

Exploring characters

Read this passage from *The Barrumbi Kids* by Leonie Norrington.

Miss Wilson turns from the board to look at the children. Her shoulders are sharp at the edges. Her eyes are really blue, like see-through blue. Her hair is neat and brown, held up with a clip at the back. Miss Wilson loves to teach. She loves the sound of the chalk on the board, the smell as it escapes, some dropping to the floor in a tiny rain-shower, a little floating in the air like dust. But most of all she loves to turn around like this, after filling the just-washed shiny blackboard with stiff white letters, and watch all the children copying her words, their little black, brown and white faces concentrating hard on their books.

She believes that what she does is good. Anything that distracts the children from the blackboard is bad and she watches carefully for bad things. She even has special glasses that let her see out the back of her head. Like, say she's writing on the board with her back to the class. No matter how quietly Dale whispers or how silently he passes a piece of paper folded and folded to make it small, she'll say, "Dale, would you like me to read that note to the class?"

"No, Miss Wilson".

"Then put it way till smoko!"

How does she know? his shocked face asks.

"I have eyes in the back of my head," she says.

He doesn't believe her. It has definitely got something to do with her glasses, he reckons.

And it isn't only in the classroom. Miss Wilson guards the playground during smoko and lunchtime, watching to make sure no one escapes. She might sit under a tree reading a book but she can still see everything that goes on — even behind the tankstand!

Miss Wilson believes that all knowledge can be written down and learnt in the classroom. She doesn't believe, as Mavis does, in the value of listening to the bush. In her mind, children are clean blackboards and she is the white chalk filling the empty space with knowledge. Miss Wilson thinks the way to change the world is to educate children so that when they grow up they will do the right thing. "The next generation", she calls them. Like now, at this time of the year, when everyone is setting fires to clean up the country, she talks and talks about fire. She reckons fires are dangerous and wrong, bad for the environment; that people should not burn.

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Dale's head is aching with frustration ... He just wants to get out of the classroom. He lifts his face and the smell of the Dry season is very clear in his nostrils. *Gotta go, but how?* He pretends to listen and take notes about the discussion while he thinks about how to get out of the school yard without being seen. What excuse can he make for being gone for the rest of the day? He'll have to get Lizzie's help with that! His eyes are slitted and his forehead wrinkles with concentration. He watches everyone as they talk and pretends to write down their ideas.

Miss Wilson looks at Dale. She sees him thinking, concentrating, writing. She smiles. That's the boy, Dale! Look at that little brain ticking, she thinks. He's a smart one, that child. If only he would knuckle down. We'll make a scholar out of you yet, Dale Murphy. Her heart fills with pride.

Source: Norrington, Leonie 2002, *The Barrumbi Kids*, Omnibus Books, Norwood, South Australia, pp. 9–10, 12–13.