

To Love a Sunburnt Country

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Jackie French

Book Summary

The year is 1942 and the world is at war. Nancy Clancy is 16 and left school to spend a year droving, just like her grandfather Clancy of the Overflow was famed for. Now Nancy's family has sent her to Malaya to bring home her sister-in-law Moira and baby Gavin. Moira is British and married to Nancy's brother Ben, who is now a soldier. Malaya is under threat from the Japanese, but despite the warnings Moira has resisted leaving as she wants to stay near her husband. When Malaya is invaded, Nancy, Moira and Gavin are fortunate to get out before Singapore falls. When their ship is bombed they end up stranded on an island where they, and some other colonial women, are captured. There begins the nightmare and horror of internment in a Japanese camp. Back home at Gibber's Creek families are doing their bit for the war. They worry constantly about their men who are fighting - and now those who are missing after Singapore falls. Written by one of Australia's most respected and admired authors, *To Love a Sunburnt Country* is powerful, compelling and confronting and a book that pulls no punches. Filled with emotional truth and heartfelt agony, this book is truly unforgettable.

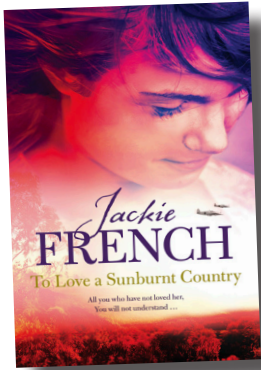
Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes

ACOKFH023, ACHHS190, ACHMH002, ACHHS182, ACDSEH023

Appropriate Ages:

14+

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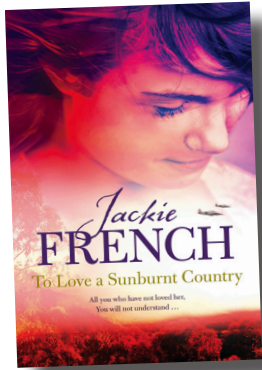
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Book Description

'If worse comes to the worst, Miss Clancy, remember this. We'll win. Not by next Christmas: not for years. But we have the resources, and they don't. We'll win in the end. All you need to do is survive, and you'll get home again. Can you remember that?' (p 106)

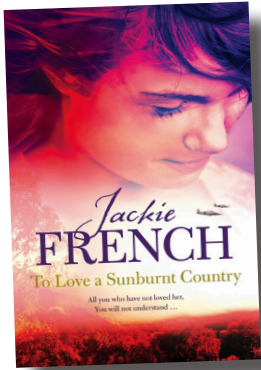
'Mr Harding looked at her steadily. 'A lesson I learnt in the last war. Keep believing in home, Miss Clancy, and you will get there.' (p 117)

The year is 1942 and Australia is embroiled in another world war. Nancy Clancy is sixteen and had left school at fourteen to spend a year droving, just like her grandfather Clancy of the Overflow was famed for doing. But now Nancy's parents Sylvia and Bruce have sent her to Malaya to bring home her British sister-in-law Moira and baby Gavin. Moira is married to Nancy's brother Ben, who had been a plantation manager and is now a soldier. Malaya is under threat from the Japanese, but despite the warnings Moira has resisted leaving as she wants to stay near her husband. Nancy is not impressed by Moira's attitudes but remains faithful to her in respect for her brother. When Malaya is invaded, Nancy and Moira feel fortunate to get out with baby Gavin before Singapore falls. But when their ship is bombed, they are stranded on the island of Pulau Ayu, where they, and some other colonial women, are captured. There begins the nightmare and horror of internment in a Japanese camp where

they are desperately short of food, water and any comforts. There she witnesses atrocities, discovers the strengths of her sister-in-law, is determined to save the baby, and battles illness and near-starvation. Her love for the Overflow and for Michael Thompson, the son of the owners of Drinkwater, give her some hope where little is to be found.

Meanwhile, back home at Gibber's Creek, families on both Drinkwater and Overflow and all the local members of the community, are engaged in the war effort. The local newspaper reflects the worries of those who have men fighting – and who are now either missing or interned in camps after the fall of Singapore. This is a harrowing and emotional account of the war and how lives and nations were changed irrevocably. It is a story of both survival and of terrible loss.

