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Talking To My Country

By Stan Grant



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Book Summary:

TALKING TO MY COUNTRY is a powerful and personal meditation on race, culture and national identity, this text assists students to think critically about Australian identity, Australian history and the historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples. Through this text students develop a heightened understanding and appreciation of the concepts of social justice and shared histories and how Indigenous history and culture are fundamental to the development of Australian identity.

Stan Grant reveals the diversity of historical and contemporary Aboriginal cultural life and the impact government policies, legislation and legal decisions have had on Indigenous peoples.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

Australian history, English, Australian Literature and SOSE Personal Development.

Appropriate Ages: 14+

CONTENTS

- Recommended for
- Introduction
- Structure and Style
- Language and symbolism
- Themes
- Writing and Assessment Task

Recommended For

These teaching notes are intended to be used as an introduction to the study of Stan Grant's text as inspiration for opinion writing, history study, writing essays, creative writing, or as part of any unit of work on Place and Belonging, Cultural Identity, Representation of perspectives of Australia, Indigenous studies and Australian history, English, Australian Literature and SOSE Personal Development.

It is also relevant as a related text for HSC Advanced English: Module C Elective 1: Representing People and Politics, a related text for HSC Advanced and Standard AOS Discovery and HSC English Extension 1, Module A: Genre, Elective 1: Life Writing

Introduction

Stan Grant is a Wiradjuri man; an outstanding journalist and one of the country's most respected and powerful Indigenous voices. A journalist since 1987, he has worked for the ABC, SBS, and the Seven Network. In July 2015, as the debate over Adam Goodes being booed at AFL games raged and got ever more heated and ugly, Stan Grant wrote a short but powerful piece for The Guardian that went viral, not only in Australia but right around the world, shared over 100,000 times on social media.

Please see: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/30/i-can-tell-you-how-adam-goodes-feels-every-indigenous-person-has-felt-it>

He also made a very influential speech when he addressed an audience in Sydney, October 2015 on the impact of colonisation and discrimination as part of the IQ2 debate series held by The Ethics Centre. It has been viewed more than 1.4m times on Facebook and shared 41,000 times.

Please see: <https://youtu.be/uEOssW1rw0I>

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Grant is the International Editor at SKY NEWS. From 2001 to 2012 he worked for CNN as an anchor in Hong Kong, before relocating to Beijing as correspondent. As a journalist, he has covered some of the world's biggest news events. He is the author of a memoir, 'The Tears of Strangers', and in 2015, he won a Walkley award for his coverage of indigenous affairs. He is Managing Editor of National Indigenous Television, and Indigenous Affairs Editor at The Guardian.

TALKING TO MY COUNTRY is a powerful and personal meditation on race, culture and national identity, this text assists students to think critically about Australian identity, Australian history and the historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous peoples. Through this text students develop a heightened understanding and appreciation of the concepts of social justice and shared histories and how Indigenous history and culture are fundamental to the development of Australian identity. Stan reveals the diversity of historical and contemporary Aboriginal cultural life and the impact government policies, legislation and legal decisions have had on Indigenous peoples.

Grant's *TALKING TO MY COUNTRY* talks to every Australian about their country - what it is, and what it could be. It is about all of us, our shared identity. Grant's personal story engages with the great collective memory of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Grant explores how his life has been shaped by the past and present Aboriginal experience because of its dislocation and distinction from Australian collective memory and history. His account of how Aboriginal lives have been recorded proves the divergent and incomprehensive nature of Australian history and culture. Australia's collective autobiography has followed two separate parallel paths: one Indigenous, and one Australian, Grant argues for a unified recording of the Australian experience and recognises the difficult moral dilemma each and every Australian faces in reconciling them.

He might not have all the answers but he wants us to keep on asking the question: how can we be better? The text is political in nature, revealing that the past is firmly in the present and Grant urges us all to play a part in the process of reconciliation.

Structure and Style

Grant's heart is in Australia and he weaves his story, the story of his family and his ancestors through Australian history, revealing the very personal impact colonisation and discrimination have had on Indigenous people and their ancestors. Alongside of this, he retells the account of white Australian history which silences the Indigenous account and calls for a marriage of the two to form the story of Australia.

This is an autobiographical text but it is also an allegory for Australian history. It mostly explains Grant's life in chronological order but he includes flash forwards, flash backs, anecdotes and important historical and social moments that have shaped Australian history and society. It is a deeply personal and emotional text; a plea and a call to action.

