

# TEACHERS' NOTES for A Long Way from Misery

BY JACK TURNER & JACQUI HALPIN

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*Teachers' Notes written by Jacqui Halpin*

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*A Long Way from Misery is an entertaining and engaging primary source with the flexibility to be used for cross-curricular teaching. It aligns with the National Curriculum for English, and Humanities and Social Sciences for Years 7 – 10, and with Modern History, English and Geography for Senior Students. It also touches on themes of Aboriginal history and culture.*

## **Introduction**

Born in rural New South Wales during the Depression, Jack Turner lived in a very different time. The way he sees it, they were better days. He loved his childhood, growing up with many siblings on a farm called Misery, and retells it with delight.

*A Long Way from Misery* takes you on a rollicking journey through the Australia of yesteryear with Jack Turner, the larrikin shearer, as he rescues his brother who's being drowned by a kangaroo, rides a wild steer through the house, and leaps from a moving train. But these misadventures are nothing compared to his mother wielding a carving knife.

## **About the Authors**

Jack Turner is a quick-witted larrikin who loves to laugh and make others laugh. His knack for telling a yarn is classic Aussie bushman. A former shearer with no education and a rough and ready upbringing, Jack's 'that'll do me' attitude has stayed with him throughout his long life and seen him through many a scrape. He has lived an ordinary life full of extraordinary stories. His memoir, *A Long Way from Misery* is an authentic retelling of adventure, family and Australian identity.

**For more insight into Jack's life and character visit his blog  
[blackjackturner.weebly.com](http://blackjackturner.weebly.com)**

Jacqui Halpin is the second born of Jack's three children. As a child she was enthralled by the stories of her father's early life. His knack for telling a yarn inspired her own love of storytelling. Jacqui is a children's author whose works are published by Stringybark Publishing, Creative Kids Tales and Little Pink Dog Books. She is currently writing a series of junior fiction novels inspired by her father's adventures growing up.

**For more information about Jacqui and her writing please visit her website:  
[jacquihalpin.com](http://jacquihalpin.com) or follow her on Facebook [www.facebook.com/jacquihalpinauthor](https://www.facebook.com/jacquihalpinauthor)**

## **In the classroom...**

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **English**

In your opinion does the cover reflect the title? Why? Why not?

Does the back cover blurb entice you to read the book? What were your expectations of the memoir after reading the blurb? Were they met?

Compare and contrast the language and everyday expressions used then and now. Discuss reasons for similarities and differences.

Do you know any other people who speak in a similar way to Jack? How is it similar and why do you think this is the case?

Were you aware of the meaning of words/expressions such as ‘ring the shed’; ‘clip under the lug’; ‘cocky’s joy’; and ‘ringer’ before reading the glossary in Jack’s book?

Is Jack’s lack of education noticeable from the way he speaks? Explain your answer.

Australians have a fondness for larrikins. It is almost a term of endearment. Research the original meaning of the word larrikin. How does it differ from today’s use? Do you believe Jack fits the title of larrikin? Why? Why not?

Even though he was illiterate, Jack never seems to have any trouble getting work. As a class discuss whether or not you think it was easier in Jack’s time to find employment than it would be today?

Every profession and industry has its own jargon. Some professions have changed dramatically over the last 50-60 years, especially with the introduction of technology. Discuss the jargon used by shearers in Jack’s time. Is the same jargon used in shearing sheds today or has it changed over time?

After reading Jack’s memoir would you agree that he lived an ordinary life full of extraordinary stories? Explain your answer.

Use *A Long Way from Misery* as the backdrop to write your own historical fiction story based on one of the characters mentioned in the book.

Compare Jack’s story with the great Australian classic, ‘A Fortunate Life’ by A. B. Facey. Facey lived an ordinary yet extraordinary life, with great appeal in its retelling. How does Jack’s story differ? How is it similar?

What new information about life in Australia during the years 1930-1950 have you gained from reading the book?

What surprised you most in the book?

In Chapter 12, Jack says his father wrote a lot of poems and gives a brief example. Like many everyday Australians of times past, these poems were written in Australian bush verse. What is your understanding of the term Australian bush verse? Investigate its meaning.

In Australian bush verse, write your own poem based on one of Jack's adventures or stories.

### **Creative Arts**

Divide students into groups and have them write and perform a scene from *A Long Way from Misery* that they feel would translate well to film or stage.

Create a model of the house on Misery based on Jack's description.

The picture on the front cover of *A Long Way from Misery* was taken in 1946 on a box Brownie camera. It was restored and creatively adapted for the front cover. Design a front cover for your own memoir using a family photo. You could also use another photo for the back cover as Jack has done.

