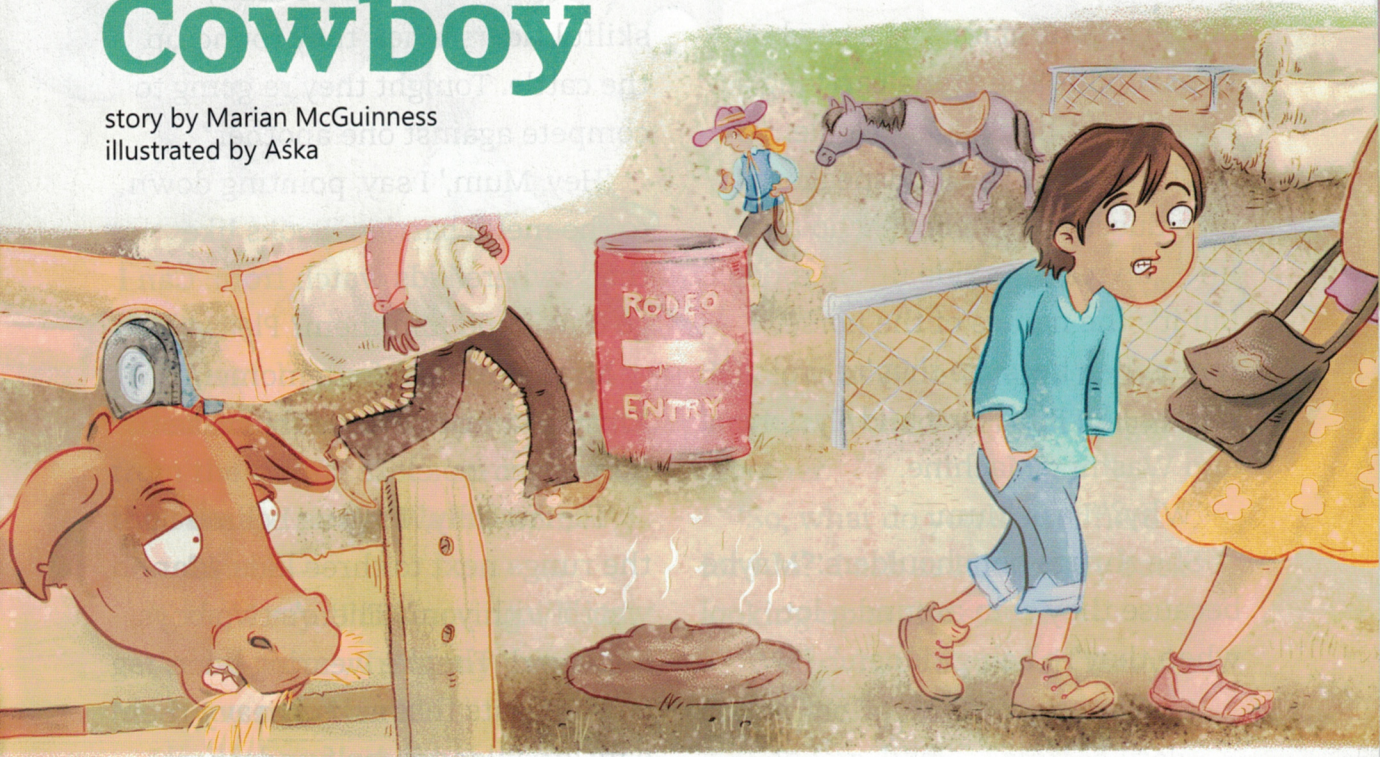


# Collarenebri Cowboy

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'YEE HAW!' I holler as we get out of the car at the Pony Club where the rodeo is being held.

There are cowboys in huge hats and checked shirts and cowgirls with sparkly belts made of fake diamonds. There are horses and cows and horse trailers and tents and *pew ...* the smell ... it's like horse and cow poo mixed with dust and sweat, and it's getting up my nostrils.

It's the first weekend of the school holidays and instead of

going somewhere cool, like Bali or the Gold Coast, Mum and Dad have decided to *go bush*. We're in Collarenebri, in the outback of New South Wales. I scuff my feet because it's hot and dusty and it stinks. I wish I was at the beach.

