I’d like to think an ordinary person is capable of anything …
It was very soon after publication of Tracks that Robyn Davidson was first approached about a film version of her phenomenal journey. Emile Sherman, Oscar-winning producer of The King’s Speech, explains:

Tracks is one of those books that pretty much every Australian knows. It’s sort of a seminal Australian story: it was actually on the school syllabus for many years. I always thought it was one of those big stories that was set in Australia … It’s very pertinent and current to the world today …

Robyn was consulted on the film from the early stages, but was always happy for the film to be its own creative work. So much of the character of the author
**TRACKS – THE BOOK**

Robyn Davidson’s 1977 journey across the desert – funded, photographed and chronicled by National Geographic Magazine – resulted in a stupendous reaction from readers worldwide. This inspired her to write about the trip in greater detail, entirely from memory – an honest and open account of the trials, triumphs and sorrows experienced along the way.

In the closing pages of her book, she tells us, *I wanted to shed burdens, to pare away what was unnecessary. A process that was literal, in the sense of constantly leaving behind anything extraneous to my needs, and metaphorical, or perhaps metaphysical, in the sense of ridding myself of mental baggage … It was something to do with letting go of boundary … and a sense of merging with everything around me* … (pp.259–260)

‘The camel lady’ – as Robyn came to be universally known – was, and always has been, reluctant to involve herself in publicity. She had come to the desert to live sparingly, to take control of her life – ‘disconnecting’ herself from what she perceived as passé, conformist and ultimately unfulfilling. These are feelings repeatedly echoed in her book – choosing adventure over convention at a time when the debates over roles of women in Australian society were only in their infancy. The desert spoke of space, wind, fire and air, purity and delicious freedom. She discovered self-sufficiency and resilience, her lowest ebb coming with the death of her closest companion, her beloved dog Diggity, killed by strychnine bait. There were also days when the reality of dying of thirst or heat exhaustion, or losing her way, were terrifying realities. To her annoyance, word leaked out about her journey and she became headline news, and the frequent intrusions of photographer Rick Smolan – who was assigned to photograph and record her trek – became an irritant; images of her bathing with her camels in the turquoise blue of the Indian Ocean objectified her, she complained. She wrote *Tracks* believing that the book might shield her from the publicity. It only intensified it. She came to personify the solo adventurer, a feminist figure and romantic symbol of the desert. *Tracks* cemented the myth of ‘the camel lady’. The true Davidson – introverted, restive, searching – represented anything but. The invasion of her personal space by public fascination roused her to take up a nomadic journey again, travelling again with camels in India, which she wrote about in *Desert Places*.

For a detailed insight into the character of our protagonist, read the interview she gave to online journalist Anna Krien in ‘Robyn Davidson is a Nomad’ at [http://www.dumbofeather.com/conversation/robyn-davidson-is-a-nomad/](http://www.dumbofeather.com/conversation/robyn-davidson-is-a-nomad/).

Now a major Australian film, *Tracks* (2013) is directed by John Curran and stars acclaimed Australian actress Mia Wasikowska.

A succinct portrayal of some of the more prominently drawn characters in the book:

- A restructuring of the storyline to eclipse and strengthen Robyn’s presence as the focal point of the story;
- A ‘subtext’ which intends to more fully explain Robyn’s predilection for solitude;
- Only passing references to Robyn’s responses to, and observations of, Indigenous Australian culture and ‘white’ outback Australia’s reputation for chauvinism and a number of other unpleasant traits.

As the director reflects, ‘the book is first-person and very interior and obviously the film wasn’t going to be that … [Robyn] left it up to me to project my own ideas into it.’

**Study guide aims**

- To acquaint us with the storyline, characterisation and cinematic elements of *Tracks*;
- To draw comparisons between the original text and the film version;
- To examine the issues raised by the film and consider its contemporary relevance;
- To link the film to appropriate areas of study as a supplementary text.

*Tracks* is the first film to be invited to screen in competition at all three international fall festivals: the Venice International Film Festival, Telluride Film Festival and Toronto International Film Festival.

can be observed in her portrayal by Mia Wasikowska: her strong sense of independence and self-reliance, her love of family but preference for solitude, her dislike of being in the spotlight, her love of animals and her principled defense of Indigenous Australians. However, with all book-to-screen projects, a director must make decisions on what to include and what to remove from the original text – and indeed, decide if a page-to-cinema-screen adaptation may require extra elements. We will examine these structural, scripting and adaptational elements later in this study guide, but in brief, the major features you will quickly observe in the film version of *Tracks* that differ from the written text are:

- The exclusion of a number of characters in the written text;
- A succinct portrayal of some of the more prominently drawn characters in the book;
- A restructuring of the storyline to eclipse and strengthen Robyn’s presence as the focal point of the story;
- A ‘subtext’ which intends to more fully explain Robyn’s predilection for solitude;
- Only passing references to Robyn’s responses to, and observations of, Indigenous Australian culture and ‘white’ outback Australia’s reputation for chauvinism and a number of other unpleasant traits.
Synopsis

Arrival in ‘The Alice’

As we have already observed, our camera acquaints us instantly with the key theme of this film: the tracks that will guide protagonist Robyn Davidson (Mia Wasikowska) when she sets out on her journey. But once the camera has moved to ground level, we then see some very cryptic scenes. In slow motion a little girl in a yellow dress runs away from the camera; she’s carrying a suitcase – what’s going on here? Then we see a taller figure obscured by waves of outback heat; this figure too is running away – from what? These enigmatic instances will recur throughout the film of *Tracks* and as our tale unfolds they will become clear.

‘I was bored of life in the city, its repetitious and half-hearted attempts at jobs and various studies …’ says Robyn in voiceover. She is going to tell us about herself, her motivations and goals as we see her arrive in Alice Springs, one of the remotest towns on earth. It is 1975 and she is a young woman walking into an environment of heat, dust, isolation and truculent, inarticulate locals, but drawn ‘to the purity of the desert’. We listen to her as she reads aloud her letter to *National Geographic Magazine*, outlining her project: ‘I am planning to walk across the desert from Alice Springs to the Indian Ocean, a distance of two thousand miles. The trip will take six to seven months …’.

Robyn doesn’t think she needs humans to accompany her on her travels – just her dog Diggity (graciously played by Special Agent Gibbs) will do – but she knows she needs transport and funds. First, she works in a pub to save for her trip, until she witnesses a local Aboriginal woman being struck violently by the publican; that sends her in search of alternative employment and finding those essential camels.

Apprenticeship with camels

She seeks work and a camel-training apprenticeship at Kurt Posel’s camel farm, a tourist business that requires her to dress in Afghan costume – complete with turban – and take tourists for rides around the area while giving them a talk on the history of the camel in Australia. In return, Kurt Posel (Rainer Bock), who declares ‘your plan is ridiculous’, will teach her to train camels and will sell her two after she has worked for him – without pay – for a year. A hard and unjust bargain, but Robyn knuckles down and gradually begins to know the character of camels as we see her working long hours in the heat and dust, musing in voiceover about her forthcoming journey and thinking of her father, an explorer in his own right, who ‘was happiest on his own out in the bush’. She reflects on the ill-fated explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, who was lost out in the desert and who had carved his name on a tree on her parents’ property.

Robyn sets up a tent for herself, sleeping under the stars at night, enjoying the solitude. One day, while out walking, she comes across an abandoned stone farmhouse that she
claims as her ‘home sweet home’, tacking to one wall her huge map of Australia and visualising the tracks she will take as soon as she is ready. But her solitude is disrupted by the arrival of a garulous and vocal group of friends from the city, introducing her to *National Geographic* photographer Rick Smolan (Adam Driver). It is he who suggests that Robyn can secure funding for her trip by writing to *National Geographic* and setting out her plan. Initially dismissive of this, she cannot wait for this noisy but well-meaning crowd to leave her to her peace and quiet.

It is at this point that we are introduced subtly to an aspect of Robyn’s past life. She is presented with a cassette tape of ‘an old recording of your mother’s, the one you used to play to your dad’. ‘Stardust’, a popular jazz piece from 1927, fills the soundtrack while Robyn lies awake at night and looks up at the blaze of stars in the Northern Territory night sky. A flashback or a dream of childhood accompanies this, another return to that enigmatic, slow-motion opening scene of the little girl in the yellow dress; in this scene, her father is walking towards her. Behind them, an ambulance is parked outside the family home. Once again, what is all this saying?

Once again, we will have to wait to find out.

The backbreaking toil at Kurt’s camel farm is not paying off. Kurt refuses to keep his end of the bargain, demanding she work even harder; his wife Gladdy (Felicity Steel) has left him and in response to Robyn’s angry objection to his demands he tells her ‘You’re fired’.

**Meeting a mentor**

Robyn is out on her own once more, wheeling her bicycle back to Alice Springs, her dream of a camel trek as far away as ever. We are given, again in voiceover, a little history of the origins of these animals in Australia, how they were imported as beasts of burden but considered obsolete when trains and cars came along, but ‘instead of perishing, they flourished’ in a country very similar to their homeland. ‘Now Australia has the largest feral camel population in the world; I just needed three of them’, she reflects.

Undeterred in her quest, she seeks out Sallay Mahomet (John Flaus), a descendant of a long line of Afghan cameleers, asking for work and training with him. Sallay’s response is that ‘anyone who can put up with Kurt Posel for eight months deserves a chance’. And so begins a fond relationship with Sallay, her mentor, who warns of the dangers of taking on a project such as hers (‘you don’t have to be unlucky to die out there … it’s easy enough to get lost and run out of water …’) but is impressed by her determination and seriousness: ‘you’re an odd girl, Robyn Davidson’.

Part of the work involves rounding up camels for export. Scenes of Robyn seated in the truck that tracks and catches them show her looking intently at their grace, their long-legged strides, their intelligent faces; these animals fascinate her.

And finally, Robyn has her camels: Dookie, Bub, Sally and baby Goliath. ‘Perfectly reliable beasts’, she insists to *National Geographic*, but Sallay warns her: ‘Rule number one: protect your camels’. Wild bull camels are a persistent danger in the outback and Robyn will need to shoot
any that venture near her own. And shortly, there is a reply from National Geographic: they like her idea!

There is, however, one ‘catch’ to her plan. The camel trek will naturally be photographed by National Geographic and this will require a photographer to go along with her; this will be Rick Smolan, whom we met earlier with the noisy, intrusive group of friends who visited her in her old stone farmhouse. This is not what Robyn wants at all; the aim was a solo journey and she is discontent with the compromise she has to make for the sake of her funding.

Before she takes off, however, there is a family visit to her home. Her sister and father arrive courtesy of Sallay’s truck and attempt to hide their dismay at the primitive conditions in which she is living. Their care for her and their worry that her venture is dangerous and possibly foolhardy is evident; so too is her father’s inarticulate response to his determinedly independent daughter.

9 April 1977 – departure

Helen: ‘It’s really reassuring to know my sister won’t be out there all alone.’ Rick: ‘Oh, I’m only meeting up with her four or five times.’ Robyn: ‘Two or three times. Two or three.’

