SOFTWARE & TECH

What Is Rabbit Proof Fence About

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795583840550817

Introduction: A Journey of Survival and Identity

At its heart, the question "What Is Rabbit Proof Fence About" leads to a powerful and moving story of courage, resilience, and the unbreakable bond between family and country. The phrase refers to the 2002 Australian film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, directed by Phillip Noyce and based on the book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington Garimara. The film tells the true story of three young Aboriginal girls—Molly, Daisy, and Gracie—who, in 1931, were forcibly taken from their families under a government policy of assimilation. Their incredible journey home, guided by the long, straight line of the rabbit-proof fence, is a testament to the human spirit and a crucial lens through which to understand a dark chapter in Australian history. This article explores the film's plot, its historical context, its key themes, and its enduring legacy.

The Historical Context: The Stolen Generations

To fully grasp what the rabbit-proof fence is about, one must first understand the policy it so starkly illustrates: the forced removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, a practice that created what is now known as the Stolen Generations. From the late 1800s well into the 1970s, Australian government authorities, along with church missions and welfare agencies, believed that the best way to deal with Indigenous Australians was to "absorb" them into white society. This meant removing children of mixed descent—often referred to as "half-caste" children—from their Aboriginal mothers and communities.

The stated goal was to educate them in the ways of white society, train them as domestic servants or laborers, and eventually have them marry into the white population, thereby erasing their Aboriginal heritage. In reality, this policy caused immense trauma, breaking up families, erasing cultural knowledge, and creating lasting generational pain. The film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* personalizes this abstract policy, showing the devastating impact on one family and the extraordinary lengths a child would go to find her way home.

The True Story Behind the Film

Doris Pilkington Garimara wrote the book about her mother, Molly Craig, and her aunt, Daisy Kadibil. The story is not a work of fiction but a documented, harrowing account of survival. In 1931, Molly (14 years old), Daisy (8), and their younger cousin Gracie (10) were living a traditional life with their families in Jigalong, a remote Aboriginal community on the edge of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia. Life there was hard but stable, rooted in a deep connection to the land.

Under the Aborigines Act of 1905, a local "Protector" could remove children from their families. The girls were taken from Jigalong and transported 1,200 miles south to the Moore River Native Settlement, a government-run institution near Perth. Moore River was notorious for its harsh conditions, with a strict regime designed to strip the children of their Aboriginal identity. They were forbidden to speak their native language, taught Christianity, and trained for servitude. For Molly, the only thought was escape. The film captures this moment of

determination: she watched the guards, waited for the right moment, and led her sister and cousin into the unknown bush.

Plot Summary of Rabbit-Proof Fence

The Escape

The film's tension begins almost immediately. The girls are taken in a car, and the camera captures their silent, terrified faces as they see their mothers crying and chasing after the vehicle. At Moore River, they are processed—stripped of their clothes, given uniforms, and assigned numbers. Their hair is cut, and they are told to forget their old lives. Molly, however, refuses to accept this. She notices that the settlement is near a railway line. Using her sharp memory of the land, she remembers that an endless, wire fence runs straight north from a point near the settlement all the way back to Jigalong. This is the rabbit-proof fence, built in the early 1900s to stop the spread of rabbits across the continent. For Molly, it becomes a lifeline.

One night, after just two weeks at Moore River, Molly, Daisy, and Gracie slip under a fence and run. With no food, no water, and no maps, they have only their wits, their bush knowledge, and the fence to guide them. The film follows their incredible 1,500-mile journey on foot. They face hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the constant threat of recapture by the authorities, especially by the chief "Protector," A.O. Neville, who is determined to bring them back.

The Journey Along the Fence

The rabbit-proof fence is a powerful physical and symbolic element in the film. As the girls travel north, they rely on the fence as a constant landmark. It cuts through vast, unforgiving landscapes—through deserts, salt pans, and farmlands. The film does not shy away from the brutal realities of their journey. They eat raw birds, catch fish with their hands, and find water in rock holes. Daisy, the youngest, falls ill and is carried by Molly. Gracie, terrified and homesick, eventually decides to turn back and is recaptured. This act of separation highlights the immense mental and physical toll the journey takes on each girl.

The film also juxtaposes the girls' journey with the official search for them. A.O. Neville, played with chilling bureaucratic coldness by Kenneth Branagh, uses police, trackers, and even airplanes to hunt them down. Yet Molly's deep understanding of the land keeps them ahead. She uses techniques passed down through generations: covering their tracks, reading the stars, and finding food where others see nothing. This is a powerful statement about Indigenous knowledge and its value, which the authorities completely dismiss.

