Insight Text Guide
Mark Eckersley

No Sugar

Jack Davis
Sergeant Carrol
The local sergeant in Northam; officious but not cruel.

Auber Octavius Neville

Superintendent Neal
Superintendent at the Moore River Settlement. Abuses Indigenous people and is lecherous to Indigenous girls.

Matron Neal
The local Matron for the Moore River Settlement; kind and sympathetic.

Frank Brown
Unemployed white farmer who befriends Jimmy.

Jimmy Munday
Outspoken, forthright and often in trouble; has a heart condition.

Milly Millimurra
Sister of Jimmy Munday and daughter of Gran Munday. Married to Sam and has three children: Joe, David and Cissie. A strong matriarch.

Gran Munday
Mother of Jimmy Munday and Milly Millimurra; grandmother of Joe, David and Cissie. A strong matriarch.

Sam Millimurra
Husband of Milly Millimurra; in his early 40s; tries to do the right thing.

Cissie Millimurra
Milly and Sam’s daughter.

David Millimurra
Youngest son of Milly and Sam.

Mary Dargurru
Indigenous girl who works with Matron Neal. Falls in love with Joe and runs away with him. Beaten by Mr Neal while she is pregnant.

Topsy
Mary’s subservient and submissive friend who also works for the Matron.

Billy Kimberley
Indigenous tracker from ‘up North’; works for Mr Neal. One of the last of his tribe; caught between ‘white’ and Indigenous worlds.

Jimmy Munday
Outspoken, forthright and often in trouble; has a heart condition.

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OVERVIEW

About the playwright

Jack Davis was an Indigenous Australian playwright and poet, who was born on 11 March 1917. He was a descendant of the Nyoongah and was raised at Yarloop and the Moore River Native Settlement.

When his father died, Jack Davis left school and moved to the North West of Western Australia to work as a labourer, boundary rider and drover. Largely self-educated, Davis furthered his education by writing after long hard working days. He wrote down observations, stories and poems about his experiences and the struggles of his people.

Davis was involved in advocacy and the Aboriginal Advancement Council in the lead-up to the 1967 Referendum which gave the Australian Federal Government control of Indigenous Australians. It also acknowledged Indigenous peoples as being counted in the Census and having the same rights as other Australians. With the success of the Referendum, new horizons opened up for many Indigenous people. In 1967, Davis became Director of the Aboriginal Centre in Perth where he promoted Indigenous Australian cultures while writing articles, poetry and stories. His first book, an anthology of poetry called The First-Born, was published in 1970. Davis became the first chairman of the Aboriginal Lands Trust of Western Australia in 1971, championing Indigenous causes. He mentored the work of Australian Indigenous writers in Identity, a quarterly journal he published as Managing Editor of the Aboriginal Publications Foundation.

As early as 1972, Davis saw drama as a natural medium to promote modern Indigenous stories. His first play, The Steel and the Stone, was a semi-autobiographical dramatic piece exploring the history of the Moore River Native Settlement. It had a week’s run at the Bunbury Arts Festival in 1972. Davis wrote another short play in 1975 called The Biter Bit, which is about a group of country Indigenous people who go to Sydney and con a con man.
In 1976, Davis was made an MBE (Member of the British Empire) for services to Indigenous Australians and in the same year he developed the script for *Kullark*, an Indigenous drama about the first contact between ‘whites and blacks’. Director Andrew Ross included the play in the National Theatre Company of Western Australia Theatre-in-Education program, giving young Indigenous actor Ernie Dingo his first major role. In 1978, Davis published another collection of poems entitled *Jagardoo: Poems from Aboriginal Australia*.

Davis then began writing *The Dreamers* with the Swan River Stage Company which premiered at Perth’s Dolphin Theatre in 1982 as part of the Festival of Perth. In 1983, the National Theatre Company of Western Australia and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust mounted a four-month national tour.

The death of sixteen-year old Indigenous youth John Pat in police custody in 1983 led to Davis writing the moving poem ‘John Pat’ (published in the 1988 poetry anthology *John Pat and Other Poems*). Davis became a strong lifelong advocate for the work of the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee.

The plays *Honey Spot* (a children’s play which looks at cultural and environmental understanding) and *No Sugar* were written in 1985. *No Sugar* premiered at the Festival of Perth and was chosen to go overseas to the World Theatre Festival in Vancouver, Canada, in 1986. In that year Davis became a co-winner of the Australian Writers’ Guild Award for Best Stage Play for *No Sugar* and was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM). Together, *The Dreamers, No Sugar* and *Barungin* (1989) form the First Born Trilogy.

Davis’ other plays include *Moorli and the Leprechauns, Barungin* (*Smell the Wind*), *Death of a Tree, In Our Town* (1990) and the incomplete play *Triangle* (written with his wife Madelon). During the 1990s Davis continued to be an inspiration for Indigenous Australian writers, performers and activists. After a long battle with sickness, he died in his sleep on 17 March 2000 at the age of eighty-three.
Synopsis

The Millimurra-Munday family live in poverty in a run-down camp at the Government Well Aboriginal Reserve outside Northam, Western Australia in 1929. Government rations are being steadily reduced. In Perth, A. O. Neville (the Chief Protector of Aborigines) decides to further cut rations to the ‘natives’ while planning to move them away from Government Well.

Frank, an unemployed white farmer, befriends Jimmy Munday and comes for dinner. Frank gives alcohol to Jimmy and his brother-in-law Sam Millimurra – though this is illegal. The next morning, Frank is charged with supplying alcohol to natives and is sentenced to six weeks imprisonment, Jimmy is given three months and Sam is fined.

Soon after, Sergeant Carrol is instructed to move all the natives from Government Well to the Moore River Settlement supposedly because of a scabies outbreak, but the real reasons are political. After some resistance the families leave Northam and arrive at the Moore River Settlement where they are under the charge of Superintendent Neal. Soon, young Joe (Sam’s son) meets Mary Dargurru, a minor without family. They fall in love.

After hearing that Mr Neal wants to move Mary to a position at the hospital – where he has a reputation for molesting the girls in his care – Joe decides to run away with Mary back to Northam. Mr Neal finds out about this, and sends Billy the Tracker after them. Billy discovers them waiting by the train tracks, but Joe overcomes Billy and handcuffs him, and they escape.

Arriving at Northam, Joe and Mary find the camp has been destroyed. They forge a living for themselves until the Sergeant arrests Joe, sending him to gaol, and sends Mary (now pregnant) back to Moore River.

Mary refuses to follow Neal’s orders to work in the hospital and swears at Neal. He beats the pregnant Mary with a whip and she escapes to Joe’s family where she stays to have Gran deliver the baby.

At the 1934 Moore River Settlement Australia Day celebrations, speakers are heckled and a hymn is mocked by the Indigenous people.