

**Based on true events, "Rabbit-Proof Fence" is a moving story of racial prejudice, agoraphobic desert vistas, and amazing endurance as three girls walk 1,500 miles to find their mothers in 30s Australia.**

These are the shocking facts behind the movie: during the early years of the 20th century, white Australians panicked about the supposed disaster of an "unwanted third race" of "half-caste" Aborigine children.

Special detention centres were set up across the continent to keep the mixed race children from "contaminating" the rest of Australian society, and orders were given to forcibly remove "half-caste" children from their families.

It was a disastrous, racist policy that brought about the misery of the so-called "stolen generations".

In "Rabbit-Proof Fence", Australian director Phillip Noyce gives us a perceptive, uplifting drama that highlights - and overcomes - that racist policy.

**Having been forcibly separated from their natural mothers, three girls - Molly (Sampi), Daisy (Sansbury), and Gracie (Monaghan) - escape from the Moore River Native Settlement, presided over by AO Neville (Branagh).**

With an epic journey ahead of them, the girls set out to find their way back home by following the rabbit-proof fence that stretches across the Outback.

Cutting back and forth between the children's journey and Neville's increasingly desperate attempts to capture them, Noyce's sensitive dramatization swaps angry politics for emotional sympathy, concentrating on the plight of the children instead of ranting against the authorities.

**By highlighting the realities of this hidden genocide (unbelievably, the policy continued until the early 70s), "Rabbit-Proof Fence" stands as a powerful, worthy testimony to the suffering of the stolen generations.**

## Leaping The Fence Of Australia's Past

**In the true story of Rabbit-Proof Fence three aboriginal girls were forceably removed from their parents to be assimilated into white society. [Brian Pendreigh](#) hears how they and subsequent generations are still recovering from the trauma.**

[Review of Rabbit-Proof Fence](#)



**Rabbit-Proof Fence tells the true story of how three children**

It was a hot summer night in July 1999. Phillip Noyce was asleep at home in Los Angeles, where he had established himself as one of Hollywood's top directors since emigrating from Australia years earlier. He had worked with Harrison Ford and was preparing for the premiere of *The Bone Collector*, a \$50 million (50m dollars) thriller with Denzel Washington.

**endured a nine week walk  
across Australia to be reunited  
with their families**

Suddenly Noyce's sleep was shattered by the ringing of the telephone. The clock showed 3am. With that sick feeling that comes with the sense that something is terribly wrong, the lumbering, bearded Australian put the receiver to his ear. The voice on the other end was that of a woman with an antipodean accent. Noyce braced himself.

The caller announced herself as Christine Olsen and said she was a writer and producer. She had co-written a TV series on Indonesia, she had produced "an Islamic road movie", and now she had the "perfect script", and Noyce was the only man who could do it justice.

Relief gave way to outrage. "In Hollywood you spend a lot of time erecting a fence to keep people out," he says, "because if you let your guard down every buggah who is a waiter or a car parker is going to want you to do something." Noyce's fence had been breached and he was not happy.

Producers sent scripts to his office every day. A-List stars phoned him - in the office. Unknown writers did not phone him, at home, in the middle of the night. He paid people to read scripts, and if they were good enough, he might read them too. But he would not be reading this one.

"I just thought, 'Oh my God, she's never going to leave me alone,'" he booms, a jovial, easy conversationalist, when not suffering from sleep deprivation. "Play *Misty for Me*, I kept thinking," he adds, with a chuckle, alluding to the Clint Eastwood thriller in which a DJ's devoted fan turns into a deranged stalker. So it was - don't call us, and we definitely won't call you. Good night.

## **Stolen generations**

So how come Noyce wound up in the Outback with this crazy woman, sleeping on an old aborigine woman's floor? What was the true story that moved him to tears and took him back to Australia for his first film there in more than a decade?

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* tells the story of "half-caste" children who were brought up in camps and homes, in an attempt to "advance" them into white society - as domestic servants and farm labourers. What made a misguided policy into a heart-breaking one was the element of compulsion. Thousands were forcibly removed from aboriginal mothers between 1900 and 1971.

The "stolen generations" had become the subject of fierce debate in Australia, but the expat director knew nothing of the controversy. The politics interested him, but what really fired his imagination was the story of three children who run away from a camp and attempt to walk home over 1,000 miles of inhospitable country - *The Great Escape*, with three cute little girls up against everything the state and nature can throw at them.

## **Fantastic journey**

Rabbit-Proof Fence is the true story of Molly Craig, who, in 1931, at 14, was taken from her mother in Jigalong, a depot on one of the fences that were being constructed across the continent in an attempt to keep marauding rabbits from destroying the western farmlands. Along with her half-sister Daisy, 8, and cousin Gracie Fields, she was taken to the Moore River Native Settlement in Western Australia.

"I would not hesitate to separate any half-caste from its aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic momentary grief might be at the time," wrote one "protector". "They soon forget their offspring," He maintained it was just like removing a pup from a bitch. The film would show the terrified children sprinting across stony wasteland in a futile attempt to escape the police, distraught mothers wailing in the dust, and an aged granny battering her head with a stone in impotent frustration. It would show the girls in a cage as they are transported by train to their new home and a culture of flogging and solitary confinement for those who failed to appreciate what the white man was doing for them.

One day, when the coming rainstorm would hide their tracks, Molly, Daisy and Gracie set off for home, traipsing across the desert, scavenging from farmers and aborigine hunters, cooking what little meat they could obtain over an open fire, close to collapse with hunger, heat and exhaustion. For long parts of the journey the girls followed the rabbit-proof fence.

