

# Black Inc. Australian Curriculum Questions

**TITLE:** Nona & Me

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Suitable for middle and senior secondary

*Australian Curriculum questions for Nona & Me by Clare Atkins.*

*Questions by Laura Gordon.*

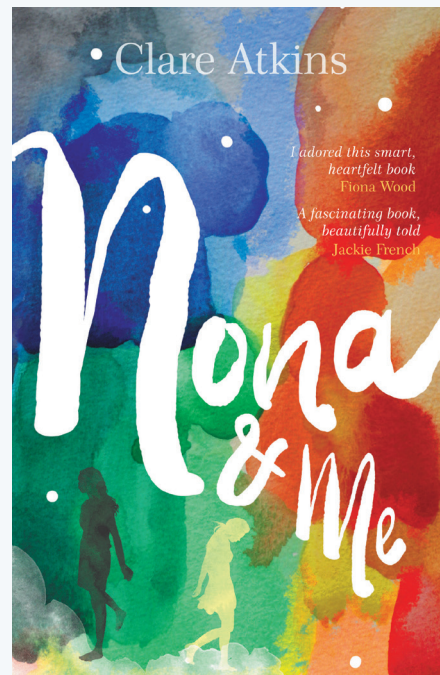
## Question 1.

In *Nona & Me* you have created a fascinating, moving and powerful novel set in the Top End of Australia. For many urban students who will read this text, possibly in the walls of a classroom, the setting and experiences of Rosie and Nona may seem like they occur in another country. Can you tell us a little bit about your time living in Arnhem Land?

**Clare Atkins:** I moved from Sydney to Arnhem Land in 2012, with my husband and two children. We chose the community of Yirrkala because we already had connections there; I knew a fantastic Yolngu woman from that area, who I had met years before through work, and had been adopted into her family.

For the first six months, my family and I immersed ourselves in community life. We went on outings with our Yolngu family most weekends: fishing, looking for guku (bush honey) or munydjutj (berries), or to funerals. But then the build-up started (a period of humid weather before the wet season starts), and then the wet season kicked in, and I fell pregnant. I didn't feel like going on hot and exhausting bush trips. My kids weren't that keen either; they had made friends their own age and wanted to play with them instead. I started to withdraw.

It was during this time that I



realised it was possible to live in an Aboriginal community yet not be part of it. I had never considered that before. In my idealistic thinking I had figured that if you lived in a community of five hundred or so Aboriginal people of course you would be immersed in community life. But now I found myself going from my air-conditioned teachers' house, in to my air-conditioned car, into the nearby town of Nhulunbuy (also known as Gove), to shop or talk to mining families and then go home again. At the same time, I realised this wasn't how I wanted to live.

That feeling of living in a community yet being outside it became part of the inspiration for Rosie's story.

## Question 2.

How different did you find the lifestyle, the people and the culture compared to other parts of Australia you have lived with your family?

**(CA):** I have travelled overseas and lived in various parts of Australia, but living in Yirrkala was very different. The main thing I'd say is that the pace in Aboriginal communities seems to be a lot slower. I had experienced this change of pace once before whilst staying in Papunya (in the Central Australian desert).

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I found that the experience is very much about just being there and taking it in. If you're rushing around, being busy, asking lots of questions you're probably not going to learn very much. But if you're happy to just sit and be there and really listen people start to offer you information and share their knowledge. So that requires you to really slow down and be patient and just notice what's going on around you.

This is very much the case when Rosie attends the funeral. For the first time in many years she is required to just sit there and really be present with her emotions, her family connections and the cultural traditions of mourning. And that's when she starts to feel those real human bonds again.

### Question 3.

What do you want students to understand about life in this part of our country?

**(CA):** I would love it if this story inspires a real interest in, and respect for, Aboriginal cultures.

So many people don't realise what a rich culture it is, and how different it is. I remember in my late teens and early twenties my friends and I wanted to travel and experience other cultures, and no one, me included, went to an Aboriginal community or thought that it was somewhere we could go to learn and experience another culture. But living in a community really is another world. I have never experienced culture shock as intensely as I did living in Yirrkala; the language, the social and cultural mores and customs, and the pace is completely different to other parts of Australia.

### Question 4.

What did you love the most about your time living there? Was there a particular experience or relationship that inspired this novel?

**(CA):** I loved the ease of living. In Sydney, I had a diary that was always booked up with things to do or people to see. In Yirrkala, I stopped using the diary and we kept a family calendar instead. Life was simpler. There weren't as many options of things to do; there was the library, the pool, the toy library, friend's houses or beach or bush trips. That was pretty much it. There was something very liberating about having many choices removed.

