

AUNTY FAY MUIR & SUE LAWSON

Possum Skin Cloak

Illustrated by LEANNE JONES



TEACHERS' NOTES

ABOUT

When you are born your mother and your aunts wrap you in a possum skin. Your possum skin holds you and you grow together. It tells who you are and where you come from. It keeps you always in the warmth of belonging.

METADATA

Authors: Aunty Fay Muir & Sue Lawson

Illustrator: Leanne Jones

ISBN: 9781742037226

Format: 245mm x 245mm

RRP: \$26.99

Extent: 32pp + cover

Binding: Hardback

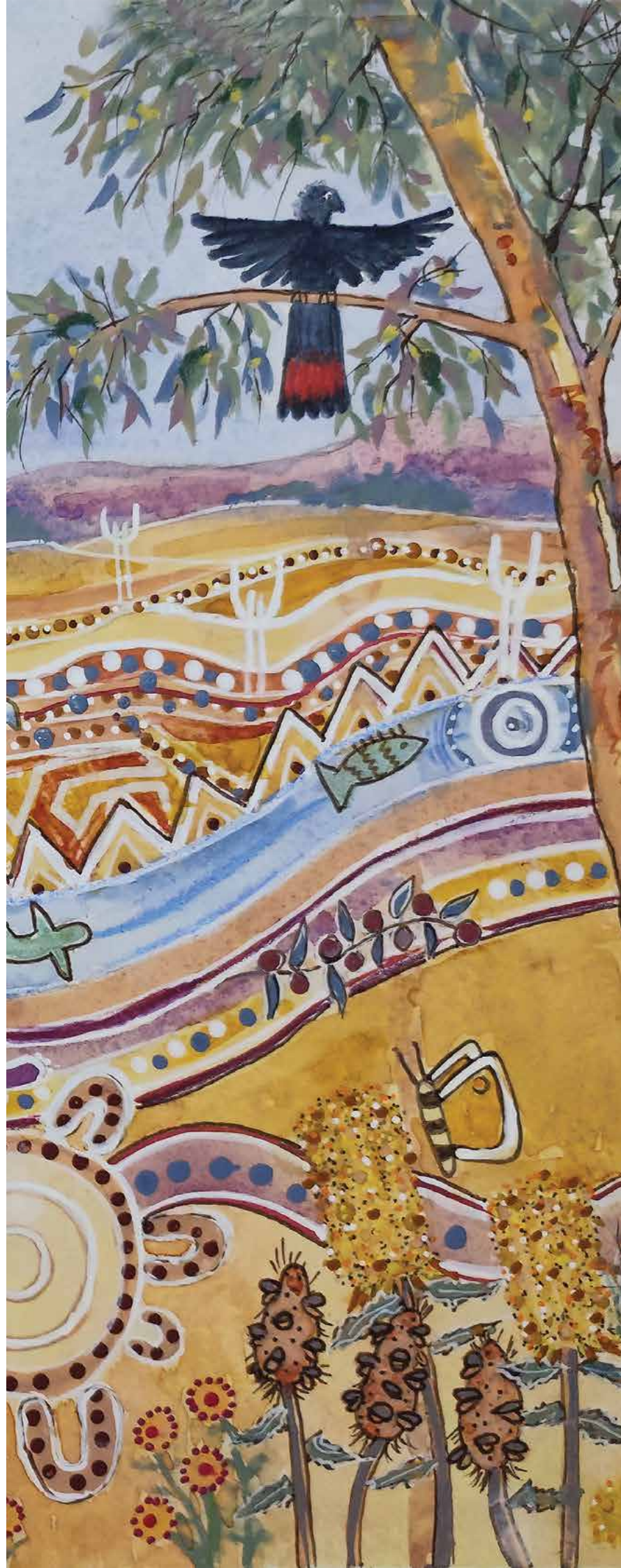
Reading level: 6+

Interest level: 5+

Category: Children's Non-Fiction

THEMES

- Belonging
- Country
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures





ABOUT THE CREATORS

SUE LAWSON'S

books have won the Australian Family Therapists' Award for Children's Literature and have been short-listed for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards and the Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year Awards.

AUNTY FAY MUIR

is a Boon Wurrung Elder of the Yalukut Weelum of the Boon Wurrung, Wamba Wamba and Wergiai clans. She is passionate about sharing her culture and language. In 2025, Aunty Fay was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for her work with First Nation's communities.

TOGETHER

Aunty Fay and Sue have written six books. Picture book, *Country*, won the Speech Pathology Book of the Year award while non-fiction book *Always Was Always Will Be* won the CBCA Eve Pownall Award in 2025.