The text is structured to illustrate how history impacts and shapes an individual life. Students may never have thought about this idea in relation to their own lives. For students to really make sense of this text, divide the class into small groups and ask them to map out the parallel stories of their own lives, their parents and their grandparents. Map out their individual histories and also how social, political or historical events may have impacted their own lives. Ask them to consider how history has impacted on their own families and has that limited or created opportunities?

Ask them to consider:

Were any of their family members impacted by:

War

Displacement

Torture

Racism

Targeted government policies

Lack of educational opportunities

Poor health

Detrimental and differential treatment because of a characteristic about themselves that they could not change? For example, gender, religion or race?

Ask them to also think about stories and histories and secrets and have some secrets been carried from one generation and why have they been deemed necessary to keep quiet?

Also ask students to retell what they know about Aboriginal history? How much do they know? If they don't know much, ask them to think why that might be so. How is history recorded? Who gets to record it? Have we been told? Are we listening?

Drawing on quotes from the text, ask students to then do the same with Grant's life and the lives of his parents and Grandparents. Give them one chapter each and ask them to look at how history, personal experience, government policies, historical and social events, such as the Colonial Secretary's reports, policies of assimilation and self-determination, Aboriginal resistance, Keating's speech, the creation of the film *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and the creation of Missions impacted on his life and the lives of his family members. Ask students to consider how history has impacted on Grant's family and has that limited or created opportunities for them? Did they enjoy freedom of movement, the right to vote, the right to live freely? Does history intrude into the present?

Create a visual portrayal of the Grant families' stories on a wall in the room. The top half of the wall can feature important historical facts and turning points and some of the key quotes about a particular time and below there can be key quotes that represent Grant's thinking on that issue.

Once students have read the text, ask them:

- What are the central ideas in the text?
- How has the text been constructed?
- How has the choice of form and its associated language features connected with the composer's purpose and context?

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The Cover

Look at the cover image, discuss with students how it conveys the central themes of the text. Identify one visual and literary technique that conveys the central theme of the text.

Epigraph

The text begins with an extract from a poem, *Theme for English B* by African American poet, Langston Hughes. It discusses how we are all interconnected, regardless of our cultural background or the colour of our skin.

Explore with students why Grant chose this poem to open text. What is the idea being communicated in the poem? How does this relate to the text overall? Does it distill the overall thematic concern of the book? What is effect of the inclusion of this poem? How does it position the reader? Why has Grant written this book? What does he want readers to do once they have read this book?

Opening statement, My Country: Australia

The first line of this statement reads, "These are the things I want to say to you" while the last lines say, "I am the sum of many things but I am all history. And we are trapped in this history, all of us, and if we don't understand it we will remain chained to it".

What is the impact of the direct address to the reader?

Who is you?

How does the tone change over the course of the chapter?

What is the impact of his use of 'our' and 'we'?

What is Grant's message?

Why has Grant written this book?

What does he want readers to do once they have read this book?

Who is Stan Grant?

Working in pairs, ask students to do some research on Indigenous voices in Australian history and Australian life and the current social position of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Some of the key issues are:

Breaking the silence of Aboriginal history.

Understanding that Aboriginal communities resisted and engaged in guerilla type campaigns against European colonisation and that peaceful settlement of Australia is a myth.

Some of the key legal, historical and social policy moments in Aboriginal History which Grant mentions and can be explored deeply:

The Richmond Hill battle

Policy of absorption

The Bathurst War

Pinjarra Massacre

Protectionism

Aboriginal Missions

1967 Referendum

Land Rights

Self-determination

Aboriginal Deaths in Custody

Reconciliation Movement

1992 Keating's Redfern Address

1992 Mabo Decision

1993 Native Title

1997 Bringing them home report

2007 The Intervention in the Northern Territory

2008 The Apology

2015 Adam Goodes booed at AFL games

Research:

Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, Adam Goodes, Cathy Freeman, Lowitja O'Donoghue, David Unaipon, Archie Roach, Brownyn Bancroft, Vincent Lingiari, Eddie Mabo, Bennelong, Charles Perkins, Jandamarra, Truganini. Pemulwuy, the Richmond Hill battle, policy of absorption, the Bathurst War, Pinjarra Massacre, Mick Dodson, Linda Burnie and Henry Reynolds.

Activity

Ask students to prepare a short presentation for the class on an historical event and a famous Indigenous person. Ask students to express how these people and the events could have shaped Stan Grant and themselves. Ask students to articulate what they have learned as a consequence of this task; what they didn't know previously.

