Walkabout
by Bret Harte

SUMMARY
Walkabout by James Vance Marshall tells the story of two American children, Mary and Peter, who are stranded in the Australian outback after a plane crash. With no knowledge of how to find food in the desert, their prospects look bleak until they meet a sixteen-year-old Aboriginal boy. He is on his walkabout, the six-month journey into the desert that each boy of his tribe must make alone in order to pass from childhood to manhood. The changing relationships between the three children as they make their way through the desert form the basis of the story. An inevitable clash of cultures causes misunderstandings between them and ultimately leads to tragedy. The boy interprets the fear he sees in the eyes of thirteen-year-old Mary when she looks at him, fear caused by her pubescent self-consciousness about her body, her lack of experience of men, and the suspicion of black men that her South Carolina upbringing has given her, as a sign that she has seen the spirit of death and that his death is, therefore, imminent. This belief in the inevitability of his death, combined with his exposure to Peter’s cold causes him to become ill and die, leaving Mary and Peter once more alone. However, he has already taught the children the survival skills they need to live in the desert and he has pointed the way they need to go. They are able to continue on the journey and the story ends with them setting off on the last leg of their walk back to their world.

A film adaptation of Walkabout was made by the director Nicholas Roeg in 1971 and the photograph on the front cover of the book is taken from this film. Several elements of the story are different in the film. The children, played by British actress Jenny Agutter and Roeg’s own son, Lucien John, are driven into the desert by their father who attempts to shoot them and then sets fire to his car and kills himself. The reason for this behaviour is never explained. The Aboriginal boy hangs himself from a tree after a failed attempt at courtship of the girl. The children are by then already close to civilisation and continue on to a mining town. However, they get an unfriendly reception from a tree after a failed attempt at courtship of the girl. The only food they have with them is chocolate and they do not even have the basic skills to know which plants are good to eat and which will make them ill. Through their experience in the bush and their contact with an Aboriginal boy, they gain an appreciation for the beauty of their surroundings and they learn to live off the land, by the end almost regretting that they have to return to their own world.

The Aboriginal boy has been brought up in the bush. He is in harmony with nature and is able to survive in its harsh conditions. As a fellow human being, but one with the skills needed to survive, he acts as a bridge between the children and the bush. He interrupts his walkabout, which is supposed to be performed alone, to rescue the children. However, in so doing he loses his own life. Exposure to the common cold, an illness unknown amongst his people and against which he has no natural resistance, coupled with his misinterpretation of Mary’s reaction to him which causes him to stop caring for them, do not even have the basic skills to know which plants are good to eat and which will make them ill. Through their experience in the bush and their contact with an Aboriginal boy, they gain an appreciation for the beauty of their surroundings and they learn to live off the land, by the end almost regretting that they have to return to their own world.

Walkabout is a story of contrasts – the contrast between the three children’s experience of life; the contrast between the natural world and the urban world; the contrast between Peter’s ready acceptance of the bush boy as friend and leader and Mary’s fear and reluctance to accept his help even though without him they will almost certainly die.

It is also a story about growing up. The bush boy’s walkabout is a ritual journey during which he will pass from childhood to manhood. His tribe have sent him out alone, but with the skills he needs to survive. Mary and Peter have also been sent on a journey, but when their plane crashes, their journey turns into a form of walkabout and one which they have not been provided with the survival skills needed to undertake. Nevertheless, with the help of the bush boy they do survive and in the process they gain some maturity. Peter becomes more self-sufficient, more responsible and less dependent on his sister. The greatest change, however, is in Mary. On the brink of womanhood, she is initially self-conscious about her body and disapproving of the nakedness of the boys. She clings desperately to the mores of the society in which she has been brought up.

BACKGROUND AND THEMES
The story takes place in the outback of Australia, a barren unforgiving landscape. Into this landscape come three children. Two of them have been raised in an urban setting with all the benefits of modern civilisation, but their technological society has left them ill-equipped to deal with the dangers of the natural world. When technology lets them down, in the form of a plane crash, they are left to face the harsh realities of the natural world from which their world has up to now protected them. The only food they have with them is chocolate and they do not even have the basic skills to know which plants are good to eat and which will make them ill. Through their experience in the bush and their contact with an Aboriginal boy, they gain an appreciation for the beauty of their surroundings and they learn to live off the land, by the end almost regretting that they have to return to their own world.

The Aboriginal boy has been brought up in the bush. He is in harmony with nature and is able to survive in its harsh conditions. As a fellow human being, but one with the skills needed to survive, he acts as a bridge between the children and the bush. He interrupts his walkabout, which is supposed to be performed alone, to rescue the children. However, in so doing he loses his own life. Exposure to the common cold, an illness unknown amongst his people and against which he has no natural resistance, coupled with his misinterpretation of Mary’s reaction to him which causes him to stop caring for them, do not even have the basic skills to know which plants are good to eat and which will make them ill. Through their experience in the bush and their contact with an Aboriginal boy, they gain an appreciation for the beauty of their surroundings and they learn to live off the land, by the end almost regretting that they have to return to their own world.

