Shake a Leg by Boori Monty Pryor & Jan Ormerod

Every once in a while comes a book that stands out from the crowd. In such a book, all the elements come together perfectly: a well-crafted, entertaining text; intelligent and beautiful illustrations and a message that is pertinent and heart-warming. For me, Shake a Leg, by Boori Monty Pryor & Jan Ormerod, is the book of the year.

Set in Far North Queensland, it tells of three small, hungry boys who go in search of food and meet an Italian-speaking, Aboriginal pizza chef. He explains to them that to learn how to make pizza well, he had to go back to where it all began – to Italy. As he cooks the boys a pizza, he shares with them the stories and dances that inspire his creations.

Blending cultures and stories, this book is suitable for any primary age children in the global village. 'Different mobs speak different languages', but food and dance can break through the language barriers and unite us all.

The book is perfect for the classroom and can bring together English, dance, cooking and geography lessons. Find a country that inspires you and bring it back to Australia. Make a crocodile pizza – I made mine with a small round base for the belly and another small round base cut up for the tail and head.

This is a joyful book that will inspire you and inspire your students.

Jo McDougall, NT

Shake a Leg is an interesting picture book that explains some of the aspects of our indigenous culture through a pizza shop owner who enlightens three boys who come in to buy pizza. He explains the importance of corroborees and what aspects are involved, like the use of didgeridoos, body painting and the significance of the movements. It also has Aboriginal and Italian words throughout the text.

The book has a light-hearted tone which adds to the enjoyment of reading it. It has cute puns, like going to ‘the source’ - the ‘tomato sauce ‘and works really well when read aloud. Through the humour, it debunks the stereotypes children might have about Aboriginals. The comic book-like layout is effective and promotes the conversational feel of the text.

The illustrations are vibrant and it is easy to see the movement of the corroboree in them. They come alive and you feel as though you can hear the sound as well. I especially like the double page that is devoid of text but shows the males in the tribe partaking in the corroboree. I also like the map of the world overlaid with a serpent connecting Italy and Australia.

Linking the Italian culture with the Aboriginal culture is an intriguing way to speak to students of all races in showing that everyone has a unique cultural background. I like the mention of his family so that younger readers can see that this is their culture but the family is an ordinary family.

Shake a Leg is a great picture book to use in the classroom when looking at indigenous Australians. It is a beautiful celebration of the Aboriginal culture and how this lives on in today’s multicultural society. I highly recommend this book to share with your class and to use in units about indigenous Australians.

Peter Bond, NSW

This book grabs the reader immediately when they open it. Its content is so dense and it will take teachers many sessions to pull out all the wonderful ideas and teaching aspects from it.

It is the story of three boys looking for food one evening. They are lucky when they walk in the door of a pizza place run by an Aboriginal chef because history and culture comes alive.
The graphic novel nature of the illustrations immediately capture the attention of the reader and it takes some time to move through all the panels and digest the text and tie it to the illustrations. The mixture of cultures is superbly done. The information about each, the language you learn, the feelings and emotions associated with each culture all keep the reader enthralled.

One of my favourite pages was where we saw the world map; the snake image shows how close all cultures are but the final page contrasts this, showing how vast the world is but we know from the text how welcoming it can be too.

This is a book that needs to be in every teacher’s library as it will lead the curriculum areas of history and multi-culturalism and complement story telling.

Roxanne Steenbergen, Claremont Primary School, TAS

Celebration! A celebration of culture. A celebration of song. A celebration of dance. A celebration of art. A celebration of food. A celebration of words. This is a book to treasure. With its many layers, it offers a unique and culturally rich investigation of multiculturalism in Australia. Racial walls are broken down when a group of three boys enter a pizza shop in Far North Queensland to find an Aboriginal man who cooks pizza and speaks Italian. He shares his story, stories of his heritage and teaches the boys to dance. This is visually represented in the gradual disappearance of the graphic novel-type boxes at the beginning of the book which separate and isolate characters and ideas to the open, all-encompassing double page spreads where everybody dances and shares stories together. Consequently, this book would be a great resource when investigating stereotypes in the classroom, particularly the portrayal of Aboriginal people, as it shows the indigenous people in diverse roles within our community while still holding onto their rich and unique culture and their desire to share their heritage with everybody. There are so many ways this book could be used as a stimulus in the classroom. I really love the use of language in this book. The combination of Italian and Aboriginal dialect, the use of onomatopoeia and simile to describe dance movements, the snippets of humour spread throughout the story all work together to create a rhythm and liveliness that begs to be shared and explored. Children can write their own stories and create a dance to accompany them. The class can make “deadly” pizzas and milkshakes. Jan Ormerod’s illustrations are full of imagery and symbolism and can be used to teach aspects of visual literacy. The shadow of people dancing in the background wonderfully portrays the spiritual connectedness of indigenous people with their ancestors. The endpapers are a beautiful addition to the book as the snake connects the two countries of Italy and Australia together.

