

DUSTS ECHOES

Mermaid Story



A **STUDYGUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS



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TEACHER'S GUIDE

Brief summary

An old man, feeling unwanted, leaves his group, and is taken to an underwater life by mermaid spirits. He misses his family, and chooses to return to life above ground with them.

The major theme of the story is relationships within the group.

The original story

There is an old man who is what we call a good-medicine-man or song-man. He is leaving the camp because he wants to go walkabout.

Our song man feels discontent and disgruntled with his lot, perhaps he feels unloved and unappreciated and so he goes wandering outside the camp. His family doesn't seem to care.

He takes his rest under a big stringy bark tree and begins to daydream. In his dream the old man feels a sense of being pulled or lured by the land.

He gets up and begins walking towards the cliff edge of the waterfall. He continues climbing down the rugged cliff face of the waterfall. Something is driving him.

He finds himself in a trance walking towards the sandy banks of the plunge pool. There is something there ... he can feel it.

Suddenly three mermaids appear and startle the old man!

The mermaids are young and extremely beautiful. They have chains of flowers in their long black hair and the same skin as our song man.

The old man had never seen anything as beautiful in all his years. He is mesmerized by their beauty and enchanted by the way they move through the water. Their magic fascinates him.

Slowly, the song man begins to sing to the mermaids! He wants to keep them there as long as possible! As he sings he keeps moving closer to the mermaids.

When the old man is at the water's edge, the mermaids grab him by the arm and take him deep down into the water!

In the plunge pool there are tunnels and caves. The song man finds himself in an underworld where mermaids live and water creatures play and frolic.

The song man loses time and spends his days singing and enchanting the mermaids with his music.

As time passes, the song man begins to think about his family





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again. He sees a vision of his wife, children and grandchildren crying and mourning the loss of their father and husband!

The old man is moved by the realization that he is loved and needed by his family and his people.

He explains to the mermaids that he misses his family terribly, and that his family are mourning his death! He tells them that he must leave them and the underwater world, and that he cannot play music for them any more.

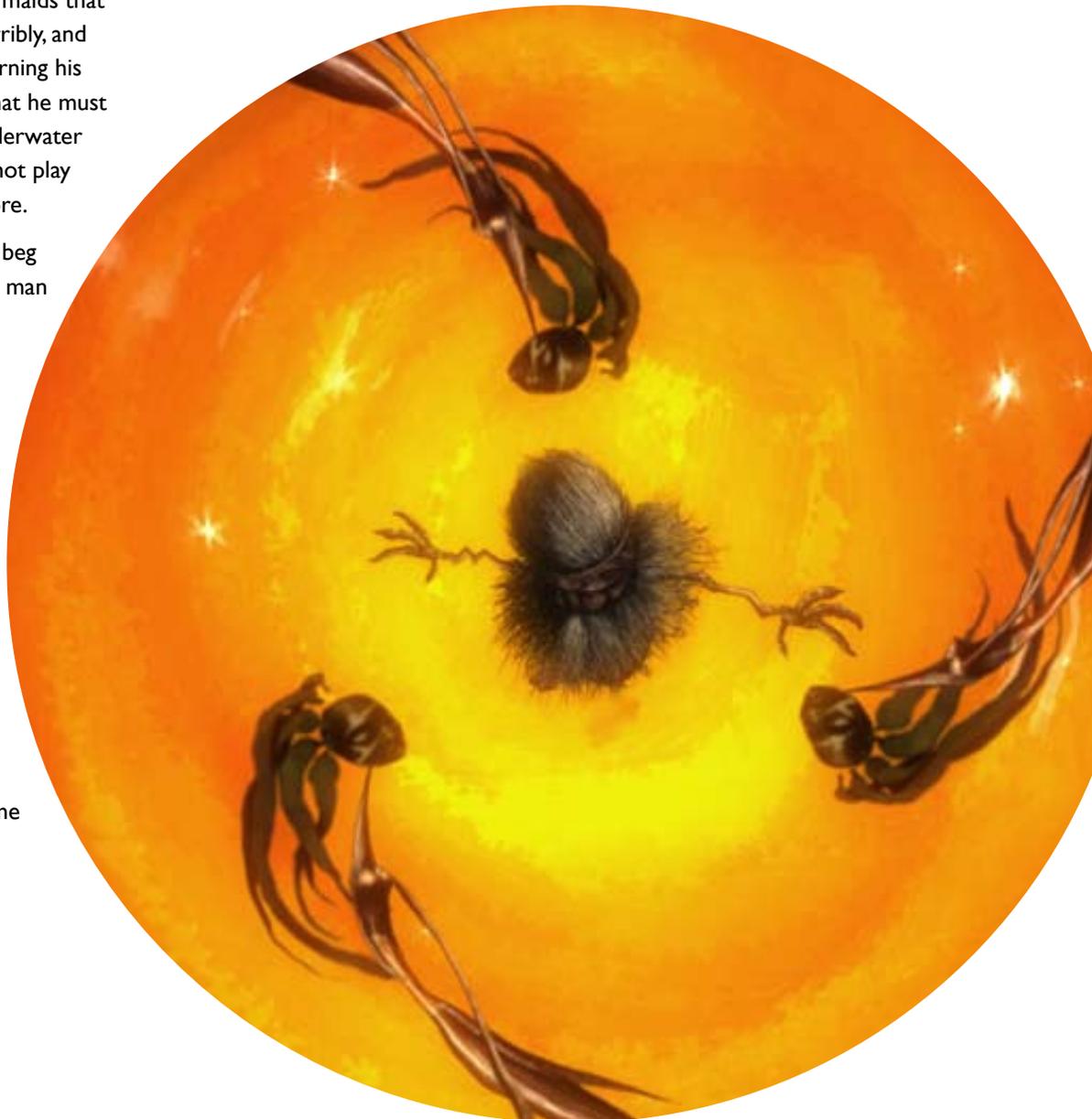
The mermaids cry and beg him to stay, but the old man is certain that he must go. So a fresh water crocodile and a turtle take turns in leading the old man back up to the surface of the water.

