

STUDYGUIDE

ROBERT LEWIS



YELLOW FELLA

SCREEN EDUCATION



Yellow Fella (Ivan Sen, 2005) is a 25-minute documentary on Aboriginal actor Tom E. Lewis' search for the burial place of his father. During the journey Lewis struggles with inner conflicts about his attitude to his father, and his mixed-race identity.

CURRICULUM RELEVANCE

YELLOW FELLA is a resource that can be used with senior secondary students to explore issues of identity conflict (English), and the impact of the European colonialism in Australia on Indigenous life and traditions (Culture and Identity).

WARNING: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should take care when viewing this film as it contains images of people who have passed away.

BEFORE WATCHING THE FILM

The film *Yellow Fella* is about culture and identity. Before watching the film it will be useful to think about some aspects of students' own identity, and how their feelings could be influenced by the sorts of forces at work in Tom E. Lewis' life as depicted in the film.

1 Many elements in our life can influence our sense of identity, who we are, and our sense of belonging in a society.

Look at this list of possible influences, and briefly describe how ideally you would like these influences on your life to be. For example, we all want to know that our parents love us. We all like to have friends who understand and support and accept us. Complete a table like Table 1 for the influences specified. You might also add some other elements to the list.

2 Our sense of identity can be challenged when some of these influences seem to be negative rather than positive. Discuss what the impact on a person's sense of identity might be in these circumstances:

- Someone else claims to be your parent
- Your siblings abuse you
- A good friend rejects you
- Your school peers do not include you in their group
- You move to a new country where a different language is spoken
- You are forced to dress differently to others at your school
- You are not able to do things as well as your school peers.



There are many influences on our sense of identity and cultural place in the world. Now look at *Yellow Fella* and consider what the film tells us about conflicts in the life of Tom E. Lewis.

EXPLORING ISSUES IN THE FILM

We meet Tom E. Lewis in his past life – playing the role of Jimmy Blacksmith in the 1978 film *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*.

- 3** What impression do you get from the film about the ideas and themes in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*?

Now look at this summary of the film's story.

The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith is based on the life of Jimmy Governor. Jimmy Governor was a man of mixed Aboriginal and white race. He was educated as a Christian, had worked as a police tracker, and married a 16-year-old white woman.

In 1900 he was working as a fencing contractor for a white couple, the Mawbeys. Governor's wife was insulted by Mrs Mawbey, and Governor and his brother, Joe and a relative, Jacky, confronted the woman, who abused him as 'black rubbish' who should be shot.

The three men attacked and killed Mawbey, three of her daughters, and the local schoolteacher, Helena Kurz. Another daughter was badly injured.

The three now spent three months on the run. They killed five more people, wounded another five, committed seven armed hold-ups, and robbed 33 homes.

After a large reward had been offered, Joe was killed, and Jimmy and Jacky were captured, and hanged in January 1901. In his last days Governor sang traditional songs, read the bible, and blamed

his wife for his situation.

- 4** Why do you think Lewis identifies with this character in his own life?
- 5** What do you expect to learn about Lewis during the film?

We are told at the start that this is a film about a journey.

- 6** What is the purpose of the journey?
- 7** Why is this journey important to Lewis?

Lewis' journey includes these places:

- Roper Bar
 - Darwin
 - Borroloola
 - Tennant Creek
- Locate and mark them on this map of the Northern Territory.

We see Lewis and his mother, Angelina, arrive at an abandoned cattle station. It is where his mother arrived as a young girl, and met Lewis' father, Hurtle Lewis.

- 9** What do we learn about Angelina's place as a young Aboriginal girl in that society, both its white and black elements?
- 10** How is she treated by her family, and by Hurtle?
- 11** What is her attitude towards Hurtle?
- 12** Why is finding out about this relationship between his mother and father such a shock to Lewis?
- 13** Why might Angelina have never told Lewis this story before?

Influence on identity	What you would like that influence to be
Parents	
Siblings	
Friends	
School peers	
Home environment	
School environment	

TABLE 1



The film changes focus to Lewis' life growing up at Roper River with his mother and stepfather, and then going to school in Darwin.

- 14 What does Lewis say was the problem with his life in this period?
- 15 Why might a person being of mixed race face problems in a society?
- 16 We are not given any specific examples of the painful times Lewis is talking about. Do you think the film should have explored this area further? Explain your reasons.

The film takes us to Borroloola and we now discover that Lewis had several periods of contact with his father.