It is also a story about growing up. The bush boy’s walkabout is a ritual journey during which he will pass from childhood to manhood. His tribe have sent him out alone, but with the skills he needs to survive. Mary and Peter have also been sent on a journey, but when their plane crashes, their journey turns into a form of walkabout and one which they have not been provided with the survival skills needed to undertake. Nevertheless, with the help of the bush boy they do survive and in the process they gain some maturity. Peter becomes more self-sufficient, more responsible and less dependent on his sister. The greatest change, however, is in Mary. On the brink of womanhood, she is initially self-conscious about her body and disapproving of the nakedness of the boys. She clings desperately to the mores of the society in which she has been brought up.

ABOUT JAMES VANCE MARSHALL
James Vance Marshall is one of the pseudonyms of the English writer Donald Payne. He was born in 1924 and lives in Surrey, England. Amongst his eleven novels and nine non-fiction works, are A River Ran Out of Eden, The Lost Ones (written as Ian Cameron) and White-Out. He wrote Walkabout in the 1950s.
raised, a society that fears black people and regards them as inferior. She comes to see the bush boy’s friendliness and openness as a sexual threat. Unfortunately, it is the fear and hate he sees in her eyes that convinces him that he is going to die. As a result of the bush boy’s death, Mary comes to realise that she has been wrong and that the world is one, not divided into black and white. She becomes less inhibited, able to walk around naked without embarrassment, and also gains an appreciation of the natural world around her which leaves her reluctant to take the final step back to her world.

It is Peter who has to take the initiative at the last and this is symptomatic of the changing relationship between the two children as their journey progresses. Peter is only eight years old and initially Mary has to assume a maternal role, rationing out the chocolate and protecting her brother from a realisation of the hopelessness of their situation. When Peter makes friends with the bush boy and starts to question her authority, she becomes angry as she senses that she is no longer in charge. This resentment is later combined with jealousy at the freedom with which the two boys interact. Peter is young enough to accept things at face value. He hasn’t yet acquired the emotional baggage that being brought up in the racist society of 1950s South Carolina has given his sister. As a result, he is better equipped than her to survive the clash of cultures.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

1 Write these words and phrases on the board:
   Mary and Peter    plane crash    desert    waterfood
   Aboriginal boy    language    help    walk
   bush    (n) areas of Australia with no towns (also a plant like a small tree)
   lost    (adj) not knowing where you are or how to find your way
   crash    (v) to have an accident
   ant    (n) a small insect
   desert    (n) a large area of hot dry land where few things grow
   plant    (n) a living thing with roots and leaves
   rock    (n) a large piece of stone

2 Tell students that this book is about two children who are lost in the Australian desert after a plane crash. Put students into small groups and ask them to imagine they are in this situation. What will they do? Will they stay near the plane. Will they walk into the desert? Will they look for food and water? Will they light a fire? What will be their biggest problem? Groups report back to the class.

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Introduction and Chapter 1

1 Write these numbers on the board. Ask students to find them in the introduction and Chapter 1 and say what each one refers to.

   6    16    2500    8    13    41/2

2 Put students in small groups and ask them to imagine that Uncle Keith telephoned Mary and Peter’s parents to tell them about the plane crash. They write the telephone conversation and appoint two members of the group to act it out for the class.

Chapters 2–3

Ask students to work in groups of four. One pair in each four should find sentences in the book that show how Mary feels about the bush boy. The other pair should find sentences that show how Peter feels about the bush boy. They compare their lists. Ask them to say why they think Mary and Peter’s feelings are different.

Chapters 4–5

In small groups, students say what happens after the end of the story. Give them these questions to help them:

   ● Do Mary and Peter find a road or a town first?
   ● How soon do they find it?
   ● Who do they meet?
   ● How do they get to Adelaide?

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

An Aboriginal boy goes on a walkabout as a child and comes back as an adult. Ask students to say how Mary changes during her walkabout.

GLOSSARY

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. Most of them are practised in the Before You Read sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Introduction and Chapter 1

survive    (v) to continue to live after an accident, illness, etc.
alone    (adj) not with other people
bush    (n) areas of Australia with no towns (also a plant like a small tree)
lost    (adj) not knowing where you are or how to find your way
crash    (v) to have an accident
ant    (n) a small insect
desert    (n) a large area of hot dry land where few things grow
plant    (n) a living thing with roots and leaves
rock    (n) a large piece of stone

Chapters 2–3

death    (n) the end of someone’s life
heaven    (n) many people believe good people go to this place when they die
hill    (n) an area of high ground
be in charge    (v) to be the person who controls everything
sneeze    (v) when you sneeze, air suddenly comes out of your nose and mouth
piece    (n) part of something
naked    (adj) with no clothes
tribe    (n) a group of people with the same language and customs

Chapters 4–5

cold    (n) a common illness. If you have a cold it is difficult to breathe through your nose.
1 Look at the picture on the front of the book.
   (a) Who are the three people in the picture?
   (b) Where are they?
   (c) Why are the white children there?
   (d) Why is the black boy there?
   (e) Do you think it will be a happy story or a sad story? Why?

