

EUNGEDUP: A WETLAND SUMMER DIARY

GILES WATSON

ISBN (PB): 9781760995171

ISBN (EBOOK): 9781760995188

YEAR LEVEL: Y10–12

ABOUT THE BOOK

Eungedup is a poetic memoir about Giles Watson's growing relationship with Eugendup, a freshwater wetland that lies between Albany and Denmark in Western Australia's Great Southern region. Teeming with life, the precious region is under developer threat, so the community rallies to purchase it. As one of the donors, Watson is permitted to visit the area, and seeks solace there as he comes to terms with his own chronic illness.

In prose, prose-poetry, and free and lyric verse, he documents observations of birds, insects, reptiles, amphibians and even the microscopic infusoria in the water – and his growing obsession becomes a deep-seated love of place. The diary traces these changes through the Noongar seasons of Kambarang, Birak, Bunuru and Djeran, as Watson's longing for better health converges with the wetland's need for replenishment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Giles Watson migrated from the UK to Australia at the age of one, grew up in Canberra, and returned to live in Britain for eighteen years. There, he became fascinated with ancient landscapes, writing prolifically in response. In 2013, he returned to Australia, settling in Kinjarling (Albany), Western Australia. He has a long-standing interest in natural history, mediaeval texts, folklore and mythology, and has worked as a volunteer in wildlife rehabilitation, specialising in orphaned and injured owls. Giles is the author of a large body of poetic work, both self-published and in literary journals, a book of essays on the folklore of natural history, *A Witch's Natural History* (Troy Books), and is the editor of *Ten Poems About Butterflies* (Candlestick Press). He has written songs with singer-songwriter Simone Keane. He teaches English, literature and drama, and lives in Kinjarling (Albany).



THEMES

- Environmentalism
- Climate change
- Conservation
- Eco-poetics
- Ecological grief and ecological hope
- Custodianship
- Biodiversity hotspot
- Chronic illness
- Health and healing

MOTIFS

- Drought versus replenishment
- Wetlands acting as the kidneys of the landscape
- Australasian bittern as a focus for ecological yearning

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y10–12 English

Y10 –12 Literature

Y10–12 Philosophy and Ethics

Y10–12 Health and Physical Education (Mental Health and Wellbeing)

USEFUL WEBSITES

- poetryfoundation.org/education/glossary/ecopoetics
- redroompoetry.org/poets/nandi-chinna/nandi-chinna-reflects-new-shoots-wa/
- denmarkbirdgroup.org/elementor-4457/
- wicc.org.au/eungedup.html
- birdlife.org.au/?srsId=AfmBOoqnkM_Owyx7iXm-kPCj9WWs-gMjt1GBZ76nWULR2j8NsYVrsuyd
- ccwa.org.au/
- wetlandswa.org.au/
- wilderness.org.au/iconic-places/the-kimberley/martuwarra-river-keepers
- frackfreewa.org.au/
- counteract.org.au/case-studies/beeliar-wetlands/
- soe.dccew.gov.au/taxonomy/term/941
- poetryfoundation.org/poets/emily-dickinson
- bitternsinrice.com.au/
- library.dbca.wa.gov.au/FullTextFiles/C20138.pdf
- bitternconservation.nz/
- lovebittern.com/connect-to-protect
- visit.museum.wa.gov.au/
- csiro.au/en/research/animals/insects/ID-Resources
- flickr.com/photos/wacrakey/albums
- ala.org.au/
- inaturalist.ala.org.au/

CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. Investigate the roles of First Nations people as custodians of this country. Discuss what it is that non-Indigenous people can learn from Indigenous practices of custodianship – both pre-settlement and now.
2. Where is Noongar boodjar (Noongar country)? What are the six seasons of the Noongar calendar?
3. Research the Indigenous seasons of the place where you live:
 - a. What are the attributes?
 - b. What season are you in right now?
 - c. How do these seasons align with the colonial model of four seasons?
 - d. How might a knowledge of your local Indigenous seasons help you to better understand and appreciate your immediate environment?
4. Investigate a recent environmental protest in relation to something near to your own home town or in your home state:
 - a. What was the protest about?
 - b. What were the protestors protesting against?
 - c. Where did these protestors come from?
 - d. Who was resisting?
 - e. What was at stake?
 - f. What forms of resistance can you find in relation to this protest?
5. The Australasian bittern is the 'flagship' species for promoting the conservation initiatives that have saved, and are now improving, the biodiversity of the Eungedup wetlands. Find out more about the Australasian bittern: its biology, the threats it faces, the research that has been done on it. Other species of bittern have been objects of fear and reverence in other countries; research these species.
 - a. What qualities do you think makes bitterns so attractive as flagship species?
 - b. What other flagship species are associated with other habitats across the world?
 - c. The steps taken to preserve a flagship species often involve wholesale attempts to save entire habitats. Find examples of other species that benefit from the preservation of habitat for the Australasian bittern.
6. Discuss the relationship between wistfulness and elusiveness in the author's search for the Australasian bittern.
7. Go to a wild space or green space near to your school and spend time writing observations, taking photographs, making sound recordings, mapping, drawing and/or just sitting in silence and observing. Bring any notes and observations back to the classroom and explore ways of writing about them, or do so in the field. If possible, plan ahead to observe the place in different seasons.
 - a. When undertaking the observations, be sure to include an exercise where students sit still and silent for at least twelve minutes, so that any animals have a chance to lose their fear and re-emerge.
8. Collect some pond water, and take the students to a science laboratory to observe the infusoria. Ask them, instead of viewing the microscopic animals scientifically, to write creatively about them.
9. Choose poems from *Eungedup* to read aloud or perform. Rehearse and show the performances.
10. The Prologue asserts: 'I need a Place whose struggle is my struggle' (p. 11). Discuss how to identify with place in a land that has been colonised. How can people whose families arrived in Australia from 1788 onwards learn from Aboriginal people about identifying with place? What might the 'struggle' then look like?
11. On p. 36, the poet is 'wishing I could never / leave a trace / of human DNA' at Eungedup. Are there ways in which a person can love a place and yet still act in a way that is detrimental to it? Discuss ways of contributing positively to a place that you love.
12. Read the account of the author's time with the horticulturalist Mark Parre on pp. 155–162. Explore how different people's careers have led them to work in conservation. How might a knowledge of conservation issues enrich a person's career, or help them to do more ethical work?
13. On pp. 199–201, the author describes a formative experience from his childhood. What experiences helped to form the person you are today?
14. Authors who write about non-human species are sometimes tempted to anthropomorphise animals in order to help their readers to imagine their way into the minds of animals whose intelligence is very

different from our own. What other ways can an author characterise animals without imposing human characteristics on them? Where do we see this happening in *Eungedup*? You could start with the poems about insects. You could also discuss the effect of the phrase 'chapels of the moist' in the poetic description of the burrows of moaning frogs on p. 224.