'Come on, Tilly,' Mum says as she leads me towards the arena. 'The rodeo's about to start.'

There's a round metal fence in the middle of the paddock and around it are rows of bleachers where everyone's sitting.

It's getting dark. Country music is playing over the speakers and then the national anthem blares out. Everyone stands as a cowboy rides around the arena carrying a huge Australian flag on a pole.

The man on the loudspeaker introduces the cowboys who are lined up ready to ride in the rodeo. But it's the names of the horses I remember, because they're crazy names like Buzz-saw and Cyclone and Washing Machine.

'Why?' I ask Mum.

She shrugs her shoulders. 'Maybe because they spin around a lot when they're being ridden.'

Dad adds his bit. 'Rodeo's another word for *round-up*. The cowboys and cowgirls have to be really skilful riders when they round up the cattle. Tonight they're going to compete against one another.'

'Hey, Mum,' I say, pointing down to the metal barrier. 'Looks like that's where kids watch from. Can I go down and join them? Please!'

Mum hesitates for a moment. 'Okay. But just be careful in case the horses get too close.'

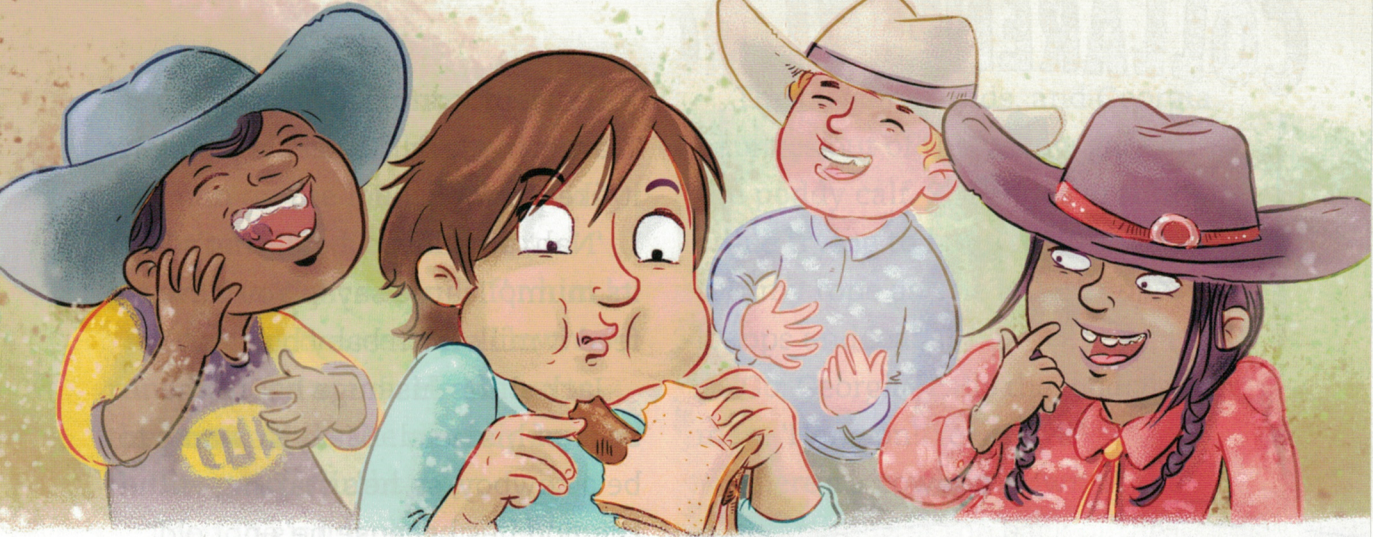
'Hi, I'm Tilly,' I say as I climb up the rungs next to three kids. 'Can I watch with you?' There's two boys and a girl. They're wearing huge cowboy hats that are so heavy their ears are folded in half underneath.

The girl moves along. 'Sure! I'm Tiarne and these are my schoolmates, Jack and Maayirr.'

'This is the Bareback Bronc Ride,' says Jack. He's pretty excited. 'The cowboy's got to ride for eight seconds to win.'

