

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Rosalie Kunoth-Monks**  
1937-  
Actor and Aboriginal Activist

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 4 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Rosalie Kunoth-Monks**

**Director/Producer** Frank Heimans **Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1995

Study guide prepared by Diane O'Flaherty © NFSA

Also in Series 4: Lily Ah Toy, Graeme Bell, Frida Brown,  
Professor Helen Hughes, James McClelland, Shirley Strickland de la Hunty

## A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM

For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:  
National Film and Sound Archive of Australia  
Sales and Distribution | PO Box 397 Pyrmont NSW 2009  
T +61 2 8202 0144 | F +61 2 8202 0101  
E: sales@nfsa.gov.au | www.nfsa.gov.au

## SYNOPSIS

Until the age of nine, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks lived on remote Utopia Station in the Northern Territory where she learnt the Aboriginal laws of her tribe, the Amajere people. Her father insisted she attend school in Alice Springs, where in 1953 she was discovered by filmmakers Charles and Elsa Chauvel. Rosalie won the lead role in **Jedda**, a film that became an Australian classic.

Filming took Rosalie away from the life she had known. Though for a year she was exposed to totally new and bewildering experiences, once production was completed she resumed her former life for a time.

Rosalie became increasingly attracted to the Anglican Church. In 1960 she moved to Melbourne, joined the Community of the Holy Name and became a nun. After ten fulfilling years in the convent, Rosalie left to set up the first Aboriginal hostel in Victoria. In 1970 she married, settled in Alice Springs and became involved in social work and politics.

The then Northern Territory Chief Minister, Paul Everingham appointed her an adviser on Aboriginal affairs. Rosalie stood for election to the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly in 1979, in order to fight the proposed construction of a dam which threatened sacred land. Although not elected, she continued to oppose the dam, which remained a hot issue for another decade. The issue was finally resolved in 1992 when plans for the dam were abandoned.

Recently Rosalie returned to Utopia Station, where she now lives while continuing to fight for the advancement of her community and her people.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

Threads and activities in this study guide will have interest and relevance for teachers and students from middle to senior secondary and tertiary levels studying English, Studies of Society and Environment, Society and Culture, Aboriginal Studies, Australian Studies, Film/Media Studies, Beliefs and Values, Politics, Women's Studies and Community and Family Studies.

## CONTEXTUALISING LEARNING

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks has spent most of her life in Central Australia. However, her involvement in the church took her to Victoria for 10 years.

Before watching the program, the following activity will enhance students' learning opportunities. Each location listed below is part of Rosalie's story. Plot them on a map of Australia. Include your own city or town for perspective.

- Utopia Station, Central Australia (A pastoral lease of 1800 square kilometres. Rosalie's birthplace and the place to which she returned with Bill and her daughter to live.)
- Alice Springs (Location of St Mary's Children's Hostel, Rosalie's first school of European learning. Also the site of the hospital where Rosalie was acting social worker, and the town in which Rosalie did much political lobbying. The parliamentary seat of McDonald covers the south of this town.)
- Coolibah Station, west of Katherine (location of the main filming for **Jedda**.)

- Katherine (The river scenes for **Jedda** were filmed here. 'Jedda's Leap', a high cliff which has become a popular tourist attraction, is in Nitmilup National Park.)
- Darwin (Another location for filming **Jedda**, the place where Rosalie first saw the sea and the city where **Jedda** premiered.)
- Cheltenham, Victoria (Site of the community house where Rosalie trained as a Sister of the Holy Orders.)

## ABORIGINAL EDUCATION

- What could be the advantages of an interrelationship with every individual in your community?
- Do you see disadvantages in being responsible for others in your community? Are any of the disadvantages you've listed that are built on stereotyping?
- Do you think a child would feel more emotionally secure knowing that his/her relatives were responsible for his/her wellbeing?

The European/Australian way of life usually has far more focus on the individual. The extent of that focus is often dependent upon ethnicity.

- How important is 'the individual' in your family?
- How would you define 'family'? What types of families can you think of? What is your understanding of the term 'extended family'?

Rosalie spoke two languages before she started her European education. At home, she spoke Amajere (her mother's tribal language) and Arunta (her father's side, but the same dialect). Rosalie's father prepared her for school with a 'crash course' in English.

- What is the meaning of the word 'dialect'?
- When Rosalie says 'we spoke our mother-tongue first', what does she mean? Are her words literal or figurative or both? What is your mother-tongue?
- Find out more about Aboriginal languages. A good starting point is the Aboriginal Languages of Australia website at [www.dnathan.com/VL/austLang.htm](http://www.dnathan.com/VL/austLang.htm)

For Aboriginal people, there is a complex system of genderless relationships within the extended family. For example, Rosalie's uncles on the maternal side of the family fulfil the roles of mothers.