To Love a Sunburnt Country covers the years 1941-6 and the novel is a symbolic reflection of 'My Country' by Dorothea Mackellar, although the poem is not mentioned. The book explores nationally significant themes – the ties that bind us to home, to land and country, class inequality, social injustice, women's rights, the responsibility of governments to their citizens, the myths which form nationhood, our multicultural heritage, and the threat of racism and prejudice to national and international cohesion. Nancy has rebelled against expectations by running away to become a drover near Charters Towers, and since arriving in Malaya has shocked her ladylike sister-in-law with her hoyden-like ways. She doesn't want to become a 'lady' and wants only the freedom to



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work on the Overflow. Nancy is feisty, strong-willed, resourceful, idealistic, and compassionate. This is also a romance in which Nancy falls in love with Michael Thompson and while she has endured unimaginable horrors, Nancy takes on whatever the future sends to her:

'I know how to dress and behave for the Melbourne Cup or a drover's camp, she thought. I am Nancy of the Overflow and I can do *anything* ... Including survive.' (p 152)

About the Author

Jackie French is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide-range of topics. Of her books she says on her website that:

There were over 140 at last count, slightly more than we have varieties of apples. If something is worth doing you may as well go heart and soul and boot leather ... I write for kids and adults, fiction, history, gardening, pests control, chooks and some that must be a nightmare for book shops to work out what genre they are. Have a look at 'which book?' for a probably not quite up to date list of what is where and for whom.

Her website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work.

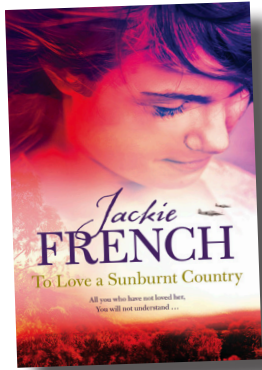
www.jackiefrench.com

Author Inspiration

This is the world I was born into: the men and women who had returned home from the Japanese prisoner of war camps, fighting in New guinea, women who managed farms or factories or hospitals with Australia's men at war. They all told stories, a hundred threads that twined to give a picture of Australia in those years when loving your country mean you had to fight for it.

I always knew I would write this book, from the day when at three years old I screamed at the sight of my best friends' father. He had been tortured by the Japanese, crucified till his arms and legs were dislocated, scarred from repeated whipping across his face. He walked hunched over and I thought he was a giant spider. I screamed and screamed, and after that we never played at her place again. Mum explained, and in that moment of intense shame, even at three, I knew that there was nothing I could ever do to undo the pain I had caused that man, who had lost so much for our country. But I also knew that his story- all their stories- should not be lost.

There are so many ways to love your country, and to serve it. Mine, perhaps, is telling stories.



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Characters

• **The Significance of Character:** Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In this work there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor ones.

Discussion Point: Apart from Nancy, which character did you consider to be central to the novel's plot and themes, and why?

• **Major Characters:** Nancy Clancy, Moira Clancy (her sister-in-law), baby Gavin, Ben Clancy (brother of Nancy), Michael Thompson of Drinkwater, Blue and Joseph McAlpine.

Discussion Point: Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why?

• **Minor Characters:** Mah and Andy McAlpine, Mrs Armitage, Ah Jong, Miss Reid, Bruce Ruddley, Cyril Harding, Matilda and Thomas O'Halloran (Thompson) who were main characters in the first novel; Sylvia Clancy, Bruce Clancy, old Mrs Clancy, Jim Thompson, Flinty (nee MacAlpine) and Sandy Mackenzie, Kirsty MacAlpine, Johnno, Fred Smith, Gilly O'Gold, Bert Thornton.
Women in Camp: Mrs Barry (Deidre) Harris, Mrs Neville (Sally) Montrain, Mrs Hughendorn, Nurse

Elizabeth Rogers, Mrs Thomas Addison, Mrs Mainwaring, Nurse Williams, Nurse McTavish, Miss Edith Smith, Miss Deborah Beatty, Mrs Addison, Miss Vivienne Crewlight, Nancy and Moira Clancy; and Gavin Clancy.

Discussion Point: Cyril Harding plays a pivotal part in the action and has a significant 'scene' with Nancy. What do you imagine his background is? What might have happened to him after the war?

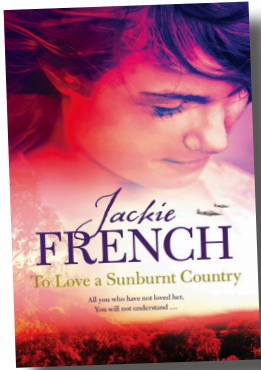
Discussion Point: Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?

• **Character Arcs** are the curve on which key events show how a character grows or develops in response to events and to interactions with other characters in the novel.

Activity: Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour (eg Mrs Hughendorn).

Activity: Read the following descriptions of Moira and Nancy and analyse how the language used reflects the Australian background to the story in poetic and metaphorical ways:

'Nancy had begun to think her sister-in-law was as delicate as a goanna, and just as stubborn, like the old one behind the chook shed at home who'd dug up a whole paddock of potatoes, thinking they were eggs, goannas being fond of eggs: he had bitten every spud, unwilling to accept they were not eggs at all.' (pp 5-6)



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This description is cunningly obtuse; a goanna is not delicate and neither is Moira, despite her delicate features and frame!