With a parting gift of a rifle from Sallay, Robyn embarks with her camels, laden with gear. Her journey shown in tracks across a full-screen map, she begins her walk to Ayers Rock – known today by its ancient name, Uluru. Many iconic scenes of the vast and isolated landscape – its colours, its sunsets, its solitude – are interspersed with intermittent, almost daily arrivals of Rick the photographer, with the radio playing loudly in his Land Rover and his persistent one-way conversations – an annoying intrusion. The camera’s use of wide-angle shots ranges across the immensity of the Australian interior, with Robyn, Rick, the camels, even the Land Rover reduced to tiny, insignificant figures in a vast, indifferent landscape. Taking shots of her doing many things that she does not ordinarily do – posing as riding on her camels (she walks rather than rides, the camels being laden with equipment) finally leads her to query in exasperation: ‘What about honest journalism?’ Rick is gentlemanly, unfazed and rather puzzled about this eccentric reaction to the publicity this will bring her – exactly what Robyn does not want.

Memories will intrude

Robyn and Rick share a fireside evening, and a truculent Robyn makes it quite clear she does not want to engage in chit-chat about her past life despite Rick’s urgings. She rebuts his observation that her father was an explorer, and in reply to his question ‘What about your mum?’ she answers ‘I hardly remember her’. Further urging, ‘well, what happened to her?’ produces the shocking answer delivered casually: ‘She hung herself.’ This, of course, stuns Rick into silence and sleep. And now we have another of those recurring dreams that act as a flashback to Robyn’s childhood. In that slow-motion dream, her father walks towards a child version of her. Ambulance officers walk inside the family home in the background, ‘Stardust’ is faintly heard.

‘A ludicrous, pointless farce’

Robyn’s patience with Rick’s well-meant but garrulous presence is wearing thin, and when the campsite is struck with a massive sandstorm that threatens to wreck her equipment she loses her temper, yelling at him to ‘f – off!’ when he attempts to actually take a photograph of this near disaster. She is desolate at the thought that her idealised journey, in which she could simply enjoy the beauty of the desert and the unconditional company of her animals, has become nothing more than a magazine spread. ‘I load a pile of junk, I walk twenty miles, I unload a pile of junk and you just stand around like some idiot taking pictures of me! I can’t do it any more!’ She is distraught. But Rick is a gentle comforter and recognises what must, under the surface, be more loneliness than anything else. After spending the night together, Robyn and he agree to make the photo-shoots at much longer intervals. They will meet again in five weeks.

Day 61 – Arrival at Docker River

Swimming naked in a bore, Robyn
relaxes and enjoys her own space. But there is always a problem of survival out here in the desert: the camels have taken off, lost to her, meaning she will need to walk for hours to locate them – and when she does, she is so relieved and so angry with their behaviour that she beats them furiously, then of course realises that they are just animals after all. Today is the day she will walk into the Aboriginal settlement of Docker River. And here is Rick to welcome her and, of course, take pictures – warned by the ‘white’ community adviser Geoff (Bryan Probets) that the local people don’t particularly like being photographed. Annoyed with this, Robyn is even further embarrassed at the sight of two beds made up for them as if they are a committed couple. During the night, Robyn is awakened at the sound of crying, as if someone were grieving, and notices that Rick’s bed is empty. Insensitively and perhaps unknowingly, he has sneaked out to photograph ‘sacred business’. As a result, Robyn’s need for a tribal elder to guide her on the next phase of her journey – for it will be through country crowded with sacred sites – is refused by an angry advisor: ‘It seems your boyfriend was seen taking pictures of secret business; the answer is no.’ ‘It looks like we’re taking the long way, Bub,’ murmurs Robyn to her lead camel.

From Docker River to Pipalyatjara

There is an uneasy tension in the air as Robyn sets off once again, and in time we become aware of what the problem is: bull camels on the horizon. They are a terrifying threat to Robyn’s animals and she needs to disperse them. Sallay’s reminder comes back to her in voiceover and she readies her rifle to shoot. Two are dispatched and now they can proceed with safety to find Glendle – ‘the last white man until Warburton’.

The heat, the overpowering grind of daily walking and keeping to her schedule finds Robyn physically drained, treading in a trance-like state in the sheer effort of placing one foot before the other, walking in her own shadow over a barren and stony landscape. Her memory once again returns to her childhood, where she follows her pet dog, Goldie. Making overnight camp at a river, she is at last relieved of her exhaustion as the camels, who are fast growing into her closest companions, drink peacefully. On the horizon, four Indigenous men arrive in a truck and share an evening meal of kangaroo with her, inquiring after her next stop – the ocean – and the track she will take to get there. ‘Too long way for you,’ they warn her; the alternative will be shorter, but will also be through ‘sacred country’ and she will ‘need an old fella’ – a knowledgeable Indigenous elder – to accompany her. This is how Robyn comes to travel with Mr Eddy (Rolley Mintuma), an invaluable source of language and guidance. Garrulous and sociable – but only in his own language – Mr. Eddy leads her through his country and they strike up a friendship based on gesture and a little of each other’s language. Finally, they arrive at Glendle’s eccentric home – an old caravan surrounded by obscure junk. Glendle himself (Tim Rogers) appears at first rather dishevelled and strange, but in conversation – which Robyn relishes because she has not spoken English to anyone for so many days – she releases all her pent-up annoyance at the intrusiveness of ‘nice people’ whose ‘hopeless romantic notions’ have intervened in her trip: ‘I can deal with pigs really easily, but nice people confound me,’ she concludes. ‘Words are overrated,’ declares Glendle wryly. We can tell that this unusual man really appreciates her company even though he knows it is temporary.

En route to Warburton

On the strength of a new pair of shoes, Eddy decides he will accompany
her to the next outpost, Warburton, entertaining her with stories and comments on the landscape that, despite the language barrier, are fun to hear. Scenes of the trek are shown through a blurred lens to emphasise the mirage created by the powerful midday heat.

Into the story come various irritations – Goliath the camel finds the sand too how for his feet and needs to have ‘socks’ made for him out of sacking; a group of unpleasant tourists turn up, eager to take photos of the ‘camel lady’. Their outrageous response to Mr Eddy sees Robyn turn on them angrily, while Eddy on the other hand scares them off, playing at being an ignorant fool, demanding ‘Give me money! Give me money!’ Unnerved, they back off and disperse. Robyn and Eddy share a conspiratorial smile as Eddy pockets the money.

‘Never cut kangaroo meat!’

This is one of Mr Eddy’s gravest warnings to Robyn; such an act will result in a terrible consequence. As they continue their journey, we are witness to the harshness of the land in the many deserted farmhouses, people living in old abandoned cars, skeletons of dead cattle; the frequent droughts have seen off many a settler. The next two months of the trek will be through waterless, empty desert; Mr. Eddy is insistent that a guide goes with her, but Robyn really wants to go this alone. Rick, turning up with a gift for Mr. Eddy – a new rifle – promises to leave supplies of water along her tracks, declaring what she has often already said about herself: ‘I think you have a problem with people.’

On to Wiluna – and nearly lost

Putting ever-growing distance between herself and civilisation – between the old Robyn and the new one she is moving towards – those vague, obscure tracks evaporate, leaving nothing in camera close-up but cracked, dry land to walk across. Terrified, she discovers she has lost her compass, a gift from her father, recalled in flashback as he tells her it was a gift from his wife. Desperately, she embarks on a search, moving away from her camels and searching through emergent scrub and spinifex. Finally she locates it lying on the path, but now she cannot find her way back to the camels! Cleverly, she orders Diggity to ‘go home!’, hoping that her canine instinct will locate the animals – and she is right. Now Robyn takes to the Gunbarrel Highway, travelling into a glorious sunset.

Day 124

The water supply is running out. Walking with her head covered against the heat, we see close-ups of Robyn’s sunburnt, dirt-encrusted face and her sandalled feet. Her bare back, peeling and blistered as she walks naked, shows us how long she has been out here. Greatly relieved, she locates the jerry can of water that the loyal Rick has promised he will deposit at various points along the track. Possibly hallucinating at night, she thinks a particularly eccentric motorcyclist has arrived at her campfire to talk about his own personal journey across the desert. But is this a dream?

Dreams explained

Wandering past yet another scene of abandoned property and dead cattle, in another nearly dream-like moment, Robyn – filthy, exhausted and possibly at the end of her reserves of strength – approaches a farmhouse where Mr and Mrs Ward (Edwin Hodgeman and Carol Burns) live, a kindly old couple who take her in and lovingly look after her. The scene is particularly moving and powerful as it demonstrates the other side to the Australian character in contrast to the rude, ignorant and intrusive gawkers who have plagued her life on her trek, and the often crass, racist and violent residents of Alice Springs. This kindly couple represent
a kind of outback civility and generosity that does not pry into her trip nor intrude on her privacy; rather, Mrs Ward bathes her and cleans her up, providing her with a clean bed for the night after a game of Scrabble. These scenes are of an almost lost ‘other world’: 78rpm records on the old record player, old photographs ranged along the piano and oil lamps lighting the rooms. This will take her back in her dreams to her own childhood and she dreams she sees her father sitting in a corner of the room, telling her that her mother is dead and that she will have to go and live with her aunt. Her beloved golden Labrador, Goldie, sits next to her father; he cannot go with her and will have to be put down, her father says sadly. By now much of Robyn’s sad childhood is explained, and we can now perhaps further understand that sense of disconnection from human interaction that has become part and parcel of her identity.

**Faithful Diggity meets her end**

Bidding a grateful and fond goodbye to the Wards, Robyn re-embarks on her travels, and on the first night she camps out, the worst disaster of the entire trip occurs. Diggity runs off into the dark and when Robyn goes to find her she discovers she has been poisoned by strychnine bait. Horrified, she knows there is no cure for this and she is forced to shoot her to put her out of her suffering. Heartbroken, she can almost not bear the thought of going on, and dreaming at night once more we are taken back to those opening scenes of the film – but this time the scene is filled out further for us. The child Robyn, carrying her suitcase to her aunt’s waiting car, is pursued by her beloved Goldie, whom she is imploring to go back to her father, because she cannot take him with her. Indifferent to circumstances around her, she sleeps late and even ignores a huge snake that slithers across her as she lies in her sleeping bag, too unhappy to get up.

**Hiding from view**

Still being pursued by tourists, Robyn hides out in the spinifex as trucks and cars roll up to her campsite, calling out for ‘the camel lady’ and denying her any peace, all feeding off the sensationalism of her trip and failing to understand the real motivation that inspired her. ‘Go away!’ shouts the tormented Robyn; it appears that newspapers around the world are fascinated with her trip, to which news she retorts ‘I should never have started it!’. Finally Rick arrives. Desperate, she declares her grief and pain – ‘I’m so alone’ – to which Rick replies, surprisingly, ‘we all are’.

Rick’s understanding of this prickly and complex young woman seems to have paid off; the next morning Robyn awakes to find herself alone and with renewed strength, she takes to the last leg of her journey, this one across a massive sandy desert – with no tracks to follow.

**The end and the arrival**

Finally, journey’s end – the shore of the Indian Ocean – is reached, and there is Rick, of course, to photograph Robyn as she swims in the striking blue waters and takes her camels for a well-earned dip. Diving down into the depths, we are perhaps being introduced to another kind of landscape, this one completely trackless and equally unfathomable – the ocean.

The screen now tells us that ‘Robyn wrote the article that accompanied Rick’s pictures’ and that ‘its overwhelming response inspired her to expand it into the international bestseller – *Tracks*’.