When the song man reaches the bank, a butcher bird that is carrying the spirit and love of family follows him back up the cliff face and leads the song man back home

to his family. The butcher bird sings the magpie song which is a symbol of a homecoming.

The old man's family hear the butcher bird first and then they see their song man in the distance and rush up to meet and embrace him.

It took the old man's experience with the mermaids to make him understand that he is loved and that he belongs with his people.



What this story is about

This story is about belonging and the pull of family and country. A man may want to explore the land or country but he has responsibilities to his people also. It is only when those people are missing from his life that he realizes that he is loved and appreciated and must go home to be with them.

Where this story comes from

Mermaid Story is a Dhuwa story in the Dalabon language from Central Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory.

Suggested classroom activities

Introducing the story

1 Tell the students the original story. Ask them to create a rough storyboard setting out how they would tell the story themselves. Students then watch the film.

OR

Have the students reorganize the summary sentences on the Student Worksheet to tell a coherent story. Students then watch the film.

Understanding the story

2 Now have students answer the

comprehension questions on the Student Worksheet (Questions 1-3), or from the online quiz.

Finding meanings, reflection and analysis

3 Students can now discuss the themes and issues set out in questions 4-9, including their analysis of how the filmmakers use the medium to tell the story.

Follow-up activities

4 Teachers can select from the activities list in the *What is ... 'Dust Echoes'* study guide to suggest appropriate follow-up activities for this story.

The major theme of the story is relationships within the group.



STUDENT WORKSHEET

Title: *Mermaid Story*

Sorting out the story



1 Here is a summary of the story. But it is mixed up. Rearrange the sentences and number them 1-4 so that they tell the story in the correct sequence or order.

Order No. **Summary**

| | |
|--|--|
| | A man living with his family group goes away and meets the mermaids of a water hole. |
| | He returns to his family group. |
| | His son at first does not respond to his father, but then he accepts him back. |
| | The mermaids show him wonderful scenes under the water. |

Understanding what this story is about

2 Here are some more questions about the story. To answer these, you will sometimes need to look carefully at how the animators have depicted the scene.

- Why does the man leave his family group?
- Are the mermaids friendly or evil spirits?
- Do the mermaids try to harm the man?
- What does he discover during his journey?
- Why does he decide to return to his family group?
- How do his family react to his return?
- What does the son see that is different about the father?
- How does he feel about this?
- Write a conversation between the father and his son about the journey, or between mermaids who tell their version of the story.

Understanding what this story means

3 Aboriginal stories may exist to:

- teach young people about natural events
- warn them about dangers
- explain relationships and identity
- teach them about the law and right behaviour

Which of these is *Mermaid Story* trying to achieve? Give reasons to support your answer.

STUDENT WORKSHEET CONTINUED

4 The stories are also about ideas. Write one sentence to explain what this story tells us about each of these:

- Love
- Belonging
- The strength of family and country
- Duties and responsibilities
- Journeys

5 *Mermaid Story* shows a journey. Describe a journey that you have been on, and how a journey can change a person.

What does the story help us understand about Aboriginal people's lives?

6 What does the film help us understand about any of these topics or aspects of traditional Aboriginal life and society?

- Food
- Work
- Family
- Society
- Law and rules
- Duties
- Spiritual/religious beliefs
- Education
- Technology (tools and weapons)
- Relationships with others
- Roles
- Emotions.

Write one sentence for any of these that you think is touched on in the story.

Understanding how the story has been told

7 What were your reactions or feelings during the story?

8 You had these reactions and feelings not only because of the story itself, but also the way the story was told and shown to you.

Here are some of the elements or parts of a film that can influence you. Divide them among your group, and have group members report back on them.

- The film's **graphic style** – What do the people look

like? What does the background look like? What colours are used?

- The film's use of **music** – Is it traditional Aboriginal music or modern music? How does the music influence your reactions? Is it effective?
- What **other sounds** are in the film – Are natural sounds used? Is there any other sound, such as people's voices?
- The use of **viewpoint** – There is no camera filming the action in each story, but you can see the artists presenting the images as if there is. What are the 'camera' angles that are used? Does the 'camera' remain at ground level, or does it change angles? Does it move? What is the effect or impact of changing our viewpoint as we watch the film?
- **Narration** – Some of the stories have a narrator. What sort of voice is it? How does the narrator tell the story? Does he just speak, or are there other elements that he includes? Is it effective?

Applying the story to your life

9 *Dust Echoes* is one way that we are bringing everyone back to the same campfire – black and white. We are telling our stories to you in a way you can understand, to help you see, hear and know. And we are telling these stories to ourselves, so that we will always remember, with pride, who we are.

– Tom E. Lewis, Djilpin Arts Aboriginal Corporation.

The makers of the story want it to be a part of your life. Do you think the story has any relevance to your life today? Explain your ideas.

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