

# Black Inc. Teaching Resources

**TITLE:** Nona & Me

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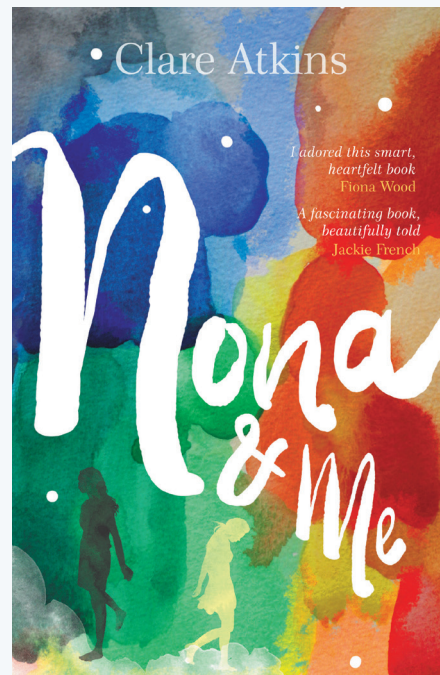
**SUBJECT:** English

Suitable for middle and senior secondary

*Clare Atkins reflects on the origins of her book Nona & Me.*

Rosie and Nona came to me as I was lying beside the public swimming pool in Nhulunbuy. There were two young girls playing together; one Ngapaki (non-Aboriginal) and one Yolngu (the Indigenous people of north-east Arnhem Land). They were dipping in and out of the water, laughing and playing together. Then they both lay down on the edge of the pool, one behind the other, in almost identical positions; their bodies long and flat on the tiles, hands trailing in the water. For that moment in time they were the same, together, two parts of a whole. I was struck by the innocence of their friendship and wondered about how it would undoubtedly change as they got older.

I started thinking about the Close the Gap campaign and wondered what that gap looks like on a personal level, and at what age it begins. I had recently moved from Sydney to Yirrkala, a remote Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land, just twenty minutes outside of the mining town of Nhulunbuy, also known as Gove. The two places were so different. Nhulunbuy was big boats and green lawns and mining families speaking English. Yirrkala was run-down houses, potholed roads and a strong community speaking Yolngu Matha and other Aboriginal languages. I started talking to people about what it might be like to grow up dividing your time between these two very distinct places.



Rosie and Nona's story began to take shape. It starts in 2007, when Rosie is in Year 10 at Nhulunbuy High. She's Ngapaki but grew up in Yirrkala; her family ties to the community go back two generations, but right now life is all about what's happening in town. She's best friends with the bubbly and cool Selena, the daughter of a mining family, and is falling in love with Selena's gorgeous older brother, Nick. She hasn't seen Nona, her adopted Yolngu sister, in years; they were inseparable as girls, but lost touch after Nona moved to Elcho Island when they were nine. But now Nona's back and she's in Rosie's class. The Northern Territory Intervention is announced and Rosie's worlds collide; past and present, community and town, family and friends, love and politics. The central conflict of the story is Rosie trying to find her place in these two worlds.

The process of writing the book involved extensive research, interviews and consultation. Ideally, I would've loved to co-write the story with a Yolngu author, but the community members with the requisite English literacy and interest were already heavily relied upon; I didn't want to be yet another Ngapaki person making demands on their time. So I approached a fantastic Yolngu woman and teacher, Merrkiyawuy

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Ganambarr-Stubbs, about working with me as a cultural adviser. She has written many children's books in Yolngu Matha and was keen to help. I sat on her balcony overlooking the bright blue ocean and told her the story of Rosie and Nona. By the time I'd finished we were both teary.

During that first meeting, Merrkiyawuy named all the Yolngu characters for me. We had to make sure they were the right moieties; everything and everyone in Yolngu culture is either Yirritja or Dhuwa. My characters had to fit the right patterns. The family relationships had to work. Initially, I thought I'd give her the chapters as I wrote, but it soon became clear that many might not make the final cut. I didn't want to waste her time, so it was a whole year later before I talked to her about Nona and Rosie again. By that time I had an almost-complete first draft. I talked to her about various chapters in detail and she helped me fill in the blanks. I finished the draft and gave it to her, and other community members, to read. The feedback they gave helped to make the second draft much stronger.

Some people might ask: why has a non-Aboriginal person written this book? That is a fantastic question, and a wonderful thing for students to interrogate in the classroom. Should non-Indigenous authors tell stories about Aboriginal people? What impact does the history of Aboriginal people in Australia have on this question? What are the guidelines surrounding the representation of Aboriginal characters in films and novels?

For me, working with Merrkiyawuy was my way of ensuring the work had cultural integrity and showed respect for Yolngu culture. I could not have written the book without her. It is also important to note that the story isn't from Nona's point of view. It is Rosie's story, told from a Ngapaki perspective. Most Ngapaki teenagers will never visit an Aboriginal community, let alone live in one. But by reading Rosie's story they will be transported to that world and experience all the highs and lows, joys and tragedies, through her eyes.

I agree with Terri Janke, who says in the Australian Society of Authors protocols for writing about Aboriginal people, that "if Australian writers are to depict a representative Australian society, they must write about Indigenous characters from diverse backgrounds, with good and bad attributes." *Nona & Me* doesn't shy away from depicting the challenges faced by Aboriginal communities, nor does it enforce negative stereotypes. It simply portrays life there, and tells the story of a teenage girl struggling to work out how to be herself. After all, life is rarely black or white; more often it's confusingly grey.

## About Clare Atkins

Clare Atkins has worked as a scriptwriter for many successful television series including *All Saints*, *Home and Away*, *Winners and Losers* and *Wonderland*. *Nona & Me* is her first book, which she wrote while living in Arnhem Land.

To download complimentary teaching notes for *Nona & Me*, visit [www.blackincbooks.com/teachers](http://www.blackincbooks.com/teachers)

For background about the Northern Territory Intervention and related articles and information, visit [www.clareatkins.com.au/resources-links/](http://www.clareatkins.com.au/resources-links/)

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