The closing credits to this extraordinary film come with photographs from the original *National Geographic* shoot of Robyn Davidson herself, and we can see clearly how faithful to the book the director has been in his portrayal of characters, scenes and events.

*Tracks*, as we have seen, is indeed an iconic tale of self-discovery, set against one of the wildest, most merciless and most breathtaking backdrops on the planet.
Robyn Davidson

Biography of the author

Robyn Davidson was born on a cattle property in Queensland, Australia. She attended boarding school at Saint Margaret’s Girls School in Brisbane, gaining two scholarships in 1966, one to the Brisbane Conservatorium of Music.

She turned down those scholarships and, between 1967 and 1972, took odd jobs while studying part-time at various institutions – a year of zoology and philosophy at The University of Queensland, a year of piano studies at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and two years of Japanese language at The University of Queensland.

In the mid 1970s, she went to Alice Springs in the Northern Territory to prepare for a journey to the west coast with camels. She left Alice Springs at the beginning of 1977 and travelled alone across 1700 miles of desert, reaching the west coast nine months later.

The story of that journey was published first in National Geographic Magazine in 1978, then by the London Sunday Times the following year. It was National Geographic’s most popular cover for a number of years. The story was syndicated to approximately ninety magazines around the world, as their cover stories. Later, she wrote the book Tracks, which was published in 1981 by Jonathan Cape in the U.K. and Pantheon in the USA. Tracks has never been out of print.

Tracks was subsequently translated into eighteen languages and was a bestseller in the UK, Australia, USA, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal and Sweden. For Tracks, Robyn Davidson won the Blind Society Award and travel literature’s prestigious Thomas Cook Travel Book Award – the only woman ever to have done so.

From 1980 to 1986, Robyn Davidson travelled a great deal, and her writing was published in Bunte, Geo, Sterne, Granta, National Geographic and Traveler Magazine. Her literary essays, columns and reviews appeared in English American and Australian newspapers and journals including The Times Literary Supplement, The Sunday Telegraph, The Times, The Guardian, Granta, Nation Review, The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald. Her writing has been included in Best Australian Essays and Best Australian Stories, as well as many anthologies.

Robyn Davidson wrote the script for a feature film, Mail Order Bride (Stephen Wallace, 1987), commissioned and produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in 1984. It won the Penguin Award for Best Script. She also researched and wrote the outlines for three feature-length documentaries on Aborigines, commissioned by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), and worked as a script consultant for the Australian Film Commission.

In 1987, Australia: Beyond the Dreamtime was published by BBC Books. Thomas Keneally and Patsy Adam-Smith contributed the first two parts, and Robyn Davidson wrote the third part titled ‘The Mythological Crucible’ – a history of Australia from 1950 until the country’s Bicentennial.

In 1988, a collection of her essays, Travelling Light, was published by Collins Australia. She received a grant from the Australia Literature Board to write a novel. That year, the British Council sent her to the United Arab Emirates to give a series of lectures.

Robyn Davidson’s novel Ancestors was published by Jonathan Cape in the UK and Simon and Schuster in the USA in 1989. The book was shortlisted for the Premier’s Award in Australia. It has since been translated into three languages.

From 1990 to 1992, she travelled through north-west India with a caste of pastoral nomads – the Rabari. Desert Places chronicles those two years. It was published in 1996 by Viking Penguin in both the UK and the USA and was on the bestseller lists in Australia for a year. It was shortlisted for the Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in the UK and has been translated into five languages.
She is, at present, working on a fictionalised memoir titled *Self Portrait with Imaginary Mother*, to be published by Bloomsbury. A section of that work in progress has been published by *The Bulletin* and *Brick Magazine*.

*Tracks* and *Desert Places* have been taught in universities and schools in the UK, Germany and Australia.

Robyn Davidson has made many radio and television appearances and been invited to literary festivals in Australia, America, Canada and the UK.

She has begun the research for a series of documentary films on the fate of traditional forms of nomadism in the modern world. She spent several weeks travelling through Tibet and staying with nomads – initial field research for that project. Her essay about Tibet was published in *Best Australian Essays*.

During 2004, she was a Visiting Scholar with the Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, attached to the Department of Social Anthropology, Cambridge University. She is a Fellow of Clare Hall College, Cambridge.

She won a Wingate Scholarship to further her field research in Nepal for the Nomads project. The Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the Australian National University invited her to continue her research with them, sponsoring her for an HC Coombes Fellowship for the first half of 2005.

She has also received fellowships from the University of Melbourne and the Australian National Museum. She won the Blazey Award for work on her current memoir.

Robyn Davidson lives in Australia and India.

**Rick Smolan**

**National Geographic photographer**

Rick Smolan is a former *Time*, *Life* and *National Geographic* photographer who has a great affinity for Australia. One of his first assignments was spending a few days photographing the then Prime Minister of Australia, Malcolm Fraser, in Japan for *Time*. Shortly after, while on assignment in Alice Springs, he met Robyn Davidson and was assigned by National Geographic to document her now-legendary trek. After Robyn’s journey became one of the most celebrated stories in the magazine’s history, he published a much wider range of his inspiring photos from the trip in his book *From Alice to Ocean: Alone Across the Outback*. He then returned to Australia to create the innovative project *A Day in the Life of Australia*, which was so successful it went on to launch the celebrated international series for which he is best known.

Today, with more than five million copies of his books in print, Smolan directs massive global crowdsourced projects that combine creative storytelling with state-of-the-art technology. Many of his books have appeared on *The New York Times* bestseller lists and have been featured on the covers of *Fortune*, *Time* and hundreds of other publications around the globe.

Smolan’s other works include *Passage to Vietnam*, which proved the storytelling powers of interactive CD-ROMs, *24 Hours in Cyberspace*, which took a snapshot of the infant internet, and *One Digital Day*, which explores the impact of the microprocessor on civilisation. *AMERICA 24/7*, a *New York Times* bestseller, enabled thousands of Americans to create a national family album during one ordinary week, and was featured by Oprah Winfrey as one of her ‘Favorite Things’.

Smolan’s numerous projects include *The Obama Time Capsule*, *America at Home*, *UK at Home*, *Blue Planet Run*, *The Power to Heal* and *Medicine’s Great Journey*.

In the fall of 2012, Smolan released *The Human Face of Big Data*, focusing on how the planet is developing a nervous system via our new ability to collect, analyse, triangulate and visualise vast amounts of data in real time.

*Fortune* magazine describes Smolan’s production company, Against All Odds Productions, as ‘One of the 25 Coolest Companies in America’.
Making the film – Production crew & cast

Adaptation and transformation

While the filmmakers knew they had a source of fantastic material in Robyn’s book, it was a long adaptation process, which the author herself assisted. Robyn was consulted on the film from the early stages, but was always happy for the film to be its own creative work:

Obviously I don’t think it’s going to be a direct rendition of my book, and I think any writer who thinks the film is going to be totally faithful to the book, is naive. It’s their vision, and I’m happy with that.

Robyn was very trusting in the Tracks production and recalls:

I first talked to Emile Sherman, the producer, and I just liked him, I just thought he was terrific. But the thing that really cinched it for me was Mia Wasikowska. I’d always wanted her and I’d said to both John and Emile, ‘If we can get Mia that would make me very happy,’ and I certainly haven’t been disappointed …

Director John Curran and Producers Emile Sherman and Iain Canning reflect that:

… the book is an incredible character study but in some ways … we had to look deeper into … the silences in the book and the silences in a lot of the things that Robyn said in online interviews … to go deeper into Robyn as a character and her past …

Robyn’s trust in the filmmakers was rewarded when the film made history by becoming the first Australian film to ever be selected to screen in competition at all three prestigious Fall film festivals – Venice, Toronto and Telluride.

All producers dream of getting into just one of these festivals but we never dreamed we’d get into all three. It is a great testament to the international appeal of Robyn’s story.

– Producer Emile Sherman

Director John Curran

Born in the USA, John Curran studied illustration and design at Syracuse University, New York, then worked as an illustrator, graphic designer and production designer in Manhattan before moving to Sydney, Australia in 1986, where he worked on television commercials and short films.

His debut feature film, the 1998 drama Praise, was nominated for the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Direction and won the Film Critics Circle of Australia Award for Best Director and the International Critics’ Award at the Toronto International Film Festival. His films include We Don’t Live Here Anymore (2004), The Painted Veil (2006) and Stone (2010). John is currently developing and is set to direct his first television mini-series titled Undaunted Courage, which tells the story of explorers Lewis and Clark.

Tracks was a story John had heard of for many years. He recalls:

I was twenty-four and I decided to come to Australia and I can’t really remember a reason why I did that. I did some backpacking around and I was introduced to the book back then. I didn’t read it then but I knew what it was about. Then years ago it struck me that the book and (Robyn’s) journey really captured a time, a place and an experience that I felt like I had a lot of affinity for; the idea of doing something dramatic in your life when you’re feeling a bit stuck. It resonated with me because at the same age I’d kind of done the same thing when I decided to come to Australia.

John wanted more than anything to ‘do a film where the landscape itself was a character in the film’. In preparation for the making of Tracks, John and his crew researched many other films from the 1970s, such as Walkabout (Nicolas Roeg, 1971) and Wake in Fright (Ted Kotcheff, 1971), and studied paintings by Fred Williams, Sidney Nolan and other Australian landscape painters. Naturally, a great deal of research was made at specific desert locations.

Producers Emile Sherman and Iain Canning

Academy Award–winning producer Emile Sherman founded See-Saw Films with Iain Canning in 2008. See-Saw is a UK and Australian company specialising in international film and television. Recent productions include Jane Campion’s Emmy Award–nominated six-part television series Top Of The Lake and the multi–Academy Award–winning The King’s Speech (Tom Hooper, 2010), starring Colin Firth, Geoffrey Rush and Helena Bonham Carter. See-Saw followed The King’s Speech with Steve McQueen’s award-winning Shame (2011), starring Michael Fassbender and Carey Mulligan.


Prior to founding See-Saw, Canning executive-produced the award-winning films Hunger (Steve McQueen, 2008) and Control (Anton Corbijn, 2007). Hunger won the Camera d’Or at the 2008 Cannes Film Festival and the BAFTA Carl Foreman Award.

Costume Designer Mariot Kerr and Production Designer Melinda Doring

Mariot Kerr is a costume designer who has been working in the Australian film industry for over fifteen years. She has been part of the costume department for feature films such as Australian Rules, Look Both Ways, Black And White (Craig Lahiff, 2002), Wolf Creek (Greg Mclean, 2005) and Oranges and Sunshine (Jim Loach).

One of the most important people who
collaborates with the director is the production designer. These two work closely to perfect all of the aspects of the ‘mise en scène’ considerable amount of time before the actual photography even begins. The production designer is generally responsible for the overall look of the movie, leading various departments that are in charge of individual sets, locations, props, and costumes, among other things.

The talents of production designer Melinda Doring and costume designer Mariot Kerr helped complete the natural look of the film and the muted colour palette that the director required. As John Curran explains,

“It was all in the details, and textures and colours, and I think both Melinda and Mariot bought into the overall palette that I was looking for. And it’s a period piece, so they both had to be really specific to the period and draw from it in a way that was authentic but still suited our overall look.

Mariot Kerr says,

“We’ve kept it as subdued as possible, taking the colours from the desert itself – all the reds and ochres and browns but also the beautiful blues and violets and greens that you see out there.

