

# WOMEN OF THE SUN

*...25 years later*

*A powerful documentary about the lives  
of the women who played leading roles  
in the ground-breaking drama series,  
WOMEN OF THE SUN*



**A STUDYGUIDE** BY SALLY CAMPBELL THORPE



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**Synopsis** > *Women of the Sun* is a remarkable series that screened in Australia in 1981, first on SBS and subsequently on the ABC. The series had a tremendous impact, bringing the Aboriginal story through the eyes of Aboriginal women to a national audience for the first time. It is a four-part drama examining the lives of four Aboriginal women over more than 150 years. The first episode is set in the 1820s, the second in the 1890s, the third in the 1930s and the last in the 1980s. It challenged conventional notions of Australian history and proved a first step towards 'setting the record straight' and putting the Aboriginal story on record. > In *25 Years Later*, Bob Weis, producer of *Women of the Sun*, sets out to discuss the impact of the film on five of the women who played the major roles. His journey reveals a profound and moving tale of discovery, for himself and those with whom he meets. Using the documentary as a medium, Weis ventures beyond the drama, to the true stories of personal growth, identity, pride, and strength of spirit inspired by the film and resulting from its release.



**About this Study Guide** > Key themes discussed in this study guide are: Australian history, social justice, indigenous issues, identity, Aboriginal spirituality, relationships with the land, religion, art and culture. The study guide includes questions and activities to be explored prior to and after watching the film. The questions can be incorporated into classroom discussion or students can provide individual written responses. The activities in the Study Guide include a mixture of individual investigation, class discussion and small group work.

**Curriculum Links** > The themes and activities in this study guide are relevant for teachers and students from middle to senior years studying: Australian History, Social and Cultural Studies, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, English, Religious Studies, Personal Development and Media Studies.





## About 'Women of the Sun'

The four episodes of *Women of the Sun* address aspects of the complex story of Australian Aboriginals over the course of two centuries. Each episode is summarized below to provide relevant contextual information helpful to understanding the documentary.

**Alinta – The Flame (Episode 1)** > The lives of the Nyari people are completely disrupted when two escaped convicts are washed up on the beach of their tribal lands. This initial encounter between the two peoples highlights the unique customs and culture of tribal Aboriginals. They provide food and shelter to the convicts despite the possible threat to the tribe and the warnings of some of the tribe's elders. The Nyari people subsequently meet other white settlers who arrive with the intent of settling on their land. The episode emphasizes the spiritual and ancestral value of land to the Nyari people, in sharp contrast to the importance of land as a source of wealth and power for the white settlers. In the end, the settlers annihilate the tribe and only Alinta remains with her child.

**Maydina – The Shadow (Episode 2)** > The story opens with the escape of Maydina and her half-caste daughter Biri, from seal hunters who had enslaved them. Their intent is to escape back to their traditional lands, but they quickly learn that these lands have been settled and their people have scattered. Without food or shelter, Maydina and Biri are ultimately delivered to a Christian mission run by a woman called Mrs McPhee. While Maydina is put into service at the mission, Mrs McPhee takes a special interest in Biri's religious education and separates her from her mother. Sickened by her existence at the mission, Maydina escapes with Biri and another Aboriginal man to re-establish a tribal way of life. Mrs McPhee dispatches troopers to return the escapees. They shoot the man and separate Maydina and Biri forever.

**Nerida Anderson (Episode 3)** > The story of Nerida Anderson is set in 1939, based on an event known as the Cumeroongunga Walkout. Nerida is a young and rebellious woman living on a government mission. The conditions on the mission deteriorate so badly that she attempts to motivate her people to improve them. Nerida stands up to the reserve manager, who retaliates by having Nerida and her family tried for treason. The charge is dropped, but the manager continues in his post and life on the mission continues to get worse. Eventually, Nerida motivates all Aboriginals on the mission to leave and establish independent lives.