- 17 What impression do you get of Hurtle Lewis?
- 18 What impression do you get of the time Lewis spent with his father?

We now join Lewis and Angelina on the road to Tennant Creek.

- 19 Why does Lewis need to find his father's grave?
- 20 We see an emotional outburst, with Lewis criticizing white people's lack of sensitivity towards Aboriginal sacred sites, their 'churches'. Why do you think Lewis suddenly has this reaction?

- 21 Lewis undertakes the long trip without knowing if his father's grave is at Tennant Creek. Could he have found this out beforehand?
- 22 In Tennant Creek we see another emotional outburst, with Lewis describing himself as a 'yellow fella'. What does this mean?
- 23 How would finding his father's grave help him resolve his feelings about being a 'yellow fella'?
- 24 How does he resolve this feeling in the end?

Here is an extract from George Rurrumbu singing 'Blackfella/Whitefella':

*Blackfella Whitefella
 Yellow fella
 Any fella
 As long as you're a true fella
 As long as you're a real fella
 All the people of different races
 Different lives in different places
 It doesn't matter which religion
 It's all the same when the ship is sinking
 We need more brothers if we're to make it
 We need more sisters if we're to save it
 Are you the one who's going to stand up and be counted?
 Are you the one who's going to be there when we shout it?
 Are you the one who's always ready with a helping hand?
 Are you the one who understands this family plan?
 Stand up, stand up and be counted*

Stand up, stand up and be counted

25 How do you think Lewis would respond to these ideas?

A documentary is a biography of part of the subject's life. It does not try to cover the person's whole life, but should illuminate and help us to understand the key elements being focused on.

26 Discuss the extent to which the film has been successful in:

- Explaining why Lewis feels so strongly about being a 'yellow fella'
- Creating understanding of the significance of the search for his father's grave
- Providing some understanding of Angelina's situation
- Promoting a feeling of empathy in us for Lewis
- Helping us to understand the tensions that might exist among mixed race Aboriginal people today.

Here is how the filmmaker, Ivan Sen, has described the film:

The initial idea for Yellow Fella involved a love story between Tom's mother and father. After the development shoot, we soon found the truth was a lot different. It became obvious the real story was about Tom as he struggled to come to terms with the truth of his parent's relationship, which forced him to reflect on his life as a man of mixed heritage.

I really wanted to plan a strong plot-like structure to force Tom to go through the motions of revelation in front of the camera as we travelled. Tom mentioned that he didn't know where his father was buried and I instantly saw this search as a fantastic objective for him, and a strong opportunity for a climax to the story.

On the last day of the shoot, we drove to Tennant Creek to find the resting place of Tom's father. Up to that point, the material contained more story than emotion. But as the sun set over the Tennant Creek cemetery, the emotion within Tom could no longer be contained. I knew something pretty special had happened through the viewfinder. And the next morning it continued, as we said goodbye and parted.

I identified a lot with what Tom went through on this journey. I have a similar background to Tom, but for him, it is very extreme. He has a fifty-fifty mix of two

incredibly different gene pools. And with that can come a lot of pain, but also an incredible view of the world through privileged eyes – like Angelina's totem, the falcon, whose feathers faithfully hung from the rear vision mirror throughout the journey ...

I suppose the film does have a dramatic feel to it though, in terms of its structure. I've been working on three different feature drama scripts for the last couple of years, and I was interested in applying a strong dramatic structure to the story, and allow Tom to interact within it. He's such an amazing person and performer. He has a great ability to say the right thing at the right time and do the right thing just when you want it.

27 Do you think Sen has achieved his aims in this film? Explain your reasons.

Yellow Fella is one representation of Lewis' life. Here are two others: an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and a transcript of extracts from a biography of Lewis shown on the ABC Indigenous Arts program, *Message Stick*.

28 Discuss the strengths and weakness of all three as ways of presenting understandings of a person's life.

Rise from a chant to a crescendo

The original Jimmie Blacksmith has come a long way, writes Mary Colbert in Cannes.

The Aboriginal actor and musician Tom E. Lewis is still stunned at what he calls his latest stroke of good luck.

Twenty-seven years ago his face was plastered all over billboards at the Cannes Film Festival as the lead in Fred Schepisi's competition entry, The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith. Lewis (then known as Tommy) didn't make the trip to the Riviera then but he's making up for lost time.