'Skin clear as river water, eyes deep as a billabong. You could see the stars reflected in her hair.' (p 37)

This description of Nancy evokes her Aboriginal background in a very poetic way.

Discussion Point:

'I married a good 'un, didn't I?' She stared at him. Moira a good 'un? Spoilt, snobbish. Thinking if she went to Overflow she'd be expected to sit in the kitchen and drink her tea with a black woman, and call her Gran.... But Moira makes her own mind up about things.' (pp 80-1)

This passage presents two different views of Moira. Which proves correct?

Study notes on themes and curriculum topics

a) Themes

World War Two and Australia

Discussion Point:

'We are on our own, she thought.' (p 67)

This novel takes place during WWII when Australia was involved in conflicts in the Middle East, Asia, and Europe. The Japanese conflict represented a real threat to Australia and without the US's intervention later in the war we may have found ourselves isolated and in real danger of invasion.

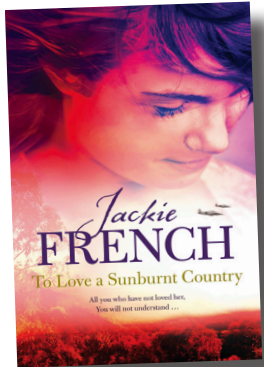
Discussion Point: What did this war mean for Australia? How did it influence our further history? What changed in Australia during and after that time? Research the major events and features of WW2.

Activity: Do an 'image search' using the key words 'World War Two and Australia' to give students some idea of the social conditions during the War. Do the same for individual conflicts such as those described in the novel, to glean more about the conditions in which people were interned.

Activity: The sinking of the *HMAS Sydney* on 30 November 1941 has fascinated historians ever since. Research this event further.

Activity: The siege of Tobruk, the bombing of Darwin and Broome, the Kokoda Trail in PNG were all sites where Australians suffered devastating casualties. Research these events as well.

Discussion Point: WW2 occurred in the shadow of WW1 just over twenty years earlier.



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'The war changed Sandy. Changed Andy. But in a funny way it didn't really change them at all. I think maybe it helped them to come back to what they loved.'

(p 293)

Discussion Point: Privations for ordinary people during war included petrol and food rations, even for wealthy landholders.

'Christmas Eve 1940 had been the same as every other year, till you looked closely: saw the absence of nearly every man between twenty-one and forty; saw the wives, sisters, mothers, smiling too brightly, lipstick defiant, seams drawn on the back of the legs to replace the silk stockings already in short supply, with shipping and factories devoted to the war effort, not luxuries.' (p 35)

Research the life lived by those at home during the war.

Activity: Food was still varied, and they made do with whatever was at hand. Read about the Christmas Eve party 1940 (pp 36-7). Have you tried any of these foods? Create a feast like this for a party at your own school.

Discussion Point: What was the outcome of the War in terms of working conditions for men and women? Did things improve or change after World War Two?

Discussion Point: The novel reveals the work done as part of the 'War Effort' to help soldiers overseas.

'Morale. Makes us feel we are all in this together, not each one with our own worries. Stops us brooding. Gives us things to do.' Like knitting army socks, he thought, making camouflage netting twice a week at the Town Hall; Red Cross meetings and collecting ivory and saucepans and paper for the war effort, and the hundreds of other jobs women across Australia dedicated their few free hours to, after the demands of family and the factory work many had taken up to keep the country going with so many men away.'

(pp 9-10)

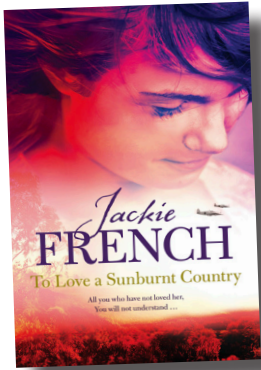
Discussion Point: The novel also reveals the seamier side of the War at home. It shows that not everyone was scrupulous: eg the black marketeer (pp 323-5); and that some people partied rather than contributing to the war effort eg the debauchery of Eva's party and the squalidness of Kings Cross:

'Was this truly Australia? Was this the price of war too? Not just the men lost, the families torn apart, Mum working in the paddocks like she was twenty again, Dad's shadowed eyes at the factory.' (p 377)

Activity: Menzies resigned, Fadden became PM briefly and then John Curtin became our war-time Prime Minister (p 55). Research the challenges faced by the government in this time.

Activity: Read some of the novels listed in the **Bibliography** which are set in the War and compare them to this one.

Australia's role in the SE Asian Community:
At the beginning of the book the European



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community, including Australia, mostly see themselves as rulers of the lands they occupy. How does this change for both the countries occupied by the Japanese, and in the understanding of the characters involved? How do the characters in this book see Australia's relationship change from reflecting European attitudes towards Asia as the book progresses?