The relationship that inspired the novel was my relationship with my momo (grandmother) Dhanggal. She is the woman I met all those years ago, who invited me to Nhulunbuy and whose family I was adopted into. Spending time with her is always fun, surprising and rewarding. We have shared a lot of laughs; she has a great sense of humour. The relationship has given me an insight into the richness of the culture, and was the reason I wanted to write about intercultural friendship.

### Question 5.

You offer various contrasting perspectives in this text. One is the Indigenous experience and another is a non-Indigenous teenage girl who has grown up as part of an extended family of Aboriginal men, women, children and her own parents. And yet another is the ignorant and materialistic views represented by Nick and his father. How delicate was the balance in presenting the ideas of the three viewpoints through Nona, Rosie and Nick, especially given they are teenagers?

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**(CA):** I think teenagers are more open to new experiences and ideas. The teenage characters are not as set in their views as their parents; they are still open to change by experience. At the same time I don't believe in wholly good or bad characters; everyone is a mix of contradictions and positive and negative attributes.

What I tried to show is how these three teenagers are the result of their experiences to date: Rosie has grown up in a community so she knows about the wonderful inclusiveness of Yolngu culture, even if she chooses to deny it at this point in time; Nona has lost one parent to a heart attack and the other to alcohol, she's had to take care of her little sisters, she has the responsibility of an adult without any real support; Nick has had a bad experience in the past which has shaped his current views, along with his family who have a similar outlook. But just because that is their experience to date, doesn't mean they can't or won't change in the future.

## **Question 6.**

It could be argued that Nona doesn't have much of a voice in the text. She is recreated through Rosie's memories and referred to by members of her family and teachers. Was this intentional? How would you like students to view Nona, her choices, her loss and her friendship with Rosie?

**(CA):** Whilst some may argue that Nona doesn't have much of a voice in the text, I felt she had a definite and ongoing presence. She is there in every scene – including the ones with just Rosie and Nick – because she is always in Rosie's thoughts; she is almost like Rosie's conscience. The name Nona means 'spirit from

Elcho Island', and that is how I saw her: ever-present, even if she isn't always physically there.

The fact that Nona isn't as physically present as some may have expected was intentional, and it is a result of the way the book is written. I wasn't comfortable writing from an Indigenous perspective; I didn't feel I was the best person to tell Nona's story, so the book is from Rosie's perspective. As such, the reader can only follow Rosie's journey, and at the start of the novel she doesn't really know Nona anymore. They were extremely close as children, but they've lost touch. So the reader follows Rosie's journey as she learns more about the teenage Nona and her life. At the same time, we learn about the girls' shared history, and the intense friendship that bonds them together for life.

I hope that students read about Nona and are left wanting to know her even more, so that it might prompt them to seek out intercultural friendships in their own lives, or at least realise that everyone has a story; Nona isn't just a kid with a burnt foot, or a teenage Mum, she has a whole history that has made her who she is.

## **Question 7.**

Describe where the inspiration for Nick's family came from. In many ways Selena is a superficial, ordinary teenage girl with her focus on one thing only. Her father has his business interests at heart and Nick parrots the ideals of his father. Their insensitivity may come from ignorance more than fear or hate, which makes us have an element of sympathy for Nick. How do think, or hope, students will respond to these characters and the views they represent?

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(CA): I hope that students see these characters as rounded and realistic people. Like many people, the Bells are not maliciously racist; they are a product of their experiences to date. Mr Bell's black jokes are actually an attempt to connect with Rosie, however misguided. He thinks that she'll find them funny. Mrs Bell is interested in Aboriginal culture and art but hasn't had much exposure which, combined with her concern for her family's safety, creates an element of fear. Selena just doesn't care; she has other things on her mind (boys, clothes, friendships) and is flippant about issues of race. And Nick had a bad experience in the past, which colours his current views. That said, it should be noted that he was open enough to have a relationship with an Aboriginal girl in the first place, so I think he has the potential to change his views in the future. And I suppose this is what I hope students are able to consider: is it just Nick's fault that he holds racist views? What would have happened if Rosie had been more connected to the community while she was going out with Nick? Or if either of Rosie's parents had taken the time to try to give Nick some one on one exposure to Aboriginal people? In my experience, I've found that if you know someone personally, and hear their story, it is harder to generalise about their culture or race.