The Role of the Fence

The rabbit-proof fence itself is more than just a physical structure. It is a paradoxical symbol. On one hand, it represents the white settler's attempt to control nature—to impose order on the land. On the other, for the girls, it becomes a tool for survival and a guide home. It is a straight line of hope in a sea of uncertainty. The fence also serves as a historical marker of colonization. It runs through lands that were once the exclusive domain of Aboriginal people, now fenced and claimed by pastoralists. The girls' journey along the fence is also a journey through the contested spaces of Australia's colonial history.

Key Themes and Symbolism

Resilience and Survival

The most obvious theme of the film is the incredible resilience of the human spirit. Molly, Daisy, and Gracie endure unimaginable hardship. They are not superhuman; they are frightened children. But they possess a deep well of courage, born from their cultural training and their love for their family. Molly's leadership is extraordinary. She makes life-or-death decisions daily, and her determination never wavers. The film is a testament to the strength of these young girls and a powerful counter-narrative to the colonial story of

Indigenous passivity.

Cultural Identity and Connection to Land

This is the heart of what the rabbit-proof fence is about. The girls' survival depends entirely on their connection to the land. Molly's bush knowledge is not just a set of skills; it is a direct link to her Aboriginal identity, passed down from her elders. The authorities at Moore River tried to sever that connection by forbidding language and culture. But on the journey, that heritage becomes their greatest weapon. The film shows that Indigenous culture is not something that can be easily erased. It is a living, practical, and powerful force.

The Power of Family

The journey is motivated by an unbreakable family bond. Molly's overriding goal is not just to escape but to return to her mother. Throughout the film, she reassures Daisy and Gracie that they will make it home. The memory of their mother and their community at Jigalong is a constant source of strength. The film powerfully contrasts this familial love with the cold, institutional care of Moore River. The bureaucrats see the children as problems to be solved; the girls see themselves as part of a family that must be reunited.

Characters and Their Real-Life Counterparts

Molly Craig

Molly is the hero of the story. Portrayed with fierce intelligence and quiet strength by Everlyn Sampi, Molly is a natural leader. She is calm under pressure, resourceful, and deeply intuitive. Her real-life story ended in both triumph and tragedy. Molly, Daisy, and Gracie did make it back to Jigalong after a journey of nine weeks. But the authorities did not leave them alone. In later years, Molly and her children were again taken. Molly escaped once more with her baby, Doris, but was forced to leave her younger daughter behind. This tragic sequel is a reminder that the policy of the Stolen Generations was relentless. Molly eventually settled back in Jigalong, living a long life until 2004.

Daisy and Gracie

Daisy Kadibil, the youngest, is the heart of the group. Her innocence and vulnerability heighten the stakes of the journey. The film faithfully shows that she fell ill and that Molly had to carry her for much of the way. Daisy lived to see the film's release and was deeply moved by it. Gracie, the cousin, represents the toll the journey took. Her decision to give up and return is a realistic and poignant moment. She was recaptured and returned to Moore River, later rejoining her family but remaining deeply affected by the ordeal.

A.O. Neville

Kenneth Branagh's portrayal of A.O. Neville is chilling not because he is a monster, but because he is a bureaucrat who genuinely believes he is doing the right thing. Neville was the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia for over 25 years. He was the architect of the policy of assimilation. In the film, he is shown as meticulous, arrogant, and utterly convinced of his own moral superiority. He sees the girls as "problems" to be managed, not as children with a family. This characterization is historically accurate and highlights the dangerous nature of well-intentioned but deeply racist policy.

The Impact and Legacy of the Film

*Rabbit-Proof Fence*was not just a critical success; it was a cultural landmark. Released in 2002, it brought the story of the Stolen Generations to a global audience. The film was praised for its stark beauty, its fidelity to the true story, and its powerful performances. It sparked important conversations in Australia about reconciliation, Indigenous rights, and the need for a formal apology from the government.

The film's release coincided with a growing movement for recognition and justice. In 2008, Prime Minister Kevin

Rudd delivered a historic Apology to the Stolen Generations in Parliament House. While many factors
Rabbit-Proof Fence
helped to educate a generation of Australians and people around the world about what happened. It transformed a dry historical policy into a visceral, emotional story that could not be ignored.

The film also had a profound impact on the Aboriginal community, particularly the descendants of the Stolen Generations. For many, it was a validation of their experiences and a recognition of their suffering and survival. It gave a voice to those who had been silenced. The surviving family members, including Daisy Kadibil, were present at the film's premiere, a moment of deep significance and healing.

Conclusion

So, what is *Rabbit-Proof Fence* about? It is about three girls who walked 1,500 miles

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