Japanese Conflict

Activity: 'The war with Japan took many by surprise, as the Australian government had assured the populace that it wouldn't happen.

'What were they doing here? The Japanese Army was supposed to be far to the north, in Thailand. Australia couldn't be at war with Japan yet. Both countries had signed a treaty saying that they would formally declare war before any attack was made.' (p 3)

After a few hours on the train, the escaping passengers, including Nancy, are told (p 65) of the bombing of Singapore and Pearl Harbour and realise how serious the war is becoming. Research these events further.

Discussion Point: Atrocities in war leave not only many dead and maimed but many emotionally and mentally damaged. Bruce Ruddley's description of being witness to the death of his colleagues and of the Japanese men who killed them (p 76) has left him a mental and

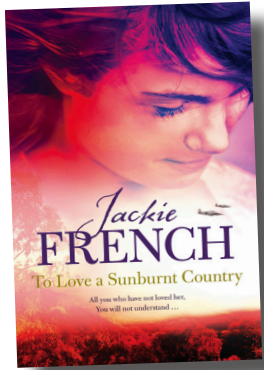
emotional wreck. Other painful scenes include the dead women on the beach (pp 140-3) and the soldier shooting those who swam ashore; the rapes of the three women and Mrs Mainwaring's suicide (pp 242-3); man tortured for a radio and Ben caged (pp 317-322). Discuss some of the incidents in this novel and how they might have impacted on the people who experienced them.

Discussion Point: Propaganda was used to paint the Japanese as 'Liberators'.

'It was Japanese propaganda, very like ones she'd seen before, dropped after the bombs. Some were printed in Chinese, others in Malay and Indian dialects. She could read none of them, but had been told by Miss Reid that they promised freedom and prosperity to all Asians once the British colonial oppressors were defeated.' (p 77)

The women are also forced to listen to a broadcast suggesting that Australia has been taken by Japanese and that those in camps are being treated well (p 216). But the Allied forces were also guilty of using such tactics, and of censorship:

'The flagship HMAS *Australia* was badly damaged by a Japanese kamikaze suicide bomber. Michael wondered if 'badly damaged' meant sunk — it was impossible to know the truth. The High Court had ruled that newspapers could only be published if they reported nothing that might damage the government's handling of the war, or that hadn't been passed by the censor.' (p 421)



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Activity:

'Better all of you die of shame. Japanese women would not be taken by the enemy. Japanese women would kill themselves first.' Nancy gaped at the translator. 'You think we should all kill ourselves because we have been taken prisoner?' 'English women do not understand honour.' (p 243)

The Japanese sense of honour was a distinctly different aspect of their military strategy in dealing with conflict; suicide bombers, or 'kamikaze' pilots were another. Research their cultural beliefs further.

Colonial Society

Discussion Point: The colonial society in which Ben and Moira lived was stratified by social class and related morays.

'Moira would have a fit if she wore sandshoes on a train, even if the entire Japanese Army was attacking.' (p 9)

'One thing Nancy had learnt in Malaya was the incessant evaluation and re-evaluation of one's acquaintanceship, each person in their place, but that place shifting according to rank and wealth, connections and antecedents. And always, always, colour of the skin.' (p 26)

Discussion Point: Read and discuss these two quotes:

'The Europeans were leaving, yet the beat of life went on. Did we matter at all? she thought. Managers like Ben and memsahibs like Moira? So many other races have come here and found their place. Did we just float across the surface of Malaya, and can now vanish, with little changed, after the scars of war have healed? Other conquerors were coming. Yet, somehow, looking at another group of children playing by a stream, she suspected that they too would be as ephemeral.' (p 91)

'We've given them ...' she tried to think '... buildings. And education ...' He gave a short laugh. 'You gave education, but no jobs. All managers had to be English. Now Japan makes local people managers. They govern themselves now.' (p 367)

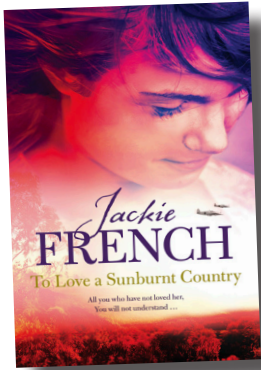
Discussion Point: Raffles Hotel (pp 95-6) is the epitome of colonial life in Malaya, except that there if you were wealthy and of mixed race it was acceptable.

'The Raffles is the only place in Singapore where you might see a maharajah dining at the next table. Doesn't matter what colour a chap's skin, he's welcome at the Raffles.' (p 99)

Read about the history of the hotel further.

Racism and Prejudice

Discussion Point: Arthur Calwell's call to 'Populate or perish' (p 8) was a form of inverted racism since it inferred Australia's fear of its Asian neighbours.