Language and textual analysis – engaging and responding; reflecting

1. Comprehension strategies to model and practise.
 - a. How would you describe the author's poetic style? What in particular stands out about his work? What effect does this particular style choice (its form) have on the content of the poem (the words themselves)?
 - b. Compare and contrast the style of a Dickinson poem in relation to the poet's own work.
 - c. Ask students to summarise a particular section of the text.
 - d. Ask students to identify key ideas/themes.
 - e. What conclusions can they draw from the text?
 - f. Ask students to find examples of onomatopoeia, alliteration, sibilance and assonance in the poems.
 - g. Explore the poet's use of dashes in the lyric, narrative and stepped-verse poems. Look for examples where the use of a dash is for parenthesis, and where it introduces a suggestion of hesitation, ambiguity or a deliberate sense that an idea is unfinished.
 - h. What is an example of a poem where form complements content and meaning?
2. Ask students to keep a reading journal in which they record particular quotes, personal reactions and any questions or discussion topics they may wish to talk about in class. Structure the journal as a response to the poems. Keeping a reader-response journal will enable students to map out their responses to essay questions.
3. Make one of the following comparisons, looking for similarities and differences between the texts:
 - a. Emily Dickinson's 'A bird came down the walk' and the poem about the Spotted Crake chick on p. 87 of *Eungedup*.
 - b. Emily Dickinson's 'I felt a funeral in my brain' and 'A clock stopped' and the poems on pp. 62–63 of *Eungedup*.
 - c. Emily Dickinson's 'A narrow fellow in the grass' and the poem about the tiger snake and other predators on pp. 77–78 of *Eungedup*.
 - i. What are your own feelings about venomous creatures? Compare and contrast Dickinson's and Watson's reactions. What is the significance of the repetition of 'disappearing' in Watson's poem? What might 'Zero at the Bone' mean in Dickinson's?
 - d. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 'Two Scavengers in a Truck, Two Beautiful People in a Mercedes' and the stepped verse poem about the kingfisher on pp. 133–136 of *Eungedup*.
 - e. John Clare's 'The Fern Owls Nest' and his sonnet, 'I found a ball of grass among the hay' and the passage beginning 'Branchlets of Casuarina fall ...' on p. 217 and ending 'sequesters from the world' on p. 218 of *Eungedup*.
 - f. John Clare's 'The Landrail' and the poem about Moaning Frogs on p. 224 of *Eungedup*.
4. Read and explore Seamus Heaney's translation, 'The Yellow Bittern'. How do you think it has influenced Giles Watson's account of glimpsing an Australasian bittern on pp. 110–112 of *Eungedup*, and the poem about the bittern on pp. 116–117? Relate these texts to the central themes and motifs of *Eungedup*. How does the knowledge of the fact that the Australasian bittern is an endangered species affect your reading of these texts?
5. The poem beginning 'I've seen the standing water fade ...' on p. 245 of *Eungedup* is a villanelle.
 - a. What is a villanelle?
 - b. Compare it with other villanelles, starting with Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night'.
 - c. What effects are achieved through the repetitive structures of this form of poetry?
6. Read Chapter 14, 'The Corncrake Wife', in Amy Liptrot's memoir *The Outrun* (pp. 123–133). In the text, Amy Liptrot is monitoring Corncrake calls whilst fighting back against alcoholism. What similarities and differences can you find between her account and Giles Watson's account of seeking

the Australasian bittern? Both authors end up catching only fleeting glimpses of the bird that is their obsession. How do you feel about this?

7. On pp. 33–34 of John Anderson's *the forest set out like the night*, he compares the glint of light on the foliage of Eucalyptus trees to the music of a Balinese gamelan. Make a collection of figurative language from *Eungedup*, and look for hints of synaesthesia (a condition in which one sense triggers an experience in another sense). What is the cumulative effect of this language in both texts?
8. On p. 95 of Nandi Chinna and Anne Poelina's *Tossed Up By the Beak of a Cormorant*, Poelina writes: 'People Place and Nature and Living Systems not dying / We can all be part of the trying / We all want the same things and for our young people... / We must not be crying wondering what we are leaving them'. In what ways do *Eungedup* and other eco-poetic texts you have read help you to feel hope rather than despair?
9. In *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy*, Michael McCarthy argues that fear of environmental disaster is not sufficient to cause people to take action for conservation; a far greater motivating factor is the joy that people can derive from real experiences in the natural world. Which parts of *Eungedup* would you pick out to illustrate this sense of joy? What do these passages make you want to do?

Creative activities

1. Dedicate some time (e.g. half an hour) to immersing yourself in a natural environment and recording what you observe while you are there. You could do this by writing in a notebook, or by dictating to a voice or video recorder. Make sure you use all your senses when recording this experience. Repeat this exercise once or twice a week. If you are good at drawing (or even if you don't think you are) try sketching what you see, training your eye to notice the smaller details.
2. Then write one poem from each separate 'sitting'. Concentrate on form enhancing content.
3. Next, write the poem in one of the styles used by Giles Watson, or a poem that would fit into Giles Watson's book.
4. Use stepped verse to describe a sequence of natural events that are unfolding moment by moment. Experiment with looser narrative verse styles and also with more tightly constructed poems with rhythmic structures and rhyming schemes. Try using pararhymes or soft rhymes to increase the subtlety of the sound patterns in your work. Try matching words to specific sounds that you hear in the natural world.
5. Other genres may be applied to the above exercise, e.g. photo essays, short memoir pieces, flash fiction or non-fiction.
6. Have a look at *You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World* (ed. Ada Limon) – or any other poetry anthology that concentrates on writing about the natural world. (There is a list of further reading at the end of these notes.)
 - a. Write a nature poem or an eco-poetic poem in any style that would fit into this anthology.
7. As a class, discuss and devise an anthology of eco-poetics based on students' writing:
 - a. What are some possible ways to order the anthology (e.g. thematic / alphabetic / geographic / biological)?
 - b. Are there any gaps in the anthology? How will you fill them?
 - c. What is the anthology's title (and subtitle) to be?
 - d. What would an introduction to this anthology say?
 - e. Who would you invite to write a foreword?
8. Try drawing maps or looking at aerial photographs (or drone footage) of a place you love. Do some of your own experimental writing about what it is like to write about a place from a different perspective from that of a person on the ground. Or acquire a canoe or kayak and try exploring and writing about a body of water that you have never before experienced from that perspective.
9. Write about the symptoms of an illness or disability in a way that encourages your reader to empathise with the experience. Be open to the possibility that some of the symptoms, horrible as they are, may be pathways to new insights. Try confronting the pain with beauty or humour.
10. Find out about the seasons identified by the Traditional Custodians of the land on which you live. If possible, see if you can access events or videos in which Traditional Custodians are speaking about the country on which you live.
 - a. What have you learned from what you have heard?

