



Reading Guide

Title: Brumby Plains

Author: Joanne van Os

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Reading Level: 9+

COVER PIECE

A modern adventure and an old mystery collide

Sam and George McAllister live on a buffalo station in the Northern Territory, and this Christmas their cousins are coming to stay. This means weeks of fun – horse riding, camping out, fishing and exploring, driving themselves around the station in a four-wheel-drive. But what they haven't counted on is a strange meeting, an old mystery, and finding out more about their isolated home than they could ever have guessed.

People aren't always what they seem...

ABOUT THE BOOK

The novel is set in the far north of Australia on a buffalo station in the Northern Territory, in the present time. Sam and George McAllister are brothers, and live on their family property, *Brumby Plains*, with their parents, an old man called Jock the Fencer, and the workers who live there during the season. The story takes place at the end of the year, when the Wet is approaching, and the workers have finished the season's mustering and have left.

Sam and George have two cousins, twins Tess and Darcy, who live in Darwin, some 300km away, and who get out to the station at every opportunity. The four kids get along well, and are looking forward to spending the entire Christmas holidays together because the twins' parents are going away, and Tess and Darcy are coming to stay at the station.

While in town to do the Christmas shopping, Sam, George, Tess and Darcy have an encounter with an odd person, an Englishman called Charles. The others like him and find him very funny, but Sam is wary and suspicious, although he's not sure why.

The highlight of the holiday is to be an expedition to a mysterious cave up on the Arm, the hulking rock escarpment that runs along the eastern border of the station. The only difficulty is that they are not supposed to go there, so they find all kinds of ways of rationalising their behaviour when they finally do locate the secret entrance to the cave quite by accident. They tell no one about it, except for their young Aboriginal friends, Norrie and Lazarus, who live on an adjoining property with their grandfather Old Vincent and other members of their community. Norrie and Lazarus, however interested they are in the cave, refuse to join Sam, George, Tess and Darcy in exploring it because they've heard some stories about it, and know 'it's a bad place for blackfellas'.

Sam has a disturbing dream after their first visit to the cave, which leaves him confused and disoriented. Sam is the oldest of the four cousins, and a worrier. He is a very sensitive person, perhaps almost fey, and this is why the dream has come to him. He is responsible and sensible, but even he can't resist the lure of the cave, even though he knows they shouldn't be going back there.

Other things are happening around them. Sam and George's parents, Mac and Sarah, are clearly distracted and worried about something, but they are not telling the children. An unpleasant and difficult neighbour adds to the tension, insisting the McAllisters have been mustering his stock and dropping fences. On an overnight fishing trip with Vincent, Sam hears a plane fly low overhead, its lights extinguished. In a moment of jealousy, Darcy rides a horse he shouldn't, and breaks his arm in a fall, requiring a trip to hospital. There is evidence that strangers have been on the property, and when Sam and the others discover a bird trapping net set up at a spring on top of the Arm, they think they know what is going on, and race headlong into disaster.

They rush home to find Old Jock there alone. He tells them that the bank is foreclosing on the property, and Mac and Sarah had to go in to town and talk to their lawyer. Unable to tell his father about the bird trapping, Sam decides they can at least go back and take the nets down. But they blunder into the smugglers themselves and in a panicked race for safety, Darcy, hampered by his broken arm, is caught while the others manage to scramble down the rockfall and into the second cave.

They are horrified when the torch lights up a skeleton on the cave floor. However, Sam recognises the cave from his dream, and realises he knows how to get them out. He leads the other two through to the other side of the Arm, and into the first cave. This is when Sam sees the bark-wrapped parcel on the floor, but they are in too much of a hurry to stop and look at it. They climb down to the land cruiser, but are caught by the smugglers, marched back up to the top of the ridge, and forced to wait while the three men set up bird nets on the spring. Later that evening they are driven in the back of a truck, along with drugged birds from the nets, to rendezvous with the plane flying in under cover of darkness to an abandoned airstrip.

Sam has been berating himself about getting them all into danger, blaming himself for not staying away from the cave in the first place. However, he doesn't sink into helpless self pity, and takes actions which result in preventing the bird smugglers from getting away, and probably saves their lives as well.

Sam learns that you can't always judge a book by its cover when Charles, about whom he was so suspicious, turns out to be on the right side of the argument all along.

“It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good”: The bank foreclosure turns out to be a plot cooked up by the neighbour in league with a dishonest bank manager. The capture of the bird smugglers, who were also working with the crooked neighbour, brings a sizeable reward, removing the worry of debt from the family's shoulders. The bark parcel in the cave which Sam noticed as they hurried through, turns out to be the sacred objects which Vincent's people had lost many years before, when the last of Vincent's clan was wiped out in a massacre by white settlers. The deaths had meant that no Aboriginal would go into the cave on the Arm, and so the sacred materials were never discovered, and certain important ceremonies could not be performed. When Sam showed Vincent the stone, which he had dreamed about and then found in the cave with the skeleton, the old man knew what it meant, and was able to go and retrieve them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joanne van Os has lived in the Northern Territory for thirty five years, and has spent most of her time there as a bull catcher, contract cattle and buffalo musterer, pet food shooter and many other incarnations. She grew up in Melbourne, where a passion for reading was established very early in her life. Her parents complain that she always had her nose in a book in a corner somewhere, deaf to everything going on around her. (Joanne swears it wasn't just to get out of the washing up) She also loved writing, and “Composition” was her favourite subject, after Nature Studies, when she was eight or nine years old. Fortunately the fact that her handwriting was absolutely awful was not an impediment to this.