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Discussion Point: Read and discuss these two quotes:

'Things like lipstick always matter. It's called keeping up appearances. If we English don't maintain our standards, how can we expect the natives to respect us?' With force, thought Nancy, thinking of the pistol at the Commissioner's belt, the rifle Ben took even for a day's work on the plantation, the shotguns lined up in their rack in the study.' (p 17)

'In Australia Moira would have to abandon her servants and picnic parties for life on an Australian station with a 'native' grandmother-in-law. 'Native' was such a Moira word: 'Nancy, darling, don't wear that. It's what the natives wear ...' (p 6)

Discussion Point:

'Was it prejudiced to acknowledge that skin colour did make a difference, simply because it *did* matter to so many, despite what Dad said about everyone being the same under the skin. How could he have thought about marriage to someone from another world ...?' (pp 43-4)

Discussion Point: Mrs White comes to Tommy Thompson saying that a worker named Jürgen Grün is a spy (pp 279-80), and even though Thomas wants to give him the benefit of the doubt, he sends him to the country for the duration. How difficult was it to be a 'foreigner' in wartime?

Women's History and Rights

Discussion Point: Women in colonial society had amahs to look after their babies and servants to cook and clean. They lived the life enjoyed in far-away England and despite the climate, dressed in ladylike fashion with gloves, hats, stockings, high heels and makeup. How does Nancy feel about these women? And how do her feelings change when she spends time with them in the camp?

Discussion Point:

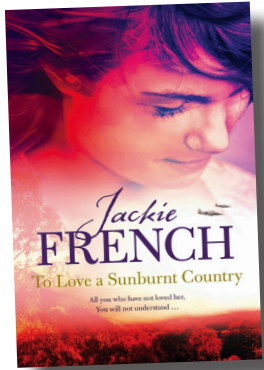
'She said it as though it was no big thing at all for a girl to join a man's world, as if it had never occurred to her that a girl should spend her life only in kitchens, or with her children on her knee. Just as it never seemed to have occurred to Mum, he thought, or Blue and Mah McAlpine with their biscuit factory.' (p 48)

Nancy and the women she is close to at home are rather different to others in their society. How?

Discussion Point:

'.. the air force had refused to accept Kirsty McAlpine as a pilot for the second time, despite all her prizes and experience. The British government might allow women pilots to ferry aircraft from the factory to the airbases, but the Australian authorities wouldn't even let women do that,' (p 56).

Later, though, Johnno asks Kirsty to fly to PNG (p 347) and she demonstrates her skills and



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bravery. Research the role of female aviators in this period.

Discussion Point:

'The prime minister assures us that such employment will only be for the duration of the war, and that the women will be replaced by men as soon as male labour is available. A sub committee will be formed to ensure to prevent the encroachment on men's jobs by cheap female labour.' (p 79)

This statement carries the weight of prejudice against women. Not only are they to be only temporary workers, but also to be paid less!

Aboriginal Cultural Beliefs and History

Discussion Point: Read the following three quotes and discuss the impressions they give of Aboriginal cultural beliefs:

'The day you were born. Before they even put you in my arms, I looked out the window and there were the pelicans, flying above the house. And I thought, They're here to look after him. I knew you'd be safe, after that.' (p 46)

'Nancy said, 'The swans are mine. Gran told me. She was there when I was born. So were the swans. Last year, coming home, when the floods nearly got us, a line of swans flew right up high above us. Travelling west, like us.' (p 47)

Michael sees the swan the morning he hears of Nancy's ship sinking: 'The pelican watched. His hands grew warm, and then his heart. He didn't know ... And then he did. So deep it was impossible not to accept, to believe.' (p 166)

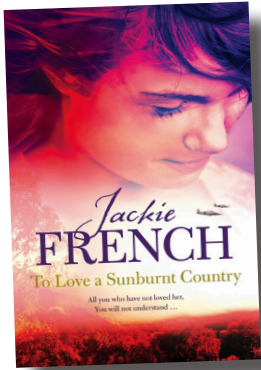
Discussion Point: Nancy's Gran seems to have a secret store of wisdom and knowledge which other people don't.

'She wasn't sure why Gran might know, or Michael either. Just that Gran sometimes did know some things that it would seem that she couldn't really know about. Like the day she had arrived back from Charters Towers a week before she was due, and there was Gran with the roast dinner ready, and her favourite apple crumble. Michael ... Had she imagined how much he understood, that linking without words?' (p 145)

What other examples of such secret knowledge are described in the novel? eg Bush medicines and foods.

