew that they were the runaways from the settlement. She had received a call to be on the look-out for them. She had the three girls come inside, promising she wasn't going to report them. The girls dried off while Mrs. Flanagan made them something to eat. Mrs. Flanagan told them they were going in the wrong direction, they needed to travel east to find the rabbit-proof fence. Mrs. Flanagan made them mutton and tomato chutney sandwiches and fruitcake and sweet tea for dessert. Mrs. Flanagan put a leg of mutton, tea, flour, and fruitcake in a bag to take with them. She gave them dry clothes and warm coats to wear.

As Mrs. Flanagan watched the girls walk away, she felt guilty, certain they would perish. She called the Superintendent to let them know they had been there. Molly, fearing that Mrs. Flanagan had reported them, went in a different direction than what they had indicated to Mrs. Flanagan. From then on they made it a practice to stop at farmhouses where they were always given food and treated kindly. That evening, they hid under large bushes and had a satisfying dinner by a small fire. Word had gotten out across the country about the missing girls—an article even appeared in the newspaper about them. The girls, not knowing they had made the news, moved on, getting food from friendly farmers and sleeping by warm fires at night.

A farmer who had given the girls food saw the article about them in the paper. He immediately reported his contact with them to the superintendent, who authorized the local police to track them down. The police theorized that the girls were heading to the rabbit-proof fence near the town of Burakin. The girls had been on the run for a month. They were suffering from exhaustion, exposure and infected sores on their legs from the dense underbrush. Mollie and Gracie agreed to take turns carrying Daisy since she was suffering the most. They eluded their would-be captors after stopping at farmhouses by going in the wrong direction initially and then doubling back.

One day, they found an abandoned cabin with two cots. They found flour and matches and some milk tins. They pried the lid of one of the tins open and found pork drippings. The two younger girls filled up on their greasy find but threw up a short time later. The girls were surviving on what food people gave them and on birds' eggs, and the rabbits and lizards they could trap. The sores on their legs were festering and painful and they could find no relief. Molly shrieked happily one day, claiming she had found the rabbit-proof fence. The other girls were skeptical that it was the fence they had been seeking but followed along. Molly proclaimed that they were almost home, but in reality they had only reached the half-way mark.

An Aborigine man named Don Willcocks called to them one afternoon. They were frightened at first, but he offered them food and seemed to pose no threat to them. The man reported the incident to the police. He told them in detail where he had tracked and found them. He also reported that the girls seemed to be in good health. The police sent a tracker named Ben from Noongal Station, who met up with Willcocks. They searched along the fence but lost the girls' tracks and gave up. The police notified constables in the northern towns to watch for the girls along the fence. Ben warned that if the girls

encountered the treacherous Sandstone blacks that they would not survive. Afraid of being reported, the girls no longer asked farmers for food but existed on bush tucker alone. So that no one could spot them at night, they stopped making fires even though it was very cold.

More search parties were sent out but still the girls eluded them. When they were near the Mt. Russell station, Gracie announced she had had enough of their adventure. She talked to a woman at the station who knew her mother who, the woman told her, had moved to Wiluna. She would be traveling with that woman to reunite with her mother. Molly and Daisy walked on although Molly was very upset about Gracie's departure. They stopped at a creek to drink and fill their canisters where Molly, exhausted and distraught, drifted off to sleep. While she slept, Daisy found three chicks in a nest and wrung their necks. Suddenly she heard a man's voice. The voice was asking her where her big sister was. He told her he knew that they were the runaways. He walked toward Daisy, who picked up stones and hurled them at him. He took off on his horse and told her he was reporting them to the police. When Daisy explained what happened to Molly, they quickly moved on.

The next day they tracked a feral cat. Even though Molly had quite a struggle with the cat and was scratched, she prevailed and the girls had the cat for dinner that night. Finally, they came upon familiar territory. With Station 594 in sight, they knew they would get help from Molly's aunt, who lived in the camp. The woman was amazed at their story and could barely believe they had made it all that way. The girls had their first bath since they left the settlement. The aunt made them a dinner of beef stew and home-made bread. They stretched out and slept in beds that night. The girls estimated that they would be home in three or four days. Molly's aunt gave the girls food to take with them. The girls began to relax, knowing they would soon reach their destination. It had been seven weeks, but they were almost there. Molly's cousin Joey and his boss would be heading to Jigalong and told the girls they could take turns riding on his camel. Each night, the group would make a fire and have a good meal.

