



RIVER OF NO RETURN

A **STUDY GUIDE** BY KATY MARRINER



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RIVER OF NO RETURN

Introduction

This study guide to accompany *River of No Return* (Darlene Johnson, 2008) has been written for secondary students. It provides information and suggestions for learning activities in SOSE, Drama, English, Media and curriculum projects exploring contemporary Indigenous Australia.

About *River of No Return*

I'm on a journey from salt water to fresh water, to see if I can survive there. Swimming against the current is not going to be easy but I won't know until I try.

– Frances

Frances Daingangan is a 45-year-old Yolngu woman from the Gupapuyngu tribe in north-east Arnhem Land. She now lives

in the remote community of Ramingining.

As a young girl Frances dreamed of becoming a movie star. She loved to emulate Marilyn Monroe. Frances would dance around the house, pretending to be her. But she was told it was ridiculous for a Yolngu girl to have such ambitious fantasies. Her dream came true when Rolf de Heer cast her in the lead female role of Nowalingu in his film *Ten Canoes* (2006).

Frances was originally promised to a Yolngu man called Djigirr. As a girl, she was abducted by a senior lawman from the Liyagawumirr tribe of Elcho Island.

Frances has now returned to live on her mother's tribal land and burial place, a sacred area called Nangalala.

As a widow with three daughters and

six grandchildren, Frances' life is one of poverty, desperation and struggle. Frances depends on her buffalo hunting uncle, acclaimed artist and tribal sorcerer Phillip Gudthaykudthay, who, at the age of eighty, has failing eyesight. When hunting for the daily meal proves to be a fruitless exercise, Frances sometimes has to rely on the winnings of her eleven-year-old grandson Bradley who is a card sharp and goes out gambling.

The success of *Ten Canoes* boosted Frances' confidence. Seeing herself on the big screen, knowing she was being seen worldwide fulfilling her dream, brought her a new sense of self-worth and with it a world full of possibilities. This new-found strength enabled Frances to leave an abusive relationship. She became the first



of many abused women in her community to take a restraining order against a violent partner. Frances had discovered that in order to follow her chosen path, she must challenge some of the traditional cultural and familial values of the Yolngu.

Whether or not she can make a living as an actress remains to be seen. Her decision to apply for a place at the only Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts in Australia surprises the local white administrators. They have never been confronted with this request before. With their help, Frances lodges the application. Learning how to move between the ancient life of the Yolngu and the modern world of the balanda will not be easy but Frances' resolve does not waver.

River of No Return follows Frances as she explores the complexities, pitfalls and joys of finding a new life.

About the filmmakers

Darlene Johnson – writer, director and co-producer

Darlene Johnson is from the Dughutti tribe of the east coast of New South Wales.

Johnson is a prominent filmmaker and has received national and international awards for her work. On Australia day 2008 she was awarded a Scroll of Honour by the mayor of Waverley, NSW for her contribution to the local art culture.

Johnson's first drama *Two-Bob Mermaid* (1996) was part of an Aboriginal anthology, *From Sand to Celluloid*, which featured first-time Indigenous filmmakers. Her documentary credits as a writer and director include *Stolen Generations* (2000), *Stranger in My Skin – Ray Cotti* (2001), *Following the Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002) and *Gulpilil: One Red Blood* (2002). In 2006, Johnson completed a half-hour



supernatural/mythical drama *Crocodile Dreaming* (2007). *River of No Return* was completed for the National Indigenous Documentary Fund. Johnson is currently writing her first feature film *Obelia*.

Pat Fiske, Bower Bird Films Pty Ltd – producer

Pat Fiske is an experienced director and producer. She is recognized as a prominent member of Australia's independent filmmaking community. In 2001, she was awarded the prestigious Stanley Hawes Award for her outstanding contribution to the documentary industry in Australia at the Australian Documentary Conference in Perth. Fiske has been co-head of the documentary department at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School for the past six years and is now developing new projects.

Her credits as a director and/or (co-) producer include *Business Behind Bars* (Catherine Scott, 2000), *For All the World to See* (1992), *Australia Daze* (as overall director, 1988), *Following the Fenceline* (1998), *Rocking the Foundations* (1986),

Woolloomooloo (Pat Fiske, Peter Gailey and Denise White, 1972), *Night Patrol* (Pat Fiske and Valerie Martin, 1997), *Leaping off the Edge* (Pat Fiske and Nicolette Freeman, 2001) *Selling Sickness* (Catherine Scott, 2004), and *An Artist in Eden* (2005).

