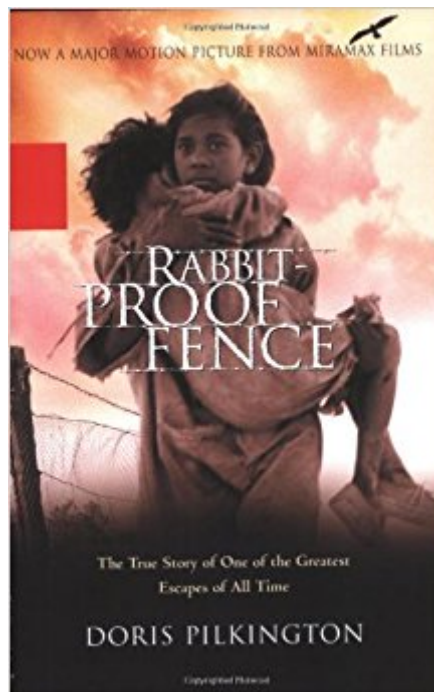


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# Rabbit-Proof Fence



## Synopsis

Following an Australian government edict in 1931, black aboriginal children and children of mixed marriages were gathered up and taken to settlements to be institutionally assimilated. In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, award-winning author Doris Pilkington traces the story of her mother, Molly, one of three young girls uprooted from their community in Southwestern Australia and taken to the Moore River Native Settlement. There, Molly and her relatives Gracie and Daisy were forbidden to speak their native language, forced to abandon their heritage, and taught to be culturally white. After regular stays in solitary confinement, the three girls planned and executed a daring escape from the grim camp.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Doris Pilkington is also the author of *Caprice: A Stockman's Daughter*. *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, her second book, is now a major motion picture from Miramax Films, directed by Phillip Noyce and starring Kenneth Branagh.

I saw the film some years ago and like it very much, so downloaded this version. I found the book difficult to follow, choppy and loaded with unfamiliar aboriginal language. The last complaint was mitigated by finding, at the end of the volume, a relatively complete glossary. A little upfront notice would have helped. The book is written by a descendant of the original participants, perhaps explaining the obvious gaps in the narrative, but the perspective is that of the participants rather than of a historical rendition. A little more background on the status of the aboriginal people at the

relevant time would have been useful, especially to non-Australians like me. All of those gripes having been aired, let me add that there is much to admire in the courage, resourcefulness and bushcraft knowledge of the key participants. I am sure that very few outsiders could have survived such a journey, let alone doing so with apparent matter-of-fact aplomb. This is my first book from a native Australian author. I will be looking for more voices of such a unique experience of life in such an outwardly inhospitable environment.

Rabbit-Proof Fence is a retelling of a brave, dangerous journey three children make simply to go home. As aborigine and white children, they were kidnapped by agents of the Australian government to be raised as "orphans." These girls defied the law and began their trek home following the only landmark they knew, a fence. The language is appropriately simple. The story was pieced together through the memories of the girls grown to women, official documents, and the recollections of people who knew them.

I first saw the Miramax movie starring Kenneth Branagh, which was based upon this book. I was intrigued enough by the film to read this book. I was not disappointed. This book is certainly a testament to the human spirit. It also reveals the harsh, paternalistic and racist policies that the Australian government imposed upon its Aboriginal population. In 1931, the Australian government issued an edict that mandated that all Aboriginal and part Aboriginal children were to be forcibly removed from their homes and taken to special settlements where they were to be assimilated. There, while living in inhumane and degrading conditions, they would be taught to be culturally white, would be mandated to speak English only, and would be trained to be domestic help or laborers in white households. The author tells the reader the story of three young girls, Mollie, Gracie, and Daisy, who had Aboriginal mothers and White fathers. Ranging in age from nine to fifteen years old, the three girls were forcibly removed from their loving families and taken to a special settlement. The girls rebelled against this system, and, homesick, escaped from such a settlement. They left with literally just the clothes on their back. Their only guide home would be a rabbit-proof fence that stretched for over a thousand miles across Australia. The girls' Aboriginal heritage and survival skills would come in handy throughout their nearly nine week long trek across Australia, as they were forced to subsist on the land and the occasional kindness from strangers. They had to endure thirst, hunger, and danger, while avoiding being caught along the way by professional trackers, police on the lookout for them, and white settlers that were unsympathetic to their situation. This story is a most personal one for the author, as one of the girls, Molly, is the

author's mother. Told in a straightforward, factual manner, it is an incredible story that is an indictment of the Australian government's racist policies against its Aboriginal people and its imperialistic self-proclaimed superiority over them.

This is the story of three Aboriginal half caste girls removed from their families in Western Australia by government officials who sent them 1000 miles away to a 'residential school', more like a prison than a boarding school, where they were incarcerated and expected to learn to read and write and speak English before being sent off to be servants. The author, Doris Pilkington (Aboriginal name Nugi Garimara) is the daughter of the eldest girl, Molly and she retells their story in simple, straightforward language. Molly and the two younger girls, sisters Daisy and Gracie run away from the school within days of arriving with only the clothes on their backs and no provisions. They amazingly manage to survive using their native skills in hunting and finding clean water and later strangers who give them food and clothing. Somehow, partly due to the rain and partly to their skills at hiding they manage to evade the police and the trackers sent to find them. Molly is familiar with the rabbit proof fence that runs the length of the state and knows if she can find that then they will just need to follow it home. Although told simply, this incredible story of tenacity and survival is powerful in portraying the devastation of white settlement on Australia's Aboriginal communities, first by depriving them of their land and the ability to feed themselves and then by allowing a paternalistic government to deprive them of their mixed race children.

This book is very matter-of-fact about a program of displacement of Aboriginal Australians. It does fail to convey the emotional horror of the family separations, so to get a better impression I'd highly recommend watching the movie Rabbit Proof Fence in addition to reading the book. Then you can picture the landscape, etc, unless you already have familiarity with it and this issue. Together they provided both a historical/factual and emotional story.

While this isn't one of those books that you start reading and can't put it down, it is definitely worth your time to read. The history of the aboriginal people shared through this story is a story we should all learn about.

I had no idea that Australia treated their native people like the United States did. Interesting and informative. Story well told.

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