2 Which of these things are most important in the desert? Number them 1–5. Number 1 is the most important.
   (a) food
   (b) clothes
   (c) water
   (d) fire
   (e) a house

Introduction and Chapter 1

Chapter 1
1 Close your book. Choose the right ending for these sentences.
   (a) Mary and Peter walk into the desert because
      (i) they have to look for water.
      (ii) they have to look for food.
      (iii) they have to get away from the animals.
   (b) From the top of the high ground they see
      (i) Adelaide.
      (ii) the sea.
      (iii) the desert.

2 How does Mary know the river goes south?

3 Which of these birds and animals are in Chapter 1?
   koala    marsupial    tiger    cat    bustard    wombat
   kookaburra    wallaby    dingo    cockatoo

Chapters 2–3
1 Are these sentences right or wrong? Correct the wrong ones.
   (a) Peter sees the bush boy first.

2 Choose the right answer.
   (a) Why does Mary tell Peter to put his clothes on?
      (i) She thinks it is wrong to be naked.
      (ii) She thinks he will get a cold.
      (iii) She thinks he will lose his clothes.
   (b) When is Mary frightened by the bush boy?
      (i) When he makes a fire and cooks the wallaby.
      (ii) When he plays in the water with Peter.
      (iii) When he dances and looks at her.
   (c) Why does the bush boy think he is going to die?
      (i) Because he knows there isn’t food and water for all of them.
      (ii) Because in his world people look afraid when they know you are going to die.
      (iii) Because he thinks Mary will kill him.

3 Write M (Mary), P (Peter) or B (the bush boy) next to these sentences.
   (a) This person learns some words of the bush boy’s language.
   (b) This person plays in the water alone.
   (c) These people find food and make a fire.
   (d) This person is afraid of the bush boy.
   (e) This person walks into the desert alone.
   (f) This person asks the bush boy to come back.

Chapters 4–5
1 Number these things in the order they happen in the story.
   (a) A koala pulls Mary’s dress off.
   (b) The bush boy dies.
   (c) A black man draws a map for Mary and Peter.
   (d) Mary holds the bush boy’s head and smiles at him.
   (e) The bush boy feels ill.
Activities after reading the book

1 These sentences describe what happens in the story. Put the words in italics into the past tense.

Mary and Peter’s aeroplane (a) ..................................
(crash) in the middle of nowhere. They
(b) ................................ (survive) the crash and
(c) ................................ (run) away from the plane.

They (d) ................................ (have) some chocolate and
there (e) ......................... (be) a river so they
(f) ................................ (have) water. They
(g) ................................ (walk) down the river. The river
(h) ....................... (go) south.

A bush boy (i) ......................... (find) them and
(j) ......................... (help) them. Peter
(k) ................................ (like) the bush boy, but. Mary
(l) ......................... (be) afraid of him because he
(m) ......................... (be) a naked black man.

The bush boy (n) ......................... (teach) them how
to live in the desert. When he (o) .........................
(get) Peter’s cold and (p) ......................... (die) they
(q) ......................... (start) to walk again. They (r)
......................... (see) an Aboriginal family. The
Aboriginals (s) ......................... (show) Mary and
Peter the way home.

Across
1 A white Australian bird
5 A six-month journey in the desert
6 The bush boy’s family is his ......................
7 The bush boy thinks Mary can see this.
9 The bush boy throws this in the river to get fish.
10 In the desert this is very hot.
11 The bush boy has no clothes. He is ..................

Down
2 An Australian bird. It makes a loud noise.
3 Adelaide is in the ..................... of Australia.
4 Peter sneezes because he has a ..................
5 In the desert you die without this.
8 Peter gets these in his trousers.

2 Do this crossword.

Across

1 A white Australian bird
2 An Australian bird. It makes a loud noise.
3 Adelaide is in the ..................... of Australia.
4 Peter sneezes because he has a ..................
5 In the desert you die without this.
6 The bush boy’s family is his ......................
7 The bush boy thinks Mary can see this.
8 Peter gets these in his trousers.
9 The bush boy throws this in the river to get fish.
10 In the desert this is very hot.
11 The bush boy has no clothes. He is ..................

2 Choose the right answer.

(a) Why does the bush boy die?
   (i) He doesn’t drink water.
   (ii) He eats a bad fish.
   (iii) He gets Peter’s cold.

(b) How does Mary feel when the bush boy dies?
   (i) She is sorry she wasn’t kind to him.
   (ii) She is pleased because she was afraid of him.
   (iii) She is worried because he can’t help them.

(c) How do Mary and Peter find their way home?
   (i) They find a map on the ground.
   (ii) An Aboriginal man makes a map for them.
   (iii) An Aboriginal family take them home.

(f) Mary and Peter meet an Aboriginal family.
(g) The bush boy lies under a mugga-wood tree.
(h) The bush boy sees Mary naked in the water.
(i) Peter tells Mary the bush boy is dying.