Using *River of No Return* in the classroom

Teachers may select from the following activities to support students' viewing and close analysis of *River of No Return*.

Before viewing the documentary

Locate north-east Arnhem Land on a map of Australia. Use print and electronic texts to find out more about the region and about the Yolngu people who call this region home.

Key terms

Yolngu – a generic term for Aboriginal people *inhabiting* north-east Arnhem land. Yolngu literally means 'person'.

Balanda – white culture



After viewing the documentary

What were you thinking as you watched *River of No Return*?

Make a list of questions you would like to ask Frances Daingangan. Share your list with the class.

Make a list of questions you would like to ask the filmmaker Darlene Johnson. Share your list with the class.

Why do you think the filmmakers decided to name the documentary *River of No Return*?

How has your understanding of the issues facing Aboriginal people, society and culture changed after watching *River of No Return*?

After watching *River of No Return*, what comments would you make about the purpose of this documentary?

Themes

- identity
- family
- dreams
- hope
- freedom
- belonging
- transformation
- self-discovery
- self-respect
- cultural identity

Add your own ideas to the list of themes.

What does *River of No Return* tell us about each of these themes? Ask students to endorse their responses with specific evidence from the documentary.

Create an A3 collage of words and images that offers a response to a theme explored in *River of No Return*. Use these responses to compose a class mural that reveals the concerns of the documentary.

Select one of the themes explored by *River of No Return* and work with other students to develop a multimedia presentation offering your group's stories about this theme.

Close analysis

Director's statement

My hope is that River of No Return will offer some insight into the entrenched cultural and social problems in remote Arnhem Land and elsewhere, and even be a catalyst for some political action to improve things.

I see River of No Return as being an important vehicle to raise many questions and explore some of the broader cultural issues facing Indigenous people throughout remote Australia today. I hope this documentary will help to instigate further support for Indigenous tribal people like Frances.

The film provides an unprecedented honest and stark point of view of life in a remote Aboriginal community. Frances candidly invites us into her world thus poignantly illustrating the ongoing difficulties and hardship of daily life. River of No Return will hopefully offer ways to improve Frances' situation and help her to pursue her dreams.

– Darlene Johnson

Frances

My name is Frances Daingangan. Even before I was born, I was promised to a Yolngu man. But just like Nowalingu, I was abducted by a stranger from another tribe.



But he was a good man and he took good care of me. I became his wife. We had three beautiful daughters together. I was with him for eleven years, until he passed away. And then I went home to my mother's traditional country, Nangalala. – Frances

When is Frances shown to be strong?
When is she shown to be vulnerable?

What do Frances' personal circumstances tell you about the difficulties faced by Indigenous women in remote communities?

'I don't have any future husbands left in my community.' – Frances

Frances claims she wants 'to be alone'.
What does Frances mean and why do you think she has arrived at this decision?

'Maybe I should leave, go to the city, try and get more acting experience, just to prove who I am.' – Frances

What do you think Frances needs to prove about herself?

Ambition

I want to go to the Aboriginal acting school because I want to learn how to become a professional actor. The story of how I lived as a Yolngu woman and also the stories that have been passed down to me from thousands of years ago. – Frances

I grew up learning to dance traditional ceremonial way. Every dance tells a story. I like to share my stories with the outside world. I like to sing my stories in songs especially for the kids. I teach my story to the children about the land, the animals, the sacred sites. I have many stories about my people and my culture. It's all true. It's all real. – Frances

Use these statements to initiate a discussion of why Frances wants to act.

'It's a hard road being an actor I tell you.'
– Phillip Noyce



Do you think Frances sees her choice of career in the same way?

Marilyn Monroe

As a child I always wanted to become an actress just like Marilyn Monroe but I was told it was ridiculous for a Yolngu girl to have such dreams, such fantasies.
– Frances

When Frances told her mum about her desire to be an actor just like Marilyn Monroe, her ambitions were dismissed as ridiculous. Frances was not discouraged. She thought of her uncle David Gulpilli and what he had achieved as an actor.

Frances has always been inspired by Marilyn Monroe. Were you surprised by Frances' choice of Marilyn Monroe as an idol?

Home

We live on the edge of the Arafura swamplands, where the river runs into the sea. I'm part of the shark people mob. Our ancestors came all the way from the east and settled in this land. – Frances

'Nangalala is our special, spiritual place. A place where we still sing and dance our ceremonies.'
– Frances



Recall those moments in *River of No Return* that affirm this claim.