### **Geography**

Jack shored in many different towns and stations across New South Wales. Using a detailed map, find the towns, and stations if they still exist, where Jack worked.

How many sheep stations Jack shored in are still operating? Of those remaining, has their land size and production of wool decreased or increased in the past 60 years?

Research the town of Rylstone, looking at things such as location, history, population, etc.

When you read Jack's stories and descriptions about Sydney back in the 1940s and '50s, what are the most obvious changes to the Sydney of today? Eg: toll roads, traffic congestion, trams, boarding houses, dance halls, etc

Discuss how the rural landscape of New South Wales has changed since Jack was a boy. Consider things like electricity poles, telephone lines, road surfaces, satellite dishes, types of crops and livestock, land clearances, residential development, etc.

Throughout *A Long Way from Misery*, Jack mentions the Kandos Cement Works. At the time it was the biggest cement works in the Southern Hemisphere. Research the size, production and location of the Kandos Cement Works. Describe how a cement works of this size would affect the landscape and environment of the surrounding area.

The town of Kandos was established in 1913 to support the cement works. The cement works closed in 2011. Discuss what impact this would have had on the town.

## History

Jacqui Halpin spent 12 years researching and writing her father's memoir. She has heard many more stories than the ones recorded in the book. How much of your family history do you know? Ask a grandparent, great grandparent, or elderly person from your community to tell the stories from their childhood and youth. Record at least two of these stories, one comical, one serious.

Find ways in which you can engage with older generations in your neighbourhood and community. Listen to the stories of their younger years. How different are they from your own stories and those of your friends?

Many of the shearers and rouseabouts Jack worked with during his time shearing were Aboriginal. Research the part Indigenous Australians played in Australia's wool industry in the 1940s and 1950s.

What have you learned about life in the bush during the 1930s, '40s and '50s from reading this book?

Do you have a different opinion on what life was like in rural Australia in the first half of the last century since reading *A Long Way from Misery*?

In what ways have rural communities changed since the 1940s, and how have they remained the same?

Did you realise, before reading Jack's story, that not all able-bodied men were allowed to serve during WW2? Had you heard of 'essential service' before reading about it in Jack's book?

Why were shearers in short supply and why was it so important to keep shearers in Australia during WW2?

After he enlisted, Jack's father was sent to Orange to guard the internees. 'Internees' was the term given to people placed in internment camps during the war. Research where these internment camps were in Australia. What year were they opened and what year did they close?

Investigate what measures were in place for residents of Australia who came under the heading of 'enemy aliens'.

What is your understanding of the term 'war rations'? Consider why rationing was important during the war and how it impacted everyday Australian families.

Were you aware before reading Jack's story that rationing of everyday items continued long after WW2 had ended? Research what items were rationed and the reason/s they were still rationed for several years after the war ended.

Have you heard of the expression 'Australia rode on the sheep's back'? How important were shearers to Australia's economy during the 1930's, '40s and '50s?

How did modes of transport change over the course of Jack's memoir and how do they differ from today?

What are the three most interesting facts about life in Australia during the 1930s to 1950s did you discover by reading *A Long Way from Misery*?

### **Social Sciences**

What do you consider to be the greatest causes of stress in children of Jack's era?

Compare the stresses faced by children in Australia during the 1940s with those faced by children in Australia today?

Do you feel there were less stresses placed on children in Jack's time? Explain your answers.

Jack seems to waltz from one job to the next. He had no resume or written qualifications, and he was illiterate. How have employment standards and qualifications changed since Jack's youth?

Working conditions during the 1940s, '40s and '50s were often hard and dangerous, and very different from conditions for workers today. How has the introduction of workplace health and safety standards improved conditions for workers?

Despite the tough, and at times brutal, discipline showered on Jack by his parents, Jack loved his childhood and his family. They were, and still are, a close-knit, loving family. Explain why you think this is so.

How do you think Jack's mother and father's parenting skills would be judged by modern day family welfare standards?

Jack and his mate Billy were allowed unsupervised use of rifles when they were still boys. How have attitudes towards firearms, and child safety, changed since Jack's youth?

Compare the way Jack and his siblings spent their evenings as children with how children of the same age spend their evenings today. How have things changed?

Consider the way Jack and his siblings and friends played and used their free time. Do you believe it was a healthier lifestyle than children have today? Why? Why not?

When you read how hard Jack worked, do you think people, in general, have the same work ethic today, or has the work ethic changed in the past 70 years?

