GENERAL

what is rabbit proof fence about

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What Is Rabbit Proof Fence About?

When people ask “what is rabbit proof fence about,” they are usually referring to a powerful narrative that intertwines history, culture, and resilience. The phrase evokes not only a physical barrier that once stretched across the Australian outback but also a story of survival that has moved readers and viewers around the world. This article explores the fence’s origins, the book that immortalized its legend, the film adaptation that brought it to the silver screen, and the lasting impact on Australian society and beyond.

The Origin of the Rabbit-Proof Fence

Historical Context: Rabbits in Australia

After the first European settlers arrived in the late 18th century, Australia’s fragile ecosystems were quickly disrupted. One of the most devastating introductions was the European rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus*, which arrived accidentally in the 1850s. Within a few decades, rabbits multiplied at an alarming rate, devouring native vegetation, damaging farmland, and threatening the survival of indigenous plant and animal species. By the early 20th century, the rabbit population had become a national crisis, prompting the government to consider large-scale containment measures.

Construction and Purpose

The Rabbit-Proof Fence, also known as the “Rabbit Fence,” was conceived as a practical solution to protect the wheat-growing regions of Western Australia. Construction began in 1907 and was completed in 1909, stretching over 1,200 kilometres from the coast at Kalbarri to the interior town of Wiluna. The fence was 1.8 metres high and comprised a wire netting with a 30 centimetre gap to prevent rabbits from crossing. Though it was never entirely successful—rabbits eventually found ways around or through the fence—the structure became a symbol of human ingenuity and the relentless fight against environmental disaster.

The Book: “Rabbit-Proof Fence” by Doris Pilkington Garimara

Synopsis

The novel is a semi autobiographical account that follows three young Aboriginal girls—Molly, Daisy, and Gracie—who are forcibly removed from their families in 1931 as part of the Australian government’s policy of assimilating Indigenous children. They are sent to a remote government settlement in Jigalong, a journey that takes them through the harsh outback and past the famous fence. The girls escape and embark on an arduous trek back to their homeland, following the fence’s path, enduring hunger, dehydration, and hostile encounters along the way.

Themes and Narrative Style

Doris Pilkington Garimara’s writing is lyrical yet unflinching. She weaves vivid descriptions of the Australian landscape with the emotional depth of the girls’ longing for home. The narrative underscores themes of colonial oppression, the resilience of Indigenous communities, and the profound connection between people and the land. The story is told from a young perspective, which adds authenticity and immediacy to the historical context.

Impact and Reception

Published in 1996, the book received critical acclaim for its honest portrayal of a painful chapter in Australian history. It won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Human Rights Award, among other accolades. The narrative has been widely used in schools to teach about the Stolen Generations and has sparked conversations about reconciliation, cultural heritage, and the enduring effects of colonial policies.

The Film Adaptation: 2002 Australian Film

Production Background

Director Phillip Noyce adapted the novel into a feature film released in 2002. The production aimed to bring the story's emotional core to a broader audience while maintaining historical accuracy. The film was shot in various remote locations across Western Australia, capturing the stark beauty and unforgiving nature of the outback.

Cast and Crew

The film stars Rachel Griffiths as the adult Molly, with young actors portraying the girls during their escape. Indigenous actors were cast in key roles, adding authenticity to the cultural representation. The screenplay, written by Andrew Bovell, was praised for its fidelity to the source material and for its sensitive handling of complex themes.

Visual Storytelling and Cinematography

The cinematography of the film is a standout feature. The director's choice to use wide, sweeping shots of the fence's length juxtaposed with intimate close ups of the characters' faces highlights both the scale of the journey and the personal stakes involved. The film's visual narrative effectively conveys the isolation, danger, and determination that define the girls' trek.

Reception and Criticism

The film received mixed reviews. While many praised its emotional depth and cultural significance, some critics argued that the film simplified certain aspects of the girls' experience for mainstream audiences. Nonetheless, the film won several awards, including the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Screenplay, and helped raise global awareness of the Stolen Generations.

The Fence in Modern Australia

Current Status and Preservation

Today, large portions of the original fence remain intact, though many sections have fallen into disrepair. Local communities and heritage organizations have undertaken preservation projects to maintain the fence as a historical monument. In 2010, the fence was added to the Australian National Heritage List, recognizing its cultural and historical significance.

Cultural Significance

The fence has become a symbol of resilience and resistance. For many Indigenous Australians, it represents both the oppression they faced and their determination to reclaim their identity and land. The fence's presence in literature, film, and public memory continues to spark dialogue about Australia's colonial past and the need for reconciliation.

Key Themes Explored in the Story

Colonialism and Cultural Erasure

Central to both the book and the film is the critique of colonial policies that sought to erase Indigenous culture. The

forced removal of children and the attempt to assimilate them into white society is portrayed with stark realism, underscoring the lasting trauma inflicted on Aboriginal communities.

Resilience and Survival

The girls' journey along the fence is a testament to human resilience. Despite extreme hardship, they persist in their quest for home, illustrating how hope and determination can sustain individuals even in the most dire circumstances.

Freedom and Autonomy

Freedom, both physical and psychological, is a recurring motif. The fence itself, while designed to contain, becomes a metaphor for the boundaries imposed on Indigenous peoples. The girls' escape and subsequent trek symbolize the reclaiming of agency and the fight for self determination.

Educational Value and Lessons

Teaching Australian History

Educators use the story to illuminate the complex history of Indigenous Australians. By presenting the narrative through the eyes of children, the material offers an accessible entry point for students to engage with difficult topics such as forced assimilation and cultural suppression.

Indigenous Rights and Representation

The story underscores the importance of accurate representation. By centering Indigenous voices, the narrative challenges stereotypes and encourages a more nuanced understanding of Aboriginal history and contemporary issues.

Environmental Lessons

While the fence was originally a response to an ecological crisis, the story also highlights humanity's ongoing relationship with the environment. It serves as a reminder of the consequences of introducing invasive species and the need for responsible stewardship of natural resources.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the rabbit proof fence about?

The rabbit proof fence refers to a historical barrier built to protect Australian farmland from invasive rabbits, and it has become a powerful symbol in the story of three Aboriginal girls who escape from a government settlement and trek across the outback to return home.

Why was the fence built?

It was constructed in the early 1900s as a practical measure to curb the spread of rabbits, which threatened agriculture and native ecosystems across Western Australia.

Is the fence still standing?

Large sections of the original fence remain, but many areas have deteriorated. Heritage groups maintain the structure as a monument to Australia's complex history.

How did the film differ from the book?

While the film closely follows the novel's plot, it condenses certain sub plots and emphasizes visual storytelling. Some critics feel that the film simplifies the girls' emotional journey for broader audience appeal.

What are the main takeaways for modern readers?

Key lessons include the importance of recognizing historical injustices, the resilience of Indigenous cultures, and the need for environmental stewardship.

Conclusion

The rabbit proof fence is more than a physical barrier; it is a narrative bridge connecting Australia's environmental challenges, colonial history, and the enduring spirit of its Indigenous peoples. Whether experienced through the pages of Doris Pilkington Garimara's evocative novel or the moving visuals of Phillip Noyce's film, the story invites readers and viewers to reflect on themes of resilience, freedom, and cultural identity. By understanding what the rabbit proof fence is about, we gain insight into a pivotal chapter of Australian history and the ongoing journey toward reconciliation and respect for all cultures.

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