As they neared their home, the girls became nervous and excited. The people of their tribe greeted them with loud wails and tears. Once word got around that the girls had returned home, the embarrassed constables were more determined than ever to locate the girls. To protect the girls and keep them safe from government officials, the tribe moved soon after the girls' return. Eventually, the police gave up on capturing Molly because she was older and had proven to be very costly to the department. They wanted to capture Daisy, however, in an attempt to salvage at least some dignity.

Gracie had finally made it to Wiluna, but her mother wasn't there. She stayed with a Mardu couple named Rosie and Ned. She was spotted one day by an informant, who reported the sighting to the police. When Gracie was captured, she told the police her name was Lucy. The authorities soon saw through her lie and identified her as Gracie. She stayed with the Chief Protector of the Aborigines and his wife for weeks. There was bickering back and forth about repayment for the cost of her food and lodging. There were plans to eventually return her to the settlement, but the disagreement was delaying it.

Molly, at age seventy, recalled the trip and her longing to decide her own future. The girls' walk across Australia is one of the longest in recorded history and certainly that longest without shoes.

Chapter 9: What Happened to Them? Where Are They Now?

Chapter 9: What Happened to Them? Where Are They Now? Summary and Analysis

Molly was trained as a domestic helper and married a man named Toby Kelly, a stockman. She had two children. In 1940, she was discharged from the hospital after surgery for appendicitis. In compliance with a warrant that was still active, she was transported back to Moore River Native Settlement. After nine months at the settlement, she took one of her children, Annabelle, with her and left the other daughter, Doris, behind at the settlement. Miraculously, she took her baby daughter along the same route and returned home again. Three years later, Annabelle was removed to a settlement in the south and Molly and Toby never saw her again.

Gracie was transported back to Moore River Settlement where she finished her education. She then was trained to be a domestic and worked at various farms. She married a station hand named Harry Cross with whom she had six children. The couple eventually separated and Gracie passed away in 1983. She never returned to Jigalong.

Daisy moved with her family along the rabbit-proof fence south of Jigalong. She also trained as a domestic and worked at various stations. She married Kadibil, a station hand. They had four children. Her husband died and she lived with some of her children. Daisy contributed a great deal of the details for the book.

Characters

Molly

Molly was the eldest of the three girls who escaped from Moore River Settlement School and found their way home through over one thousand miles of rugged and dangerous Australian terrain. Molly was the daughter of Maude, an Aborigine woman, and an Englishman, Thomas Craig, who was the rabbit-fence inspector. Craig named the girl Molly and remained part of her life. Molly grew up to be a pretty little girl who had light-skin and light brown hair. Like other half-caste Aborigines, Molly was ostracized by the other Aboriginal children. When distant relatives Gracie and Daisy, who were also half-caste, moved to her camp, she was thrilled to finally have friends.

The government mandated that the half-caste children of Englishmen should have a formal education and be treated in a superior manner to the other Aboriginal children. Molly, Gracie and Daisy were taken from their families and moved to a settlement school. Molly was only there one night when she decided that the three of them would escape. Molly was a high-spirited, intelligent and brave young girl. The successful return of the girls to their home can only be attributed to Molly's leadership, strength of character, determination and ability to navigate the trio through their unbelievably long journey.

Gracie

Gracie was a half-caste Aboriginal girl who, along with Molly and Daisy, were taken from their camp at Jigalong and forced to attend a settlement school over a thousand miles away. Gracie was eleven years old when the three girls escaped from the school to find their way back to their loved ones. Gracie generally listened to Molly, who was fourteen, and the leader of the trio. But Gracie had an independent streak just like her older cousin. Frightened that the three girls would be hurt or killed on their trek and hungry from not eating enough, Gracie wanted to turn around and go back to the school. She didn't have much faith that they could make it all the way home and feared being captured and punished at school for running away. But Molly was convincing and Gracie stayed with her and Daisy most of the way.

Once they neared their home and began recognizing the terrain, Gracie learned from a woman at a train station where her mother had moved. The independent spirit in Gracie finally overcame Molly's insistence that they stay together. Gracie announced to the other two that she would be taking the train with the woman so she could be reunited with her mother. Gracie was eventually captured by the search party and was returned to school. She completed her education and became a domestic helper.

Daisy

Daisy was the youngest girl who escaped from the Moore River settlement school. She returned to her home camp and was never recaptured by the government officials.

Tom Craig

Tom Craig was the main inspector of the rabbit-proof fence. He became involved with an Aborigine girl, Maude. They had a half-caste daughter who he named Molly.