For authenticity, the fashion of the time was something else to consider: ‘It’s set in 1975, 1977, 1978, but we’re not trying to do a fashion documentary from that time,’ says Melinda Dorling.

Director of Photography Mandy Walker

An indispensable element of production, Tracks, utilised one of Australia’s most acclaimed and in-demand cinematographers. Prior to Tracks, Mandy showed her impressive ability to capture the incredible beauty of remote Australian landscapes in Baz Luhrmann’s Australia, for which she won the Hollywood Film Award for Cinematographer of the Year.

It’s more keeping the essence of the real Robyn Davidson and what she wore, which is a combination of the practicality and the comfort and mix it up with a bit of her bohemian past as well.

CAST IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

YOUNG ROBYN Lily Pearl
ROBYN DAVIDSON Mia Wasikowska
DIGGITY Special Agent Gibbs
ALICE SPRINGS PUBLICAN Philip Dodd
PUBLICAN’S WIFE Fiona Press
KURT POSEL Rainer Bock
GLADDY POSEL Felicity Steel
RICK SMOLAN Adam Driver
SALLAY MAHOMET John Flaus
MARG (ROBYN’S SISTER) Emma Booth
JENNY (ROBYN’S FRIEND) Jessica Tiver
POP (ROBYN’S FATHER) Robert Coleby
MR EDDY Rolley Mintuma
GEOFF (DOCKER RIVER SETTLEMENT ADMINISTRATOR) Bryan Proberts
GLENDLE Tim Rogers
MRS WARD Carol Burns
MR WARD Edwin Hodgeman

Mia Wasikowska is a multi-talented star in the Australian film industry with an acclaimed reputation both at home and abroad. Her first feature film role in her native Australia was in Suburban Mayhem (Paul Goldman, 2006), for which she was nominated for an AFI Young Actor’s Award. Her international debut came with her role in the acclaimed HBO drama series In Treatment in 2008.

Mia has most recently starred in the acclaimed psychological thriller Stoker (2013) from iconic Korean director Park Chan-wook and co-starring Nicole Kidman and Matthew Goode. Other recent roles include Richard Ayoade’s The Double (2013), with Jesse Eisenberg, and Jim Jarmusch’s 2013 Cannes Film Festival entry Only Lovers Left Alive (2013) with Tom Hiddleston and Tilda Swinton. In 2011, Mia starred in the Oscar-nominated Jane Eyre (Cary Fukunaga, 2011), opposite Michael Fassbender, Jamie Bell and Dame Judi Dench. Also in 2011, she starred in the three-time Oscar-nominated film Albert Nobbs (Rodrigo Garcia, 2011) with Glenn Close, and was announced as one of Time magazine’s ‘100 Most Influential People in the World’ for that year.

A multi-talented artist, Mia recently made her film directorial debut with a short film as part of the anthology film The Turning (various directors, 2013), based on the collection of short stories by Tim Winton. As a still photographer, Mia was a finalist in the Australian National Photographic Portrait Prize 2011 for an image she took of Jamie Bell on the set of Jane Eyre.
possible choice for the role and Robyn Davidson herself championed the choice, having already seen her work. Mia declares she was instantly attracted to the character of Robyn and she and the director collaborated on many elements of production.

Their mutual affection for the book tended to be something of an encumbrance at first, given that the script readjusts the written text at a number of levels; the ‘key’ to ‘unlocking the film lay in letting go of the book but keeping the essence … or the core of who [Robyn] was’.

Acclaimed Time, Life and National Geographic photographer Rick Smolan needed to be sensitively cast for Tracks, appearing as he does as one of the few significant characters in the story. John Curran had a very clear idea of the kind of person required to play Rick:

He needed to have a sort of physical and social awkwardness but be very intelligent and very likeable. He needed to be a fast talker with a lot of energy … an idiosyncratic character … an American …

Named one of Variety’s ‘Ten Actors to Watch’ in 2012, rapidly rising star Adam Driver is a graduate of the prestigious Juilliard School in New York.

His recent film credits include The Coen Brothers’ Cannes Grand Jury Prize–winning Inside Llewyn Davis (2013) and Noah Baumbach’s successful New York comedy Frances Ha (Noah Baumbach, 2012), in which he starred alongside co-writer and lead Greta Gerwig. He has worked with multi-Oscar-winning directors Clint Eastwood in J. Edgar (2011) and Steven Spielberg in the twelve-time Oscar-nominated Lincoln (2012).

His roles on Broadway include Man and Boy, starring Frank Langella, and Mrs. Warren’s Profession, in which he starred alongside Sally Hawkins.

In addition to his acting career, Driver, a former fully-trained Marine, is a co-founder of the not-for-profit Arts in the Armed Forces that intends to bridge the gap between the military and the performing arts communities by producing a series of free performances of monologues, scenes, staged readings and music for a mixed military and civilian audience.

Just as Adam Driver was found in New York to play New Yorker Rick Smolan, Rolley Minutra came from the same area of Australia as the real Mr Eddy. Rolley is from the Mutitjulu community near Uluru and knows Mr Eddy’s family. Like Mr Eddy, Rolley is a respected Elder and custodian of his culture and his first language is Pitjantjatjara. He is a traditional dancer and singer, an artist, craftsman and nankari (traditional doctor). Long before the film, Rolley had heard stories of Robyn’s journey that are still told in many of the Indigenous communities that she visited.

Rolley previously acted in the acclaimed two-part TV drama Through My Eyes: The Lindy Chamberlain Story starring Miranda Otto, nominated for an AFI for Best Tele-feature or Mini Series in 2005, and has appeared in numerous documentaries.

The aggressive Austrian émigré and camel-breeder Kurt Posel introduces Robyn to much of what is negative about non-Indigenous society in the Northern Territory; his brief presence illustrates how the hard life of the outback can sour an individual. Again, the director selected a citizen of the country from which the original Kurt came.

Having begun his successful career in German theatre and film, Rainer Bock first garnered international acclaim with his role in Michael Haneke’s masterpiece The White Ribbon (2009), which saw him nominated for the 2010 German Film Award for Best Supporting Actor. He has appeared in major international features including Quentin Tarantino’s Inglorious Basterds (2009) and War Horse (Steven Spielberg, 2011). He continues to star in German film, television and theatre.

While a tough taskmaster, Sallay is the antithesis of Kurt Posel; he is thoughtful and fair; the character played by John Flaus represents that kind of decent outback individual. John Flaus is a well-known and admired artist with a colorful list of acting credits spanning over forty years in film, television, theatre and radio. His major roles range from parts in films including The Castle (Rob Sitch, 1997) and Spotswood (Mark Joffe, 1992), as well as TV shows including Jack Irish, Seachange and Blue Heelers.

A true ‘Renaissance man’ in his portfolio of artistic endeavors, Tim Rogers has been a songwriter and lead singer for rock/lounge act You Am I for almost twenty years. He has a cabaret show called Saligia, has been employed by the Malthouse Theatre for their 2009 production of Woyzeck, writes for The Age newspaper and The Monthly magazine and has appeared in the TV series The Time Of Our Lives.

For further information about the full cast, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2167266/fullcredits?ref_=tt_ov_st_sm>. 
Cinematic Techniques

1. Mise en scène

When applied to the cinema, mise en scène refers to everything that appears before the camera and its arrangement – composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, sounds and lighting. The mise en scène – along with the cinematography and editing of a film – influence the verisimilitude of a film in the eyes of its viewers. The various elements of design help express a film’s vision by generating a sense of time and space, as well as setting a mood and sometimes suggesting a character’s state of mind.

Elements of design – the use of film

Tracks was shot on film as a medium, rather than the current digital technologies of filmmaking; this was a directorial choice. Choosing this so-called ‘dying medium’ was a design decision because of film’s ‘richness’ and ‘classical look’.

Cinematography – creating the atmosphere

We often see scenes of the intense heat of the outback, and to reinforce this, the camera uses a filter that will warp and distort the shot as if we are looking through heatwaves.

The use of music

Although Robyn’s journey took place in the 1970s, the approach to scoring the film reflected the timeless nature of the landscape and of her experience, far removed from society. Brooklyn-based composer and double bassist Garth Stevenson was brought on to the film; as a musician raised in the mountains of Western Canada, nature had long been the primary inspiration and common thread between his life and music, a connection that would be crucial for Tracks. Director John Curran was also drawn to his experimental approach to recording the double bass and in their initial conversations they discussed how this would apply to other instruments.

It was Garth’s double bass and its deep resonant sound that really was key to capturing the awesomeness of the desert, the literal dryness of sound in the desert for a more reverberant openness that would depict the vastness of the landscape most accurately.

In addition to the double bass, further instruments were added with careful consideration, as Garth explains:

Piano was a present instrument in Robyn Davidson’s childhood, which gave it added significance as a leading voice in the score. Flute was chosen as a sound that could float atop the denseness of the string and piano layers while capture a sound of youthful femininity.

As well as communicating the feel of the desert environment, the music in the film is also key to communicating much of Robyn’s emotional journey throughout the film. As Garth says,

There is a darkness in Robyn’s past that she carries with her, and there is also a lightness and hopefulness in the journey that she creates for herself. The music walks this line with her from the start to end of the film.

The location and sets

Tracks was shot in the deserts of South Australia and the Northern Territory in October/November, the beginning of the hot season. Shooting in remote locations always has its challenges, with the production team encountering bushfires, floods and at one time – unbelievably and unseasonably – snow. The locations were chosen to complement the storyline and to emphasise the changing desert landscapes through which Robyn treks. Areas in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia – Parchilna, Leigh Creek, Beltana Station, Quorn – doubled for outback scenes and recreations of Alice Springs circa 1970.

Lighting

Lighting plays a significant role in Tracks. Sunsets and dawns are a constant feature, illustrating the daily routine and monotony of Robyn’s journey and the vastness of the outback landscape. Fireside night shots accentuate the need for warmth at night in the
desert and the nightscape of the stars again emphasises the diminutiveness of man in the environment. Shadows need to be created to show the harshness of the sun and the only shade being produced is from the human being walking through the scene.

2. Camera angles – wide-angle, close-up, tracking

Aerial shots

In filmmaking, shot compositions, sizes and angles enhance the way the director tells the story. A close-up shot is taken when two actors are talking if the conversation is an intimate one. A wide or ‘establishing’ film shot may be appropriate to show that the actors are surrounded by a barren wasteland.

Our film opens with an aerial shot – sometimes called ‘the God shot’ – looking down on the landscape. When such an angle is employed, subjects on the ground below look smaller and therefore insignificant – and this, of course, is the point; the shot is telling us, asking us, to compare the immensity of the outback landscape and the diminutive figures that inhabit it and the daunting task of trekking across it and how a central character is human and sometimes insignificant. This is Robyn’s world, and her plan to travel through it is ambitious to say the least. Aerial shots are a feature throughout Tracks, reiterating this point.

Wide angle shots

A wide shot reveals where the scene is taking place. Also referred to as a long shot or master shot, a wide shot helps orient the audience. A wide shot also gives the actors room to move within a shot without the camera having to follow them. This technique is often used to illustrate the ‘figures in a landscape’ element in Tracks. The camera moves across the scene, showing us how small and insignificant the individuals are who people this scene.

Medium shots

These are often cut into a wide shot for variation or are used to focus our eyes on the characters who are doing the talking. Kurt Posel, Sallay Mahomet, Glendle, Mr Eddy, all interact with Robyn in dialogue; these shots are the cinematic equivalent of punctuation in a dialogue.