WRITING STYLE

Possum Skin Cloak is written in a direct, poetic style. This approach allows readers to access the depth of meaning in the text. The authors use poetic structure to emphasise themes of family, Country, belonging and culture. The language is comforting and nurturing, reflecting the experience your kin wrapping you in a possum skin cloak. The narrative arc encourages students to discuss life's phases from birth to death.

LEANNE JONES

is a contemporary Indigenous Australian artist. She is a Dharug, Wiradjuri, Nyampa woman who lives and creates on Dharug Country. She is deeply connected to her Culture, Country and Community and has created art from a young age. She has won many awards. Her paintings tell stories of place, family, history and Culture.

ILLUSTRATION STYLE

Leanne used acrylic paint, mixed media and collage to create the illustrations. In some instances, the paint is diluted, creating a watercolour effect. At other times, it is applied heavily to outline elements that need emphasis. Her paintings are representational and composed of many layers, which can be linked to themes of history and Ancestors. Her landscapes are a dreamy blend of realism and First Nations symbology. The illustrations reflect the past, present and future. The detail and depth of the illustrations invites students to find new detail and meaning upon each reading.

CURRICULUM LINKS

	FOUNDATION	YEAR 1	YEAR 2	YEAR 3	YEAR 4	YEAR 5	YEAR 7
HASS	AC9HSFK04 AC9HSFK03	AC9HS1K02 AC9HS1K04	AC9HS2K04 AC9HS2K02	AC9HS3K02 AC9HS3K04	AC9HS4K01 AC9HS4K05		AC9HG7K07 AC9HH7K05 AC9HH7K03 AC9HH7K07
THE ARTS	AC9AVAFE01	AC9AVA2E02 AC9AVA2E01		AC9AVA4E02		AC9AVA6E02	AC9AVA8E01 AC9AVA8E02
ENGLISH	AC9EFLE01 AC9EFLY05	AC9E1LA08 AC9E1LE01	AC9E2LE01 AC9E2LA01	AC9E3LE01			AC9E7LE06



BEFORE READING

- On the whiteboard or butchers paper, brainstorm what you know about possum skin cloaks. After reading, revisit the brainstorm and add new details learnt about possum skin cloaks. Discuss the new knowledge as a class.
- Look closely at the book's front and back covers.
 - Can you spot the title, authors, blurb and spine?
 - What predictions can you make about the book?
 - Where might you find this book in the library?
 - Is this a picture book or a nonfiction book?
 - What genre might it be?
- Discuss the book's title: *Possum Skin Cloak*.
 - What clues does it offer readers about the book?
 - What questions does the title prompt?
 - Record the questions and return to them after reading.
- Discuss clues the cover and blurb offer about the book.
 - Ask students to share their decision making.

AFTER READING

- Ask students if there were any unfamiliar words in the text. Together explore the words' meanings.
- Look closely at the illustrations. What stories do they tell?
- What details do you notice on a second view that you missed the first time?

*“When you are born,
your mother and aunties wrap you in
the warmth of belonging ...
to family, Country, Ancestors and mob.”*

- What do the words family, Country, Ancestors and mob mean to you?
- What do you think they mean in First Nation's culture?
- For older children, break the class into four groups and allocate each group one of the words – family, Country, Ancestors, mob.
- Allocate 15 minutes for the students to research the terms. Groups share their findings with the class.
- Discuss if and how the students' meanings differ from First Nation's meaning.
- Explore the meaning of Country. Discuss as a group.
- Invite a local Elder to visit your class and discuss Country. If the local First Nation's people wore possum skin cloaks, ask the Elder to share their stories about them.

*“It holds journeys short and long, tough and smooth, that take you
across Country.”*