Maude

Maude was a sixteen-year-old Aboriginal girl who became involved with Tom Craig, a white man and chief inspector of the rabbit-proof fence. They had a daughter, Molly, together.

Martha Jones

Martha Jones was a half-caste Aboriginal girl who befriended Molly and the other girls when they came to Moore River Settlement. She led the girls around on a tour of the grounds. She warned them not to try to escape.

Captain Freeman

Captain Freeman was the commander of the ship that brought Molly, Gracie and Daisy to Fremantle on their way to the Moore River Settlement school.

Constable Melrose

Molly, Gracie and Daisy were handed over to Constable Melrose at Marble Bar on their way to the Moore River Settlement. Constable Melrose locked the girls up in the local jail for three nights before they continued on their journey.

Kundilla

Kundilla was the chief of one of the first Aboriginal tribes that dealt with the "white raiders." When the English settlers came, Kundilla determined that these white men did not present a danger to his people.

Captain Fremantle

Captain Fremantle was the commander of the Challenger, the first ship to bring English settlers to Australia. Captain Fremantle named the region where they landed Western Australia.

Objects/Places

Australia

The story of Rabbit-Proof Fence takes place on the continent of Australia. There are vivid descriptions of the diverse terrains that are found in Australia throughout the book.

England

Much of the story of Rabbit-Proof Fence surrounds the problems that arose with the presence of the English settlers who encroached upon the land of the Aborigines and who passed laws that favored the settlers.

Jigalong

Jigalong was the destination of Molly and the other girls who escaped from Moore River Settlement. They found their way back to Jigalong after traveling by foot for over two months.

Moore River Settlement

The English government decided that the half-caste Aboriginal children, who were fathered by Englishmen, should be moved to settlements where they would receive an education. Moore River Settlement was where Molly, Gracie and Daisy were sent.

Rabbit-Proof Fence

The rabbit-proof fence ran almost the entire length, north to south, of the Australian continent. The purpose of the fence was to keep the flourishing rabbit population out of Western Australian. The fence became a landmark for travelers to follow along.

Fremantle

Molly, Gracie and Daisy were taken by ship to Fremantle, which was one of the legs of their journey to their new home at the Moore River Settlement.

Challenger

The Challenger was the ship that was commanded by Captain Fremantle. It was the first ship that brought a substantial number of English settlers to Australia.

Marble Bar

The girls were transferred to the constable in Marble Bar who jailed them for three nights before they continued their journey.

Red Desert

Molly and the other girls were members of the Mardu tribe that lived a nomadic lifestyle in the red desert regions of Western Australia.

Australian Heathlands

As the girls made their way back to their homeland, they passed through the diverse terrain of Australia. Some of the more pleasant spots were Australia's heathlands, which were abundant with unusual and beautiful flowers.

Themes

Discrimination

The heart of the story of Rabbit-Proof Fence is the escape of three young girls from a settlement that they were forced to live in by the English government. Government officials took note of the growing number of Aboriginal children who were being fathered by white Englishmen. The officials felt that these children were a step above other Aboriginal children because they had English blood in them. They felt that they were smarter than pure-blooded Aborigines and were educable. Needless to say, they considered Aborigines as an inferior race.

After the settlers came and established colonial outposts, laws were established to deal with the native people. Although the English knew the meaning of fairness and justice, many of the laws that they created favored the English. The English authorities enforced the laws committed against Englishmen by Aborigines but were far less enthusiastic about enforcing them when Aborigines were the victims. The native's ownership of any land was just ignored as the English were allowed to select whatever piece of land they wanted.

The Aborigines, for their part, had a kind of bias of their own. Most of the native people had never seen the white man before or very many of them and, didn't consider them human. The leaders and elders of the tribes warned the little children that the white men were evil spirits or ghosts because of their light color. This illustrates that man, just in his natural state with no outside information, has a fear of others who are not like them. Of course, there was a history of white men abusing the Aborigines in ways that were less than human.

Sexual Abuse

When the first white men came to Australia in the early 1800s, many of them were violent and cruel men. Some of the men were crew members of whaling vessels while others were pirates on the high seas. At first they deceived the frightened, naïve Aboriginal natives by offering them friendship and doing them favors. However, what these men were really after were the Aboriginal women who they kidnapped, raped and murdered. They would throw the dead bodies of the women out to sea just as they did their garbage.

When the English settlers came to the island, they are law-abiding and civilized for the most part and were mannerly and respectful. But they also took advantage of the native women. Many of the men had sex with young girls and fathered many half-caste children. The main character in Rabbit-Proof Fence, Molly, was the daughter of a sixteen-year-old Aborigine and a white fence inspector who was much older. Although there may not have been the blatant abuse of the women by the settlers and workmen,

they certainly were guilty of abusing them by exploiting them and using them for their own purposes.