Activity

Ask students in pairs, decide and create a symbol which represents Stan Grant and how he feels about Australia and ask them to make one for themselves now that they have a better appreciation of Aboriginal history. Make a poster of them and then put all the posters on one wall to create a collage of Stan and themselves to show how a person is made up of history and individual experience.

Show the class the footage from the Adam Goodes incident, ask them to walk in Stan Grant's shoes, then ask how they would feel after that incident.

Ask them to write a short essay on the following topic, "The Winter of 2015. Australia looked at itself and turned to face its soul." Discuss.

Language and symbolism

Stan Grant is one of Australia's most experienced and respected journalists. The text displays his journalistic background and ability to deliver information but also to express his opinions powerfully and persuasively. Each paragraph contains an abundance of persuasive techniques that power his writing and distil his message.

Language – how journalists persuade

The following quotes are a small selection of some of his writing.

"These are the things I want to say to you. These things I have held inside or even worse run from. It's not easy, what I have to say, and it should not be easy. These are things that tear at who we are. These are the things that kill, that spread disease and

madness. These are the things that drive people to suicide, that put us in prisons and steal our sight (p.1)."

"I want to tell you about the road that leads to my parents' house. It was here that my people were murdered (p.7)."

"Today it is marked with a sign that reads: Poison Waterhole Creek. I could not count the number of times I have passed by here. Now I have brought my youngest son to sit by the cool water, under the shade of the trees. It is time he learned the truth of our history (p.7)."

"On 26 February 1974 a rainstorm lashed the lake. It was just enough to loosen the hard packed soil. Jim Bowler, a young geologist, spotted a skull poking just above the surface. He cleared the loose sand and what he found altered our entire view of life on this continent. Lying there was an intact skeleton, buried in this ground for 40,000 years (p.8)."

"The sun shines brightest where it peeks through the clouds on a distant canola yellow hill. The rocks are strewn across open fields in odd formations (p.11)."

"The local homestead owner wanted the blacks gone. He laced this waterhole with poison. Men, women and children died. Their bodies were left strewn along the banks rotting in the sun, a warning to others (p.13)."

"Our people had been on the losing end of history but Cathy made us all feel like winners" (p.171).

"In the coming days of Garma I will see the old men in tears. 'We know your language,' one says, 'we go to your schools, we know your law, when will you learn ours?' (p. 208)."

Ask students to first study Stan's masterful writing then ask them to attempt to emulate it. Looking at the list of persuasive techniques below, ask students to identify the persuasive techniques in the extracts provided and explain their effect on the reader.

Persuasive techniques

Short sentences to create punch and make a point.

Use of 'hooks' to grab the attention of the reader.

Sensory language references stimulate the senses and create vivid images and feelings in the mind of the reader.

Use of personal pronouns, I/We/You/Us – can be used make the reader feel connected to the author.

Use of active verbs to animate the meaning of a sentence.

Alliteration

Use of three

Repetition

Anaphora

Emotional language

Contrast

Emotional/logical appeals

Anecdotes/statistics/first hand accounts/interviews

Once they have finished, then ask your students to think about an episode in their own life and how they would want a reader to feel about it. Using at least five of the persuasive techniques in the list above, encourage them to emulate Grant's approach and see if they can produce a piece of writing about that episode that positions the reader to feel what she or he wants them to feel.

Then ask them to write a reflection on what they have learned about the power of persuasive techniques to communicate an idea.

Extension questions:

How has Grant used journalistic techniques to represent his point of view?

In what way does the text represent individual, shared or competing political perspectives, ideas, events or situations?

How are Grant's political motivations and actions represented in the text? Do you think the text will have an impact on individual lives or society more broadly?

How does the form and language choices influence and shape meaning?

Motif

Grant uses driving in his car with his son as an extended motif that links the beginning and the end of the text.

What does the use of this motif evoke?

Why has Grant included it?

What does it add to the text?

How does it relate to the key ideas in the text?

Themes

Activity

As students complete their close reading of the text, the range of issues Grant explores in this text will come to life. The following suggestions are only a few of the ideas he explores and include some possible learning activities that will help students consider not only the view Stan Grant holds, but also encourage them to consider their own views.

To start, ask students to answer the following questions:

Why is this text important?

Context - What is significant about the context in which the text was created?

Author/Purpose/Form - What important information do you know about the author?
What is significant about the form of the text and what the author has done with it?