At 20 Joanne left home to take up a job in a remote Aboriginal community called Port Keats (now known as Wadeye), in the north west of the Northern Territory. It was a year after Cyclone Tracy had demolished Darwin. Joanne intended staying in the NT for only a few months, but hadn't counted on falling in love with the bush, and the north, and stayed at Port Keats for two years.

She always intended to write a book ‘one day’, but like so many budding writers, life got in the way. She had one rejection slip for a short story which she had sent into *The Australian Womens' Weekly* once, but that was about the extent of her literary pretensions, unless you

count writing long and detailed letters home to family and friends. She didn't begin writing a book seriously until around 1994, when she began the first draft of 'Brumby Plains'. This book ended up on the back burner for a few years, until after she had completed a memoir of her life in the NT with her former husband Rod Ansell, known as the "Real Crocodile Dundee". The memoir, *Outback Heart*, was published by Random House in October 2005. She took the unfinished manuscript down from a shelf, blew the dust off it, and in a few months sent it off to her agent. *Brumby Plains* was published in July 2006 by Random House.

Joanne is currently working on a series of *Brumby Plains* novels, and an adult historical fiction novel. She has three children, and lives in Darwin with her husband and their youngest daughter.

THE WRITING PROCESS

The story line for *Brumby Plains* was something that developed as time went on. I didn't start out with a clear idea at all for what the book was going to be, or even where it was headed. I just wanted to write about life in the outback, from a child's point of view, or at least *for* children. I realised pretty quickly that I wanted to write for the children who lived out bush, because there seem to be so few books that reflect their lifestyle back to them. Most of the books available to them are written for, and about, kids living in the city. And I thought it would be good to write something that opened up this lifestyle to city kids as well.

So the background was clear. The bush was the main location, and in particular a buffalo station, which was something I knew intimately. The characters came along one by one, sometimes in response to a situation, and sometimes they just appeared and demanded to be included. Sam and George are not renditions of my own two sons, but obviously share some qualities with them, and with many other children I've met out bush over the years.

The character of Charles, the eccentric Englishman is inspired by a very old friend of mine in Darwin, so much so that I had to have my friend read the relevant sections to make sure he was happy with the portrayal! Fortunately for me, and the book, he was very pleased with it, because I don't think *Brumby Plains* would be the same without Charles Rowntree. Characters become very dear to the writer, I discovered. I really enjoy Sam and George, and I especially like old Jock the Fencer. Old Vincent is a treasure too. He is an amalgamation of several old Aboriginal men I have known over the years, very patient and very clever. He, and Charles, will definitely appear in future *Brumby Plains* books.

THEMES IN THE BOOK

The major theme of the book is the importance of believing in yourself. Sam is a worrier, and constantly doubts himself and whether he is doing the right thing. He worries about how you know what's right. But in the end he shows he is capable of making the right decisions when he trusts himself.

There is the basic background theme of good versus bad, such as the children against the smugglers, and the McAllisters threatened by the bad neighbour plotting to get the station for himself. Jealousy and deception bring their own rewards too, as when Darcy feels bitter about the perception that Sam is a better rider than him, and sneaks off to ride Saxon and gets hurt.

Sometimes boundaries have to be stretched if things are to change. The cave was off limits, but Sam's discovery of the stone, and consequently the bark parcel, bring an end to a taboo about the cave, and enable the resurrection of important ceremonies, and perhaps the healing of a terrible tragedy many years before.

The Aboriginal theme in the book is deliberately understated. It is difficult for many non-Indigenous people to understand the depth of Aboriginal spirituality, which is not something the author claims a great understanding of either. Instead the author has tried to show it as a background concept, something we can glimpse out of the corner of our eye, but not really see clearly. The author has not described Aboriginal ceremonies, or the sacred objects, because it would have been disrespectful to have done so. Many ceremonies cannot be witnessed by women, children or uninitiated men, nor can they see or touch the sacred objects. Ceremony might be best described as part of Aboriginal religion which has been practiced for over 40,000 years in Australia.

DISCUSSION POINTS

Are the children wrong when they don't tell Mac exactly where they are going, knowing that Old Vincent would be upset about them going to the cave? What are some of the effects of their disobedience?

The fact that it all turned out all right in the end didn't justify the disobedience. However, there is an old saying that "It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good." How do you think this might relate to the story? In which parts might it relate?

What do you think was the purpose of the bird in the story?
Why do you think Sam had the strange dream?
And why not George, or maybe Darcy?

Why do you think that Sam was suspicious about Charles, when everyone else seemed to think he was a good bloke?

How would you have felt if you were Sam, when Vincent was telling him the story of the massacre?

Do you think it was a good idea that the children found out about the massacre that happened so long ago?

Sam and George have lots of useful knowledge about living on a bush station. What were some of the skills they had, which seemed unusual to you?

What things do you know how to do that perhaps someone else wouldn't know? Especially someone who lives far away from a city?

What skills do you have, living in the city, that someone from the bush might not have?