Establishing shots

This is a type of wide shot that can, for example, establish a building from the exterior before the camera cuts to an interior scene. This is most evocatively displayed in the scene where Robyn arrives at the outback, isolated farmhouse of Mr and Mrs Ward. The enormity of the desert surrounding the property and the smallness of the figure of Mrs Ward as she sweeps away the dust establishes for us the toughness of the country – and its residents.

Close-ups

A close-up shot, or single, is usually from above a person’s chest or the nape of the neck to just slightly above the top of the head. If the camera moves in closer so that the actor’s head fills most of the frame, we have a tight close-up. Going in even tighter to a person’s eyes or mouth is an extreme close-up. Close-ups create a sense of intimacy and the feeling that we are involved in the scene. They also reveal emotion in the eyes or the hint of a smile. The director often chooses a close-up to emphasise the intensity of a scene. We see these close-ups in Tracks when Robyn’s exhaustion is weighing upon her as she walks, sunburnt and dizzy with heat through the spinifex or the sand dunes. We are also shown a back view of her in close-up, her sunburn clearly agonising and brutal.

For some useful lessons in the terminology and methods of filmmaking, see <http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/how-film-shots-frame-the-action-in-film-making.html>.

Comparisons and contrasts

What are the differences between the film and the book? What’s similar?

(NB: In all references to Davidson’s written text, the publication used is the 2012 Bloomsbury edition.)

When adapting a written text for the screen, the process always involves making some difficult choices: what people and scenes to include and what to omit; how to convey the timeframe of the written text within the fairly restrictive length of a film; how to make use of the written language – the imagery, the symbolism, the metaphor, the issues; how to portray the
characters. We need to understand that John Curran’s focus in this cinematic version and Robyn Davidson’s focus in her written text differ to some degree, although the essential element – the goal the protagonist has set herself – remains the primary focus.

**Storyline structure**

While *Tracks* – the book – is divided into a series of ‘Books’ detailing the process of Robyn’s arrival in Alice Springs, camel-training, preparations and journey, *Tracks* the film flows freely, focusing on key moments and scenes rather than details. While the director shows Robyn’s journey as a long and arduous undertaking, the number of specific stops along the way are greatly reduced, but given greater dramatic importance.

**Characterisation**

**Robyn, the protagonist**

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**Characterisation**

**Robyn, the protagonist**

*Tracks* – the film – departs from the book in its characterisation of Robyn in:

- **Her humour.** In the book, Robyn is laconic, often grim but always self-deprecating and highly perceptive. From the title of Part 1 of *Tracks*, ‘Alice Sprung’, we are introduced to a wry and keen wit. Descriptions of the ‘benign and beautiful desert at night’ come with counteracting observations:

  the eight-inch-long millipedes’ that crawl into sleeping bags, the ‘stray scorpion … the lonely silhethering of a Joe Blake (rhyning slang for ‘snake’) who may want to cuddle up and get warm … then fang you to death when you wake up … are not much to worry about … (p.112)

  A violent angry camel is ‘like a windmill with teeth’… (p.64).

  Her reference to the iconic Australian singer Slim Dusty is both affectionate and satirical:

  … [the Mt. Isa Rodeo] sees the participants woken at four am to the sound of Slim waking you from a booze-clogged dream … to the more important things in life like bronc-riding, steer-roping and drinking … (p.215)

  Cartographers also come on for a little sledging:

  People who fly in planes and make maps of the area … need glasses, or perhaps were drunk at the time; or perhaps just felt like breaking free of departmental rulings and added a few bits and pieces of imaginative toponography, or even, in some cases, rubbed out a few features in a fit of solitary anarchic vice (p.110).

  Her growing resilience to the antipathy she senses around her in Alice Springs (described as ‘a god-damned hole’) is shown as developing ‘a reinforced concrete strip down my back’ (p.34).

  However, while Robyn’s sense of humour may not be present in his film, John Curran has made the protagonist an equally assertive, courageous and goal-driven character; these aspects of her nature, obvious in the written text, dominate Mia Wasikowska’s portrayal.

- **Robyn’s detailed reflections and observations on the Indigenous Australians.** The written text focuses in detail on this aspect of outback life. It is also addressed in the opening scenes of the film, when Robyn witnesses an Aboriginal woman who walks into the pub and is ejected and beaten by the publican. In the book, this heinous action is performed by the local policeman; the change of character to publican is a directorial choice. In another scene in which Mr Eddy, the tribal elder, is patronised by a foolish tourist, we have another specific reference to the racism prevalent in the outback at the time of writing. But from the very first pages of the written text, Robyn goes into detail about the outback racist view, not too dis-similar from that held by so many city-dwelling Australians in the 1970s.

  … cliched images of stone-age drunks on the dole … and everyone … taught at school that they were not much better than specialized apes, with no culture, no government and no right to existence in a vastly superior white world; aimless wanderers … backward, primitive and stupid … (p.6)

- **Myths (‘Aboriginal people are chronic dole-bludgers’) are dispelled:** fewer blacks receive social services than the whites, despite ten times more unemployment’ (p.46).

- **Indigenous living conditions are described in horrific detail:** Trachoma … diabetes, ear infections, heart trouble and syphilis are just some of the diseases which ravage Aboriginal populations, living without proper housing, medical facilities or correct diet … (p.120).

Robyn includes an observation by Kevin Gilbert, an Indigenous Australian activist and artist, who speaks of ‘a rape of the soul’ of Aboriginal Australia, and yet despite two centuries of brutalisation, the inner beauty, structure and nobility of Indigenous culture remains:

… particular trees, rocks and other natural objects are imbued with enormous religious significance … there is no confusion in the minds of Aboriginal people as to who are the traditional caretakers of country. [There is a] detailed body of knowledge, law and wisdom handed down to people from the dream-time … maintained and kept potent and passed on through generations through enactment of ritual … (p.166).

In her travels through country with Eddie (pp.159–188), Robyn recalls this as ‘a time of delightful calm’ in which he made me notice things I had not noticed before – the land was not wild, but tame, bountiful, benign, giving, as long as you knew how...
Her detailed description of the Indigenous settlements she encounters on her trek. Because Robyn’s journey takes her several months and takes her through a number of different regions of the outback, introducing us often very briefly to the residents who look after her, the director is faced with the decision to ‘cut’ various individuals out of the story in order to film within the fairly restrictive time allowance for a standard-length film. In the film, the Pitjantjatjara people of Areyonga, (p.120), Docker River (pp.140–146) and Pipalyatjara (pp.164–170) are ‘contracted’ to a degree, into the scenes in which Robyn inter-relates with the Indigenous people.

In her written text, Robyn’s lengthy references to Indigenous life are her reflections on the quality of life of the traditional owners and the character of the Indigenous people themselves, their understandable wariness of non-Indigenous people and their horror at having their cultural traditions spied upon, the terrible history of neglect and racism they have suffered, their enduring sense of connection with country, their massive knowledge of their land and the inviolability of land rights legislation. The caregivers from the ‘white’ community who live among the traditional owners and dedicate their lives to these communities – nurses, health workers and teachers – are also given a voice – a strongly protective one.

In the film, John Curran’s focus is on Robyn and the challenge she has set herself; this is what drives the narrative. Nonetheless, we are also able to recognise some of Robyn’s reflections made visual in her obvious enjoyment and respect for ‘Mr Eddy’ as they travel compatibly together – he is one of the few people she can comfortably journey with; John Curran has made Robyn a dedicated friend and, on occasion, a protector of Mr. Eddy.

The critical contrasts provided by references to non-Indigenous people who resided in this part of Australia. With a few notable and admirable exceptions, Robyn’s written text provides readers, from the outset, with an uncompromising view of ‘an aggressive masculine ethic and severe racial tensions’ common to much of the Northern Territory. The pubs are segregated (p.17), ‘the Australian cult of misogyny’ (p.18) is widespread, the Australian male is ‘biased, bigoted, boring and above all, brutal’; to him a mate is anyone who is not a ‘wop, wog, pom, coon, boong, nigger, rice-eye, kyke, chink, Iti, nip, frog, kraut, commie, poofter, slope, wanker, and yes, sheila, chick or bird.’ (p.19) The Indigenous Australian is dismissed as ‘more nuisance value than anything else’ (p.131) and ‘they’ll never be assimilated’ (p.47). Encountering strangers on her travels with Eddie, the ‘boorish, insensitive’ passerby intrudes: one of the men grabbed him by the arm, pushed him into position and said Hey Jacky-Jacky, come and stand along a camel, boy’ (p.178)

(This scene is re-enacted in the film to clever comic effect, with Mr. Eddy winning the day by scaring an interfering tourist into handing over money; both he and Robyn share the joke – and the triumph.)

Comparing Aboriginal society with its ‘white’ equivalent, Robyn writes ‘the one so archetypally paranoid, grasping, destructive, the other so sane’ (p.197). Such reflections cannot be easily incorporated into film, either visually or in dramatic performance; here, as in so many of Robyn’s powerful musings, the written text speaks out most powerfully of these concerns.

George and Lorna (p.248) ‘astonished’ Robyn; to her they are the complete antithesis of the destructive Australian; ‘They came to my rescue,’ she recalls.

They had nothing. No electricity, no money … they shared everything they had … [and] looked after me like a long-lost daughter … remained kind, generous, warm and uncomplaining; they personified the battling bush spirit the best.

This episode of the written text is also movingly enacted in the film version, the solitary couple comfortable in their own company, the
sense of a contented, if isolated life lived well.

- **Robyn's description of the landscape**
  
  John Curran is working with a written text which employs much visual imagery, which he translates into on-screen landscaping; in this respect, both written and film text are particularly compatible. The landscape is filmed in all its beauty and terror as, without doubt, Robyn sees it in her written reflections. Naturally, the written word conveys a more intimate, deeply personal series of observations.

  Robyn writes in lavish detail about the colour, geography and plant-life of the trek; the camera provides us with another painterly version. As already mentioned, Robyn has an original and startling talent for metaphor and simile. The outback is ‘God’s majestic hidey-hole’ (p.4), ‘the drone of blowflies’ is ‘...an anthem for hot Australian afternoons’ (p.38), camels are ‘like great, curious puppies’ (p.14) and her heart ‘felt like a macaw in a canary cage’ (p.116).

  On p.22, Robyn provides us with a ‘broad-brush’ portrait of the amazing beauty and magnetism of the outback:

  **To enter that country is to be choked with dust, suffocated by waves of thrumming heat, and driven to distraction by the ubiquitous Australian fly; it is to be amazed by space and humbled by the most ancient, bony, awesome landscape on the face of the earth. It is to discover the continent’s mythological crucible, the great outback, the never-never, that decrepit desert land of infinite blue air and limitless power... those timeless boulders... that glittering riverbed in the moonlight...**

  We are often presented with glowing prose such as this:

  **the intense hot dark blue of a perennially cloudless sky... patches of burnt bushes sticking up like old crows; feathers from wind-rippled ridges (p.128)**

  The Olgas ‘glowed orange, then red, then iridescent pink, then purple, then turned into a black cut-out, against glowing moonlight.’ And the director, yet again, provides us with many full-screen landscapes of magnificent sunsets, vast desert views enhancing the miniscule figures that attempt to inhabit it, scenes depicting heat mirage and wide tracks of starlit night sky.