This is an influential book that can be used with children of all ages but particularly in upper primary.

Margy Heuschele, QLD

In a word, I would sum this book up as VIBRANT. It is also heart-warming, encompassing and full of inspiration for the multicultural nation Australia has become.

_Shake a Leg_ is a story about three hungry boys who go “hunting” in a pizza shop that is run by an Aboriginal cook who speaks Italian. They are impressed by his Italian and want to know how Bertie knows all about pizza. He explains how when you need to learn something, you need to go to ‘the source’.

For two years Bettie immersed himself in the Italian culture by going to Italy and learning what made the Italians tick - “It’s to do with song and dance and stories.” The Aboriginal stories, song and dance are important in teaching and the boys listen to Bertie as he relates the stories of the crocodile and the stinging bees through dance and song, thus breaking down the language barriers. The book neatly ties together the modern day ways as opposed to the old way - “A mobile is a much better than a smoke signal on a windy day” - indicating that we need to move with the times but not forget the old. The use of flour and water, and tomato sauce for the special markings, portray how cultures can work together to achieve a good outcome.

This book is a joyous celebration of food, song and dance and it cleverly embraces in a most uplifting spirit, the uniqueness of our multicultural nation. The variety of text from page to page adds interest and dimension to the story and the vibrancy of the book, but the most outstanding features of _Shake a Leg_ are the magnificent illustrations by Jan Ormerod as they capture the spirit of indigenous dance and the celebration of story. The idea of linking Italy with Australia via a serpent captures uniquely the unity of our embracing nation. The picture on the front cover delightfully reflects this with the indigenous boy dancing his customary dance, painted in tribal colours while wearing his cap and track pants.

This book would be a most useful classroom text when studying customs and diversity within a nation. It is
oozing with fun for the reader while powerfully demonstrating the importance of story, song and culture.

Jill Howard, Theodore, ACT

I applaud this book as being a cross cultural celebration depicting Australia’s ancient and youthful history. It cleverly weaves the Italian culture and our Aboriginal heritage through a story based on what is truly central to both - the thread of celebration, food, song, storytelling and dance - to create a fabric which is uniquely Australian: ‘Stories swirling in the stars above, / dances rising from the earth below, / around the world our arms stretch wide / to warrima / to shake-a-leg / to welcome you’.

_Shake A Leg_ is the story of three young boys who, upon ordering a pizza and milkshakes from an Italian speaking Aboriginal chef, are immersed in a rich multicultural experience... through a wonderful adventure depicting stories of crocodiles and honey bees and concluding in the whole town dancing a _warrima_. Monty Prior and Ormerod cleverly explain the specific Italian and Aboriginal terms and vocabulary pertaining to both cultures, as the words are introduced and reinforced through the clever storytelling and speech bubbles used within the narrative.

Upon opening the book and seeing the end papers the reader is immediately drawn to the link between Italy and Australia’s top end, by the use of a white serpent weaving its way across the world.

This book is a rich authentic way of introducing an Aboriginal perspective into the multicultural ways that compose the Australian life. We need more books like this. It is a wonderful way of linking indigenous culture with what makes Australia’s multicultural society quite unique.

Sue Johnston, Holy Spirit School, North Ringwood, VIC

_Shake a Leg_ is a visual and print treat. Three hungry boys are “hunting” for pizza in North Queensland. They find a pizzeria and are amazed to be met by an Italian speaking pizza chef who is also Aboriginal. “Pizza, it's much more than flour, water and a few tomatoes. It's to do with song and dance and stories” says Bertie the pizza chef. Bertie leads the boys into a couple of Aboriginal traditional stories, with them eating pizza along the way. “It's corroboree time” the boys learn dance wrapped around stories with every dance ending with “shake a leg.”

This story has wide uses within the New Zealand curriculum – an “enterprising” student could work out the costings for a pizza, go shopping and then cook the pizza. It could be used to explore Aboriginal culture, celebration, story telling, music and art – all richly displayed throughout the story.

My Pasifika students learnt a lot from this story – we celebrate our own indigenous people, the Maori, day in day out, but this book led to a lot of new knowledge for them.

