

Film review: Rabbit Proof Fence

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Rabbit Proof Fence tells the story of three young Aboriginal girls, Molly (Everlyn Sampi), her little sister Daisy (Tianna Sansbury) and their cousin Gracie (Laura Monaghan).

The film is set in 1931 in Western Australia, at a time when the government is forcibly removing all half-caste children from their families, to bring them up in settlements where they are trained as domestic servants. Kenneth Branagh plays the part of Mr A O Neville, Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines. Branagh is very convincing in the role and the dogged determination with which his Mr Neville pursues the government policy of "helping" the half-castes is at times uncomfortable to watch. But this was never meant to be a film that makes its audience feel comfortable – how could it, when ultimately it is presenting a truly horrible aspect of Australia's past.

When Molly, Gracie and Daisy are stolen from their mothers they are taken to a

settlement at Moore River, over 2000 kilometres away. On arrival at the settlement, they are scrubbed clean, dressed in white smocks and sandshoes, and put to work with all the other half-caste girls, sweeping floors and washing. They are forced to speak English, sing hymns and attend church in an effort to erase all memories of their Aboriginal culture.

Although there is a sense of camaraderie amongst all the girls, for the most part, their spirits have been broken. But Molly is determined not to let "the devil man" (Mr Neville) break her, and one morning, as the other children hurry to church, Molly convinces Gracie and Daisy to escape with her. Rain is coming, and Molly knows that their tracks will be hard to follow if they leave immediately. The journey the girls subsequently embark on to return home is remarkable, even more so, because it is a true story.

Molly believes that, if they follow the 2000 kilometre rabbit proof fence all the way, that

it will eventually take them to their mothers at Jigalong. So, for 9 weeks, the girls walk beside the fence, enduring the harsh elements of the Western Australian outback. Along the way, they are given food and clothing by farming families, stockmen and other outback characters. The Aboriginal tracker sent by Mr Neville to recapture the girls, is never far behind, yet there is a sense that he is deeply respectful of Molly's determination and resourcefulness, and even if he did find the girls, we wonder whether he could bring himself to take them back.

The rabbit proof fence itself is not only central to the narrative in a practical sense, but metaphorically it is of obvious significance. Originally built by the white settlers in 1901 to keep the rabbits from their farmland, the fence powerfully represents the division between the two cultures. From beginning to end this is an intense and profoundly sad film, which challenges its audience to face the reality of the stolen generation.

Website review: Spare Rooms for Refugees

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The website, spareroomsforrefugees.com, has been set up by Julian Burnside QC and his wife, Kate Durham. Spare Rooms for Refugees is a Melbourne based organisation started by Burnside and Durham, which encourages practical support for refugees and asylum seekers in Australia. It is essentially a project to help asylum seekers enter the Australian community.

The main feature of the site is the opportunity to register your willingness to house a refugee or a refugee family if you have a spare room that you are willing to make available. The purpose of this is to help reduce the numbers of asylum seekers held in detention centres, and to accommodate the growing numbers of homeless asylum seekers in the community. The site

states that hundreds of Australians have provided firm offers of accommodation.

On the site you can – register a protest at the Federal Government's treatment of refugees; encourage support for politicians who have spoken out against mandatory detention and the treatment of refugees; receive regular updates on refugees who have been housed; sign a petition which is calling for a Royal Commission into the Federal Government's treatment of asylum seekers (at the time of writing, there were just over 10,000 signatures collected); read eye witness accounts of conditions at the Woomera Detention Centre; write to refugees in detention centres; and donate money to the organisations who are helping refugees.

You can also read the statistics on how many refugees are accepted by different countries. For example, Sweden receives similar numbers of asylum seekers to Australia and Sweden has less than half our population. In Sweden, detention can only take a couple of weeks and children can be held for no more than six days. Australia is only ranked 32nd most generous in regards to accepting refugees. You can also read about Australia's Pacific Solution and the costs of this "solution" to Australia.

Most importantly, the site offers practical solutions to the refugee issue, as well as providing hope by setting out what has been achieved through people's compassion and generosity.