When I came back home from Paris, I felt different inside. I felt fabulous, excited, wonderful. I wanted to do something new to change my life. But there are no jobs for actors here! – Frances

Why does the filmmaker follow the images of Frances enjoying the glamour of being a movie star with Frances at home?

'We don't have film school, speech trainers or dance teachers. We try and survive on dole money, but it doesn't last long when



you've got six grandchildren to feed.'
– Frances

How does the filmmaker establish that for Frances making ends meet is not that easy?

'After travelling overseas, people started to change towards me. Some of them would give me a hard time and tell me I'm becoming too much like balanda.'

'They think I'm rich because I'm an actor.'

Were you shocked to learn that Frances' success isolated her from others in the community? When does *River of No Return* show this to be true?

If Frances was asked to write a list of why she wants to stay in Nangalala and why she wants to leave, what do you think she would include?

Would Frances find it easy to leave?

Family

'I've always got my grandchildren to keep me company.'

What's special about Frances' relationship with her grandchildren?

What does Frances want for her grandson Bradley?

River of No Return shows Frances with her great aunts and with her uncle, Phillip Gudthaygudthay. Why does Frances value these relationships?

'This is Peter Djigirr, the man I was promised to before I was born. Djigirr is my best friend. We are still obligated to each other in cultural way.'
– Frances

Frances goes fishing with Peter Djigirr. What did you notice about their relationship?

'It is my destiny to do this, because I feel free and fresh, so all over the world they can see what my ancient ancestors were like before.'

'This is not only for me, I'm doing this for my grandkids and for the next one – it goes from generation to generation.'
– Frances

Use these statements to generate a discussion of Frances' connection to family, past, present and future.

Research the concept of family in Aboriginal culture.

Ten Canoes

'But when I got the part of Nowalingu in *Ten Canoes* I knew it was a sign.'
– Frances

During the casting process of *Ten Canoes*, director Rolf de Heer spotted Frances working in a local store. Taken by her outgoing persona, he asked Frances if she would be interested in acting in a movie.

Based on your knowledge of Frances, why do you think Rolf de Heer cast Frances in *Ten Canoes*?

'A few years ago, I was working in a takeaway shop when a film crew came to town. I had a good feeling that my life was about to change.'
– Frances

Have you heard other stories of performers being discovered in unlikely places?

River of No Return shows Frances enjoying fame, walking the red carpet, posing for press photographers and being interviewed by television presenters. Her involvement in *Ten Canoes* even took her to the Cannes Film Festival and to Paris. Since *Ten Canoes* Frances has appeared in *Crocodile Dreaming*, a film also written and directed by Darlene Johnson.

'We weren't really acting, we were channeling our ancestors, it was real. Rolf told us what to do but we could do it in our own way.'
– Frances

I came out and stood in front of the camera. I thought about the birds, the trees and the land. How people lived here a long time ago. Then I could hear the wind calling my name. It was my ancestors. And after that I felt like a little girl again, just standing there.
– Frances





Watch *Ten Canoes* and write a review of Frances' performance.

Ramingining

'Ramingining is twenty kilometres from Nangalala. It's where I do my shopping and catch up with friends.'

When Frances heads to Ramingining what do you notice? Write a description of life in Ramingining.

How does *River of No Return* portray the nature of life in remote Indigenous communities?

As a class discuss how the documentary promotes the importance of providing Indigenous Australians with the resources that will give them greater opportunities?

Locate more information about the services that exist to support individuals living in remote Indigenous communities.

Chasing the dream

Beyond the red carpet experience of *Ten Canoes* the question Frances must deal with is, can she realistically pursue a film

career within the dominant white culture of Australian society? She seeks help from the local white administrators about how she can gain entry into an acting school. For the first time Frances now sees the possibility of fulfilling her childhood dream.

Frances visits the Homelands Resource Centre. Peter Fisher is a CDEP officer. With his help, Frances uses the internet to find a training course for acting.

What does Peter think of Frances' ambition?

I think it will be good to go to an Aboriginal acting school. But I'm not sure about the application. I don't understand all the balanda words. I'll have to try and find someone to help me. – Frances

What does Frances' reliance on others tell you about her ambition and determination?

Frances decides to depend on Suzanah Kuzio, the Council CEO. Getting to see Suzanah is not always easy. Frances is prepared to wait her turn. What does Suzanah think of Frances' decision?

Rolf de Heer and Phillip Noyce agree to be Frances' referees. What advice do they offer Frances?

'It doesn't matter if it's different. It's the way that you act. It's your story and it's the way you do things. And it doesn't matter about this one.'
– Suzanah

Why is Frances uncertain about the course?