This year, he's here as the co-writer and subject of the indigenous-made film Yellow Fella, invited to screen in the prestigious Un Certain Regard showcase. He's also a cast member in a new Australian feature, The Proposition, written by Nick Cave and screening at the Cannes market. In an echo of his debut role, he's playing an outlaw, known as Two Bob.

'It's good to know that we can do things in the

bloody bush and reach the world,' Lewis says, while watching his baby daughter at play in the amusement park opposite the Palais des Festival. 'I still haven't got a clue what we're doing here, as I didn't think they invited films this length [25 minutes]. But if people are interested in our culture, then we should get behind it and do some more.'

Lewis's life has been a roller-coaster, including a bout with alcoholism, but throughout he's been creatively prolific. 'I thought I'd do Jimmie Blacksmith and that would be the end of it. It opened my eyes and views so much. And then you get addicted to it. I just loved the camaraderie of film sets. How likely was a young man of Aboriginal background to get that kind of break?'

*His film debut opened doors to other movies (including *We of the Never Never* and *Robbery under Arms*), television (*A Town Like Alice* and *Naked Country*) and theatre. He then devised the internationally successful, semi-autobiographical multimedia work *Lift 'Em up Socks*.*

*As a didgeridoo player, Lewis was part of the acclaimed jazz duo *Lewis & Young*, which toured abroad, and he later played with classical musicians such as George Dreyfus. He's added flute, saxophone and clarinet to his repertoire, will release a CD, *Sunshine after Rain*, next month, and is in the process of forming a five-piece band.*

But the laid-back performer modestly insists: 'I've had a lot of great people teach me and give me a leg-up.'

He pays tribute to 'Uncle' Fred Schepisi, who cast him in the role that changed his life, when he spotted the then 18-year-old mechanics student at Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport and asked him to audition.

Lewis exudes a warm, positive energy. 'I don't want to blame white fellas because what's the point of crying over spilt milk? Sure, we're sick of the hurting, but the only way to tell them is to do good things.'

Lewis tries to maximise the involvement of elders in the plethora of cultural activities in which he and his partner, Fleur Parry, a performing arts manager and curator, are tied up. 'If we make our old people strong, they can pass on so much more culture.'

*One of the scene-stealing characters in *Yellow Fella**

*is Lewis's mother, Angelina George, an articulate woman who turned down a marriage proposal from his white father, the search for whose grave forms the basis of the documentary. The film's director, Ivan Sen, comes from a similar mixed-race background, which he so poignantly explored in his award-winning feature *Beneath Clouds*.*

*When Lewis and Parry showed the film in their remote Aboriginal community of Beswick, in south Arnhem Land, they struck up a connection with the filmmaker, which resumed when they sent him the proposal for *Yellow Fella*.*

But even they were unaware of the depth of the love story they were about to uncover, and the profound personal repercussions on Lewis. At one point in the film he is overcome by the odyssey and breaks down and cries. 'Yep, there were some jaw-dropping revelations,' he admits.

*Produced by Citty Williams, *Yellow Fella* was funded by the Australian Film Finance Corporation, Australian Film Commission, SBS Independent and Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association.*

*They'll have a hard time getting Lewis off the stage at *Yellow Fella's* public screening tomorrow. He just has so much to say.*

Mary Colbert, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2005

Tommy, Tommy

INTRODUCTION

Tom E. Lewis' appearance in *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was his first film. He was 'discovered' at Tullamarine airport, Melbourne, by Rhonda Schepisi, on his way back to Darwin where he planned to work as a motor mechanic. It was her husband Fred who was to direct this film adapted from Tom Keneally's novel, the story of Jimmy Governor.

Even though *Blacksmith* was Australia's first film to compete at the Cannes Film Festival, it didn't live up to the huge media hype which preceded it. After this, Tom was reluctant to continue as an actor and due to the criticism, he turned down a number of roles. However, two years later, in 1980 he was on the set of the mini-series *A Town like Alice* joining Helen Morse and Bryan Brown in Broken Hill. Parts in other films followed including *We of the Never Never* (1982), *The Life of Harry Dare* in 1994. And in

television, the 1985 production of *Robbery Under Arms*, *Kangaroo Palace* and others.

Born in Moore River in 1957, Thomas Elmore Lewis lives in Beswick with his wife Fleur and their family. Tom is an artist, musician – didgeridoo, guitar & winds – and loves to fish.

This is a story about life after Blacksmith, and the challenges faced by Tom and Fleur in Beswick.

