

SOARING WITH THE SUGARBIRD LADY

DIANNE WOLFER

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YEAR LEVEL: Y4–8

ABOUT THE BOOK

Imagine flying solo, crisscrossing the north-west of Australia in your own plane and single-handedly delivering life-saving vaccines to remote communities.

Robin Miller did this, and at a time when most people didn't think women should be pilots at all. Her arrival seemed like magic to the outback children who received her polio vaccine on sugar cubes.

Before long, she became known as the Sugarbird Lady. And this was just the start of Robin's extraordinary real-life adventures!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dianne Wolfer is an award-winning author. Her book *Lighthouse Girl* served as inspiration for PIAF's *The Giants* and was adapted into a stage production by Black Swan State Theatre Company. One of Dianne's picture books, *Photographs in the Mud* (set along the Kokoda Track), was inspired by a wartime anecdote, has been used as an international peace reference and was also published in Japanese.

THEMES

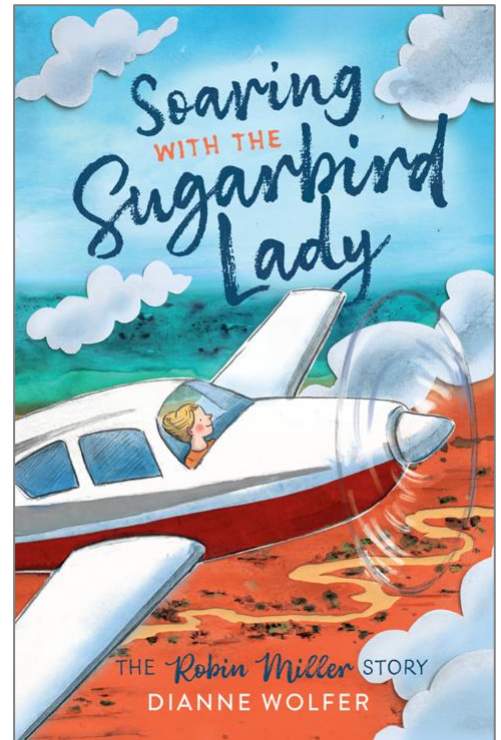
- Australian history
- Postwar Australia
- Aviation
- Regional and rural Western Australia
- Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia
- Indigenous health
- Women's rights
- Determination
- Resilience

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- Y4–8 English
- Y4–8 Humanities and Social Sciences (History and Geography)
- Y4–8 Health and Physical Education
- Y4–8 Science
- Y4–8 Mathematics

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: diannewolfer.com
- Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia: flyingdoctor.org.au
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Describe the character of Robin Miller. Give examples that demonstrate her strengths and weaknesses.
2. Miller faced many challenges as she pursued her dream to become a pilot in a male-dominated field. Discuss her challenges and how she worked to overcome them.
3. How did Miller's adventures and achievements contribute to the advancement of women in aviation and healthcare?
4. How did Miller's relationship with her family, especially her father Horrie, shape her determination and achievements?
5. Discuss the emotional and physical challenges Robin faced during her battle with cancer and how she continued to work despite her illness.
6. How is Miller's legacy remembered today?
7. Would you have liked to become a pilot in Miller's era? Discuss reasons for and against.
8. The author describes Miller as **'a trailblazer for women, winging through "glass ceilings" in a miniskirt and impressive bouffant hairdo'** (p. 145). What do you think the author means by this quote?
9. How do the health outcomes for rural and remote Australians compare to those living in major cities today? Search the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare website for information.
10. Why is Julie concerned about speaking Japanese? (p. 14)
11. On page 46, the chapter begins with: **'When in doubt, go.'** What does this phrase mean to you?
12. Miller's father, Horrie, often uses the phrase **'hooroo'** (p. 10). What does it mean?
13. How does Robin's story inspire you, and what lessons can be learned from her life and career?
14. Can you name any other Australians who have made a notable contribution in the areas of healthcare or aviation?