Survival Skills

Discussion Point: Nancy's and Moira's survival is a combination of many people's skills and insights. Cyril Harding gives them life jackets which save their lives; Moira saves them from drowning (p 129) when faced with bombs at sea, as she is more confident than Nancy who can't swim and doesn't know ships; later, Nancy's bush skills prove useful when she lights a fire with wet wood (p 186); Nancy suggests growing



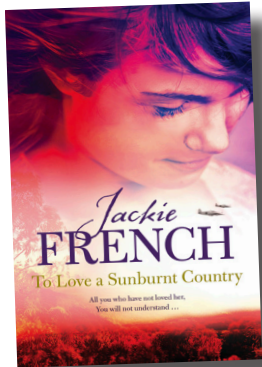
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vegetables and then they discuss obtaining medicines and keeping chickens (pp 199-202); Nancy kills a rat and a gecko to eat (pp 222-4) and collects hibiscus buds to eat. What other survival skills are evident in this narrative?

Key Quotes

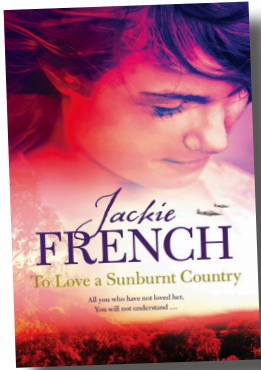
The following quotes relate to some of the Themes above. You might like to present any one of them (or two related quotes) to your students as a catalyst for further discussion, or as the subject of an essay outlining how the quote reflects a theme which is central to this novel:



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<p>'Australians would stop the Japanese, of course. She knew that as surely as she knew the colour of the paddocks after rain. But, here and now, the safety of her nephew and sister-in-law was up to her.' (p 3)</p>	<p>'No worries, Ben had told her and Moira last week. The Japs aren't going to risk war with the British Empire. And if they do try to land in Malaya, we'll stop them easily.' (p 3)</p>
<p>'There were things you sometimes had to do for love, like swallow your longing for grey-green trees and water with a tang of rock, not earth and leaves, for Michael and her family.' (p 13)</p>	<p>'Why should Malays or Chinese have any more diseases than Europeans? thought Nancy. Her best friends at school had been the Lee twins. But she had given up trying to change Moira's view of the world months ago.' (p 25)</p>
<p>'Though surely Malaya was safe, protected by the impregnable might of Singapore in its south. Other towns might fall, but Singapore — and the lands it protected — could never fall.' (p 40)</p>	<p>'A jigsaw assembled itself in his mind. The pieces had been there waiting, just needed the final piece to make a whole. The music, the laughter of friends and neighbours, the complaints of sheep in the river paddock, the whicker of horses greeting each other closer to the house, the feeling when a mob of sheep flows over the hill, like a brown flood of wool and baas. So many pieces, waiting for him now. Not another life, in fifteen years' time. This life.' (p 41)</p>
<p>'He realised with a shock that he didn't have to say any more. Never, perhaps, would need to say more about the heart of his life to this girl, or the woman she'd become.' (p 48)</p>	<p>'She could hear Gran's quiet voice now. 'I was born at the end of a war. We lost.' (p 78)</p>
<p>'If the BBC could not be trusted to tell them the truth about Malaya, considered Nancy, what might it be concealing about the rest of world?' (p 100)</p>	<p>'Japanese agents have been collecting information about Malay defences for years. No one put a stop to it — the Japanese have been allowed free movement as part of the policy of appeasement.' (p 102)</p>
<p>'Don't underestimate the Yanks. They have what Japan doesn't.' She thought he meant courage. But he continued, 'Natural resources. Oil. Iron. Factories. They'll be making new planes and ships already, while every ship, every plane that Japan loses means one more lost to them for good. And we,' he meant Australia now, 'have food.' (p 104)</p>	<p>'He wondered if this was the real reason women gathered in their precious 'free' hours at night to roll bandages, wrap comfort packages, or organise fundraisers. There was comfort in being together.' (p 114)</p>



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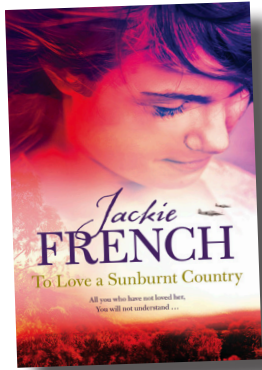
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'Your brother cares about you. My dear girl, has it ever occurred to you that if you marry that young man you keep writing to — or anyone else of good family — you need to know how to behave in public? Your mother's done her best, but oh dear, even after you had some respectable clothes you'd keep putting on those rags you arrived in to go around the plantation. There was no way to get through to you that some things are acceptable, and some are not ... Had Michael also wanted her to look 'acceptable'? Was that why he had never sent the word 'love'?' (pp 150-1)

'But here — ha! All the RAA F wanted its women members to do was type. Or chauffeur officers in cars. Let anyone with a bosom get within sneezing distance of an aircraft and the RAA F had pink kittens. She could fly rings around them.' (p 344)