The buzzer goes and the yellow gate springs open. A horse rockets out. It's bouncing and twisting and trying to buck the rider. I hang on tight to the railing as the horse skids towards us in the red dust. We squeal like we're on a roller-coaster.





We watch a couple more crazy rodeo rides; then Jack jumps down from the railing. 'Let's go over to the sausage sizzle. Wanna come?' he asks me.

'Sure,' I say. 'I'm starving. I'll just get some money from my parents. Meet you over there.'

I line up and get my sausage sandwich. Back near the bleachers the four of us sit on a half-dusty, half-grassy patch.

I lick my fingers as the tomato sauce dribbles down my arm.

'Tasty, isn't it?' Maayirr laughs.

'Yeah,' I say. 'I love sausage sizzles.'

'You know you're eating goanna sausage?' Maayirr laughs again so much that he snorts.

'What!' I look at the bitten piece of sausage left in my soggy bread.

'It's delicious,' I say, 'but not as

delicious as Blue Tongue Lizard.' I laugh, and then we're all laughing together.

'So, what do you do out here for fun?' I ask as I lie on my back looking up at the stars.

'Well, what do you do?' Maayirr copies me.

'I do lots, like ... I started Irish dancing this year.' I jig my feet clumsily on the ground, like I'm dancing.

'Well, I do emu dancing,' Maayirr says. He curls his hand. He sticks out two fingers like a beak and darts it back and forth pretending to peck us.

'And I'm learning to play the flute,' I say, holding my hands up and wiggling my fingers along an imaginary flute.

'Me too ... well, sort of,' Maayirr laughs. He sure does laugh a lot.



‘My grandad’s teaching me the didgeridoo.’

‘You’ll never do as much as Maayirr,’ Tiarne says. ‘He does everything.’

Jack joins in. ‘And he’s a lasso champion. Maayirr knows heaps of stuff.’

I sit back up and even though I can’t see it, I can tell Maayirr’s embarrassed, because he keeps shifting his legs.

‘Gotta go,’ Maayirr says. ‘I’m in the poddy riding comp. The judge is calling the contestants over the loudspeaker.’ He heads around the back of the bleachers towards the holding chute.

‘I’m a bit confused,’ I say to Tiarne and Jack. ‘What’s a poddy? Is it like a pony?’

‘Nah, a poddy is a calf that’s lost its mum,’ Tiarne says. ‘You have to feed it milk from baby bottles.’

Jack shifts his huge hat to the back of his head. ‘Maayirr wants to be a cowboy, so he’s starting with the poddies because he’s not old enough to ride the steers. You’ve gotta be 14 to do that.’

We go back to the arena and climb up the rails.

‘They’re still doing the Bareback Bronc Ride,’ says Jack. I guess Jack knows everything too, living out here. ‘Watch the yellow gate in front of the chute—that’s where he’ll come out. They’ve got to ride for eight seconds to win.’

When the buzzer goes, the yellow gate springs open and a horse comes rocketing out. It’s bouncing and twisting and trying to buck the rider. It’s kicking up so much dust I can hardly see the cowboy.

He’s holding on with only one hand and the other is swinging in the air as he jerks around like he’s out of control. The horse bucks and the cowboy flies off and thuds onto the ground.

'Well, that's one crazy turbo-charged ride-on bulldozer,' says the man on the loudspeaker. 'Cody might be dusted, but he's not busted. No eight seconds for him.'

A cowboy dressed as a clown runs into the arena. He distracts the horse while the cowboy runs to the rails and climbs over.

Then the loudspeaker man starts talking again.

'And now for the next generation of cowboys and cowgirls,' he says. 'We're up to the Poddy Riding Comp and there are some brave pint-sized riders waiting in the chutes. First up is Georgia. She's settling onto the back of The Little Dipper.'

We look over to the chute and can see Maayirr. He's putting the fringed cowboy chaps over his jeans, and he's got a helmet on his head instead of his cowboy hat.

The buzzer sounds, and Georgia bounces out of the yellow gate on the poddy calf. She slides around while trying to hang on to the tummy rope as The Little Dipper lollops and leaps.

'Go, Georgia,' calls the loudspeaker man. 'Hang on! Yee Haw!'

There's a cowboy clown at the front and one at the back of the poddy, but Georgia falls off after a few seconds.