- b. Do you think that the role of custodianship might belong to everyone?
 - c. Write with an open heart about the difference such a role might make and what your relationship with country might be.
11. Become obsessed with a particular species – the more rare, mysterious or elusive, the better. Seek it out wherever you can. Write about your hopes and fears for it, and about any encounters you are lucky enough to have with it. Alternatively, become obsessed with an extremely common species. Watch this species for half an hour each day for a week, and keep a journal. See where it leads.
 12. Write about your dreams. Experiment with different ways of writing about them. What happens when you try imposing a rigid verse form on the narrative of a dream? What happens when you use a freer one?
 13. Read the passages about tiger snakes in *Eungedup*. Then, deliberately seek out safe encounters with an animal that you fear or do not like. Observe it carefully (and if it's venomous or dangerous, observe it at a safe distance). Look for beauty. Write about your experience.
 14. Write about a place you have lost. Explore in writing what it is like to have deep-seated attachments severed by destruction or personal dislocation.
 15. Write about discovering a new place and falling in love with it.
 16. Find something very, very small to write about. Use a magnifying glass or a microscope. Or find something very distant to write about and use a telescope.
 17. Experiment with writing about a topic that fascinates you while merging two very distinct and different forms, e.g. interpretive essay and free-verse poem.
 18. Find a person who has deep knowledge of an aspect of the natural world. Walk and talk with this person. Write a portrait that includes what this person does, what they tell you, and what they are like.
 19. On p. 261, the poet ends the narrative with a description of the signs that the rainy seasons are coming. Think of a time when you knew that change was in the air, and write about it.
 20. If you are in a group, you may wish to share your writings / observations with other participants.

Philosophy and ethics

Eco-poetics is poetry that works to remake our understanding of the world by exploring the relationships between words, ecology and the earth as our collective home. Eco-poetics is a creative and critical practice that goes beyond traditional nature poetry by viewing humanity as integral to, rather than separate from, the biosphere, and uses scientific, theoretical and innovative poetic approaches to foster awareness of the planet on which we live. In doing so, it explores the interconnectedness between language, human activity and the environment, particularly in response to ecological crises like climate change.

1. With the class, devise a working definition of eco-poetics and discuss the following roles in that context:
 - a. interconnection
 - b. ecological awareness
 - c. interdisciplinary approaches
 - d. how this practice moves beyond traditional nature poetry
 - e. an investigation of the meaning of 'home'
2. Locate and discuss the work of some of the practitioners of eco-poetics today (e.g. Nandi Chinna, Jill Jones, John Kinsella, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Martin Harrison, Coral Hull, Tracy Ryan, Louise Crisp and Kirli Saunders).
3. Compare and contrast some examples of their work to the work of Giles Watson.
4. Discuss: what is the role of eco-poets within the framework of environmental activism?
5. The famous scientist and conservationist Jane Goodall wrote: 'We are going through very dark times: socially, politically and especially environmentally. If you think globally, you get really depressed, so act locally. Each one of us makes some impact ... every single day.' Discuss the significance of engaging with and conserving specific local places: the way it is explored in *Eungedup*, and the implications it has for young people.