But the abuse of the Aboriginal women was not limited to visitors to the country. The native men in the country were leaders of their tribes and made all the rules. There was no romancing of young women—men selected who they wanted to marry and coldly rejected others who were offered up to them. The laws of the tribes allowed men to have multiple wives. There was no indication in this book that women were given that same freedom.

Freedom

Considering the odds that the three girls who escaped from Moore River Settlement had against them in making a journey that was over one thousand miles long, not to mention being barefooted with no food or guide, it is nothing less than miraculous that they made it. Even though Molly and the other girls were warned that those who tried to escape were beaten and jailed, Molly, the eldest of the three girls and a natural leader, was not deterred. As she laid in her bed the night before the first day of school and listened to the other girls telling stories and getting to know the new girls, all she could think of was leaving.

Every door had a padlock and chains and every window had bars. Molly thought to herself that the "school" was nothing more than a jail. It was then that this "free-spirited girl knew that she and her sisters must escape from this place" (p. 74). Without that spirit and drive to be free, the two younger girls would have never attempted such a journey or even considered it. Molly was willing to risk punishment, abuse and the risk of worse out in the wild to get home to her loved ones and to live free.

Gracie, the eleven-year-old girl, displayed her independence by leaving the group when she heard news that her mother was in a town that was nearby. It was then that she left the other girls because she had her own idea of freedom.

A warrant was still active for Molly's return to the settlement even after she was married and had children. She was forced to go to the settlement with her two children. She stayed only nine months and left, carrying one of her children with her, and took the same path as she did years before to home and to freedom once again.

Style

Perspective

The story of Rabbit-Proof Fence is written in the third person narrative. The author is the daughter of Molly, one of the girls who escaped from the Moore River Settlement where she and her two cousins were sent to school. There is a natural sympathy that Doris Pilkington, the author, has for the girls—although there could be few people, related or not, who would not sympathize with the girls and admire the unbelievable feat that they achieved.

In her research and preparation for the book, Pilkington was able to interview some of the principals of the story including her mother, Molly, and Daisy, the youngest of the trio. Pilkington singles out Daisy as contributing much of the information about the trip back. In one incident, the girls are frightened by a "Marbu" in the forest. They reportedly saw the beast and described it as an evil, flesh-eating creature. Undoubtedly, Gracie provided the details of this episode but the reader must keep in mind that this mythical creature was "seen" through the eyes of an eight-year-old. Naturally, there are no doubt other incidents that are shaded by the memory of a very young child about an adventure so many years before.

Doris Pilkington was the younger daughter of Molly and her husband. Molly was forced to return to Moore River Settlement after she had her two daughters—apparently there was still have active warrant for her return there. After staying for several months at the settlement, Molly again escaped and took only Annabelle with her, leaving Doris behind to live at the settlement. Pilkington provides no reason for this "Sophie's Choice" action on her mother's part, provoking the reader to wonder what deeper, conflicted feelings the author may have had in writing the book and interviewing her mother about it.

Tone

There is a softness and gentleness to the presentation of Rabbit-Proof Fence. The story is recounted with an undeniable respect for the indigenous people as well as for the history of Australia. There is an underlying emotion that is detectable at times, perhaps since the storyteller, Doris Pilkington, is the daughter of Molly, one of the girls who escaped from the Moore River Settlement. Pilkington provides a historical background about the hardships, discrimination and abuse that the Aborigine people faced first from "white raiders," who were the crews of whaling ships and later over the encroachment of their land from white English settlers. Despite the fact that the author is relating the history of her own land and own people, there is a lacking of bitterness, although there is a measure of emotionalism that evokes the sympathy of the reader.

By all indications, Pilkington is providing an accurate historical background of the problems that arose from the incursion of white settlers into Australia as she provides

details such as dates, events and names of historical figures. She may have presented the anecdotal episodes of interactions between the Aborigines and the English with some bias. The Aborigines are portrayed as peaceful victims who provoked no conflicts. As in all conflicts, there are two sides to each story and English historians may have a different view of the events as they went down. However, there is no doubt that the Aborigines were driven off their land by the more advanced white settlers who out-numbered and out-armed them.