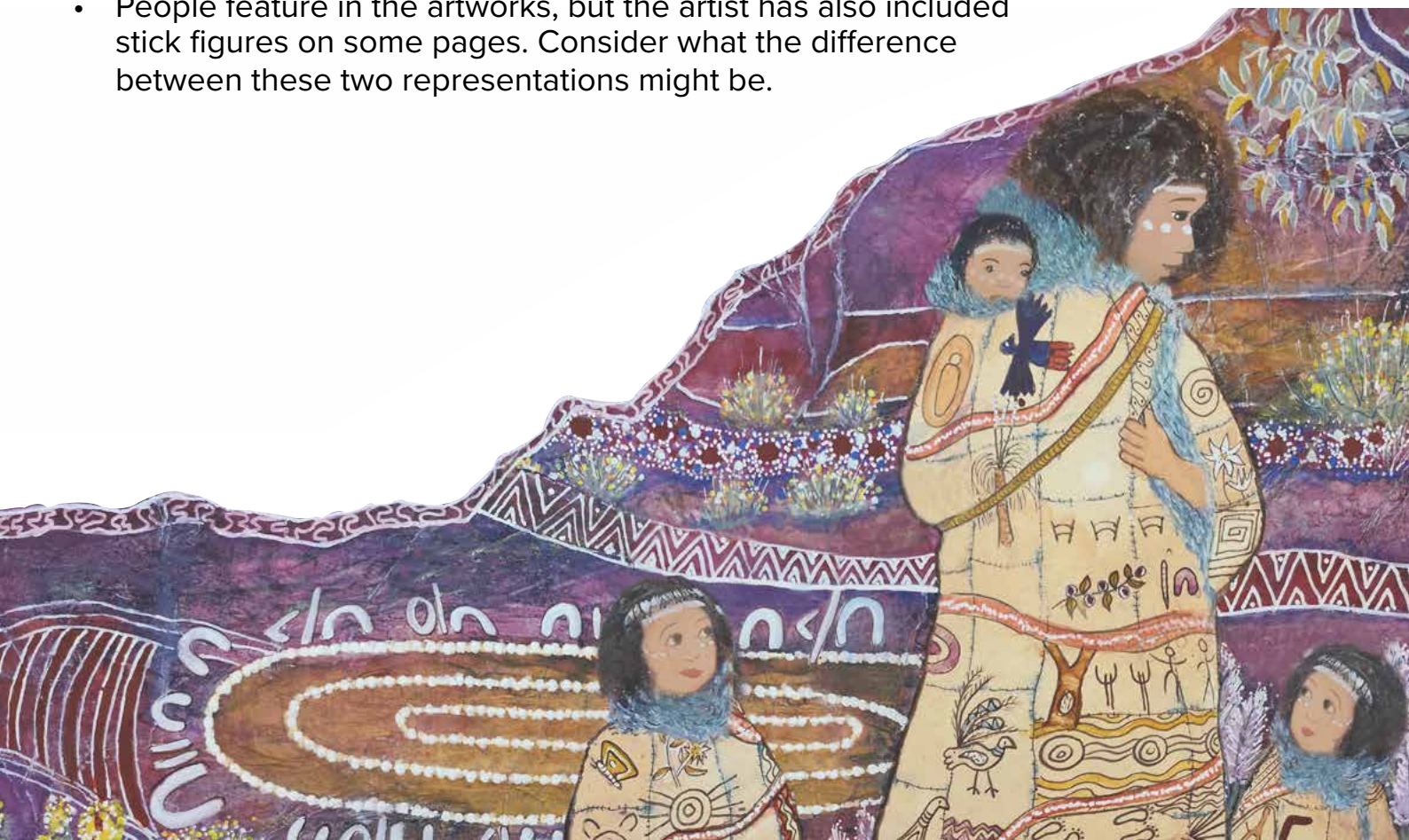
- What might the authors be referring to here?
- Do you think they mean journeys literally?
- What other journeys might they be referring to?

Revisit the final spread.

- Why do you think First Nations people were buried with their possum skin cloaks?
- Lead the students on a discussion to explore why historic possum skin cloaks are so rare.

ARTWORK

- Look closely at Leanne Jones's artworks for the book.
 - Explore the artwork more deeply asking questions such as:
 - How do the illustrations add meaning to the text?
 - How do the materials and techniques used add texture or detail to the illustrations?
 - What animals, plants, landscape features do you recognise in the artwork?
 - What does the artwork tell you about the relationship between the people, landscapes, plants and animals?
 - What new things can you notice when you take time to look at the artwork?
 - How does the choice of colour influence the mood or message of the illustrations?
 - Does this illustration style match what you usually see in other texts?
 - Ask students to share their opinions.
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- Leanne Jones's artworks feature many familiar plants and animals. Create a list of the animals and plants featured in the illustrations. Research where these animals and plants live. See if you can determine where the illustrations might be set.
 - Identify the different symbols featured in the illustrations. Have students research the meaning of the symbols and how these connect to community and Country.
 - Focus on one image and consider where your eyes are first drawn to. How has the illustrator guided your focus?
 - People feature in the artworks, but the artist has also included stick figures on some pages. Consider what the difference between these two representations might be.



RESEARCH ACTIVITY

Possums

- Explore the life cycles and habitats of possums.
 1. Research the breed of possums First Nations people used for possum skin cloaks.
 2. Explore why they chose this breed.
 3. Explore the lifecycle of brush-tailed possums. Create a group or solo project for display.
 4. When First Nations people kill an animal, nothing is wasted. Research what other parts of the possum were used for.

Cloaks

- How are possum skin cloaks made?
- Compare how First Nations people used to make and decorate cloaks to how it is done today.
- Possums are now a protected species in Australia. Have students research how this impacts the cultural practice of making possum skin cloaks. How are possum skins sourced/where do they come from?
- The cultural practice of making possum skin cloaks continues today. Ask students to research First Nations artists who make possum skin cloaks.

