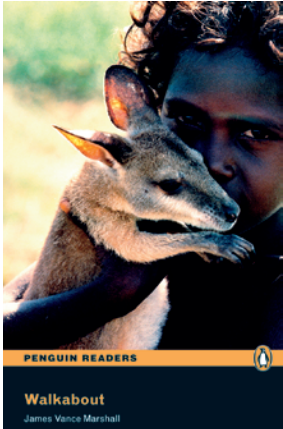




## Walkabout

James Vance Marshall



### About the author

James Vance Marshall wrote *Walkabout* in the 1950s. He was born in 1924 and lives in Surrey, England. A film adaptation of *Walkabout* was made by the director Nicholas Roeg in 1971 and the photograph on the front cover of the book is taken from this film.

### Summary

The story is about the changing relationships between the two American children and an Aboriginal boy as they make their way through the Australian desert.

**Chapter 1:** Two American children, Mary and Peter go to visit their uncle, Keith, in Adelaide. On their way they get lost in the Australian outback after a plane crash. They don't know where to go and how to find food in the desert. At night, strange animals are interested in them but don't attack them. On the following day, they climb a mountain and Mary, the elder child, realises they are far away from the sea.

**Chapter 2:** The next day, as the children are gathering food, they discover that a sixteen-year-old Aboriginal boy is watching them. Mary is afraid of the black boy because of her South Carolina upbringing and because the boy is naked. However, Peter soon becomes friends with him when he starts sneezing and the bush boy copies the sounds he makes. Talking with their hands, the children ask the boy to take them to a place where there is food and water.

**Chapter 3:** The bush boy shows them a place where there is water, makes a fire and cooks for them. Peter follows the boy everywhere and Mary starts feeling jealous because she cannot control Peter. The following day Mary finds Peter playing with the bush boy with no clothes on. She orders

him to dress but she only gets him to wear his trousers. The bush boy teaches Peter to make a fire, cook and dance around it. The boy can sense that Mary is afraid of him but he thinks it is because she can see his imminent death. He is on his walkabout, the six-month journey into the desert that each boy of his tribe must make alone in order to pass from childhood to manhood. Suddenly, the bush boy misunderstands Peter's look and thinks he can also see his death. As the boy is about to leave, Peter stops him and the boy decides to stay.

**Chapter 4:** The bush boy knows that he has to walk into the desert and take the children to a safe place before he leaves them on their own. After a day's walk, they find a river and decide to stay the night near it. They walk for days across the desert. Peter sneezes all day because of the cold he has. The bush boy doesn't understand what sneezing means until he sneezes for the first time in his life. They decide to stop to let Peter rest and recover from his cold. The next day Peter feels better and the boy teaches him to catch fish. After eating the fish, the boy starts dancing around the fire. Suddenly the boy can't stop sneezing and starts feeling cold. He has caught Peter's cold. That night the bush boy can't sleep and the next morning he can't find the strength to get up. When Peter insists that they continue their journey, the boy finally stands up and guides them across the Australian desert. The next day, the boy is very ill and decides to ask Mary for help just when she is swimming naked in the river. Mary gets very scared and shouts at him so the boy decides to die on his own. Mary wants to leave but when Peter finds the bush boy agonising under a tree he refuses to go with her. Mary refuses get near the bush boy while the bush boy points Peter the way they have to go. Finally Mary gets worried when Peter tells her that the boy is dying. She holds the boy's head in her hands, the boy looks at her, smiles and dies leaving Mary and Peter alone once more. Mary sees how stupid she has been and realises that in this world we are all one.

**Chapter 5:** Peter and Mary make the bush boy's death bed and leave the place. The bush boy has already taught the children the survival skills they need to live in the desert and they can find food and water on their own. As they walk, the desert slowly disappears. They find trees and a baby koala pulls Mary's clothes. This time Mary is happy not to be wearing clothes. The children come across an Aboriginal family that shows them the way to their world by drawing a map on the ground. Before they reach their



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destination, Mary, almost regretting that they have to return to their own world, praises the beauty of the place, while Peter suggests going home.

### Background and themes

*Walkabout* is a story of contrasts – the contrast between the three children's experience of life:

**Civilisation vs. lack of civilisation:** Technology lets the children down, when the plane crashes, and they are left to face the harsh realities of the natural world from which they have been protected. The Aboriginal boy has been brought up in the bush. He is in harmony with nature and is able to survive in its harsh conditions. As a fellow human being, but one with the skills needed to survive, he acts as a bridge between the children and the bush.

**Age:** Peter is young enough to accept things at face value. He hasn't yet acquired the preconceptions that being brought up in the racist society of 1950s South Carolina has given his sister. As a result, he is better equipped than her to survive the clash of cultures.

**Epiphany:** After the bush boy's death, Mary comes to realise that she has been wrong and that the world is one, not divided into black and white. As a result of this, she is able to look at the world with different eyes and praise its beauty.

**Rite of passage:** The bush boy's walkabout is a ritual journey: his tribe have sent him out alone, but with the skills he needs to survive. He interrupts his walkabout, which is supposed to be performed alone, to rescue the children. However, in so doing he loses his own life. Mary and Peter, on the other hand, have also been sent on a journey, but when their plane crashes, their journey turns into a form of walkabout and one which they have not been provided with the survival skills needed to undertake. Nevertheless, with the help of the bush boy they do survive and in the process they gain some maturity. Peter becomes more self-sufficient, more responsible and less dependent on his sister. The greatest change, however, is in Mary. She is initially self-conscious about her body and disapproving of the nakedness of the boys. She comes to see the bush boy's friendliness and openness as a sexual threat. However, with the help of the bush boy she becomes less inhibited, able to walk around naked without embarrassment, and also gains an appreciation of the natural world around her.

