

DUSTS ECHOES

The Wagalak Sisters

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY ROBERT LEWIS



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TEACHER'S GUIDE

Brief summary

In this creation story, the Wagalak sisters are seduced by humans and lose their powers.

The main theme is about the origins of people, and their fall from innocence.



The original story

The Wagalak sisters are creation sisters, they walked across the land creating the landscape. Their spirit name is Djangka-Bu.

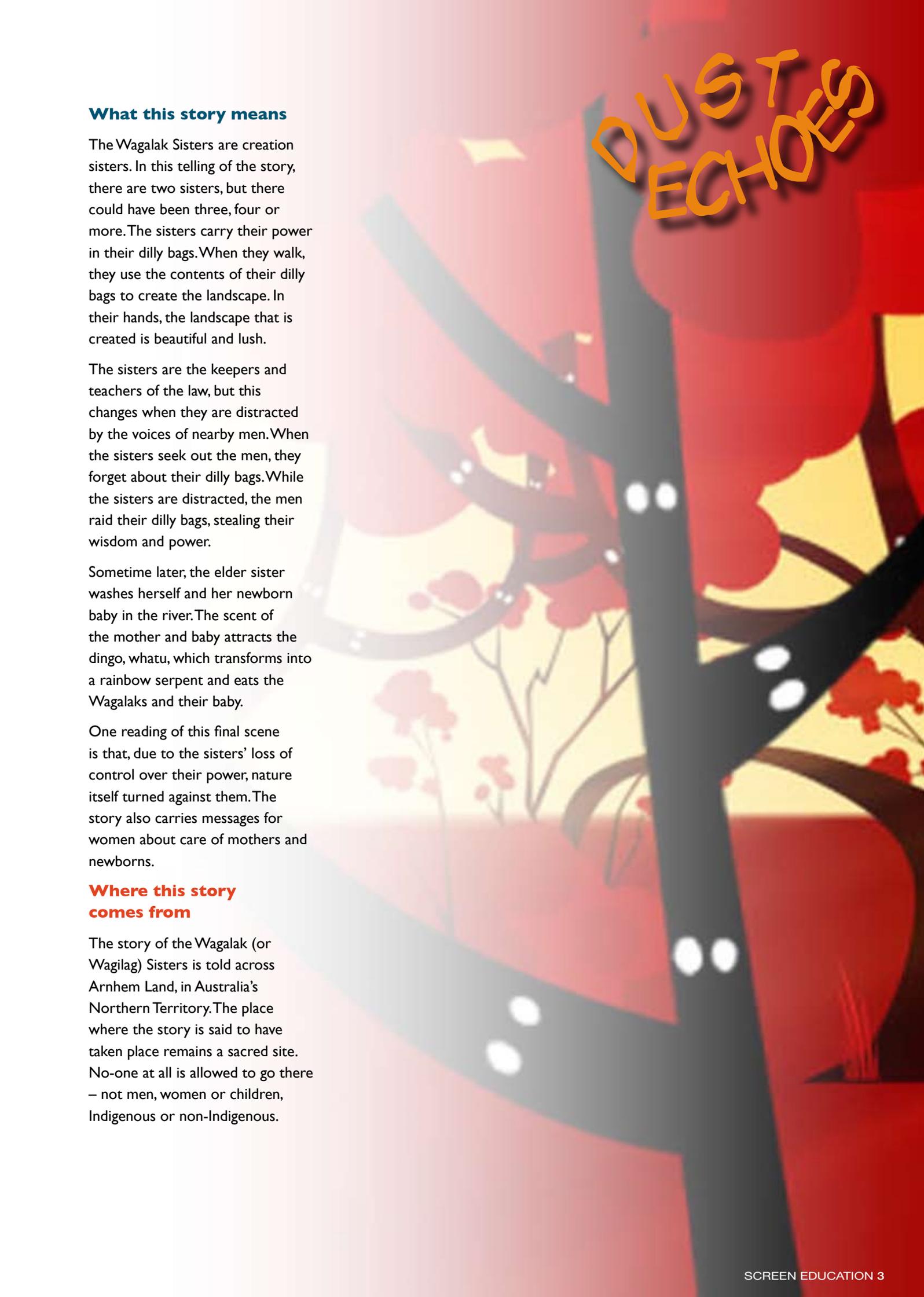
The two Wagalak sisters walked a long way, right up to one place near the river where they stopped to sit down. They heard the sound of men nearby. They took off their dilly bags and hung them up. Their dilly bags contained all their power – sacred ornaments, power objects. They followed the sound of the men, leaving their dilly bags behind.

Much later, the older Wagalak sister had a baby. They went hunting and caught goanna, blue tongue lizard and possum. They built a strong shelter house with paperbark to sleep in. They prepared a huge fire to cook their meal. The elder sister took her new baby down to the river to wash.

Sometime after the animals had been cooking in the fire, the Wagalak sisters saw them get up, burnt, from the fire and run towards the nearby river. The sisters went to sleep hungry in their hut. A huge rain and lightning storm hit and they were awoken by the appearance of a whatu (a native dog or dingo). The dog disappeared and the sounds of animals could be heard everywhere.

Eventually a rainbow came out – the dog had smelled the mother and the new baby in the river where they washed, it came to the hut to look for the baby, then it morphed into a huge rainbow. The dog-rainbow (serpent) ate the Wagalak sisters and their baby.

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What this story means

The Wagalak Sisters are creation sisters. In this telling of the story, there are two sisters, but there could have been three, four or more. The sisters carry their power in their dilly bags. When they walk, they use the contents of their dilly bags to create the landscape. In their hands, the landscape that is created is beautiful and lush.

The sisters are the keepers and teachers of the law, but this changes when they are distracted by the voices of nearby men. When the sisters seek out the men, they forget about their dilly bags. While the sisters are distracted, the men raid their dilly bags, stealing their wisdom and power.

Sometime later, the elder sister washes herself and her newborn baby in the river. The scent of the mother and baby attracts the dingo, whatu, which transforms into a rainbow serpent and eats the Wagalaks and their baby.

One reading of this final scene is that, due to the sisters' loss of control over their power, nature itself turned against them. The story also carries messages for women about care of mothers and newborns.

Where this story comes from

The story of the Wagalak (or Wagilag) Sisters is told across Arnhem Land, in Australia's Northern Territory. The place where the story is said to have taken place remains a sacred site. No-one at all is allowed to go there – not men, women or children, Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

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.

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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 main theme is about the origins of people, and their fall from innocence.



STUDENT WORKSHEET

Title: *The Wagalak Sisters*

Sorting out the story

1 Here is a summary of the story. But it is mixed up. Rearrange the sentences and number them 1-8 so that they tell the story in the correct sequence or order.



Order No. Summary

	Some time later the older sister has a baby.
	The sisters build a home, and hunt animals and cook them, but the animals jump out of the fire, and run to the river.
	The Wagalak sisters are creation sisters.
	There is a huge storm, and the dingo changes into a rainbow at the end – and is able to eat the sisters and their baby.
	They hang their dilly bags on a tree, and go to investigate.
	They hear the sound of men nearby.
	They walk a long way, and rest near a river.
	While the mother and child were bathing in the river, a dingo smells them.

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.

- The sisters are dreamtime figures. What does that mean?
- What is the source of their power?
- Why do they leave their dilly bags (power) in the tree?
- What happens to the dilly bag?
- What happens to the older sister?
- What happens to them when they have lost their power?

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 *The Wagalak Sisters* 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:

- Power
- Evil

5 There are many creation stories. Find one from another cultural source such as the Bible, or from Greek or Roman mythology. Compare it with this creation story.

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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