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Digital Learning

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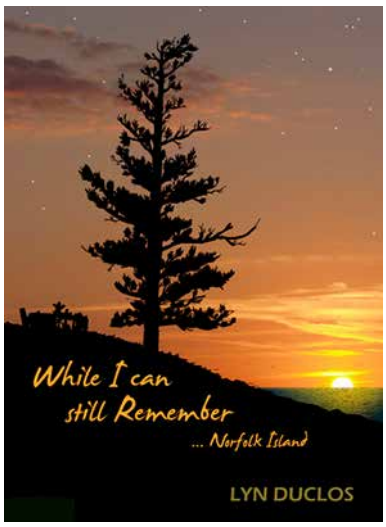
Reviews



While I Can Still Remember ... Norfolk Island

Lyn Duclos

Piland Press, 2015

While I Can Still Remember ... Norfolk Island by Lyn Duclos is a historical fiction narrative that tells socio-cultural, political and ecological history through the memories of a tree called Lone Pine, a Norfolk Pine dating from the mid-1300s. The narrative shifts from the present (2015) to the past as the dying Lone Pine must give his memories to a sapling, Piali, so the Norfolk Pines can survive. The concept of memory and oral history is at the heart of this novel.

The structure of *While I Can Still Remember* shifts from present to past. History moves forward in chronological order, highlighting Polynesian history, Captain Cook, the Third Settlement with the Pitcairners and other key moments in colonial history. Lone Pine's memories focus on key events and key figures in Norfolk Island history, relating them to key figures and events in New Zealand and Australian history. The various historical events are not discussed in great detail but the book does provide a general understanding. The start of each chapter features illustrations by Zozie Brown that depict the historical setting, people and environment, helping to situate students historically. The book also includes a present-day map and maps from history to help students with historical understanding.

Within the classroom, this text would be best suited to be read alongside Australian and New Zealand colonial history. The greatest strength of *While I Can Still Remember* is that it allows teachers to examine issues about history outside traditional texts and illustrates historical empathy and the idea of oral history and memory. This could allow for discussion about the importance of oral history, prompting projects on interviewing family members and older community members in relation to local histories.

The key conflict of this narrative is the survival of the Norfolk Pines. Their survival is dependent on the oldest pine, Lone Pine, sharing the history of the island with the sapling, Piali. As Lone Pine begins dying and forgetting his memories, other animals including starlings and sea turtles help by telling stories that were passed down to them by their families. Lone Pine transfers his memories through the 'old root [that] felt its way towards Piali's roots. It was a passage used long ago instinct reading rather than remembering' (5). Thus, this sharing of memories has been happening for centuries.

Like human history, memories are connected to the roots of where a

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person comes from. The concept of blood memory draws on the importance of listening to elders in a community. A community can carry on existing as long as they understand their cultural, historical and social memories. If they know where they are from, they can exist as a living and vibrant people. Lone Pine could be symbolic of Indigenous Elders within Australian and New Zealand indigenous communities. At the end of the narrative, Piali stretches out his roots to nearby saplings and shares all the memories passed down by Lone Pine to all the trees on Norfolk Island. Lone Pine dies, but his memories of the island live on in each sapling. This theme could lead to family history projects where students interview family members and elders within their own communities on their own personal cultural and historical histories, thus, engaging in the concept of oral history and playing the role of the sapling. This text and projects relating to oral histories emphasises that history doesn't exist within a vacuum but is still alive and affecting us today.

A limitation of *While I Can Still Remember* is that it does not go into great detail about any specific point in history. Without prior knowledge, students will not understand the key historical events or the key figures, thus a teacher would need to provide context and explain some historical events as students read the novel.

I would recommend this text for students in the later of primary and junior high school years. The writing style is approachable for students with lower literacy levels as well. The story line and characters would appeal to younger students but may alienate older students as they may interpret it as too 'kiddy.'

Lyn Duclos' *While I Can Still Remember ... Norfolk Island* opens up an opportunity to explore the importance of history itself and why it needs to be studied. It is an ideal text to use as a jumping off point for further exploration of Norfolk Island, Australian and New Zealand history. However, it is the urgency of historical memory that makes this novel a significant and interesting text to examine within the classroom.

Reviewed by Julia Vogel, pre-service teacher, University of Melbourne