What images, patterns and puzzles did you find? What are the issues that may be contested? Why are they contested? Are there values in conflict? If so, what are they? How do these values inform what the author is saying? What do you believe?

What have you learned from studying the text? Why is it important?

What does a reader learn about ethics, power or truth about the human condition from studying the text?

If I had to write a convincing opinion piece about this text, my reader has to know....

The next thing my reader needs to know is....

On all themes you can do a range of head; heart and hand activities.

Head: What do students know about Indigenous issues? What do they need to know?
What issues?

Heart: What do students feel? How does Stan Grant feel?

Hand: How can you respond? What action can be taken to change this state of affairs?

Identity

Grant presents a powerful case for a deep examination of what it means to be Australian. He speaks to every Australian about their country – what it is, and what it could be. He asks non-Indigenous readers not to turn away, but to create a new inclusive Australian dream. Using his own story, he reveals our shared identity. He might not have all the answers but he wants us to keep on asking the question: how can we be better?

Activity

Ask students to write a letter to the editor outlining Grant's main argument about Australian identity and their own view as well.

Activity

Write a speech for a school assembly about what questions for the student have been raised as a consequence of reading “Talking to my country”.

Redressing the past and changing the future

Another key theme in the text is how does a nation heal? Grant argues that the past lives in the present, the question is what can be done to change the present and the future? This is a contested idea about history and the present. Divide the class in two and have a debate on this topic.

Activity

Ask your students to imagine they are living in a future Australia that has achieved reconciliation. Brainstorm with the class a list of changes that would have occurred in Australian society to contribute to this achievement.

Activity

Ask students to think about colours, create a symbol, and an image that would signify reconciliation and identify the things that would have changed. Ask students to develop and design an advertising poster/video or postcard to send from future Australia to a friend or significant person, telling their recipient what life is like now that reconciliation has been achieved.

Key quotes

Page	Quote	Significance
1	These are the things I want to say to you. These things I have inside me or even worse run from... I am angry...afraid too.	
2	We fear the state and we have every reason to.	
3	I want to tell you how you have always sought to define us.	
4	So, my country, these things are important.	
6	So here we are: all of us in this country – our country. Tethered to each other – black and white.	
6	The truth for me is that I love Australia and I must love its people.	
6	All of this is our story....My country: Australia.	
7	I want to tell you about the road that leads to my parents' house. It was here my people were murdered. Today it is marked with a sign that reads: Poison Waterholes Creek	
13	The local homestead owner wanted the blacks gone. He laced this waterhole with poison. Men, women and children died.	
14	Once we would have told stories of creation...Now our stories are of a people who came from another land and took what was ours.	
26	We know this history, my people. This is a living thing. We touch it and we wear it.	
26	A truly great country – if we truly believe that – should be held to great account.	

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29	It was the period of forgetting. The myths we created fed Australia's lie; that no blood had stained the wattle.	
29	These were the myths of my childhood, the myths of my education.	
30	Here, was my place, among the detritus of the frontier: the huddled remnants of the hundreds of nations who formed here as the continent formed around them.	

31	We were dismissed as brutes.	
33	Everything told me I wasn't equal. The whites told the story of this land now; there was no glory in us.	
	If we existed at all, we were a footnote, a prehistoric relic.	
34	Exclusion and difference: these were the abiding lessons of my early school years.	
39	What I saw went beyond violence; it was a rage born of history.	
53	It is hardly surprising that some of our people prefer to stay where they are. Here is another uncomfortable, confronting question: who says we have to aspire to white Australia's idea of a good life?	
59	At the Institute I reconnected with the kinship I had lost when I moved to the city. There was a subterranean black community lurking below this bland bush city.	
60	Australians found of sense of themselves constructed from a narrative that wasn't necessarily constructed wrapped in the Union Jack.	

65	Of course this powerful, violent and defiant film would resonate with a fifteen year old Aboriginal boy raised on a history of black submission and defeat.	
69	But our history is a living thing. It is physical. It is noses and mouths and faces. It is written on our bodies.	
69	This is the history I feel every time I hold my mother. I feel it every time I think of the future of my children. It is a direct connection to an Irish Catholic convict and a man born before white people had ever arrived here. It is my name and it is my face. In every way I am connected directly to the bloody birth of this country.	
71	And so it begins, away back in time before time was even counted here. The rhythms of life were laid down in lore and law and marked in ceremony.	
72	My story begins too, in another place: County Tipperary, Ireland in 1810.	
73	My blood, the blood of Moyne and Belabula. White and black; two worlds that even within me, bend to each other but still can't quite touch.	