**Minor Characters**

The director’s consistent focus is on the journey – both physical and psychological – of the protagonist; therefore, characters given considerable elaboration in the written text are somewhat contracted in the film in order to be more of a backdrop to Robyn’s character. In all instances barring the characters of Rick and Mr Eddy, the detailing contained in the written text is abbreviated on screen.

**The Posels, Kurt and Gladdy**

In significant contrast to the film, the Posels and their farm are drawn in considerable detail in the written text.

The film shows the farm surrounds only briefly, in a haze of dust and decrepitude, while the book has a completely different physical description: (pp.11–31). The farm is...

... a perfect white cottage set among trees and lawns. It was an Austrian chalet in miniature, beautiful, but crazy out there among red boulders and dust devils. The yards were all hand-hewn timber and twisted ropes – the work of a master craftsman. The stables had arches and geraniums... not a thing was out of place... The ranch was fantastic and uncanny perched out there in the middle of the oldest rocks in the world...

Kurt, when Robyn first meets him on page eleven, is...

... dressed in an immaculate white outfit, with an equally crisp white turban. But for his ice-blue eyes, he looked like a bearded, wiry Moor. Standing near him was like being close to a fallen power line – all dangerous, crackling energy... grinning, gap-toothed...

Kurt Posel on-screen is a grubby, poorly dressed, taciturn individual, beaten down psychologically by the tough life he leads – breaking camels, mending equipment, struggling to make a living.

The feature of Kurt that is common in both book and film is his anger at disobedience or ineptitude, although this is far more vocally expressed in the written text.

The book continues to develop the relationship between Kurt and Robyn, whom she calls at one point ‘my demon friend’ who was ‘a wizard with camels’ and ‘a wonderful teacher’ who, she thinks in retrospect, ‘manufactured his own hell, because there were wonderful moments with him, long peaceful rides through the back country and learning to race camels,’ laughing over what Kurt called ‘the terrorists’ – the tourists. It is Kurt who helps Robyn catch and train a pet crow she names Akhnaton – a ‘character’ absent from the film but written about in endearing terms in the book. Of course, as in the film, the relationship ultimately sours when Kurt places ridiculous pressure on Robyn’s workload and it becomes quite clear he has no intention of providing her with her camels.

Gladdy Posel has only a few seconds on screen – a nervous, timid woman possibly in fear of her husband’s anger – but is a more obvious and confident presence in the written text. We are introduced to her before we meet Kurt, and she is...

... a bird-like woman, middle-aged... the first person who had not greeted my idea with patronizing disbelief...

Gladdy, it appeared, was a rebel, with strongly expressed opinions on the Aboriginal population: ‘There’s nothing wrong with the blacks except what the whites do to them.’ Later, she insists Robyn spend her nights on the farm.
inside the house for comfort and they ‘develop a deep friendship’.

**Glendle**

In Robyn’s text, Glendle is the community advisor in Pipalyatjara (p160–168), and is fully engaged activist with the Indigenous community:

… burdened with endless paperwork dished out by bureaucrats … formulizing the distribution of money to individuals … co-ordinating the systems such as health and education [and is] a liaison officer between bureaucracies and the people. And Glendle was tired – boned out.

We have a written imagery of an exhausted, meticulous official. In the film, Glendle is more eccentric than bureaucratic in character; the odd caravan in which he lives (also shown in the film) adds to this portrait of a solitary yet gentle individual, more at home in the outback than anywhere else. ‘Words are overrated’, he observes to Robyn. He is, in the film, a man of few of these, but a charming ‘hippie-ish’ presence nevertheless.

In the written text, Robyn comes across a variety of Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters – friends, station-owners, carers and administrators in both Alice Springs and the various settlements. A number of these are written out of the script as inessential in directing our focus upon the protagonist. In the film, Robyn comes across an empty stone house and makes it into a temporary home. In the book, this house is known as ‘Basso’s Farm’ (p.28) and is actually inhabited by ‘potters and leather craftsmen’, and Robyn leads a very social life with these kindly people – quite unlike the image we have of her in the film as she settles into the lone, empty building. The window-cleaning business Robyn and her friend Julie establish to make money (p.67) is discarded in the script. The directorial choice here is to reinforce that sense of Robyn being happiest in her own company (which is why she sets out on her journey).

Other characters are synthesised into only a few individuals who represent particular attitudes and responsibilities. The kindly, civilised natures of George and Lorna (p.248) are cinematically elided with the family of Glenayle Station – Eileen, Henry and their son Lou, (p.234) who were ‘charming, kind, generous and pretended not to notice my eccentricities’. Geoff, the ‘white’ community adviser in Docker River, stands in for the many individuals on a number of outback settlements who try to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the Indigenous people in their charge.

**Leichhardt and Lasseter**

Interestingly, in the film Robyn refers to an inscription carved into a tree on her father’s property, a name left by the ill-fated explorer Ludwig Leichhardt. The poignancy of the idea resonates with Robyn as she prepares herself for her own journey of exploration and we are positioned to consider a certain affinity with the explorer by the protagonist. In the written text, Leichhardt is not referred to, but Lasseter, another doomed trekker is referred to in some detail:

*poor Lasseter, that gold-hungry mug who … perished in the sand-hills and leaving behind an unsolved mystery … like so many other luckless explorers … dies a miserable death …* (p.139)

Again the exclusion of Lasseter’s failed venture from the cinematic version is doubtless to keep the focus on Robyn herself, but its detailing in the written work leads to the possible conclusion that Robyn may be seeing reflected in the tragedy of this man a sense of the danger to which she has exposed herself; there also seems, in the language of this reflection a subtle sense of relief that she will not be placed in this position.

**The director’s subtext**

The director has elaborated on some brief but poignant references made by Robyn in the written text about her mother’s death. In the reference by the writer of the ‘need to lay a ghost’ (p.98), we are presented on-screen with a number of flashbacks, or dream sequences, which weave their way through the film until we are fully informed about Robyn’s mother’s suicide and the devastation of the family that ensued. Further flashbacks focus on Robyn’s inarticulate but strong feelings for her father, poignantly illustrated in the flashback in which she goes in search of her missing compass, a gift from her father, a gift to him from his deceased wife – a construction of the director. The use of the haunting ‘Stardust Melody’ – another directorial inclusion – also shows how Robyn is reluctant to open up about her feelings of grief and loss, but they nevertheless haunt her.
1. NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

Formerly the National Geographic Magazine, this is the official magazine of the National Geographic Society. It has been published continuously since its first issue in 1888, nine months after the society itself was founded. It primarily contains articles about geography, history and world culture. The magazine is known for its thick square-bound glossy format with a yellow rectangular border and its extensive use of dramatic photographs.

The magazine is published monthly and additional map supplements are also included with subscriptions. It is available in a traditional printed edition and through an interactive online edition. On occasion, special editions of the magazine are issued.

By 2011, the magazine was circulated worldwide in thirty-six language editions and had a global circulation of 8.3 million. Its US circulation is around 5 million per month.

2. THE HISTORY OF Camels IN AUSTRALIA.

Contrary to popular belief, camels are not indigenous to Australia – although they thrive in the desert environment that is so much like their native habitat.

From 1860, 20,000 camels and more than 2000 cameleers – men skilled in handling them – were shipped to Australia from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The men signed three-year contracts. In return for their meager pay, they made a vital contribution to the history of Australia – one which has largely been left out of the history books, says Cara Rosehope, an amateur historian in Melbourne. Unlike horses and bullocks, the camels could trek long distances without food and water, which made them indispensable for exploration. The cameleers played a key role in many of the exploring expeditions. On 9 June 1860, twenty-four camels and three cameleers arrived at Port Melbourne to join the pioneering Burke and Wills expedition. While the expedition successfully made it from the south coast to the north through the heart of Australia, Burke, Wills and others lost their lives on the return journey. Disastrous as it was, it was quite certain that Burke, Wills and King could not have made the north–south continental crossing without camels, historians say.

Australia has the largest population of feral camels and the only herd of dromedary (one-humped) camels exhibiting wild behaviour in the world. Live camels are exported to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Brunei and Malaysia, where disease-free wild camels are prized as a delicacy. Australia’s camels are also exported as breeding stock for Arab camel-racing stables and for use in tourist venues in places such as the United States.

3. LUDWIG LEICHHARDT

Friedrich Wilhelm Ludwig Leichhardt, a Prussian scientist, is remembered for his long journey in 1844–1845 from the Darling Downs to Port Essington, an early settlement in the far north of the Northern Territory. He proceeded up the Burdekin Valley, crossed the Dividing Range and discovered the Lynd and Mitchell Rivers. After following the Mitchell, Leichhardt skirted the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The exhausted party lost much valuable equipment at Roper River and finally arrived at Port Essington in December 1845. He made the return journey by sea. In 1846–1847, Leichhardt was forced by heat and drought to turn back from an attempt to traverse Australia from east to west, but shortly afterwards set out again on an overland journey to Perth. From this expedition he did not return, and nothing certain is known of his fate.

4. LASSETER’S REEF

Lasseter’s Reef, referred to in Robyn Davidson’s book (p.139) – but not in the film version of Tracks – is the purported discovery, announced by Harold
Bell Lasseter in 1929 and 1930, of a fabulously rich gold deposit in a remote and desolate corner of central Australia. Lasseter’s accounts of the find are conflicting and its precise location remains a mystery – if it exists. In 1929 and again in 1930, Harold Bell Lasseter (1880–1931) made conflicting claims that he had discovered a rich gold deposit, ‘a vast gold bearing reef in Central Australia’, and that it was located at the western edge of the MacDonnell Ranges. By 1930, when Australia was in the grip of the Great Depression, the attractions of desert gold were considerable and Lasseter succeeded in securing approximately £50,000 in private funding towards an expedition to relocate the reef. Unusual for the time, this expedition included motorised vehicular transport and an aircraft.

On 21 July 1930, the group left Alice Springs. Lasseter was a sullen companion and a vague guide. Exasperated, his fellow explorers eventually declared Lasseter a charlatan and decided to end the expedition. Lasseter, whose behaviour was increasingly erratic, insisted on continuing the trek, accompanied by a dingo-shooter and his team of camels.

One afternoon, Lasseter returned to camp with some concealed rock samples and announced that he had relocated the gold reef. He refused to reveal its location. A fight ensued and Lasseter was left to his own devices. Lasseter himself trudged off into the desert sands with two camels and disappeared.

A search was conducted and in March 1931 Lasseter’s emaciated body was found at Winter’s Glen and his personal effects in a cave at Hull’s Creek. From Lasseter’s diary, it was learned that his camels had bolted, leaving him alone in the desert without any means of sustaining himself or returning. He encountered a group of nomadic Aborigines, who rendered assistance with food and shelter, but a weakened and blinded Lasseter eventually died of malnutrition and exhaustion, having made a belated attempt to walk from the cave to Ayers Rock or the Olgas.

No maps showing the location of the fabled gold reef were ever found and, over subsequent decades, the tale of the reef and its discoverer has assumed mythic proportions; it is perhaps the most famous lost mine legend in Australia, and remains a ‘holy grail’ among Australian prospectors.

