

## Task for *Ruby Moonlight*

### Text orientation script for teacher use

*Ruby Moonlight* is a verse novel, this means it is written entirely in poetry. Written by Ali Cobby Eckermann, it is a novel about the impact of colonisation in mid-north South Australia around 1880.

We begin in the warm afternoon light as a family rove through the plains. They laugh and chat, a young woman is gathering food, berries and wild fruit. Her husband, a spear maker, looks on lovingly, his brother teases him. An old woman sings clan songs, the cooking fire begins. The spear maker notices something in the hillside. He sees the women hurrying back from a hidden path, he sees his brother running, signalling to get the spears ready. There is fear in their eyes. The old man and his wife meet with others, the meeting circle is filled with worry. The rest of the tribe are waiting in the shadows, they are watching, they are silent, they are ready to flee. Strange animals and pale men burst from the river. 'Hack ... hands, heads, hearts'. The pale people, the white people have killed the tribe, slaughtered them.

A young woman sits like a rock, staring at her husband's and mother's bodies. She is filled with grief, yet no tears flow. The survivor is a woman of the Shadow tribe. Trapped in her grief she tries to trust nature, trust her home, she follows the bird song, leading her to water. She wanders, she has nightmares, she is led only by instinct. In her dreams she sees a guardian spirit, who sits nearby, watching her.

There is a bend along the river, she finds shelter, she stays there, there is little movement and days pass without anything happening. She washes herself in the river, she cuts herself, slicing the knife into her thighs, one sorry mark for each family member, she rubs ash into the wounds, a cultural ritual. The woman weaves a basket, she sits on sheltered sand by the secluded river cave. No one comes, she is alone.

It rains, this brings a goanna, dinner. More rain forces her into her cave. She wakes up to an unusual smell. She observes something that looks like a ghost, it is tall like an emu, its face as pink as a galah. It breathes smoke from its mouth. It is a white man, he is smoking a cigarette. This is unusual for the girl, she has not seen this before. She finds him funny.

Inside a shack the man takes off his wet clothes. He falls asleep on a rabbit skin rug in his human-made cave. It is a log shape. Three sides rammed against the earth. There aren't many possessions, a faded photograph, a small hand-held mirror and a flute all on a bamboo shelf. His name is Miner Jack. He likes to live alone, a solitary life. He is not successful at his trade, trading rabbit skin pelts for cash. He is an Irishman of about 30 years of age. He has a red beard, he remembers the famine and fighting of his childhood in Ireland.

Jack has a horse which scares Ruby. She isn't used to such a beast. Ruby watches Jack and his horse. Jack begins to notice someone watching him. He leaves out plates of food for her. At night, she sneaks in and takes the food. They begin to develop a friendship. Slowly she leaves Jack gifts. He introduces sugar to her. She moves to sleep near his fire. They make love. Jack is a man of few words and she is glad. They do not know each other's language but

they know each other. He whispers his endearment 'Ruby Moonlight', she is a gem glistening in the night. Ruby loves Jack's little shack. It is hidden and safe.

Jack shaves his beard. Ruby laughs at this strange thing. Days, weeks, months pass.

One day a visitor appears, 'We need ya help mate, there's sickness going on cross the river.' Jack knows what this means. 'Ya see any blacks roaming, best ya kill 'em disease spreading pests.'

Ruby begins to see signs that a mob is near, she packs her essentials in an old fire bag and searches for them. She waits outside their camp, watching for her invitation. The mob tell her it is harder to hide, the trees are vanishing, there are lots of killings, there are fences which make it hard for them to travel like they used to. They are Cloud people of the Eastern Shadows. An old dancer demands Ruby become his wife, he tells her to leave the colourless man. Ruby realises that she has been watched, long before she knew the mob were nearby.

Ruby disregards the old dancing man, she wants to keep her simple life with Jack. Jack sees Ruby and the mob. Jack realises Ruby is too special for him, she will leave him.

The mob moves on, they invite Ruby, she says no. The old dancer steals some gems from the white man, he says, 'You are not the one for her, I am the one.'

Ruby returns to Jack. Jack will leave soon to search for more furs to sell. Jack secures the cabin removing all evidence of Ruby. The fear mongers still hunt roaming blacks to slaughter. Ruby returns to the bush, she realises this is about her safety.

Ruby's spirit guardian still follows her, keeping her safe.

Jack continues hunting for fur. He does not get much and feels the sting of failure. Jack is sick, he stumbles and sleeps. When he wakes he sees his mirror and gems stolen by the old dancer. Jack smiles, thinking his troubles are over.

Jack goes to town. He goes to a shop to sell his pelts. He visits the beer house. He meets a 'music-less' man. The man with no music hunts Aboriginal people. He lost the music after he killed a black man and his wife. In a fur pouch carried by the couple, he found crystals and their new-born son. That was the day he lost his music heart.

Jack returns to the shop and buys a dress. He gives Ruby the dress. She wears it. She returns to sleeping in the cabin.

The old dancer has found that the protection song he placed on Ruby has been broken, the mirror and gems gone.

Ruby begins to think someone is watching them, she notices it in the earth.

The man with no music in his heart begins to suspect Ruby and the miner are lovers. He wanders to his horse, he tells two brothers to join him.

Jack is unaware they are being hunted.

Ruby slips away. She does not return. Jack cries. Ruby hides. The strangers are still hunting her.

The music-less man and his band are exhausted from hunting. They camp along the river, they do not know it has been poisoned. In the evening their bloated bodies are found by children playing in the river.

The townsfolk drag the bodies from the river, the priest says they will not be buried in the cemetery.

Ruby hastens to see Jack. They both know it is over, yet Jack does not want it to end. Ruby is already gone. Ruby joins the old dancer. Jack stays trapped inside himself.

In this country there is sadness, in this sunset, a Ruby Moonlight.