75	Here, the bodies of dead Aborigines – my family – are given names.	
82	The Sydney Gazette described this as a war of extermination.	
82	My family's name – Grant – emerged from this bloody tangle of history.	
87	Somewhere, sometime, my two ancestors came together.	

90	Australia had us trapped in its pervasive whiteness.	
95	They would relive that great love, that forbidden love, the love that couldn't survive death and poverty and the police and the history that separated them.	
99	Spirits are not strange to us. They are not relegated to the realm of fantasy. The believers and the seers are not mocked. We like being scared. But there's another reason: we live closely with death.	
105	There are so many others: black people assailed, beaten and dead. Others, taking their own lives, in the dark hours of prison lock-down.	
107	My father refused to be defined by the harshness of this world.	
115	In that moment my grandfather was an Australian. His God said he was equal and he was still proudly black.	
117	My family is like so many other Aboriginal families. What has happened to us happened to us all. We have felt the brutality of Australia.	
122	Keating challenged the country to do better.	
124	Australians could no longer cling to the fiction that this land was empty.	
148	I grew to understand that conflict doesn't end when the guns stop, that its legacy is passed through the generations.	
157	But that accumulated trauma awakened a long dormant malaise. Everything was torn open...It was Australia that had brought me so low.	

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158	But there I was in Mongolia wounded in any case and bound by fate to my community – my country.	
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159	I am above Australia now at 30,000 feet. Even from here I can feel the pull of this land: my land.	
168	Where is my flag? Where was my anthem?	
174	I am often asked: What is an identity? It is a question that defies on convenient answer.	
180	An identity carved up, measured and fought over. I grapple too with inconsistencies and contradictions.	
183	Here, in 2007, in the shadow of the rock – Uluru – the army moved in, telling the local people they were there to save them.	
186	As I stood in Mutitjulu I was at the crossroads of the eternal dilemma in indigenous affairs. How do we redress generations of disadvantage and injustice? How do we protect people from violence and abuse? How do we build secure, healthy communities?	
186	I am a story teller. I try to connect people to our shared humanity.	
190	Australia is bigger than us all and we only hold it for a brief moment before handing it to our children.	
190	I seek the language of healing because we just can't take any more pain.	

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215	Yet with each high point we seem to retreat.	
216	I have wondered for days if I should say anything about Adam Goodes.	
222	I don't know if there will come a day when the past will be past. In me always will be the people of these pages – Wongamar and Windradyne and John Grant and Bill Grant – the story teller.	
223	I will always sit by a river or stand on my land and hear the voices and see the faces of my people. My children and their children will be Wiradjuri people.	
224	My father has always told me: 'You will come home.'	
224	Why? Because this is where we are from. My country: Australia.	

Writing and Assessment Tasks

Imagine you are Stan Grant and you are delivering a journalism writing workshop for emerging writers. Write down five ideas and bits of advice he would give these students.

In pairs, invite students to construct a dialogue between Stan and a person who disagrees with Stan as if they were two characters in a play. Practise until they can do it without reading the text and perform it in front of the class.

Imagine you are Stan and you were sitting in the stand at the AFL game and the crowd started booing at Adam Goodes. Write in your diary that night about how you felt. What would you write? Thinking back on it, how would you feel?

Dear Diary, Today I ...

Select any of first or last lines of any chapter and use them as the first line for a writing piece. It may take the form of song lyrics, poetry, reflection, narrative or argument.

Essay questions

1. Stan Grant encapsulates what it means to be Australian in the 21st century. Do you agree?
2. What impact do personal stories and direct address have on our understanding of history?
3. A writer once said, "Men make their own history but not in circumstances of their own choosing" Discuss in relation to Stan Grant's, "Talking to my country".

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4. How does this text challenge non-Indigenous people to think about Australian history and themselves?
5. Is racism a visceral experience?
6. Does this text divide or unite?
7. How does this text respond to the dominant narrative of Australian history and experience?
8. What is the central argument of the text? Can reconciliation be achieved, if so how?
9. Do more things unite us than divide us?
10. What choices has Grant made to make his text have a greater emotional impact? How does he build empathy?

STAN GRANT



talking to my country



'A story so essential and salutary to this place that it should
be given out free at the ballot box' Sydney Morning Herald