## Question 8.

There are two key political references that take place during this narrative. One is the way everyday life has been affected by the Intervention in the Aboriginal communities. From your experience, what would you like students to understand about the impetus for this action and the consequences that have arisen from the implementation of this government response?

(CA): I included these two political events (the Intervention and the Apology) as a backdrop to the story because they mirror Rosie's personal journey, and I am interested in how big political decisions play out on a personal level.

The Intervention was announced in 2007, supposedly off the back of the Little Children Are Sacred Report. I say supposedly because the Intervention didn't take into account any of the report's recommendations, including the very first recommendation: that Indigenous communities be consulted and included in the process of creating change.

When the Intervention was announced I was actually in Papunya, a remote Aboriginal community in Central Australia, working on a fantastic youth literacy project run by Victoria University called SWIRL. One morning, we woke to find families tidying up their yards; they had heard about something called 'The Intervention' on TV the night before and were worried the army was going to come and take their kids if their homes were dirty or messy. This gave me a real insight into how policy impacts on people and the powerlessness of Aboriginal people in this process. Not only were they not consulted, they found out about it from the television.

When we moved to Yirrkala, I was interested in finding out how the Intervention had affected the community there. The overwhelming response was that it had been a huge blow to the community's pride and independence. Previously functioning roles, like the Yolngu guys who collected the rubbish, were scrapped.

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There was a feeling of disempowerment and also stigmatisation of all Aboriginal men as paedophiles. So even though not much actually happened physically in Yirrkala – apart from things like fences and sensor lights being installed – the psychological impact was huge. Suicides increased in the period directly following the announcement, and most of them were young men.

So the inclusion of these big events in *Nona & Me* is about saying these political decisions do matter, and seeing how they play out in people's lives.

## Question 9.

The other is the Apology delivered by Kevin Rudd in 2008 to the Indigenous population for the forced removal of children that became known as 'The Stolen Generation'. Were you living in Arnhem Land at the time of this apology? How did it affect the Indigenous people you knew at that time? What about the non-Indigenous population? Has it had a lasting impact do you think?

**(CA):** I was living in Sydney at the time of the Apology, and I remember watching it by myself on the television at home, and seeing the televised glimpses of other people watching it around the country, and wishing I'd gone somewhere like Pitt St Mall to watch it in the company of others, because it felt like something that should've been shared.

I think it was a huge moment for Aboriginal people, particularly members of the Stolen Generation. I also think it was cathartic for non-Indigenous people to openly admit the historic injustices we've inflicted on Aboriginal people. But I don't know how much of a lasting impact it has had. The Intervention is still

continuing today. We haven't Closed the Gap – Aboriginal life expectancy and health in general, and education levels are still much lower than for non-Indigenous people. I think Sorry was a good first step, but we need to follow that with action that empowers Aboriginal people to decide what they want for their own communities.

## Question 10.

*Nona & Me* is a story of forgiveness and hope; of considering someone else's point of view, of starting over and rebuilding relationships. Would you agree with this? How does the Apology taking place during the narrative underpin this theme?

**(CA):** I definitely think forgiveness and hope are two big themes of the story. The political backstory mirrors Rosie's own emotional journey. The Intervention is like Rosie's denial of Nona: it is a devastating blow to everything that has come before it. And Rosie has to find a way to work up the courage to say sorry – which she actually never does, because when it finally happens the Apology highlights the fact that words without action are meaningless, so Rosie seeks to say sorry with her actions instead.

A related theme is the impact of politics on everyday lives. As teenagers or adults we can sometimes be tempted to think that politics are another world, are somehow separate to us, and we can be apathetic and think we don't need to pay attention or be involved. But politics do influence us in more ways than we think, and in the case of the Apology it's showing our government leading by example, facing up to past incidents and admitting guilt.

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## Question 11.

The struggle between the appeal of the town of Nhulunbuy, with the pool, school, friends and a boyfriend, and the tug of Yirrkala where she grew up, tests Rosie. Is this more than just an ordinary teenage struggle to rebel against one's parents and be drawn toward the popular? Or does it represent more than this?

**(CA):** Yirrkala represents a part of ourselves that is intrinsic to our identity but which we choose to deny. This could mean different things to different people; I have known Aboriginal or Asian teenagers who have denied their cultural identity, or people who pretend to have different music taste to try to fit in, or teenagers who practically disown their parents because they think they're uncool. Essentially, all of these examples are about having the courage to own who you are and be true to that.

