

**Wanda Gibson. *Three Dresses*. University of Queensland Press, 2024.  
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It is rare that a children's book wins a major literary award that is also open to books for an adult readership. It is rarer still for a picturebook to achieve this honour. This year, for the first time in the history of the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, a picturebook, *Three Dresses*, written and illustrated by Wanda Gibson, has won the Victorian Prize for Literature and the award for children's literature.

This comes in an important year for First Nations picturebooks, which has seen Kirli Saunders's *Afloat* (illustrated by Freya Blackwood) shortlisted for the Children's Book Council of Australia (CBCA) Picture Book of the Year Award, and two First Nations illustrators' picturebooks shortlisted for the CBCA New Illustrator Award—*Raymangirrbuy dhäwu When I Was a Little Girl*, written and illustrated by Kylie Gatjawarrawuy Mununggurr, and *The Land Recalls You*, illustrated by David Cragg and Noni Cragg (written by Kirli Saunders). A number of other First Nations picturebooks were shortlisted for the 2025 Australian Book Industry Awards, including *Yanga Mother* by Cheryl Leavy (illustrated by Christopher Bassi), *My Dad's Gone Away* by Andrew Krakouer and Jacqueline Dinan (illustrated by Paul Seden), and *Super Snake* by Gregg Dreise. This review of *Three Dresses* offers insight into the substantial contributions made to Australian literature by First Nations picturebooks.

Wanda Gibson is a Nukgal Wurra woman from her mother's side. Her father's Country is Yiithu Warra in Cape Melville. Gibson lives in Hope Vale on the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland. She is an artist, a weaver, and now a prize-winning author. *Three Dresses* is her first book. *Three Dresses* draws on Gibson's childhood experiences growing up on Hope Vale Mission in the 1950s. The book begins on Christmas Day when the young girls on the Mission each receive a parcel from the Lutheran Church containing three second-hand dresses and three pairs of undies. It then follows the journey the family takes to the beach for their annual two-week holiday from "Mission life."

Picturebooks are complex multimodal texts in which meaning is created through the interplay of words and images. The verbal and visual modes in *Three Dresses* combine to create connection between characters, with place and with the reader. The story that is shared is intensely personal but also one experienced by many Australian First Nations people. It is told from the point of view of the youngest girl in the family through first person narration, including moments of direct address which builds intimacy and connection with the reader ("You should have seen the joy on our faces"). The majority of the images also directly address and make contact with the reader (see Kress and van Leeuwen) through the gaze of the represented characters.

The visual mode is privileged in *Three Dresses*, creating a powerful visual narrative and fostering connection with the child reader. Gibson's paintings appear on every page and are given maximum visual space. Approximately half the images are full-bleed or unbound images (see Painter et al.) which extend to the page edges and a number of these extend across double-page spreads so that there is "in effect no boundary (except for the page edge) between the world of the child reader and the depicted story world" (Painter et al. 104). The child reader is "invited into the story" (Painter et al. 104) at these select moments. The words of the narrative are overlaid onto the unbound images and integrated into them to become part of the image itself—a choice which Painter, Martin and Unsworth say "creates the strongest fusion between words and picture, guiding the reader to view the two as an integrated whole" (100).

The unbound images which completely fill the double-page spreads also slow the pace of the narrative and encourage the reader to pause at significant moments in the narrative, such as the opening, describing the children's joy at receiving the three dresses; the point when the

family's journey nears the end as they approach the beach; the first full day at the beach; the child's comparison between running on the beach and working on the Mission farm.

The remainder of the images are single page full-bleed images or bound images (see Painter et al.) in a vertical layout with the words above or below the images. The bound images still have greater visual weight than the verbal text due to their relative size. The undefined irregular edges of the bound images not only emphasise the "painterly" qualities of the images but also reduce the demarcation between the reader and the semiotic world of the story/book.