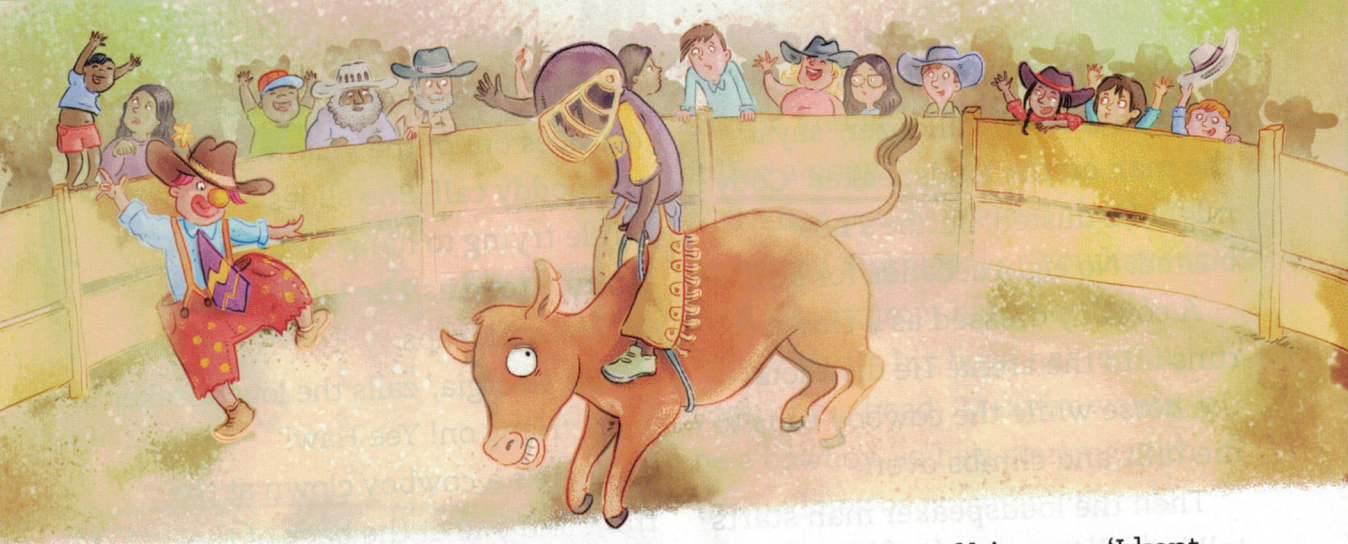
'Great work from a future cowgirl!' the loudspeaker man says.

Now it's Maayirr's turn. We can see him perched on top of the poddy and he's jigging around.

Buzzzz! The yellow gate shoots open.

'Call him brave. Call him crazy, but Maayirr is from a long line of cowboys and he's riding Dodger. Hang on, cowboy!' calls the loudspeaker man.





Maayirr's flapping around on Dodger like he's about to fly.

'Go, Maayirr!' we shout.

'Six ... Five ... Four ...' the loudspeaker man counts down.

'Hang on, Maayirr!' we shout.

'Ten years old and riding like a pro ... Two ... One ...'

*Buzzzz!*

'Eight seconds! What a champ!' the loudspeaker man announces as everyone cheers.

A rodeo clown grabs him off the poddy. Maayirr runs towards us and climbs over the railing.

He's out of breath but he's grinning from ear to ear.

We give him a high five.

'Told you Maayirr can do anything,' Jack says.

'Did you feel scared?' I ask.

'Just a bit when I was waiting for the buzzer,' Maayirr says as he

wipes dust out of his eyes. 'I kept telling myself I could do it. You've gotta believe in yourself. You've gotta try new things.'

I look over to the bleachers and Mum's waving at me.

'Looks like I've gotta go,' I say to my new friends. 'Mum's calling me. This has been the best time ever.'

I'm super-tired when we get back to our holiday cabin. As soon as my head hits the pillow, I'm thinking of my new friends, Tiarne and Jack and Maayirr.

Maayirr's words whisper in my mind ... *You've gotta try new things.* And he's right.

Yeah ... I think. It was the best time ever. ■



Trying  
new things  
can lead to  
discoveries!