After walking for nine weeks, Molly and Daisy were reunited with their mother (though Gracie was recaptured). They disappeared into the desert, just the sort of uplifting ending the film needed. They are still living in the Jigalong area, 600 miles north-east of Perth - two days on a bus, followed by a couple of hours in a truck.

Their story was retold in the book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, written by Molly's daughter, Doris Pilkington, and published by the University of Queensland Press in 1996. It might never have attracted anything more than local attention had it not been for Christine Olsen, who forced herself on Pilkington, with much the same persistence she would later apply to Noyce.

### **Why Noyce?**

Noyce was part of the new wave of Australian film-making talent of the 1970s, before moving to LA and directing such slick, empty, high-budget entertainments as *Sliver* and *Clear and Present Danger*. "I no longer knew what it was like to feel Australian," he tells me, "but then along came this story."

He grew up in the Fifties in the country town of Griffith, in New South Wales, where his neighbours included 300 aborigines. There was no race problem - they had their own settlement, beyond the town limit, "behind a barbed wire fence". He says: "We hardly saw them in the town and nobody asked any questions."

*Rabbit-Proof Fence* got him thinking about those 300 dark, nameless faces, thinking of an alternative history of Australia from the black man's perspective. It was a history of loss - loss of land, loss of culture, loss of pride, loss even of their own children. It was the history of a people who were told they should be ashamed of the colour of their skin and should keep to their side of the fence. Like the rabbits.

He travelled with Olsen to Jigalong, where his meeting with Molly Craig shaped his vision

of the film. "The first trip just provided the basis for the whole movie, because I realised this was a movie about the indomitable human spirit," he says. "Molly was just so determined that she wasn't going to accept the fate that had been decreed to her and no institution was going to defeat her."

### **Everlyn "is Molly"**

The role of Molly went to Everlyn Sampi ([see photo](#)), a poor kid from the remote community of Djarindjin in Western Australia. She had mixed aborigine and Scottish ancestry. Her grandad stowed away on a ship in Glasgow Docks, wound up in Australia, married an aborigine and had eight children, including Everlyn's mother Glenys, who was herself taken into care by the white authorities.

Everlyn did not adapt readily to the demands of film-making, trying to run away and driving Noyce to despair. "We tried desperately to recast," he says, "but we just couldn't find anyone who was nearly as charismatic and talented as her... The more she rejected us the more convinced I was that she was another version of the real Molly, her disdain for authority, her scepticism that she had to do what the white man told her because it was good for her... She is Molly."

The real Molly and Daisy appear briefly at the end of the film, old women now, along with a voice-over that will reduce many to tears. Molly married and had two daughters. All three were taken to Moore River. Molly escaped and walked back to Jigalong again, carrying the infant Annabelle, but the authorities caught her and took Annabelle away. Molly never saw her again.

### **The untold story**

What the film does not tell you is that Annabelle was told she was an orphan... and that she was white. She was sent to another institution, because her skin was lighter. "These children grew up without any contact with aborigine people," says her sister Doris Pilkington, now a grandmother, a small, articulate woman with brown skin and silver hair.

Doris was transferred to a Christian mission where she was "conditioned to believe that my people were devil-worshippers - their culture was evil." She was so ashamed to have an aborigine father that she pretended he was white. She was 25 before she saw her parents again, in 1962. Her voice breaks as she adds: "If I had chosen my parents myself I couldn't have done any better than the ones I had."

The words prick the heart, because for so many years she did not have them. She was robbed of their love and affection and company by Christian missionaries who insisted it was all for her own good.

At least Doris was reunited with her mother. Annabelle refuses to acknowledge her mother, sister and aborigine heritage. Doris met her once, by chance, years ago, when they were nursing aides at the same hospital in Perth, but Annabelle refused to believe Doris was her sister. Doris could not be her sister, because she was black.

Doris went on to study journalism and more recently tracked her sister down in South Australia. She sent copies of her books and offered to pay her fare for a reunion. "She sent the package back... I just threw it away... I was so hurt and offended." Only months later

did Doris read the letter that accompanied the returned package. "She said, 'I told you 20 years ago I didn't want to know anything about my history and I don't want it now today.'"

Every time Doris visited her mother, Molly would greet her and then ask "Any news?", meaning, any news of Annabelle. "I said, 'Mum, she doesn't want to even know us.' So her words were, 'She's dead then. Let her be dead.' But then after I was getting ready to go back to Perth again, she came and she said, 'Try one more time.'"

### **Next generation offers hope**

Annabelle seems to symbolise a nation in denial and Doris says she feels nothing but sympathy for her. For so long, most white Australians, like the young Noyce, knew virtually nothing about the aborigines beyond the fence or wandering on mysterious walkabouts. Many still refuse to believe the reports of abduction and abuse, dismissing them as exaggeration, false memories and lies.

Although Annabelle remains a stranger to Doris and Molly, there is hope. Annabelle's children have contacted Doris and want to meet their grandmother. "I told them when they rang me, 'I would be very happy and delighted to take you up, but you must tell your mother about what you are doing. You're not doing this behind her back.'

"We were deceived all our lives," she says firmly. "We're not having our children do that to their mothers. So that's the situation right now..." Her voice trails away, leaving an empty silence. The film may be complete. But the story is far from over.

[http://www.iofilm.co.uk/feats/interviews/r/rabbit\\_proof\\_fence\\_2002.shtml](http://www.iofilm.co.uk/feats/interviews/r/rabbit_proof_fence_2002.shtml)

### **LINKS:**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stolen\\_Generation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stolen_Generation)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit-Proof\\_Fence\\_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rabbit-Proof_Fence_(film)) (Rabbit Proof Fence (film))

<http://media.news.com.au/multimedia/2007/10/garma/>