The inverse of that is that Nhulunbuy represents whatever is 'cool', accepted and considered 'the norm'.

There is also the added element of race, and the two locations are representative of the mind frame of 'us and them'. Yirrkala is mostly Aboriginal and Nhulunbuy is mostly Anglo; the two places are just twenty minutes apart but function completely differently and are essentially divided.

## Question 12.

Rosie's parents are really interesting. Young adult readers will no doubt identify with the difficulty of living with parents who are no longer together, or who lecture them about the values and beliefs they should have, and they may even identify with discovering there is more to their parents than they ever knew.

What role do Rosie's parents play in this story?

**(CA):** Rosie and her parents each represent a different way of living in an Aboriginal community. Rosie's dad embraces Yolngu values and lifestyle to the point of total immersion; he has a Yolngu girlfriend, shares everything he earns and owns, speaks Yolngu Matha and doesn't see himself leaving community life. Rosie's mum lives more of a moderated life; she is part of the community, and genuinely cares for the people, but she retains her own Western values, such as maintaining financial independence and keeping Rosie protected from the potentially distressing elements of Yolngu funerals when she's young. When the novel begins, Rosie is at the other extreme from her dad. She has cut herself off from community life; physically, she still lives there, but her heart and mind are very much in town.

## Question 13.

One of the real beauties of this narrative is how you have shown the complexity of what it means to be Indigenous. From Aiden the musician to Lomu, and his tragic demise, to Rripipi as the matriarch and Gulwirri and her struggle with alcohol, the picture of what it means to be an Aboriginal person living in this part of Australia is explored. What conversations do you hope take part in classrooms based on these characters?

**(CA):** I hope that it can prompt discussion about stereotypes, which – let's be honest – often have some foundation, however small, in truth. But rather than end the conversation at 'what' the stereotypes are, we need to move on to asking 'why'?

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Why did Gulwirri turn to alcohol? Why did Rripiipi find herself in the role of looking after her grandchildren? Why would someone in Lomu's situation end his own life? Why did he become a father so young? Why did Bolu die at such a young age? Why might Aiden be Indigenous but have an Anglo appearance? What are the socio-economic, environmental, cultural and historical reasons behind these characters' journeys?

## Question 14.

There are lots of symbols and motifs that recur throughout the text. What is the symbol that has the most meaning for you?

**(CA):** The symbol that has the most meaning for me is the blue-winged kookaburra, which appears three times during the story. Aboriginal people believe that natural occurrences, such as weather events or the appearance of certain animals, can hold greater meaning. I saw the kookaburra as a symbol of Nona's presence, even when she wasn't physically there.

## Question 15.

The theme of forgiveness is something that pervades the text and punctuates it with a sense of hope. But there is also a sense of guilt experienced by lots of these characters. What role do you think guilt plays in the healing of relationships?

**(CA):** I think guilt is essential to healing, because guilt is, by definition, a feeling that things aren't right, and you need to be aware that things aren't right before you can start to act and try to improve them.

Likewise, change can't come unless you're aware of the issues, so I don't try to give any answers in the book, but I do hope to show students a world that would otherwise be unfamiliar to them and get them thinking and talking about the issues presented.

## Question 16.

Finally, if students and teachers want to read more about this part of Australia are there any texts or resources you would recommend to them? Were there texts, or music, or people that inspired you and enabled you to generate such authenticity in your writing?

**(CA):** There are a huge number of fantastic resources (music, news clips, timelines, audio pieces) available to teachers and students who want to learn more about this part of Australia, Aboriginal culture or the Intervention. I list them all on the resources page of my website: [clareatkins.com.au](http://clareatkins.com.au)

In particular, I would say *Nona & Me* would make a great companion novel to be read with Laklak Burarrwanga's award winning non-fiction novel *Welcome To My Country*, which tells readers about Yolngu culture in a friendly, conversational manner. In fact, one of the flashback chapters in my book is heavily based on some of the content from Laklak's book.

**For teaching notes and other education resources for *Nona & Me*, visit [www.blackincbooks.com](http://www.blackincbooks.com)**

**For articles and resources on the Intervention, visit [www.clareatkins.com.au](http://www.clareatkins.com.au)**

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## 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.

## About Laura Gordon

Laura Gordon is an experienced secondary English teacher. She currently teaches years 7–12 at St Joseph's College, Geelong, where she has taught for the past 10 years. She shares her passion for books and reading by creating engaging curriculum and learning activities for the classroom.