English

1. What is historical fiction?
 - a. Which parts of this story do you think are fact and which are fiction?
 - b. Have you read any other historical fiction novels? Which ones do you recommend?
2. The author has used similes and metaphors to engage the reader. Find three examples from the text.
3. What is the purpose of the quotes that begin each chapter?
4. What do these words from the story mean? Use each in a sentence:
 - a. pindan (p. 13)
 - b. exuberant (p. 27)
 - c. slipstream (p. 65)
 - d. overreaching (p. 77)
 - e. perilous (p. 90)
 - f. entombed (p. 90)
 - g. disorientating (p. 96)
 - h. posthumously (p. 145)
5. Language evolves over time. How could you rephrase these quotes from the text to sound more modern:
 - a. **'Goodness me ... What a bunch of ragamuffins!'** (p. 26)
 - b. **'You're a bonza nurse.'** (p. 31)
 - c. **'Dad had received the suggestion coldly.'** (p. 32)
 - d. **'That would be a godsend.'** (p. 51)
 - e. **'My oath, I'm on.'** (p. 68)
 - f. **'There is one ambition to which I must confess.'** (p. 83)
6. Write a short story describing a fictional flight from Perth to Broome in the 1940s. Include details about the journey, the people and places visited.
7. Write an abridged biography of Robin Miller.
8. Write a letter to Miller expressing your thoughts on her achievements and legacy.
9. Write a review of the book, including a brief outline, rating and recommendation.

10. Imagine you are in the cockpit with Miller during one of her overseas flights. Describe in detail what you would see, hear, smell and feel. Use figurative language to bring your description to life.

History

1. The author has used both primary and secondary sources to ensure the book is as accurate as possible. List some examples of each used in the research of this book. The author note beginning on page 148 gives some examples.
2. Compare and contrast Miller's childhood with your own:
 - a. How is childhood different today to how it was in Miller's time?
 - b. How is Australia different today to how it was in Miller's time?
3. Develop an annotated timeline of the key events in Miller's life.
4. Create a family tree outlining the relationships between Miller, her parents, siblings and husband.
5. Discuss the social, economic and cultural context of Australia after World War II. How did the postwar period influence the development of the country?
6. How does historical fiction help shape our understanding of the past?

Geography

1. How did aviation enhance the liveability of regional WA in the postwar period? Consider some of the services mentioned in the book, such as milk run, mail delivery, and health services.
2. Create a chart to compare and contrast the liveability of urban, rural and remote communities today. Consider access to services and facilities (sanitation, education, health services, etc.), environmental quality (air pollution, water quality, etc.) and social connection.

Health and Physical Education

1. Explain how success, challenge and failure strengthened Miller's identity as a female nurse and pilot.
2. Create a mind map of people, places and events that influenced Miller's career choice and passion for aviation.
3. What personal attributes helped Miller succeed as a nurse?
4. What personal attributes helped Miller succeed as a pilot?
5. What were some strategies used by Miller to promote healthy choices in the Kimberley and Pilbara regions she visited? How did Miller adapt her messaging to suit her audience?
6. Create a poster encouraging people to attend one of Miller's polio clinics.
7. The eradication of polio in Australia due to widespread vaccination is an example of preventive health. What are other ways individuals and communities can maintain positive health and wellbeing through preventive health?
8. What role does the Royal Flying Doctor Service play in maintaining the health and wellbeing of Australians? Look online at their website to discover the services provided in your state or territory.

Science

1. Miller and her sisters are fascinated by the ever-changing mangroves. Create a multimedia presentation on this intertidal habitat and the adaptations of its inhabitants.
2. How has scientific knowledge improved the efficiency and safety of aircraft since Miller's time? Consider the impacts of new technologies, materials and design.

Mathematics

1. Consider the flights Miller took ferrying aircraft for the Royal Flying Doctor Service:
 - a. San Francisco to Perth (pp. 86–87)
 - b. Paris to Perth (pp. 98–99)
 - c. Wichita to Perth (pp. 130–131)For each flight, add the distance travelled during each leg of the trip to find the total kilometres flown. Which trip was the farthest?
2. Miller explains that it took 10 hours to fly from Perth to Broome in 1946 (p. 13). Find out how much less time the same flight takes today. What factors would contribute to this time saved?