**Death:** Exposure to the common cold, an illness unknown amongst the bush boy's people and he has no natural resistance, coupled with his misinterpretation of Mary's reaction to him, causes the bush boy to stop caring for himself. The walkabout ends in death for the bush boy.

### Discussion activities

#### Before reading

- 1 Guess and pair work:** In pairs, have students look at the cover and:
  - a** Describe the picture: *What do you see on the cover? How old do you think the boy is? Where do you think the story takes place?*
  - b** Read the title: *What is a 'walkabout'?*
- 2 Research:** Ask students to bring a map of Australia and have them colour with yellow the Great Australian desert and find Adelaide.

#### Introduction

#### While reading

- 3 Discuss:** Have students talk about the walkabout.
  - a** Ask students to read the first paragraph of the Introduction and circle the words used to talk about the Aboriginals. *What is a man-child? What do the Aboriginals do when a child is sixteen? Do you have any celebration when you turn sixteen?*
  - b** In pairs have students write, in their own words, a definition for 'walkabout'.
- 4 Research:** Have students look for information about the animals mentioned on page 6 and ask them to complete this chart:

Animal	What I want to know	What I learned

#### Chapter 1

#### While reading

- 5 Read carefully and write:** Have students re-read the first paragraph of page 1 and write an article of the plane crash with the following heading: PLANE CRASHES, NO SURVIVORS.
- 6 Role play:** Have students re-read the second paragraph of page 1. Uncle Keith has to tell Mary and Peter's mother about the plane crash. In pairs, have them act out the telephone conversation.
- 7 Discuss:** Have students talk about being lost in the desert. *What would you do if you were Peter and Mary? How would you find food or water?*
- 8 Read carefully and write:** Mary can't sleep the first night they spend in the desert. Have students re-read the paragraph that starts 'Peter was quiet again ...' on page 3 and write what Mary is thinking about.



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- 9 **Read carefully and artwork:** Have students re-read the paragraph that starts with 'In the east ...' on page 3 and then draw what is described in the paragraph.
- 10 **Read carefully and write:** Have students read page 4 and describe the children from the kookaburra's point of view.

### After reading

- 11 **Read carefully and write:** Have students complete the following table about page 1:

Who?	Where?
What happened?	Why?

- 12 **Artwork and write:** Mary and Peter's parents don't think the children are dead. Have students draw missing posters for Mary and Peter.
- 13 **Write:** Mary thinks Peter doesn't understand the problems (page 6). Have students write an event in Chapter 1 from Peter's point of view and show how much he understands and how much he doesn't.

### Chapters 2–3

#### While reading

- 14 **Research:** On page 12, we are told that 'At home in Charleston, South Carolina, no black person came near white people.' Have students find information about how blacks were treated in South Carolina before the 1950s, when the *Walkabout* was written.
- 15 **Pair work:** Peter talks to the bush boy with gestures. Have students play Peter and the bush boy and ask each other things using mimicry.
- 16 **Discuss:** Have students talk about languages. *Have you ever gone to another country when nobody spoke your language? How did you feel?*
- 17 **Discuss:** Have students talk about clothes. *The bush boy feels Peter's clothes. Why do people of different places wear different clothes?*

#### After reading

- 18 **Write and group work:** Divide students into three groups.  
Group 1 will write Mary's thoughts about the bush boy.  
Group 2 will write Peter's thoughts about the bush boy.  
Group 3 will write the bush boy's thoughts about Mary and Peter.  
Once they finish, have students read their character's thoughts aloud.
- 19 **Guess:** Mary and Peter don't know if they are going to find Adelaide and the bush boy thinks Mary can see his death. Ask students to predict what will happen: *What will happen to the three children?*

### Chapter 4

#### While reading

- 20 **Guess:** Mary neither goes near the bush boy nor looks at him. Have students discuss about this: *Is Mary afraid of, angry at or in love with the bush boy?*
- 21 **Write:** The children walked the next day, and the next day, and the day after that. Have students write what happened during the three days as three separate diary entries. The diary entries can be written from any of the character's point of view.
- 22 **Discuss:** Have students talk about having a cold. *How do you feel when you have a cold? Do you feel like walking? How would you feel if you were to cross a desert?*
- 23 **Discuss:** The mugga-wood is a sad tree. Have students discuss the following: *Why does the bush boy want to die there? Will the boy die there or will the children help him? Why/Why not?*
- 24 **Role play:** Have students imagine that suddenly Mary and the bush boy can speak the same language and Mary has the chance to talk to the boy before he dies. In pairs, students role play Mary and the bush boy. *What does she tell him? What does he tell her?*

#### After reading

- 25 **Artwork and write:** Mary and Peter put rocks and wood over the dead boy. Have students draw the tombstone and write the inscription.

### Chapter 5

#### While reading

- 26 **Read carefully and artwork:** Have students re-read page 37 and draw the map that the Aboriginals draw on the ground.
- 27 **Discuss:** Have students talk about language. *Mary asks herself why we use language. How important is language? What can we talk without language?*

#### After reading

- 28 **Guess:** Ask students to guess the following: *What did Uncle Keith do when the children were lost in the desert?*
- 29 **Discuss:** Have students talk about the walkabout. *An Aboriginal boy goes on a walkabout as a child and should come back as an adult. In this story who else goes on a walkabout?*
- 30 **Write:** The children have changed in the story. *What were they like at the beginning of the story and what are they like now?* Have students complete the following table.

	Now	Then
Mary		
Peter		

#### Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to [www.penguinreaders.com](http://www.penguinreaders.com).