World Literature: Australia, Oceania, and Antarctica

About the Author

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (1920–1993) was an aboriginal Australian of the Noonuccal tribe, born on Stradbroke Island, Queensland. She was known as Kath Walker for most of her life, but changed her name in 1987 to protest discrimination against her people. Oodgeroo means “paper bark”; a tribal elder gave her this name in recognition of her writing. Oodgeroo was an activist for Aboriginal rights throughout her career and the first Aborigine to have a book of poetry published (We Are Going, 1964). Her writings reflect the Aboriginal values and way of life.

Guided Reading

As you read this excerpt from the short story, “Kill to Eat,” think about why the four younger children share the older brother’s punishment.

from “Kill to Eat”

My father worked for the Government as a ganger of an Aboriginal workforce that helped to build roads, load and unload the supply ships, and carry out all the menial tasks around the island. For this work he received a small wage and rations to feed his seven children. (I was the third-eldest daughter.) We hated the white man’s rations—besides, they were so meagre\(^1\) that even a bandicoot\(^2\) would have had difficulty existing on them. They used to include meat, rice, sago,\(^3\) tapioca,\(^4\) and on special occasions, such as the Queen’s Birthday festival, one plum pudding.

Of course, we never depended upon the rations to keep ourselves alive. Dad taught us how to catch our food Aboriginal style, using discarded materials from the white man’s rubbish dumps. We each had our own slingshots to bring down the blueys and greenies—the parrots and lorikeets\(^5\) that haunted the flowering gums. . . .

One rule he told us we must strictly obey. When we went hunting, we must understand that our weapons were to be used only for the gathering of food. We must never use them for the sake of killing. This is, in fact, one of the strictest laws of the Aborigine, and no excuse is accepted for abusing it.

One day we five older children, two boys and three girls, decided to follow the noise of the blueys and greenies screeching from the flowering gums.\(^6\) We armed ourselves with our slingshots and made our way towards the trees.

My sisters and I always shot at our quarry from the ground. The boys would climb onto the branches of the gum trees, stand quite still, and pick out the choicest and healthiest birds in the flock. My elder brother was by far the best shot of all of us. He was always boasting about it, too. But never in front of our mother and father, because he would have been punished for his vanity. He only boasted in front of us, knowing that we wouldn’t complain about him to our parents.

The boys ordered us to take up our positions under the trees as quietly as possible. “Don’t make so much noise!” they told us. In spite of the disgust we felt for our boastful brother, we always let him start the shooting. He was a dead shot, and we all knew it. Now we watched as he drew a bead on the large bluey straight across from him. The bird seemed intent on its honey gathering from the gum tree. We held our breath, and my brother fired.

Suddenly there was a screeching from the birds and away they flew, leaving my brother as astonished as we were ourselves. He had been so close to his victim that it seemed impossible he should have missed . . . but he had. We looked at him, and his face of blank disbelief was just too much for us. We roared with laughter. My other brother jumped to the ground and rolled over and over, laughing his head off. But the more we laughed, the angrier my elder brother became.
Then, seeming to join in the fun, a kookaburra\(^7\) in a nearby tree started its raucous\(^8\) chuckle, which rose to full pitch just as though he, too, saw the joke.

In anger my elder brother brought up his slingshot and fired blindly at the sound. “Laugh at me, would you!” he called out. He hadn’t even taken time to aim.

Our laughter was cut short by the fall of the kookaburra to the ground. My brother, horrified, his anger gone, climbed down and we gathered silently around the stricken bird. That wild aim had broken the bird’s wing beyond repair. We looked at each other in frightened silence, knowing full well what we had done. We had broken that strict rule of the Aboriginal law. We had killed for the sake of killing, and we had destroyed a bird we were forbidden to destroy. The Aborigine does not eat the kookaburra. His merry laughter is allowed to go unchecked, for he brings happiness to the tribes. We call him our brother and friend.

We did not see our father coming towards us. He must have been looking for firewood. When he came upon us, we parted to allow him to see what had happened. He checked his anger by remaining silent and picking up a fallen branch. Mercifully he put the stricken bird out of its misery. Then he ordered us home. . . .

Father spoke for the first time since we had killed the kookaburra. He asked for no excuses for what we had done, and we did not offer any. We must all take the blame. That is the way of the Aborigine. Since we had killed for the sake of killing, the punishment was that for three months we should not hunt or use our weapons. For three months we would eat only the white man’s hated rations.

During those three months our stomachs growled, and our puzzled dog would question with his eyes and wagging tail why we sat around wasting our time when there was hunting to be done.

It happened a long time ago. Yet in my dreams, the sad, suffering eyes of the kookaburra, our brother and friend, still haunt me.

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the information from the reading to answer the following questions. If necessary, use a separate sheet of paper.

**INTERPRETING THE READING**

1. Why do the children hate the government rations?

2. How does the family obtain additional food?

3. Why does the older brother shoot at the kookaburra?

**CRITICAL THINKING**

4. **Making Generalizations** According to this story, which is more important in Aboriginal culture, the individual or the group?