- How would you define the word 'gender'? How does this word differ in meaning from an individual's sex?

Gender stereotypes are a facet of many cultures. For example, in some societies women are expected to be more nurturing than men and men are assumed to be stronger than women.

- List five qualities you associate with masculinity and five qualities that you associate with femininity. For each trait, think of someone who you believe demonstrates it.
- Look at your completed list. Have you illustrated masculine characteristics with men and feminine traits with women? If so, find other everyday examples of men who demonstrate qualities commonly considered 'feminine' and women who show 'masculine' qualities.
- Do you think society is changing in what it expects and accepts? Discuss in relation to areas such as sport and personal appearance.

- From this activity, can you learn anything about society's labelling?

Rosalie is very positive about the beauty and value of a genderless relationship within extended family.

- Do you share her enthusiasm? What are some of the likely results of this approach to relationships?

## EUROPEAN EDUCATION

Rosalie left a loving family and a known system of living to attend an impersonal hostel in Alice Springs, many miles away from her home at Utopia. Parents of children from remote areas of Australia can face enormous dilemmas when the time comes to send their children to school.

- Cite evidence from the program to indicate how Rosalie felt about going to St Mary's Hostel.
- Discuss the advantages and the disadvantages of sending a child to boarding school for an education. What dilemmas might confront parents?
- Do you think Rosalie's expectation of being 'boiled' indicates an awareness of racism even at such a tender age?

St Mary's was a hostel for 'mixed blood' children.

- What did this concept mean in Rosalie's case?
- Is the concept of any importance today? Give examples and reasons.

Sister Eileen Heath was the Anglican Deaconess in charge of St Mary's Hostel. In 1994, Rosalie said of her, 'Sister Eileen gave dignity to people of mixed heritage, and she did it in the most positive way... instilled into us, that we were worthwhile and that we could do exactly what we wanted to do with our lives'.<sup>1</sup>

- Why is a mentor like Sister Eileen so valuable?

## JEDDA

**Jedda** (1955) was the first Australian feature film that used Technicolour. Set mainly on a Northern Territory cattle station, it tells the story of Jedda, an Aboriginal baby adopted by a white family. She falls in love with an Aboriginal boy wanted under white law. After they are rejected by both cultures, they run away together. The media hailed this film as an Aboriginal story yet if we look more closely we see it portrays how Europeans thought Aboriginal people felt and behaved.

- How would you describe Jedda's dialogue in the film clip where she asks with a wave 'How's your piccaninnies?'
- If Elsa Chauvel (the director's wife) told Rosalie how to feel and 'showed [her] the scene she had to act out', how authentically does the film reflect Aboriginality? Can you find any other reasons the film may not be reflective of Aboriginal reality?
- In the film clip where **Jedda** pounds on the piano, what contrasting symbols of Aboriginal and European cultures do you see? Within the scene, what techniques convey Jedda's inner torment?
- What do you understand about Rosalie from her words, 'I was petrified that I wasn't going to see my family or my country again?'

Victorian England had taboos about women's ankles. Long skirts ensured they were rarely glimpsed.

- What other countries today forbid men to see parts of the female body?
- Do you think the filmmakers were aware of the sexual connotations of Marbuck grabbing Jedda by the ankle?
- Rosalie's mum was concerned about this incident on film and whether it would culminate in sexual activity. Today, what behaviour causes parents to worry about the sexual activities of daughters?
- Is it only the parents of girls who are concerned about these matters?
- Why did Mrs Chauvel reject Rosalie's rightful skin totem when choosing a screen name for her?
- Can you explain Rosalie's agitation at the screen name Ngarla?
- Why is it important that people know who they are?
- What areas of your own life define you?

Above all else in Darwin, Rosalie clearly remembers seeing the ocean for the first time.

- What does this tell you about her relationship with the world?
- What is conveyed about Rosalie's spirituality by her metaphor for the sea as 'the sky lying on the ground'?

## SOCIAL WORK

From the beginning of her working life, Rosalie knew her future would involve helping people.

- Investigate the true meaning of 'social work' and find out about the qualifications needed for employment.
- List areas of our society that benefit from the services of a social worker.
- Draw up a three-column table with headings as below and note down your ideas. This will show you how important helping others has been to Rosalie. Note especially the way she began to move into exclusively Aboriginal people-based services.

Institution worked for	Rosalie's role	Benefits of her contributions

Rosalie expected to find opportunities to help people within the Anglican convent, the Community of the Holy Name where she took final vows. However, she left because of a sense of alienation.

