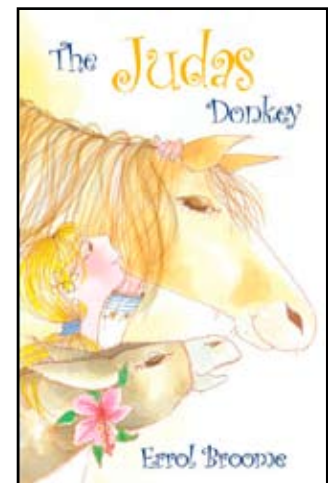


The Judas Donkey

Errol Broome

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Plot outline

Francesca is not impressed when her grandfather brings home a donkey. All she'd ever wanted was a horse. Gramps had worked on a scheme to rid the Kimberley in north-west Australia of feral donkeys. The Donkey Eradication Program operated by setting free a female donkey with a beeper attached to her neck. A team in helicopters tracked the beeper till the donkey led them to a herd. Then they shot them, but set the beeper donkey free to find another herd. The program became known as the Judas Donkey Scheme.

When Gramps retires, he takes pity on the Judas donkey and asks if he can take her home with him to Kununurra. Francesca wonders whether Judy, the donkey, is aware of the role she has played in the death of her mates. Is she lonely, finding friends only to lose them? Francesca isn't too happy herself, facing taunts from the town bully, and at first she refuses to ride Judy. To her surprise, an Aboriginal girl at school shows interest in the donkey. Before this, Tula had been so quiet that Francesca hardly knew her. With Tula's help, Francesca comes to understand Judy, and their friendship is cemented.



A problem arises when her grandparents need to move house because of Gamma's increasing vagueness and confusion. What will happen to Judy? Only when she might lose her does Francesca realise how much the donkey means to her.

A near disaster enables Judy to show her mettle, overcome her past and reverse the role of betrayer.

Author inspiration

While travelling in the Kimberley, Errol Broome learned of the feral donkey problem from a man who had worked on the Donkey Eradication Program. Errol felt an immediate sympathy for the donkey who set out each time to find mates, only to have them shot in front of her.

The awe-inspiring Kimberley landscape and the Judas theme stirred her imagination. Gramps in the book is a little like the man who told her the story, but Errol chose to develop her ideas into a gentle story of a girl and a donkey, a tale not of death but of redemption.

Author information

Errol Broome worked as a journalist in Western Australia before turning to fiction writing. She is the author of more than thirty books for children, including five listed as Children's Book Council of Australia notable books. Her books have been shortlisted five times in the WA Premier's Awards, and she won the award for a children's book in 1992 with *Dear Mr Sprouts* (Allen & Unwin.) *Away with the Birds* (FACP) was a CBCA Honour Book in 2001. Other books include *Nightwatch*, *What a Goat!* and *Tough Luck* (all FACP.) Her work is published in countries around the world and has been translated into several languages.

Educational adaptability

The Judas Donkey should appeal to animal lovers of mid to upper primary years. At the same time, they will learn about the landscape and way of life of north-west Australia. 'The Way Things Are' (a quote from the book) was considered as an alternative title. This applies not only to the nature of donkeys, but to childhood hopes and fears and the ageing of grandparents. The grandmother's advancing Alzheimer's is shown mainly from a child's point of view.

The metaphor of the Judas donkey provides a talking point for Christian schools.

Topics and issues for classroom discussion:

GEOGRAPHY

The Kimberley:

Find the Kimberley on a map of Australia.

- What is the climate of the Kimberley area?
- What kind of vegetation do we find here?

Kununurra:

- When was the town established? And why?
- What is produced around Kununurra?
- What other industries are found here?

CONSERVATION

Feral animals:

- A survey of the Kimberley in the 1980s found one wild donkey for every three cattle counted. What other animals have become pests in Australia?
- What other methods are used to try to save the land and native wildlife from feral animals?

DONKEYS

- Donkeys were imported into Australia before 1930 and used in the Kimberley, harnessed four abreast, to cart stores. Why were they no longer needed after 1930?
- How do feral donkeys damage the land?
- In what ways are donkeys more intelligent than horses?
- Most donkeys have a long cross down their back and across their shoulders. How does legend explain this?
- Why do people sometimes call a donkey an ass? (Clue: what is the scientific name for donkey?)

ATTITUDES

Humans often regard animals as less intelligent but sometimes humans can learn important lessons from animals. What does Francesca learn from Judy, and how does it help her in relationships with other people?

STYLE AND LANGUAGE

- 'Judas donkey' is a metaphor, a figure of speech; Judy isn't really Judas. There are lots of similes in the book, too, likening one thing to something else. The author uses this device to enhance description, to paint pictures with words. Can you find similes in the book?
- Who do you think is the hero, Francesca or Judy?
- Did you notice that Francesca tells the story herself? This is first person narrative. Who else could have told the story? Would it have worked better told by another character?
- Could this story have been set anywhere else in Australia?
- How does the author convey 'a happy ending'?