Artists to research include:

- Maree Clarke (Yorta Yorta / Wamba Wamba / Mutti Mutti / Boon Wurrung)
 - Vicki Couzens (Keerray Woorroong Gunditjmara)
 - Lee Darroch (Yorta Yorta, Mutti Mutti and Boon Wurrung)
 - Treahna Hamm (Yorta Yorta)
 - Kimberley Moulton (Yorta Yorta)
 - Eileen Alberts (Gunditjmara)
- Many different language groups in southeastern and southwestern Australia made possum skin cloaks. Ask students to research these different groups and their traditional lands.



ACTIVITIES CONTINUED

Your First Nations Country

- Whose Country do you live, learn and play on?
- If the language has been reclaimed in your area, explore the names for the animals and plants depicted in *Possum Skin Cloak*.
- Learn about the local First Nations people. Did they have possum skin cloaks?
- Other indigenous cultures around the world have their own practices of making traditional garments that reflect the identity of the wearer. Ask students to research where else these traditions exist or assign them one. Some examples:
 - The Andean Unku
 - The Maori Kahu huruhuru
 - The Mapuche Makuñ



Writing Activity

Consider the text on page 4:

“Your cloak keeps you
warm,
dry
and close to mother’s heart.”

- Discuss why the authors chose to set out the text like this.
- What effect does it have on the words that have a line to themselves?
- Discuss times when the students felt ‘close to mother’s heart’
- Who might the authors be referring to when they say mother?
- Auntie Fay describes Country as being like your mother. You care for your mother and your mother cares for you. What does mother mean to you?
- Have students write a poem inspired by the line.
- After they have written their first draft, return to the book and discuss the way the authors have set out the text.
- Have students set their work in a way that suits their poem.

ART ACTIVITY

Revisit the text:

“Your cloak records your knowledge and understanding, language, sacred stories and places. It maps your responsibilities to family, Country and Songlines.”

- As a class, discuss the different stages in life the students have experienced. For example – birth, kinder, starting school, perhaps losing someone they love, gaining or losing a pet. List the stages on the board.
- Create a new list – this time focus on the knowledge the children have gained over their lifetime. For example - learning to sit up, crawling, walking, talking, how to dress themselves, how to tie shoe laces, how to make a meal etc.
- Finally, list the responsibilities the children have at home, at school and on Country. For example – caring for their pet, making their bed, walking a sibling to school, way to treat others, listening etc etc.
- Now have students consider what symbols they might choose to create to represent the stages, knowledge and responsibilities in their life.
- Students then, on a large piece of paper and using whichever medium preferred, design a cloak and illustrate it with symbols that represent their own life story.



READING

Sue Atkinson, 2017, Possum Skin Pedagogy: A Guide for Early Childhood Practitioners

Dr Vicki Couzens, 2020, Possum skin cloaks then and now – same same but different, Australian Museum. <https://australian.museum/learn/first-nations/possum-skin-cloaks-then-and-now/>

AIATSIS, 2025, Possum skin cloak. <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/possum-skin-cloak>

Joe Hinchliffe, 2019, The timeless and living art of possum skin cloaks, Museums Victoria. <https://museums victoria.com.au/article/the-timeless-and-living-art-of-possum-skin-cloaks/>

WATCH

How to read a possum skin cloak
Museums Victoria

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHuiox0AYPg>

What is a Possum-skin Cloak? |
Maree Clarke

NGV Melbourne

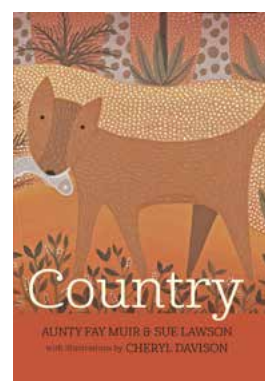
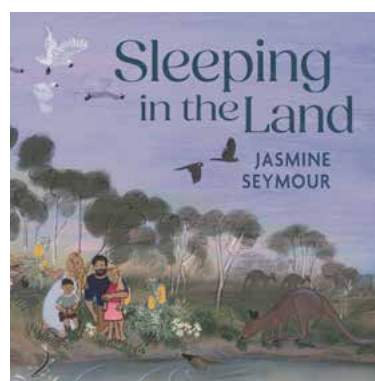
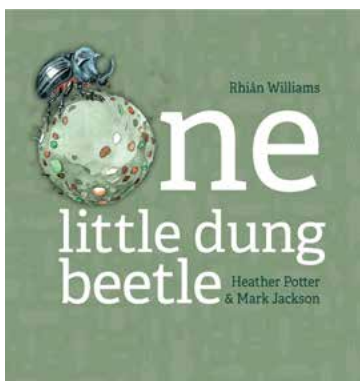
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-qkV6tUqmJA>

Watch Lee Darroch creating the
AIATSIS possum skin cloak
The Australian Institute of
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Studies

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKe6dfZwMBA>

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