RACHAEL MAZA:

Hello. And welcome to *Message Stick*. I'm Rachael Maza. Tommy Lewis's acting career led him to international acclaim and back again. The role that made him known to Australia, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, took a young, inexperienced Tommy into a world he wasn't ready for. And today,

his stage is the community of Beswick.

TOMMY LEWIS, ACTOR:

My skin name, my moiety group Dhuwa, me a Balang. That's my skin name. My Aboriginal name, Bungarl, from Murrungun people. Morning star – Burnumbirr Thumbul. Murrungun Thumbul Bungarl. You either got to be Dhuwa or Yirritja. They're fire people, crocodile dreaming, baru, where us mob, we're shark and morning star. And through that, we have king brown snake. So everything is connected to the country. This tree, this wind, that fly. This fly here. Jiggy-jiggy, yeah? (Laughs) Murra-murra, him come. Even this ground. (Speaks Aboriginal language) And ... that water. Even them rocks. Everything has a meaning for me.

I got an opportunity once in a lifetime to ... I never thought I'd ... get to how ... where I got to. Like a big whole circle sometimes or the circle breaks off and goes somewhere else. Something happens. Um, but being in Melbourne ... Someone ... someone came and they said, 'Do you want to do this?' And I knocked it back first. I didn't know ... because I didn't know anything about, um ... television or anything, yeah? I thought all the stuff came from America. I still do, now you learn about it. But we watched David Gulpilil, yeah? Gulpilil in *Walkabout* when I were in college. And for us, that was like, 'Wow!'

I didn't know what I was going ... going into. I didn't know what was it about, where they're going to take you, what they're going to do. But all of a sudden, there was a big transition. Somehow, you've got to learn how to swim. And that's the journey where a lot of you and me, people, when they get involved in the film industry, they got to float down that river but that journey going to get rougher because nobody's standing on the banks to pick them out or they're not putting their hands up to be picked up. They need to flow more further, maybe, you know ...

Well, to think that I saw cultures, to be famous.



Yeah? They blame you. My own brothers down the Roper would say, 'Hey, you traitor!' I tell you, brother, you can't gammon-gammon. 'Oh, I'm doing this for the film. You know, I'm a pretty Aborigine, you know.' You can't do that. Law first. And never sell any women's secret stuff. And people have already done it, you know. The ... even blackfellas themselves have to look at themselves. Look. What is the writing? Not gold. Just because you're in a film, to do a ... a sacred Aboriginal thing? But at the same time too, the Australian film industry have to be careful of what they're doing in dealing with Aboriginal culture. You know, you can't just go around and do things anymore. I will not do anything anymore that ... that ... that would ... inspire my family to call me a traitor. Yeah? No more. And I believe in my culture. I worship my culture. I live in it. I belong to it. I'll dance in it. I'll put my paint on. The bush is a wilderness for me. I can live here. I've learnt that when I was a kid. I've learnt ceremonies, I've learnt dances and songs and all the things that are important for me now. You have to be part of the old people and stay by them because they stood by you. No matter what they say, our old people, they stay by us.

After I finished *Jimmy Blacksmith*, I've come up here to Beswick in my little red Celica. And when I came here, a lot of people didn't like it. We had to deal with a lot of things, yeah? And one of them is dealing with the policeman. One morning, this policeman come up with his shorts in the policeman Toyota, but no uniform. And he come up and he says, 'Hey! You're not an Aborigine. You're not a blackfella. You should get out of this community.' I said, 'Do you know anything about where I come from? Because if you say that in front of my family, they'll ... (Speaks Aboriginal language) ... they'll tell you off.' While he was talking to me, that Old Victor, he was come walking up the road. And that policeman turned around to him and said, 'Old Victor, this bloke's not an Aborigine, isn't he?' And he looked at him and he said, 'That's my son.' And he went like that. 'That boy is my son. You leave him alone.'

The lowest point in my life is when I used to drink. Alcohol really crippled me up ... inside. I was drinking whisky and beer and everything. And then I went outside and I conked out in a little laneway. And a car missed me, my head, about that much. It splashed water in my face. And my spirits were looking at me maybe that night. I got up and I looked at the wall. Arnhem Land, too far away, do you know?