In large families, especially in rural areas, it was expected that older siblings would help carry the load. Jack and his sisters, Marie and Wop, had many jobs to do around the farm from a young age. Jack had his first paid job when he was twelve. Before this he was working with his father trapping rabbits, and ploughing. Investigate the kinds of jobs children

had to do and how they contributed to the running of their family farms during the 1930s and '40s.

Jack came from a large family, ten children in all. His mother and father were both from families with eleven children. All were from nuclear families. Can you identify any changes in the dynamics of Australian families since the 1930s and '40s?

How have attitudes towards the care and management of the environment changed since Jack was a boy?

We live in a society of disposable packaging, goods, and equipment, etc. There was no plastic on Misery Farm. There was no such thing as disposal anything. There was no need even for a garbage service. Everything from flour bags to clothes, brown paper packaging to kerosene tins, was reused. Discuss the impact the introduction of disposable packaging, goods, and equipment has had on the environment over the past 80 years.

From the descriptions in *A Long Way from Misery*, Rylstone is a close-knit, supportive community. Discuss whether this is simply because it is a small country town or whether it reflects the time in which Jack's story is set?

Research life in a small rural town today. Have peoples' attitudes towards, and involvement with, their local community changed since the 1930s?

There was no immediate medical help available to Jack and his family when they were living on Misery Farm. It was an hour's ride in a horse and cart to get to the doctor in Rylstone. There was no phone nearby to call for an ambulance or any other kind of assistance. Discuss how the advances in transport and technology have improved the health care for people in rural parts of Australia? Are people living in rural Australia still disadvantaged when it comes to medical help and healthcare facilities?

Jack never once mentions takeaway. He had pub meals, and sometimes ate in cafes, but not once in his youth did he have takeaway. Why do you think this is?

Do you think modern families would cope without having takeaway? Would you and your family cope without takeaway or drive through?

Jack and his family ate very basic food with not much variety. Explain how the food eaten by Australians today has changed over the decades. Was the home cooking Jack's mother made healthier than the average diet of Australians today? Explain your answer.

Compare the types of Christmas presents children get now with what Jack and his siblings got for Christmas.

How do Jack's family Christmas celebrations differ from today's? The traditions, the gifts, the food and celebrations.

What Christmas traditions does your family have that are similar to Jack's?

Jack's love of the bush shows in his memoir. He feels he belongs in the bush. Do you feel you belong to any specific part of the Australian landscape? If so, why? What associations

does it have for you?

How does the 'make do' attitude Jack demonstrates compare with the attitude of consumerism prevalent in today's society. Discuss the differences.

Jack's family, and many other families of the time, lived without any type of technology or even electricity. How do you think you would cope living without any type of technology? What do you think you would find most challenging? Try going without using electricity and technology for one day.

What feelings about mateship are conveyed in Jack's memoir?

What general attitude towards alcohol use do you observe in Jack's story? Discuss whether it is the same today?

You will notice there is no reference to any kind of drug use in *A Long Way from Misery*. Why do you think this is so?

In his memoir, Jack refers to Aboriginal people as 'black fellas' yet he is by no means a racist and has a great fondness and admiration for Aboriginal people and culture. Do you consider the term 'black fella' when referring to Aboriginal people racist? Why? Why not?

In what way have public attitudes towards Indigenous people changed since the 1950s?

In your opinion, did Jack's attitude towards Aboriginal people reflect the attitude of most Australians of that time?

In Chapter 19, Jack buys an Aboriginal mate a bottle of rum. This was illegal at the time. Jack believes he did nothing wrong. Although not stated in the book, he did not think it fair that he could buy alcohol and his mate couldn't. Discuss why this law was in place and why it still exists in some Aboriginal communities to this day. Do you think it's fair, or is it discrimination against Aboriginal people?

In Chapter 19, Jack refers to 'the Mission' the Aboriginal workers returned to. What is your understanding of the term 'Mission'? Research where the 'Aboriginal Missions' were located in rural NSW in the 1940s. What purpose did they serve? Do any still exist today?

Outline what rights and freedoms existing today were denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people during the 1930s-1950s.

Websites to visit:

<http://www.abc.net.au/site-archive/rural/shearhistory/story2.htm>

<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/great-depression>

<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-farming-and-agriculture>

<https://www.communityheritage.net.au/dabee-rylstone-district>

<http://www.rdhswiki.com/page/Dabee>

<http://www.rdhswiki.com>

<http://mininglink.com.au/site/kandos-cement-plant>

<http://www.mudgeemuseum.com>

<http://www.kandosmuseum.org.au>

<http://rylstonekandos.com/towns-villages/rylstone/>  
[http://public.fotki.com/Pedro23/historical/australian\\_shearing/](http://public.fotki.com/Pedro23/historical/australian_shearing/)

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