**Lo-Arna (Episode 4)** Ann Cutler is the 18-year-old adopted daughter of middle-class parents in an Australian country town. The loving relationship she has with her parents changes dramatically when she is informed that she is not French-Polynesian but Aboriginal, born of her adoptive father and an Aboriginal woman living in a town nearby. Ann feels conflicted and insecure, and attempts to resolve her emotional turmoil by re-establishing contact with her natural mother. After an emotional meeting, Ann finds the situation too difficult to deal with. She drives away, but hesitates when she sees her mother chasing her down the road.



## Before Watching the Film

Before viewing *Women of the Sun: 25 Years Later*, teachers may want to prepare students by considering the following key themes and issues. The suggested activities related to these topics aim to enhance students' understanding of the film by introducing its central themes.

**Topic 1: Australian History** > Europeans arrived in Australia with the intention of settling the land, posing a direct threat to the Aboriginal people who had been there for centuries beforehand and for whom the land held particular spiritual significance. This cultural clash between the two groups made conflict inevitable, leading to the systematic near-eradication of the Aboriginal population and the appropriation of the lands and natural resources on which their livelihoods depended. By the middle of the nineteenth century, violence against Aborigines, the introduction of European diseases, and spiritual demoralization challenged the whole structure of Aboriginal traditional society, leading to its social and economic marginalization. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Aboriginal story has involved the forced separation of Aboriginal children from their parents, forced service on Christian missions, imprisonment on government reserves, and denial of the right to practice Aboriginal culture, learn its history, speak the language, and build an empowered identity. This led to a process of social demoralization and cultural disintegration. It is only in the past thirty years that Aboriginal history has emerged as a distinct part of mainstream written histories of Australia.

- Investigate the history, tribes, language and super heroes of Aboriginal culture. Write an essay describing the distinct characteristics of Aboriginal culture and explain why it is important to recognize and respect such a unique tradition.
- As a class, discuss the importance of history to reaffirming personal and cultural identities. In what ways can history be revised to accommodate different experiences and interpretations of the truth? Discuss how written histories of Australia have changed in the past thirty years to embrace the experiences of indigenous Australians.
- Imagine that you are a leader of an Aboriginal tribe in Australia today. What steps would you take to make sure traditional culture and language continues? In your opinion, what challenges do Aboriginal leaders face in continuing their culture and tradition? Write a short essay on the characteristics that would make a good Aboriginal leader in an Aboriginal community today.
- Using a map of your state, research and identify the major Aboriginal tribes that lived in this area. Does the land where your school is located have an Aboriginal past?







- It is thought that over 600 distinct languages were once spoken by various Aboriginal tribes in Australia. Research the language spoken in your area, and identify objects around your school with Aboriginal words from that language.
- The Aboriginal flag is distinct. Research what its various elements mean.

**Topic 2: Social Justice** > Social justice is a philosophy and action that seeks to achieve a fairer and more equal distribution of resources among people and to right the structural disadvantage of groups in a society. This includes the fulfilment of equal access to opportunity and participation, fair and adequate distribution of resources, access to and ability to exercise human rights, and the fair treatment of all citizens. Social justice acts against the exclusion of certain peoples or groups by an oppressor with the aim of reducing inequality for socially marginalized and/or vulnerable groups. Social justice recognizes human wellbeing as a required part of our shared humanity and an essential part of our societies. Social justice is one of the most important themes explored throughout *Women of the Sun: 25 Years Later*. In fact, the filmmaker identifies it as part of his motivation for creating the documentary, drawing parallels between the Aboriginal experience and his family's story of the Holocaust. A key point of reference for all those interviewed is the search for justice through personal and collective empowerment, the discovery and speaking of the truth, and the articulation of identity.