6. Discuss the way illness affects the poet's view of himself on p. 89. Are we really just 'biological detritus'? How do we make meaning out of our lives if we are?
7. Read the essay and poem on the idea of 'miasma' on pp. 145–150. What role do misconceptions play in the destruction of habitats and species? How should we respond when these misconceptions are based on over-exaggerated truths, such as the fact that some wetland birds do carry disease?

Health and physical education

1. Ask students to research chronic fatigue syndrome and fibromyalgia (the poet's specialist arrived at a fibromyalgia diagnosis after the text was written).
2. What are some of the impacts of living with chronic fatigue or fibromyalgia on the individual in terms of mental health, physical health, social and economic status? Where do you see this reflected in the text?
 - a. Divide students into small groups to research and discuss the impacts of living with a chronic condition.
 - b. How might a chronic condition affect or impact the individual and those around them?
 - c. Each group should report back to the larger group on their findings.
3. Discuss the depiction of chronic fatigue in this book and the nexus between the author's illness and his immersion in the wetlands of Eungedup. How do these things interconnect and relate?
4. If a sense of deep connection with wild spaces is a source of good mental health, the destruction of beloved places is also a cause of ecological grief. *Eungedup's* prologue confronts the danger of forming an attachment with a wild space: it may later be destroyed, with consequences for the mental health of anyone who loves it. Discuss the deep-seated psychological need for wilderness, and why we feel so compelled to expose ourselves to the risk of loving a place and then losing it.
5. Polly Atkin, in her book *Some of Us Just Fall: On Nature and Not Getting Better*, argues that the idea of the 'nature cure' – if that is taken to mean physical healing – is largely a myth. The author of *Eungedup* is not made physically better by his visits to the wetland in any measurable way, but Gail Simmons in her endorsement on the front cover of the book describes it as 'A luminous testament to the healing power of place.' Discuss what you think about 'nature cure' narratives. In what ways is Eungedup a place of healing for the poet, if not physically? Discuss this and then invert the question: how can human beings be whole and healthy without wild spaces?
6. How do poems such as 'The Nerve which makes the Eyelid twitch' (p. 72) teach us to pay attention to physical symptoms?

FURTHER READING

John Anderson, *the forest set out like the night* (Black Pepper, 1995)

Polly Atkin, *Some of Us Just Fall: On Nature and Not Getting Better* (Sceptre, 2023)

Phil Barnett, *Birds Knit My Ribs Together* (Arachne Press, 2024)

Nandi Chinna, *Swamp: Walking the Wetlands of the Swan Coastal Plain* (Fremantle Press, 2014)

Nandi Chinna and Anne Poelina, *Tossed Up by the Beak of a Cormorant* (Fremantle Press, 2024)

Mark Cocker, *Our Place* (Penguin, 2018) and *Crow Country* (Penguin, 2008)

Rob Cowen, *The Heeding* (Elliot and Thompson, 2023)

Louise Crisp, *Yuiquimbiang* (Cordite, 2019)

Miriam Darlington, *Otter Country* (Granta, 2012) and *Owl Sense* (Faber and Faber, 2018)

Roger Deakin, *Wildwood: A Journey Through Trees* (Hamish Hamilton, 2007)

Tim Dee, *Landfill: Notes on Gull Watching and Trash Picking in the Anthropocene* (Dovecote Press, 2018)

Kerri ni Dochartaigh, *Thin Places: A Natural History of Healing and Home* (Milkweed Editions, 2022)

Nick Hayes, *The Book of Trespass: Crossing the Lines that Divide Us* (Bloomsbury, 2020)

Isabel Galleymore, *Significant Other* (Carcenet, 2019)

Charmaine Papertalk Green and John Kinsella, *False Claims of Colonial Thieves* (Magabala Books, 2018)

Dafydd ap Gwilym (14th century Welsh poet)

Michael McCarthy, *The Moth Snowstorm: Nature and Joy* (John Murray Press, 2015)

Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *My People* (Wiley, 2020)

Trish O’Kane, *Birding to Change the World* (Harper Collins, 2024)

Alice Oswald, *Dart* (Faber and Faber, 2002)

Gail Simmons, *Between the Chalk and the Sea* (Headline, 2023)

Barbara Temperton, *Ghost Nets* (WA Poets, 2022)

Judith Wright, *Birds* (Angus and Robertson, 1968)



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