5. ICONIC AUSTRALIAN FILMS

It’s always a good idea to review past films made about the Australian outback when a new film about this environment is made. Here is a selection of films set within the Australian landscape that have much to say about the characters – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – who inhabit it:

- Wake in Fright
- Walkabout
- Evil Angels / A Cry in the Dark (Fred Schepisi, 1988)
- Jedda (Charles Chauvel, 1955)
- The Proposition (John Hillcoat, 2005)
- Rabbit-Proof Fence
- Yolngu Boy (Stephen Johnson, 2001)

6. ARTESIAN BORES

At one point in the film, we see Robyn swimming happily in a deep outback pool. In an environment where water is an often-frightening scarcity, where does this water originate from? Geography students may know of The Great Artesian Basin, which provides the only reliable source of freshwater throughout much of inland Australia. The basin is the largest and deepest artesian basin in the world, stretching over a total of 1,700,000 square kilometers (660,000 square miles), with measured temperatures ranging from 30°C to 100°C. It underlies 23 per cent of the continent, including most of Queensland, the south-east corner of the Northern Territory, the north-east part of South Australia and northern New South Wales. The basin is 3000 metres (9800 feet) deep in places and is estimated to contain 64,900 cubic kilometres (15,600 cubic miles) of groundwater. To tap it, water wells called ‘bores’ are drilled down to a suitable rock layer, where the pressure of the water forces it up – mostly without pumping – establishing an artificial artesian well. So, underground throughout much of inland Australia is a massive water-source.
Tracks as: curriculum relevance of Sherman are setting out for students the potent. In some ways it makes it even more could actually do this trip today. So smartphones, there’s no way that you then. With technology, satellite phones, harder to do today than it even was aside. In many respects that’s much you need to put all distractions she actually is. And sometimes to do that you need to put all distractions aside. In many respects that’s much harder to do today than it even was then. With technology, satellite phones, smartphones, there’s no way that you could actually do this trip today. So in some ways it makes it even more potent.

In broad and general terms, Curran and Sherman are setting out for students the curriculum relevance of Tracks as:

- a historical account of a groundbreaking young woman;
- an account of the life and nature of the Australian outback, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous;
- showing us the challenges that confront the adventurer.

More specifically, the written text and the film make an excellent ‘tandem’ combination for the following subjects and year levels:

- Year 10 English and Literature;
- Year 10 Film and Media Studies;
- Year 11 and Year 12 VCE English/ EAL Contexts: Identity and Belonging; Personal Journeys
- Year 12 Literature Units 3&4 (Adaptations & Transformations)
- Media Studies Units 3&4

THEMES OF TRACKS

Themes and issues are an essential feature of study in any text set for students of English from Year Nine through to VCE. Both the written text and the film of Tracks embrace the following themes:

1. Personal challenge and response/the extraordinary within the ordinary;
2. The individual on a quest;
3. Journeying towards self-discovery/identity
4. Overcoming adversity;
5. Connection and disconnection
6. Civilisation versus barbarity
7. The seductive and dangerous power of the outback;
8. Nomads – their nature and philosophy.

To locate and reflect upon these themes, let’s consider the following:

1. Personal challenge and response/the extraordinary within the ordinary

Robyn makes the point repeatedly throughout her written text that she considers herself an ordinary human being who is prepared to take on a massive and frightening challenge. This is further emphasised in the film in her early voiceovers in which she describes herself in almost mundane terms as ‘bored of life’ and finding nothing much of interest in the world she has left behind in the big cities; she sees herself as a unprepossessing and insignificant individual. Yet, as we observe, she is anything but, given the challenge she sets herself and the success she achieves. Can you think of anyone like Robyn – an ordinary individual who succeeded in achieving an extraordinary goal?

2. The individual on a quest

Clearly, our protagonist is on a quest to challenge herself and commit to a taxing adventure which will reward her with the solace of a virtually empty territory through which to journey. Does she feel that the quest has been worth the effort?

3. Journeying towards self-discovery/identity

Robyn has a particular view of herself as the film opens. What is this view? Do you think she has another self-image by the film’s end? What might this be?

4. Overcoming adversity

There are a variety of obstacles in the way of Robyn’s objective. What are these materially, philosophically, emotionally? Are these overcome? How? In what way?

5. Connection and disconnection

The theme of disconnection in a connected world is particularly significant in the written work of Tracks. Cinematically, the director has also conveyed this through a variety of techniques: the view of vast landscapes; the unique individuals, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, that sparsely people this terrain; the use of music; empty, ruined farmhouses and the like all speak of another world removed at great length from the citiescape and thus presenting and demanding a unique response. The ‘connected world’ of the residents of Alice Springs – the world of pubs, camel farms, fences, tourists – is both hostile and dismissive; in the written text it is often downright threatening. There are also other ways in which Tracks – the film – explores the themes of connection and disconnection:
Robyn’s family background, for example, is inhabited by a father who, she reminisces, ‘was happiest on his own out in the bush’ – rather like his daughter. Was he a man voluntarily ‘disconnected’ from the world of social interaction? When we see Robyn’s father visit her in her abandoned farmhouse, we are introduced to a virtually mute character; his body language suggests he finds it difficult to articulate his feelings. In the ongoing series of dreams/flashbacks, her father speaks of sending his daughter away to live with her aunt because he cannot bring her up; here is a man who has, for whatever reasons, chosen to disconnect himself from his children. Even the dog, Goldie, Robyn’s beloved pet, will be put down. The familial links we all recognise as essential to family bonding – the presence of a parent, a family home, even a pet - are severed – disconnected – in Robyn’s childhood. Is this why she prefers her own company?

She does, however, connect at a subtle, unconventional level with the character of Mr. Eddy; why? This character is so self-contained, so independent, so alien to her own culture, so aware of the great silences and power of the outback he knows so intimately, that he poses no threat to Robyn’s own craving for inner solitude.

This may also pose another question for us to consider. When we observe the non-Indigenous residents of the vast outback – Geoff, Glendle, Mr. and Mrs. Ward – have they chosen to disconnect themselves from the company and companionship – and no doubt, greater ease – of life in a community?

The most obvious connection Robyn makes on her journey is with Rick. While he is initially an unwanted companion intruding on her desire for solitude and compromising everything the journey means to her, it is through his care and persistence that Robyn finds a way to open up to this connection and accept his help. We see this in particular in the scene where Rick insists on laying water cans along her route ahead to ensure her safety.

Finally, in this technologically-powered twenty-first century world, with its growing dependence on social media and massive international telecommunications, is it possible to ‘disconnect’ and live a solitary life if we so choose? Robyn loathed the intrusion of nosy tourists and media on her journey in the 1970s; how would her journey differ if she were to embark on her camel trek today?

6. Civilisation versus barbarity

The director makes the point that ‘civilisation’ does not necessarily mean what we expect this term to mean. The ‘civilised’ world of Alice Springs – in other words, the world of organised houses, streets and amenities, is decidedly unpleasant and unwelcoming. What is the first sight that greets Robyn as she walks up the main street? What scenes in the early part of the film demonstrate racism, aggression and indifference? What lessons can we learn from indigenous culture as demonstrated in the later scenes of the film?

7. The seductive and dangerous power of the outback

Like all themes in any work of literature or cinematic art, this is inextricably intertwined with all others. There is a constant stream of references throughout Tracks to the beauty of the landscape and the inherent dangers it poses; these are repeatedly contrasted and we are shown how the terrain impacts on the human psyche, challenging, threatening, occasionally destroying those who try to inhabit it.

8. Nomads – their nature and philosophy

Another significant focus of both the written and filmed versions of Tracks, Robyn tells us that ‘some nomads are at home everywhere. Others are at home nowhere and I was one of those.’ This reflection goes some way to explaining much of Robyn’s unique character, and perhaps the reason why she loves the desert, peopled as it is by nomads, a people disconnected voluntarily from established, permanent communities. Once again, we can see how the themes in this text conspicuously interlink. A nomad takes what he needs from the land through which he passes, but ultimately moves on. The word ‘nomad’ comes from a Greek word that means ‘one who wanders for pasture.’ Nomads, it is said, take home with them as they travel. This can be observed in the traditional lifestyle of Indigenous Australians, and may explain why Robyn finds herself comfortably drawn to these people. Nowadays, governments in some countries try to settle nomadic peoples in permanent environments and all over the world, with the socio-economic changes we are witnessing, nomadic societies are under threat. Robyn has herself travelled with nomadic peoples in India. What might draw someone to this choice of lifestyle?

A number of learning areas in the National English Curriculum are inherently addressed in Tracks:

**English Content Descriptions:**

**Language.**

Language variation and change. Students should:

- understand that Standard Australian English in its spoken and written forms has a history of evolution and change and continues to evolve (ACELA1563)

Language for interaction. Students should:

- understand how language use can have inclusive and exclusive social effects, and can empower or disempower people (ACELA1564)

- understand that people’s evaluations of texts are influenced by their value systems the context and the purpose and mode of communication (ACELA1565)

Text structure and organisation. Students will:

- compare the purposes, text structures and language features of traditional and contemporary texts in different media (ACELA1566)

- evaluate the impact on audiences of different choices in the representation of still and moving images (ACELA1572)

Film study is a common element of the English course at this level, and *Tracks*...
provides both a useful text to introduce students to cinematic techniques and to potentially provide an introduction to the works of other Australian writers and cinematographers. The study of film as literature in Year 10 English aims to enhance student enjoyment through a greater understanding of film as a mode of communication and most importantly, to learn how the meanings created by the filmmakers intersect with the world of the viewers.

- According to the rubric of the National Curriculum, this film may provide students with a text ‘to compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts’ (ACELT1639).
- Students can use Tracks ‘to analyse and evaluate how people, cultures, places, events, objects, and concepts are represented … through language, structural and/or visual choices’ (ACELT1749).
- They are also able ‘to analyse and explain how text structures, language features and visual features of texts, and the context in which texts are experienced, may influence audience response’ (ACELT1641).
- Using this film, students can address and ‘evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts’ (ACELT1812).
- Finally, Tracks provides an example for students to ‘compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts’ (ACELT1639).

FILM & MEDIA STUDIES: YEAR 10

In general, Media Studies at Year 10 level involves studying aspects of both film and television, with a series of projected Outcomes:

- students develop the ability to critically analyse film and television texts in a range of ways;
- they work towards understanding the aesthetics, styles and formats of film and television texts;
- they develop the ability and knowledge to explain ways in which media texts reinforce or challenge social, cultural and artistic values;
- they learn to use appropriate media terminology and personal interpretations to describe the structure, content and aesthetic qualities of film and television texts;
- they study critical approaches to analyse and interpret media texts;
- the language of film and television; cinematography, sounds and mise-en-scene are studied.

VCE ENGLISH/EAL UNITS 3&4 CONTEXTS

These Contexts often foreshadow or utilise those proscribed for Year 12. For example, Units 1&2 Contexts such as ‘Who are you?’, ‘Personal Journeys’ and ‘Australian Identity’ have a strong connection to the ‘Identity and Belonging’ Context in Units 3&4. Tracks applies to these Contexts in the following ways:

We are presented with a portrait of a young woman rejecting the typical avenues open to her – study, employment, developing relationships – dedicating her time, training and income to a longed-for goal; she is regarded by many as eccentric, by some as crazy and by one or two simply as ‘odd’. The ‘Who are you?’ aspect of this film is manifested in the reflections of many of those who react to Robyn’s aspirations and by the voiceovers in which she reflects about herself. ‘Who are you?’ is further ironically illustrated in the relationship with publicity that Robyn has to suffer as ‘the camel lady’, gawked at by passing tourists and photographed by Rick Smolan – circumstances in which she sees herself as nothing but a subject for a magazine cover or a random snapshot. It is only when Robyn is alone in the desert, finding her way through the punishing climate and surroundings, that she is fully aware of herself as an individual and most ‘comfortable in her own skin’.