- Do you think the filmmaker is correct in comparing the Aboriginal experience to the Holocaust? Discuss as a class.
- Discuss the relevance of social justice to the experience of indigenous Australians. In what ways has their experience been socially unjust? How is this reflected in today's Aboriginal community? Write an essay exploring social justice issues for Aboriginals and outlining those issues (e.g. health) where Aboriginals are clearly behind the rest of Australia. The essay should include some of the projects being undertaken to improve their situation.
- What is meant by the phrase 'human rights'? Research the meaning of human rights and discuss why it is important to Aboriginal Australians.
- In an attempt to solve truancy problems, a school leadership team in the Aboriginal community of Wadeye in the Northern Territory built a swimming pool and implemented a rule whereby children were only allowed to use it if they attended school. This initiative increased school attendance and reduced the prevalence of skin diseases and eye problems. Imagine you are a journalist for *The Australian* and write an article about this initiative from a human rights perspective. As a class, devise other initiatives that might have a social justice impact on indigenous communities.
- The current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner is Mr Tom Calma (appointed in 2004). What are his roles and responsibilities? Why is a Social Justice Commissioner an important position for indigenous Australians?



## After Watching the Film

- Why does Bob Weis decide to create this film? Why was *Women of the Sun* particularly important to him and what does he hope to achieve from the documentary?
- Given his family experience, what aspects of the Aboriginal experience does Bob Weis relate to? As a class, discuss how local experiences can have universal significance, bringing together people from very different backgrounds. Is there part of the Aboriginal experience that you can relate to?
- At the beginning of the film, there is advice to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island viewers that the program includes images of the deceased. Why is this advice included? What is its relevance?
- Visit the Council website of Yirrkala (<http://www.yirrkaladhanbul.nt.gov.au>). Identify what social and economic opportunities are available within the community. What is particularly unique about Yirrkala? Using this information, write an article attracting visitors to the area.
- Why does co-writer, Sonia Borg, say that she believes *Women of the Sun* was before its time? How has Australian history been revised since then and how did the film contribute to this change?
- Hyllus Maris was an award winning poet and writer and received international acclaim for her work on *Women of the Sun*. Research her poem *Spiritual Song of the Aborigine*. How are the ideas of the poem reflected in the stories in *Women of the Sun*? In the poem she says, 'I am this land and this land is me/I am Australia.' As a class, discuss the meaning of these lines and the special importance ascribed to the land by Aboriginal people. Further, identify other popular Australian poems and songs that share the same theme.
- Discuss the role of poetry throughout the documentary. Why is it included in the film? Do you think it strengthens the story of the five women interviewed?
- In his interview, Boori Pryor states: 'instead of exploding, we implode. A lot of Aboriginal men die of broken hearts.' What steps does he take to avoid having this happen to him? What is his philosophy on life? Why is his philosophy so essential to his survival? Research projects being undertaken by, and with, indigenous Australians to assist them in confronting the social and economic challenges they face.
- What are some of the difficulties that may have been encountered by having white men involved in a film about black women? What steps does Bob Weis take to be accepted by the Aboriginal communities with whom he works?
- No women are interviewed about Episode Two, *Maydina – The Shadow*. Why do you think this might have been? Is this an important omission in the documentary? How does the filmmaker try to get around the lack of interviews?







- Of the five women interviewed in the film, which of them feels that *Women of the Sun* has had a profound impact on their lives? How so?
- *Women of the Sun* involves four episodes, and the final episode takes place in the 1980s. Write a short screenplay for a fifth episode that takes place in 2006. What would the story be about? Who would be the protagonist? How would the story of Aboriginal women have progressed since the 1980s? What achievements and challenges would they speak about?

## Character Profiles

### Shirley Nirrurrangyydji, who played Warroo in Episode 1

- The story of *Women of the Sun* is about Aboriginals living in Victoria. What does Shirley say was the motivation for her tribe from the Northern Territory to fly to Victoria to become the cast of this film?
- In small groups, imagine that you are responsible for seeking out actors for the original film. Create a campaign to attract Aboriginal actors to a first audition and design a strategy to convince the successful candidates to move from the Northern Territory to Victoria for filming.
- Shirley explains that the film script had to be translated from English into her tribe's language. What is the significance of having the tribe speak in their language? What message did this send to the Australian people watching the film for the first time in 1981?
- What impact did the film have on Shirley? What did she find particularly empowering? How did the film affect her personal development?