The balanda way

Frances' application is rejected. Although the letter indicates that she may reapply, Frances is disappointed.

But I don't know if I can do that. That's why I wanted to go to the school to learn that balanda way. It's hard for me to break into this balanda world. I think I'll stay home for now, with my grandchildren. I hope they'll have a better chance. – Frances

'Marilyn will always be with me and I'm still going to follow that dream.'
– Frances

'I think now you are a real actor. Because you got rejected.'
– Phillip Noyce

Use these statements to initiate a discussion of Frances' response to rejection.

Production values

What expectations does the opening sequence create? How are you positioned as a viewer?

The following warning appears at the start of the documentary:

Indigenous viewers are advised the following program may contain images or voices of deceased people that may cause distress to members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities.

Why is this warning necessary?

Examine the narrative structure of *River of No Return*. Discuss how the documentary charts Frances' story.

How has the filmmaker decided to portray Frances?

What techniques has the filmmaker used to establish Frances' commitment to home and family?

Why do you think the filmmaker decided that Frances should narrate her own story?

List the settings used by the filmmaker. What do these settings reveal about place and its significance in Frances' life? What do they suggest about the filmmaker's purpose?

Discuss how music complements the narrative, shapes our understanding of the subject of the documentary, creates mood and evokes particular emotional responses.

Frances is often shown walking along a dusty red road that stretches into the distance.

How does the filmmaker use this image to comment on Frances' situation?

River of No Return tells the awful story of Frances' experience of domestic violence.

How does the filmmaker use vision and sound to recreate this time in Frances' life.

How did you feel? What did you think?

River of No Return makes use of footage from *Ten Canoes* and *Balanda and the Bark Canoes*, the trailer for *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*. How does this material help to tell Frances' story?

The closing sequence shows Frances calling Phillip Noyce. The phone call between the two plays out during the end credits. Do you think this was an effective way to resolve Frances' story?



Extended responses

'Frances has a fierce desire to better her situation.' Discuss.

I'm on a journey from salt water to fresh water, to see if I can survive there. Swimming against the current is not going to be easy but I won't know until I try.

– Frances

Drawing on both moments and statements from *River of No Return*, discuss Frances' decision to swim against the current.

While the film is primarily the story of Frances' quest to become an actor, it also becomes an important social document. Do you agree? How is this achieved?

Do you think Frances' story encourages a greater understanding of the challenges of being an Indigenous Australian?

Making a digital story

Do you know someone who has pursued a dream despite the odds?

Create a digital story about his or her journey.

A digital story uses multimedia tools and visual and audio resources from personal archives. Most digital stories are approximately two to five minutes in length. Digital stories are a unique and powerful way to tell a story.

You will need to write a script and source photographs and other keepsakes to compose the story. Then there are other decisions. Who will read the script? What sounds and music will be part of the digital story? What is an appropriate title? Don't forget a dedication and end credits.

Further information about digital stories can be found on the website of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image <<http://www.acmi.net.au>> and by typing the term 'digital stories' into a reliable search engine.

Going further

In *River of No Return*, Phillip Noyce is optimistic that the Australian film industry will begin to tell the stories of Indigenous Australia and that there will be more parts for Indigenous actors.



Working as a class, make a list of films that tell what Noyce calls 'black stories'. Working as an individual, view and complete an analysis of one of the listed films. Your analysis should provide:

- A synopsis of the film
- A description of the roles played by Indigenous Australians
- An explanation of the filmmaker's purpose
- An assessment of the film's portrayal of Indigenous Australia
- A comment on how the film was received by film critics
- Your judgement of the film's worth

Use PowerPoint to present your analysis to the class.

Working as a class, make a list of Indigenous actors past and present. Working as an individual, find out more about one of the actors. Present your research as a feature article.

Your article should do more than just inform. It should offer a perspective. Like Johnson in *River of No Return*, you should comment on the actor's professional achievements by drawing on their personal stories.

Before you begin writing, decide on the publication that will feature your article. Are you writing for a tabloid newspaper or magazine? Will your article appear in a journal devoted to film? You could write for the arts pages or weekend magazine supplement of a broadsheet newspaper. It could even appear in the newspaper

published in the actor's home town.

When you have made your decision, think about your likely audience and the format of your article. Use vocabulary and adopt a tone that best suits the publication that you have chosen. Download appropriate images from the internet to include in your article.

Ask your teacher to act as your editor and don't forget to devise an attention-demanding headline.

References

River of No Return post production script, 2008.

River of No Return press kit, 2008.

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