Structure

Rabbit-Proof Fence is separated into nine chapters. The structure of these chapters sets the stage for the heart of the story, which is the escape of three girls from a settlement school which, by law, they were forced to attend. The first several chapters is a lead-up to that event. The first chapter provides historical background on the conflict between white "raiders" or "pirates" and Aborigines in Australia. These first conflicts began in the early 1820s, compelling the government to establish the first military post on the continent to protect the Aboriginal tribes from the white renegades. The next chapter covers the strained relations between "peaceful" English settlers and the natives. The large number of settlers produced many half-caste children who the government felt obliged to treat "better" than the other Aboriginal children. Unfortunately, their idea of "better treatment" was taking them away from their families.

The chapter titled The Escape,is account of how, in 1930, the three very young, unhappy girls ran away from the settlement school and walked for over two months until they reached their home which was over one thousand miles away. The final chapter explains what happens to the girls after they found their way home.

An introduction preceding the book provides some reflection on how information was obtained for the book. There is a Glossary of Mardujara words at the back of the book which provides definitions of the native words which are interspersed throughout the book. There is also a list of sources that were used as references.

Quotes

"Little did he know that soon devastation and desolation would shatter this tranquil environment; that this pristine forest would echo the anguished cries and the ceaseless weeping of thousand of people - his people - as they were tormented by foreigners and driven off their land."
Chap. 1, p. 2

"They readily agreed and took the six men to the island and left them there, stranded without food or water. Meanwhile, they returned to the mainland and made a thorough search of the area beyond the sand dunes until they found the Aboriginal people's camp and kidnapped six women who were taken back to the whaling ships where they were brutalized and later murdered."
Chap. 1, p. 5

"The best land was taken up by the more wealthy, influential people who had the responsibility of maintaining their customs. They were advised to 'keep up their Englishness' at all costs. This meant having picnics, fox hunts and balls."
Chap. 3, p. 13

"The desert dwellers were baffled, they could not understand why anyone would be embarrassed of offended by their own nakedness, their normal, natural appearance."
Chap. 4, p. 25

"Patrol officers traveled far and wide removing part-Aboriginal children from their families and transported them hundreds of kilometers down south. Every mother of a part-Aboriginal child was aware that their offspring could be taken away from them at any time and they were powerless to stop the abductors."
Chap. 5, p. 40

"There were so many cars and trucks coming and going in this big place. It was too made for the girls. They knew that they could easily get lost in this man-made environment with so few threes and only small patches of bush."
Chap. 6, p. 58

"After roll call and lights out, Molly listened to the slide of the bolt and the rattle of the padlock, then silence. It was at that moment this free-spirited girl knew that she and her sisters must escape from this place."
Chap. 7, p. 74

"For the three runaways, the fence was a symbol of love, home and security."
Chap. 8, p. 109

"The trek had been no easy feat. It had taken the girls months to complete and nothing or nobody could take this moment happiness and satisfaction from them. They had

finally reached their destination and were reunited with their families."
Chap. 8, p. 123

"'We stay in the busing hiding there for a long time,' remembers Molly, who is in her late seventies. When she was only fourteen years old she decided that she wanted to have a part in planning her own destiny."
Chap. 8, p. 129

"[It was] one of the longest walks in the history of the Australian outback. While other parts of this vast country of ours have been crossed on horses or camels, these three girls did their exploring on their bare feet. An incredible achievement in anyone's language."
Chap. 8, p. 129

"[Molly] moved back to Balfour downs Station with her husband Toby and baby Annabelle. Three years later Annabelle was removed and sent south to the Sister Kate's Children's Home in Queens park. Molly has not seen her since."
Chap. 9, p. 132

Topics for Discussion

Why were the Aborigines afraid of the white man raiders? What had the white men done to them in the past? Why weren't the Aborigines able to fight them off?

Why were Molly, Gracie and Daisy ostracized by others in their tribe? Why did the government decide to move them, and others like them, to different settlements? How did the government view these girls compared to others in the tribe?

What was the purpose of the rabbit-proof fence? How long was the fence? Why was it significant to the tribal people? What role did it play in the girls' escape?

Why didn't Molly want to stay at Moore River Settlement School? What type of nature did she have? Why was she able to navigate so successfully through the many miles and different terrain in which they traveled?

Even though the English settlers weren't violent with the Aborigines, what damage did they do to them and their culture? Why did the English want the Aborigines to wear their clothing? Why did the Aborigines think it was a strange request?

How did the English control the activities of the tribal people? When was it acceptable for the British settlers to violate their own laws? How were Aborigine prisoners treated?

What happened to the three runaway girls once they reached home? Why did the government feel humiliated about the girls' escape? Why did they abandon plans to capture Molly?