### Naykalan Mununggurr, who played Young Alinta in Episode 1

- Naykalan says it is important for Bob to keep making films to show current and future generations of Aboriginal children about their culture. How might a film like this encourage and sustain Aboriginal culture?
- Take a classroom vote. Would you pay to watch this film in the cinema? Why/ why not?
- What is the significance of the film's title: *Women of the Sun*? What other titles might have been appropriate for the film? In small groups, enter in a competition for the best alternative film title. Each group should create a billboard advertising the film with its new title. As a class, vote on the best entry.





- Naykalan refers to a scene in the first episode when one of the European convicts is killed for breaking tribal law by assaulting one of its young women. She says that Aboriginal law and Australian law are worlds apart. Divide the class into two groups, one representing an Aboriginal tribe, and the other representing an Australian court. Each group should prepare an argument deciding the fate of the same European convict according to its laws. Debate the issue as a class.
- As part of his journey, Bob Weis makes a point of interviewing Chips Mackinolty, an artist and advisor to the Northern Territory government. Why does he ascribe such importance to meeting Chips Mackinolty? Is the interview relevant to the documentary? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Aboriginal representation in the Northern Territory Parliament has increased significantly since *Women of the Sun* was screened in 1981. Why does Chips Mackinolty emphasize this as a significant positive change? Why might it be particularly important that three of the Aboriginal parliamentary representatives are women?
- Using the United Nations Development Fund for Women website (<http://www.unifem.org>) research women's representation in parliament in other countries around the world. In which countries are women under-represented? What might these countries have in common? Discuss the steps that need to be taken to increase women's representation in national and community-based leadership and decision-making roles.
- How does Naykalan's relationship with Gatja Munyarrun in real life reflect their relationship in the film? How has their relationship developed over time?
- What impact did the film have on Naykalan? What is her perspective on the film twenty-five years later?

### Justine Saunders, who played Nerida Anderson in Episode 3

- What is Justine Saunders' background? Why is the truth so important to her and how has it affected her life?
- John Herron, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, says in an interview that he 'can't apologize' for the impact of the policies of forcible removal on indigenous Australians. Research the story of the 'stolen generations' and write an opinion piece explaining why you think the Australian Government should, or should not, apologize.
- What impact did Episode 3 of *Women of the Sun* have on those Aboriginals who watched the film? What does Professor Marcia Langton mean when she says it 'reverberated in the memory of those who watched'?
- Imagine that you are an Aboriginal woman leader working to motivate people to leave a mission station. Write a story about your plan to 'walk off' and the steps you would take to get others to strike out with you.
- What was particularly important to Justine in acting the role of Nerida Anderson? What has been the impact of *Women of the Sun* on her life?



### Michelle LaCombe, who played Lo-Arna in Episode 4

- What is Michelle LaCombe's relationship with Lo-Arna? What do they have in common? What was the impact of the film on her personal development at the time? Why does she feel she would act the part more convincingly now that she is older?
- As part of the documentary, Michelle is asked to read part of her role again. In your opinion, is this an effective technique? Does it enhance or detract from the message the filmmaker is trying to convey?
- Imagine that you are Lo-Arna's mother. Write her a letter telling her for the first time that she is your child and explain to her the importance of her lineage and culture.
- What has been the impact of *Women of the Sun* on Michelle's life? Has it changed her 'sense of being Aboriginal'?

### Eva Johnson, who played Alice Wilson in Episode 4

- What does Eva Johnson's art and writing tell us about her experience and background? Why is creative expression so important to her? As a class, discuss the role of art in modern Aboriginal culture and explore some of the great Aboriginal artists of the past thirty years.
- Eva tells a remarkable story about how *Women of the Sun* reunited her with her mother for the first time since they were forcibly separated from each other thirty-six years earlier. Discuss the emotional impact of their reunion. What are some of the impacts of early childhood traumas and how are these expressed by those affected? How would you have dealt with the same situation?
- As a class, discuss the similarities and differences between indigenous Australians and Native Americans. What would they have in common and what initiatives exist to encourage cross-cultural gatherings?

#### Endnote

- <sup>1</sup> Adapted from the Study Guide for *Women of the Sun* by Rie Natalenko.

#### *Women of the Sun – 25 Years Later*

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