The ‘Personal Journeys’ Context is undoubtedly addressed as we witness the progress, triumphs and sorrows in Robyn’s amazing experience. The ‘Australian Identity’, another Year 11 Context, can be addressed as we see the variety of characters – both Indigenous and European – that pass through the story and assess how, if at all, Australians might identify with these individuals or repudiate these portrayals.

VCE ENGLISH/EAL UNITS 3&4 CONTEXTS

Context: Identity and Belonging

Study guides will tell us that our identity is a construction of our interests, relationships, social activity and much more. Our sense of identity and belonging is impacted upon by various factors, including our family dynamic, our experiences, relationships and our environment. The journey to find identity and belonging can often be a struggle, since we ask ourselves ‘who am I?’ versus ‘who do others want me to be?’ and ‘where do I belong? Where do I fit in?’ This search is completely subjective, meaning that it is our personal view that influences our decisions. As the film begins, our protagonist reflects in voiceover about how she sees herself, drawn to a life of solitude, disinterested in a mainstream lifestyle that involves interactions with others. She is a loner and wants to remain so. This leads to a tacitly hostile and critical response from the established community – those who embark on solo camel treks through the desert are seen as eccentric to say the least.

In different situations, we may alter our identity accordingly to the environment and the people we encounter. This is usually due to our innate desire to belong, sacrificing or amending our identity to do so. This is not the case for Robyn, however; she accepts that she must work to earn money to buy her camels, but she will not compromise to belong; she will wear an Afghan costume reluctantly in order to bring in an income, but this is for purely practical reasons.

Belonging, the other half of this Context, means to feel a sense of welcome and acceptance to someone or something. As suggested by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (a psychological theory centered on humans’ innate desire for fulfillment), belonging is a need that we naturally seek in order to feel loved. In the same manner as our identities, there are many forms of belonging. Relationships – with family, friends, partners, associates and in the workplace – may give us a sense of belonging that is vital or a sense of rejection that is painful. A social milieu evokes for the individual a feeling of
inclusion, but Robyn reacts against much of these connections. She regards herself as a nomad; relationships are more of a hindrance than anything else – unless they are with her animals!

If we fail to find a sense of belonging, isolation and depression often ensues. However, there are those who do not belong but are in fact liberated by their independence. This may be due to their desire to rebel against family tradition, friends’ expectations or work commitment and thus are pleased to be set apart. Of course, what we do notice towards the end of the film is that Robyn suddenly becomes aware that there may, after all, be an element missing in her life. She declares sorrowfully, ‘I’m so alone’.

What influences identity and belonging?

Everything and everyone can influence a person’s identity and belonging. While some influences may be major, such as a move from one country and culture to another, or relationship with one’s family, other influences may be minor, for example an incident with a friend many years ago. Tracks suggests that for the protagonist, the painful events of her childhood may have influenced her decision to ‘go it alone’ through life. After all, her mother has ‘left’ her, her father ‘leaves’ her because he believes she needs a woman’s care, her dog Goldie ‘leaves’ her because he has to be put down. Is it possible that she fears or rejects connections and commitment for fear of this recurring? Is this why she is prickly and distant with people? For different people, the same experience may have affected them to different extents, for example. Although we all live in the same world, where many of our experiences overlap, the reason why we are all unique is because we ultimately choose what does or does not impact us in a crucial or unimportant way. It is the myriad parts of our lives that come together that create our identity. We can see how Robyn becomes, by the film’s end, the sum of the many experiences in her life – good or bad, happy or sad – that has made her who she is.

Is there ever struggle with identity and belonging?

Everyone has struggled with their identity and belonging during a chapter of their life. There comes a time when our opinions and beliefs begin to differentiate from those around us. During this time, some people may discover where they belong, whereas many others do not. It is not solely at one stage of our lives when we are confronted with an identity crisis; it is a continuous challenge throughout our lives as we encounter new experiences that will alter our thoughts, emotions and perspective on ourselves.

**LITERATURE UNITS 3&4**

A specific requirement of this subject is the ‘Adaptations and Transformations’ aspect of the course. This task requires an analysis of how the form of a text influences meaning, and may be presented in written, oral or multimedia form.

Students are required to study a written text and its adaptation to the screen, and to analyse how meaning changes when the form of the text changes. Both Davidson’s text and Curran’s film function as excellent examples on which to practise/prepare for the compulsory SAC in this subject.

The VCE Study Design sets out that teachers should develop an assessment task that allows the student to:

- identify the way forms of texts are significant in the making of meaning;
- identify and discuss the conventions used in particular forms of texts;
- analyse the ways in which the original and transformed texts are constructed;
- identify the similarities and differences between the original and the adapted or transformed text;
- comment on and explore the significance of changes made in the adaptation or transformation and their effects on the ways meaning is created;
- have the opportunity to demonstrate the highest level of performance.

**MEDIA STUDIES UNITS 1, 3 & 4**

The content and focus of the four Units of the VCE Media Studies course are:

- Unit 1: Representation and technologies of representation;
- Unit 2: Media production and the media industry;
- Unit 3: Narrative and media production design;
- Unit 4: Media, influence and society’s values.

Tracks, therefore, presents as an excellent and highly relevant text for study.

**Unit 1**

**Area of Study 1:** Focus: An analysis of media representations and how such representations depict, for example, events, people, places, organisations and ideas.

**Area of Study 2:** Focus: Technologies of representation; different media forms and their features and practices.

**Unit 3**

**Area of Study 1:** Focus: The narrative construction of film, television or drama texts; students learn that narrative is a fundamental element of construction of meaning in media products.

**Unit 4**

**Area of Study 2:** Focus: Media texts and society’s values; students undertake the study of an identified significant idea, social attitude or discourse … to critically analyse its representation in the media.

**Area of Study 3:** Focus: Media influence; students explore the complexity of the relationship between the media, its audiences and wider community in terms of the nature and extent of the media’s influence.

In this subject, at both Year 11 and Year 12, the study of narrative structures and social values demonstrated through a variety of texts – including film – are explored. Story elements working with production elements include:

- the point of view from which the narrative is presented;
- camera/film/techniques and qualities including shot selection, movement and focus;
  - lighting;
  - acting;
  - visual composition and mise en scène;
- sound, including dialogue, music and sound effects.
Activities

Year 10 English & Literature

1 Before viewing the film. Class discussion/note-taking

1. What knowledge do you have of the ‘outback’ of Australia? What does this term mean to you? Could you name a town or area that would be classified as such?
2. Using your atlas, locate the following areas: Alice Springs, Areyonga, the MacDonnell Ranges, Docker River, Meekatharra, Woodleigh.
   <http://www.meekashire.wa.gov.au>
4. Using a blank map of Australia, mark in:
   (1) state borders
   (2) Alice Springs
   (3) Areyonga
   (4) Docker River
   (5) Uluru (Ayers Rock)
   (6) Mt Olga
   (7) Warburton
   (8) Lake Carnegie
   (9) Glenayle
   (10) Meekatharra
   (11) The Indian Ocean
   TASK: Starting at Alice Springs, link these places with a track.
5. Draw up a list of essentials you would need on a trip through this country. Include:
   • Form(s) of transport
   • Clothing
   • Technology
   • Food and water supplies
   • Security

2 Post-viewing class discussion/written activities

1. What is your opinion of the character of Robyn?
2. Which character, aside from the protagonist, stands out the most in the film, in your opinion? Why?
3. How is the township of Alice Springs portrayed?
4. Why doesn’t Rick argue with Robyn when she is obviously annoyed with his intrusions?
5. Does the subtext explain Robyn’s desire to be alone? Give reasons for your answer.
6. How do you view her journey?

3 Comparison with the written text

(See COMPARISONS AND CONTRASTS.)

Broad discussion points:

• Does the film satisfy more than the text in terms of portraying the physical journey as well as the ‘inner’ journey of the protagonist?
• What areas of the text would you have preferred to be included in the film version, and why?
• Select a particular passage from the written text and compare it to an equivalent aspect of the film. You might consider landscape depiction, characterisation or social issues. What observations do you make?
Year 10 Film and Media Studies

Activities: ‘… to compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts.’ (National Curriculum)

Written Tasks / Working in pairs

Questions:
(1) How are outback Australians represented in Tracks? Describe two scenes in which this representation is provided.
(2) Is the historical context of the 1970s emphasised?
(3) What is the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia as depicted in this film? Identify at least three scenes in which this relationship is observed by the filmmakers.
(4) What aspects of Indigenous culture are shown in this film? Provide two examples.

‘… people, cultures, places, events, objects and concepts … represented … through language, structural and/or visual choices.’ (National Curriculum)

Questions:
(1) What visual choices does the director make to show us:
   • the landscape of the outback? What point is he making here?
   • the differences between ‘white’ and Indigenous responses to the landscape?
   • objects: the compass, the camera, Robyn’s clothing, the animals – how are they used to emphasise particular ideas in the story?

‘… text structures, language features and visual features of texts and the context in which texts are experienced and influence upon audience response …’ (National Curriculum)

Questions:
(1) What are the structural features of this text? What is the intention behind this structure? (Think of chronology/flashbacks/routines depicted)
(2) What is the most striking visual feature of this film and what impact does it have on the audience?

‘… evaluate the social, moral and ethical positions represented in texts …’ (National Curriculum)

Questions:
(1) What are the ‘social, moral and ethical positions’ represented in this text?
(2) Who represents them?

‘compare and evaluate a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts …’ (National Curriculum)

Questions:
(1) How are we urged to evaluate the following:
   • ‘White’ Australians in Alice Springs?
   • ‘White’ Australians in outback settlements?

Activity for VCE Media:

There are three media types to consider in this subject:
• Tracks, the written text;
• Tracks, the film
• National Geographic Magazine

We therefore have three related texts with which to study and prepare for the structured end-of-year examination paper. Its three sections – (A) Narrative, (B) Media Texts and Society’s Values, and (C) Media Influence – conform precisely to the structure, social context and issues pertinent to the Study Design of this course. For example:

Section A: narrative

tasks: Identify production elements.
  - How are they used to communicate ideas?

Section B: media texts and society’s values

Tasks: What contrasting values are held by the non-Indigenous Australians in this text?
  - Explain the effect of these values on the protagonist.
  - Describe a social issue or discourse evident in this example of media.
  - What is a dominant and emerging value evident in this text?

Section C: media influence:

tasks: Compare two communication theories or models.
  - Compare two theories of audience.

Activities (Written) for VCE English Contexts

‘Identity and Belonging’ – Prompts

• It is difficult to possess a sense of belonging when we are unsure of our own identity.
• Our identity determines where we belong.
• Only upon reflection can we establish our identity.
• Mistakes help shape our identity.
• Everyone needs to feel a sense of belonging.
• Each person has different identities for different relationships and situations.
• Without connection to others there is no me.
• Having a sense of being different makes it difficult to belong.
Endnotes

1. Tracks: Production Notes