The images reproduce the texture of Gibson's original acrylic paintings on canvas. They show variety in brush strokes and the layering of paint on canvas. Some parts of the canvas are thinly covered so that the texture of the canvas is revealed. Rather than diminishing the "truthfulness" of the representations, the painterly qualities of the images seem to more authentically tell the story of the young narrator by conveying her experiences and emotions. Colour plays an important part in creating visual ambience. The colour palette in the book varies, from the use of unsaturated dark colours for the Mission and the journey, creating a gentler more restrained feeling, to the more vibrant colours of the beach images, generating a sense of excitement and vitality.

The human figure does not dominate the images. Landscape is a major component of the images, in which humans are always presented full-length and frequently dwarfed by the scale of the landscape, creating a strong connection to Country. The images are dominated by organic forms and the types of lines found in nature. The only straight lines occur in the image of the Lutheran Church at the opening of the book which sets it apart from the natural landscape. The straight lines of the church suggest order and structure in comparison with the fluidity, naturalness and dynamism of the landscape and people in it.

Another strong theme is the visual representation of family and community. There is only one image of a human figure on their own, the image that introduces us to the narrator of the story and appears on the front cover of the book. The remainder of the images show the narrator's family or the Mission community as the main unit of focus (see Painter et al.). Similarly, plural pronouns ("we," "us," "our") are used most frequently in reference to the community and family rather than singular pronouns. Unlike the classic Home–Away–Home story structure (see Nodelman and Reimer 2002) of children's literature, this is not a story of an individual child who leaves home and family to embark on a journey of discovery and who returns home with newfound wisdom and maturity. This is story of a family who journey together and, as Joanne Faulkner says, are "always already home":

Aboriginal children are at home right where they are standing. Their sovereignty resides in their relationships to the human and more- than-human beings in their midst, and in the consciousness of their being as articulated through those relationships. (Faulkner 193)

Although images carry the most visual weight in *Three Dresses*, words are equally powerful. The judges of Victorian Premier's Literary Awards describe them as "possessing a distinctive and steady pulse that mirrors the tides of the beach" (VPLA 2025). This pulse is echoed in the rhythmic layout of the book and the pace of the narrative. In addition to the poetic or aesthetic qualities of the language, the words, more than the images, convey the hardships of Mission life.

While this picturebook does not explicitly deal with colonial violence, neither is it absent. At night while the family is in Country, sharing food and yarning by the fire, we learn that both parents were from the Stolen Generation and had been "taken from their homeland and family." The contrast between the visual representation of family togetherness and the forced removal of children from their families is stark.

Life on the Mission and the impact of colonisation is represented through understatement (“We only got two weeks off Mission life each year”; “Mission life was hard for us kids too”); through contrast with the closeness and freedom of the family holiday (“It was good to run up and down the beach in my new dresses instead of working on the farm”); and through the motif of the three dresses.

The motif of the dresses occurs on almost every page in words or images. The refrain about the three dresses “one to wash, one to wear and one spare” occurs at key points in the book: at the start of the journey when the children are packing and again on the final page at the conclusion of the holiday when the dresses are washed and put away. The dresses are associated with joy (“you should have seen the joy in on our faces when we put on those second-hand dresses”), protection (“they protected me from the sun, wind and rain”), pride and care (“I was proud of my three dresses. I took care of them”) and Mission life (“It was good to run up and down the beach in my new dresses instead of working on the farm”). The motif of the dresses also recalls the historic imposition of clothing on Aboriginal people by Christian missionaries as part of the forced assimilation of Aboriginal people and the attempted erasure of Aboriginal culture:

When forcing clothing upon our naked bodies the coloniser had intended that the body of our being and law would become invisible, and that our subjectivity as First Nations Peoples would also disappear. (Watson 61)

Although the dresses are represented overwhelmingly positively in the book, it is significant that the moment the young narrator and her family arrive at the beach, the place of freedom and profound connection with family and Country, the young girl throws off her dress: “I was so excited to see the water I’d throw off my dress and run straight in.”

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