Well, I'm never alone. I've always got spirits, yeah? That eagle would fly down and get a fish – dooff! You got a fish? (Speaks Aboriginal language) Yeah? And hear spirits all along from old people. I talk to them. I too need to set my foot right. So today my brother is here. Um ... My big brother, I go speak to him. You know, I ... But when you sit down here, you meditate, you sing and you ask the old people, 'I'm going right way?' So you're never alone. They're always around you, everywhere, yeah. You talk to your father, you talk to your grandmother, you can talk to your uncles – everybody in the other world – to guide you.

We ... we worship things differently than the whitefella in his church. Because this is our church. This is the way you're supposed to pray. Pray! ...

(TOMMY DRIVES PAST HOUSES IN BESWICK)

Over here is my brother-in-law, this stretch. All my in-laws. From that house back there right up to here. Hello, sister!

Well, we go there when we're hungry because brother-in-law, he likes going hunting. (Laughs) And he's got all the licence for the rifle. So he's the main hunter in the community, yeah? So we have to go there for meat.

We're not segregated by sexism. We're segregated by law. And if you lose that law, well, there's no songs. When there's no songs, there's no country. There's no spirit. And we walk anywhere, you know, like feral animals. And we don't want to be like feral animals because there's kangaroos here. It need these songs. We've got barramundi here. It need a song, yeah? And we need to look after the place. The Mimis don't come out no more because too many green cans around everywhere.

It's good to learn about whitefellas' way. It really is. You have to learn how to drive a motor car. You have to learn how to fix it. It's good to look at what happening around Europe and every other place and television. But still you have to sit and do your own song and your own story. It's good you can have vegemite and white bread on your table. You still got to eat goanna ...

We have a great time in Beswick. (Laughs) We all work for CDEP. Today's payday. And they all get about 150 each. That's working for the dole. But we have fun. You know, we got BRACS there. We got our little shop. Broadcasting in Remote Aboriginal Communities. Yeah. And we have a 12km radius

which we're trying to spread out a little bit. We use that as our propaganda machine. (Laughs)

Trevor is a Balang, like me. He's been training at Batchelor. And last year, the community made me in charge of BRACS. So we're trying to write programs and set up programs. We'd just started off with programs and ... and ... tried training our young people. A lot of our people have difficulties in reading and ... and mathematics. And, um ... we never wrote in the sand with mathematics. Um ... But when you do things and blackfella watch you to do it, that's how we learn, you know. Like, that's our schooling. You can be fiddling with things and they watch you and they go and do the same thing, right? But, um, everything has a default if you're learning in that way. We're trying to tell our kids that reading and mathematics is ... is important in our lives. Get a little bit, you know. Reading is important for all our people these days. And we ask all our ... everybody to go to school, you know.

FLEUR, TOMMY'S PARTNER

He's a lovely dad. But our ... our relationship, he and I with Grace, it's like our professional relationship and it's like our personal relationship. I'm behind the scenes and he's the frontman, you know. He's the PR man with Grace all around the village. I'm in there – nappies, milk, washing. You know, thinking like that about everything. So ... but he's a lovely dad. He's really patient with her and all the times that I lost the plot, he was there to take over and ... I love watching him with her. It kind of makes you fall more in love with a person, seeing them with their baby ...

It was interesting coming here and seeing him in his home – home or cultural context. Really different. I sort of understood him. For the first time, you know, he kind of made sense. I went, 'Ah, I get it now!'

You know. Because things you don't realise when you meet someone in the city. You wouldn't necessarily know that they're a person with ceremony and songs and ... and quite a lot of traditional stuff ...

TOMMY LEWIS:

My mob come from the Roper when I was known as a little mununga boy and a little whitefella because my father sent money and clothing to me. And ... but I knew about him around the camp fire in the village. I grew up knowing about this phantom.

They used to tell us, 'Oh, the welfare people are coming.' Let them come. My mother and my grandmother were strong. And my father, my real father, old Hurtle Lewis.

In the whole round of things, I was lucky to be looked after well, yeah? I have this family. But I was brought up with this lot and I stay here and I belong to this lot. I belong to this region. If you want to do things for your culture, you've got to revert back to the ground. Just showing your family and people that you have to be strong and worth it to be standing, sitting on this ground and talk on top of it.

Producer and Director: Rima Tamou
Message Stick
Friday 20 February 2004
www.abc.net.au/message/tv/ms/s1046485.htm

29 Using all the information you now have about Tom E. Lewis, role play an interview with him OR write an article about his life OR write a film review of *Yellow Fella* OR write a press release for the film's showing at the Cannes Film Festival.

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