It showed how “pizza feeds the soul, keeps you dancing strong... listening with eyes, ears and heart.” _Shake a Leg_ is one fantastic celebration of food, dance and cultural understanding, which will enrich anyone who reads it. It would make a fantastic school play as well.

One of the best picture books I have read in a long time!

Kimberley Atkinson, Robertson Road School, New Zealand

The title _Shake a leg_ refers to the dancing done by aboriginal men / boys.

“Stories swirling in the stars above, dances rising from the earth below, around the world our arms stretch wide

to _warrima_
to shake-a-leg
to welcome you.”

I read this book to a group of Preps and Year 1s. Some pointing and leading eyes to various pictures and dialogue boxes, as I read the story, was necessary. Words like ’si’, ‘see’, ‘sea ’ and ‘source’ and ‘sauce’ were discussed. These are some of the comments from the children (I scribed).

“I liked the dancing, and I learnt stuff I didn’t know.”

“I liked how the dust went up.”

“... the pizza-shaped crocodile was cool.”

“I found the rising dust fact, about how people who’ve died rise up to dance with them, I found that interesting.”

“My favourite thing was to learn about a different type of language.”

“It was funny, because we don’t normally shake a leg.”

“I liked how they painted white people. I liked all of the illustrations.”
“I liked how he was shaped like an eagle.”
“I liked how the book looked.”
“The dance was weird.”
“I liked that they got stung by bees.”
Many more comments were made, all differing from each other. The children were spell-bound as I read and each got something unique from the experience. Each page in the book is distinctive in layout and text positioning. Jan Ormerod’s illustrations are full of movement and strong vibrant colour. Boori Pryor’s text brings culturally diverse people together, and illustrates the similarity of many experiences: we all eat, enjoy pizza, dance and celebrate and we can do this together. Many themes can be teased out of this book. Aboriginal identity; cultural differences; food; cooking; celebration; working together; ways of learning new things; art themes. The list could be longer. However, predominantly it is a book to sit down, enjoy and read aloud to a child or a group of children.

Caren Wyngaard, Victoria

Shake a Leg is a fantastic comic style read and the class just loved the way the pictures and story were set out. Some of the class actually thought we were reading a comic which interested them a lot. Shake a Leg takes place in a pizza shop where a few boys meet the pizza chef. He is Aboriginal but the boys are fascinated that he can speak Italian. The boys get to know the man and he talks about how many people use all different languages to talk, and his people use dance. “Let’s warrima” he says and he begins to tell a tale of dancing for a crocodile spirit, hunting for honey and didgeridoo. He encourages the boys to join in on corroboree time and he paints the fella’s faces. The boys end up dancing their own aboriginal dance — to shake a leg, to welcome you.

I really enjoyed this book as it was different to lots of other books that are multicultural. The genre was fun and kept the whole class amused. We followed up this story with our own corroboree and painted our faces in bright colours and made up our own dances. From this we also did aboriginal paintings on bark and stones and made the aboriginal flag. We displayed the flag in our room for all to see. This was a great book to start talking about ‘cultures’ in our classroom. I recommend this book for older children 5 and up. Shake a Leg is fantastic for anyone who wants to bring cultures alive in their class.

Claire Evans, Chancellor Park World of Learning, Queensland

Boori Monti Pryor’s Shake a Leg is a glorious celebration of food, dance and the sharing of cultures. The tale commences in Northern Queensland, whereby three boys enter a pizza shop in search of food – but they get far more than they’re expecting. The pizza chef is a Murri man who speaks Italian and can cook a mean pizza. As, the pizza cooks in the oven, he tells the boys stories of his culture and, after the pizza is eaten, he calls his own children to come and share their native dance with the boys.

Jan Ormerod’s illustrations are unique and transform the book into a combination of a comic strip and a picture story book. The key theme of culture acceptance has great educational scope, yet it proved too difficult for young prep aged children to grasp as, many of the children were unaware of who an Aboriginal person is and did not understand the Aboriginal culture and their tradition of telling a story through dance. Hence, I think it would be beneficial to have an Aboriginal elder as a guest speaker at our school to broaden the children’s limited awareness of their own Australian heritage. The topics raised in Shake a Leg could undoubtedly form the basis for school projects and discussions for many older primary readers to teach to the younger children.

Thus, I feel that this book would be more age appropriate for children 7 years and above.

Rhiannon Neate, Don Bosco Primary School, Narre Warren, Victoria