- What does her leaving the convent after 10 years tell you about Rosalie's character? Bring evidence to your answer.
- Cite later incidents in her life that show you similar character traits.
- List several life directions that opened up as a result of her decision to leave the convent.

Rosalie and Bill set up the first exclusively Aboriginal family group home. After this, they moved back home to Utopia.

■ Do you believe that her close involvement with urban Aboriginal people enlivened her desires to return to her birthplace and her people? Why/why not?

Setting up the social work section of the Alice Springs Hospital interested Rosalie. However, she left after two years and 'slowly got in with the Country Liberal Party'. She twice ran for the seat of McDonald but was not successful on either occasion.

- Why does she see this outcome ambivalently? ('Unfortunately, or fortunately, I wasn't successful.')
- Why might these experiences have helped her find her own voice and begin 'speaking out as an Aboriginal person'?
- What is the value of owning your identity, especially if you are part of a minority?
- What can happen if you deny your own voice and accept the majority's view on how you should run your life?
- Give examples of other minority group members who become invisible and disempowered unless they speak up about injustices they experience.
- How important is it that an Aboriginal woman is taking a role of leader in her own community?
- Bring evidence for or against the proposition that it is important for non-Aboriginal people to help ensure Aboriginal culture is preserved.

## PROBLEMS

Rosalie is concerned about the disintegration of the Aboriginal family and Aboriginal culture. She puts the blame for this decline at the feet of both black and white people.

- What does the allocation of shared blame tell you about her character?
- List some components that Rosalie sees as contributing to the problems of Aboriginal people.
- Cite specific areas where she pinpoints existing troubles for Aboriginal people.

She was appointed as special adviser to the Northern Territory Chief Minister in relation to the portfolio of Aboriginal Affairs. However, she left the job.

- Why did she quit?
- Do you agree with Rosalie that 'a job's not everything'?
- If you felt your integrity was being compromised, would you give up a prestigious position?

## ... AND SOLUTIONS

Rosalie and her people won a landmark decision when the Federal Government 'banned the construction of a \$20 million dam in Alice Springs...' The decision was based on the admission of evidence regarding sacred sites. Remember that the Mabo case concerning Aboriginal land rights was being fought in the courts during 1992. The ABC news footage about the dam was aired on 17 May 1992. The 1990s, although turbulent, saw the restoration of some native title rights to Aboriginal people.

- Research the court cases concerning Mabo and Wik. Consider what these decisions really gave back to Aboriginal people.
- Think about the notion of a piece of land that is important to you being desecrated and note down a few words that describe your feelings over such an occurrence.
- Do you believe that one person can influence a public outcome? How many individuals who made a difference can you see in Rosalie's life? Aside from Rosalie's story as told in **Australian Biography**, find three other examples of the 'power of one'.
- In the Problems section of this guide, you were asked to list areas that Rosalie saw as existing troubles for Aboriginal people. Select one of these areas and propose several solutions. For each solution, consider the ways you could implement your idea as well as the eventual advantages and disadvantages for all Australians.
- 'Are you part of the problem or part of the solution?' Consider this question in relation to your own activities and experiences.

## CONCLUSION

In her life-journey, Rosalie Kunoth-Monks has learned the importance of her identity as an Aboriginal person. Throughout this **Australian Biography** program, she is honest and insightful about the ways that this knowledge became conscious.

In her later life, she has never been afraid to speak out and to live her life for the benefit of her people. She believes 'I have to do my little bit to be in there' and that in tandem with all others responsible for '[her] young ones', they will make a more loving and accepting future. She says she is 'lucky' to be surrounded by those she loves. Perhaps she herself has created her 'luck' by those courageous, life-affirming choices she made throughout her life.

## ENDNOTE

1 Annette Roberts, **Sister Eileen: A Life with the Lid Off**. Access Press, 2002

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

ABC Online—George Negus transcript of interview with Rosalie Kunoth-Monks

[www.abc.net.au/gnt/history/Transcripts/s991310.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/gnt/history/Transcripts/s991310.htm)

Helen Chrystides, **Local Heroes**, Collins Dove, Blackburn, 1993

Community of the Holy Name <http://www.chn.org.au/>

Keith Gow (director), **Women of Utopia** [videorecording]. Film Australia, 1983, 19 minutes © NFSA

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice

[www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/index.html)

National Pioneer Women's Hall of Fame—Not Just a Pretty Face [www.pioneerwomen.com.au](http://www.pioneerwomen.com.au)

Mabo and the Wik decision - <http://www.ciolek.com/wwwlpages/aborigpages/nativetitle.html>