'When I get home I'm going to drink me beer out of Jap skulls.' Big Bob smiled. Big Bob was small, like a bit of twisted fencing wire, and his eyes glowed too blue in his brown face. Big Bob had been smiling when he'd cut the throat of one Jap sniper while Bert had shot the other two. He'd smiled when he'd looked at their bodies too. Fred had seen smiles like that before. Hadn't liked them then. Didn't like this one, now, not in the jungle with the leeches thickas lizards and the mud waiting to rot your leg off after a single scratch.' (p 266)

'She opened her eyes, but there were only strangers in the carriage. It was still hard to smile at strangers, after the years with just themselves, so close at the end that they were almost one person. Only me, she thought. How can I live with only me?' (pp 458-9)



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b) Curriculum areas and key learning outcomes

Australia's role in South East Asia

In December, 1941, white Australians had to accept that we were not a far flung part of Britain, but south east Asian. Our foreign policy and our national identity would never be the same.

This book is about that beginning: the severing from Britain, the pride in our own identity, but also the realisation that we were seen by the Japanese as part of their potential south east Asian empire. White Australia could never be entirely European again.

Language and Literacy

• *Colloquialisms of the era give a tangible sense of the times throughout this series.*

Activity: Make a list of any uncommon words or expressions and try to guess their meaning from the context in which they appear. Then check their meanings in a dictionary. Which other expressions do you know which date from an earlier era and are not used now?

• *This novel is a work of Historical Fiction or Faction* — a genre which relies on the author weaving together fact and fiction seamlessly. In this novel the experiences of people during World

War Two are juxtaposed against the imaginary story of Nancy Clancy and Michael Thompson.

Discussion Point: How much did you recognise from the history you have read? What was similar and what was different to actual events or people? Talk about the writing of historical fiction with your students, with reference to some of the articles on writing such fiction in the **Bibliography** below.

• *Narrative Structure* — The novel follows a chronological structure, but also refers to key events which have taken place earlier in the series, and in the history of Australia.

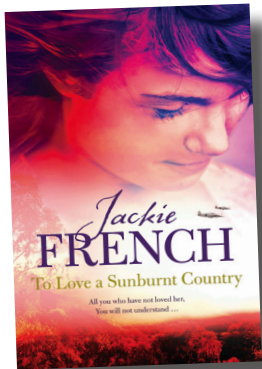
Activity: Create a timeline of all the incidents referred to in the book.

• *Narrative Perspective* — Nancy's story is written in third person subjective and sometimes the focus shifts to other characters such as Michael, Kirsty or Fred.

Discussion Point: How do these various viewpoints enhance the story being told?

Discussion Point: How might the story have changed if it had been written in first person? Choose a passage and translate it in Nancy's voice as if written as a diary or letter?

• *Mixture of Texts* — The story is told with most chapters opening with articles or letters. These various texts add to the story by creating an



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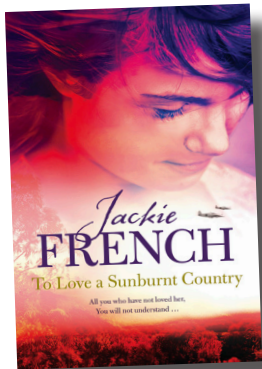
interplay between public and private experiences of the war.

Discussion Point: These texts add another layer to the core narrative of Nancy and Michael's family's involvement in the war.

Activity: Choose one of these texts and analyse it for meaning:

The novel opens in 1941, with a brief newspaper article about the sinking of the HMAS Sydney: HMAS Sydney Sunk, 645 Crew Lost *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 1); Nancy Clancy is staying at Craigiethorn Plantation via Kota Bharu, Malaya when she receives the letter from her friend Michael Thompson, who is at St Elric's School, boarding in Sydney, dated 7 December 1941 (pp 1-2); 8 December 1941 Letter to Ben from dad in *Gibber's Creek* (pp 7-8) in which Blue McAlpine, wife of Dr Joe, is quoted in the *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 141); Letter from Nancy's mother (p 20); *Gibber's Creek Gazette* announcing war (p 21); Public meeting reported *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 28); Local competition to write a slogan for *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 59); *New Call-Up* announced *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 68); Women to be accepted as workers in factories *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 79); Motorcycles taken for war effort *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 84); Telegram from Thomas Thompson (p 93); Austerity Loan *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 108); Japan Seizes Port of Rabaul *Gibber's Creek*

Gazette (p 115); War Relief Dance reported by child *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 125); Article quotes Lawson's 'In the Storm that is to Come' *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (pp 132-3); WASTE PAPER MAKES MUNITIONS! *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 138); Black-Out for *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 147); Joe's letter to Blue (pp 154-5); Singapore Surrenders *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 162); Letter to Michael from Sylvia Clancy re sinking of *The Lady Williams* and Ben being missing in action (pp 164-5); Highway Robbery in Main Street! *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 177); Letter to Blue re Joseph McAlpine being missing from BJ Smythe, Major Officer in Charge of Records, Sydney (pp 177-8); Damage Still Unknown from Japanese Strike on Australian Mainland *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 188) Aircraft Destroyed, Refugees Killed in Broome *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 191); General MacArthur Arrives to Take Command! *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 207); Articles followed by Letter to Editor by Matilda Thompson about suppression of Australian military news *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (pp 212-3); General MacArthur Named Father of the Year *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 220); New Proprietor for the *Gazette* (Matilda Thompson has bought the paper) *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 225); Letter to Mah from Fred saying he has joined up (p 228); Children's Evacuation Preparations *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 230); New speed limit *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 247); Australians Hungry on Kokoda Track *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 252); Australian Victory at Milne



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Bay *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 256); Volunteer Defence Corp Meeting *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 263); Fashions for Victory *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 278); News of new air raid siren *Gibber's Creek Gazette*, (p 285); Empire Biscuit Factory to Make Beefless Meat Pies *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 295); Victory at Guadalcanal: Allies Retake Solomon Islands *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 299); Japanese Plane Over Sydney *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 304); Petrol Warning *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 306); No Hot-Water Bottle for Winter *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 310); Jim's letter to Thompson family (pp 315-6); Report on costume ball for war effort *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 316); Sugarless Desserts for Sweet Toothy *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 323); Letter from Jim to family (p 327); Report of bonfire By Elaine Sampson, aged eleven and a quarter *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 334); Red Cross Donations for this Week *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 338); Farmers Urged to Produce Charcoal for Victory *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 343); Race group mistaken for the enemy *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 363); Letter from Jim to Thompson family re jungles in PNG (pp 370-1); Letter from Gladys to Councillor and Mrs Ellis (p 382); Letter from Flinty to Matilda (pp 386-7); Letter from Matilda to son Jim (pp 390-1); War Brides *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (pp 397-8); Letter from Blue to Flinty (pp 402-3); *Gibber's Creek* Schoolyard Skipping Song, 1945 *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 407); Letter from Flinty to Matilda (pp 410-1); Sleep-Outs to Relieve Housing Shortage *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 418); Letter from

Matilda to Flinty (pp 424-5); Party for the End of the War *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 426); Japanese Leaders Sign Surrender *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 430); Cheer the Boys as They Come Home! *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 435); Letter from Joe to Blue (p 437); *Carlton beats South Melbourne in VFL Grand Final!* Letter to Sylvia Clancy from Mrs Hughendorn (p 439-40); Australian Wins Nobel Prize for Work on Penicillin *Gibber's Creek Gazette* (p 441); Letter from Moira to Nancy (pp 451-2); *And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended, And at night the wondrous glory of the everlasting stars.* From 'Clancy of the Overflow' by Banjo Paterson, 1889 (p 457).

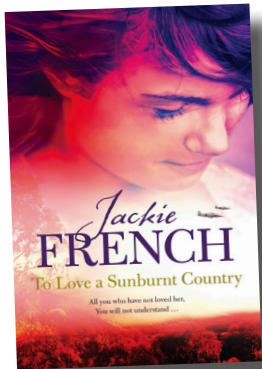
Activity: Write a letter or a newspaper article describing one of the events in the novel.

• **Use of Literary Devices such as Simile and Metaphor** — 'You see the bones of the land in the drought, that's all. Beautiful, like a skeleton.' (p 450) 'That memory was like a bayonet, pain that stabbed, too much to bear.' (p 458)

Activity: Locate other examples of the use of literary devices and discuss their meaning and effect.

• **Suspense**

Discussion Point: Nancy recalls the words she said to Michael at the Cascades (p 62) as he did earlier in the novel, but the reader is not told what they were (until p 455). What effect



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does this have on the reader's engagement with the novel? What other examples are there of suspense being created by the withholding of information like this?

• **Literary References** —Jackie French has referred to other texts in this book, as well. See p 51 letter mentioned in poem about Clancy is explained; death of Banjo (p 54); a poem 'Enoch Arden' (pp 145-6). The title is a veiled reference to 'My Country' by Dorothea Mackellar.

Activity: Read the poem 'My Country' by Dorothea Mackellar

<http://www.dorotheamackellar.com.au/archive/mycountry.htm>

Listen to the poem 'My Country' read by Dorothea Mackellar.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5bNhQrKay0>

Discussion Point: What function do the literary quotations or references play?

Activity: Students may wish to study a unit on bush poetry and visit websites for information. e.g. 'Bush Ballads' *Australian Poetry Library*
www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poems-poetic-form/bush-ballads

• **The Literary Trope of the 'Wild Colonial Girl' is used in this novel symbolically to explore wider issues.**

Discussion Point: Discuss with students the role of Nancy as a rebellious female in this novel.

• **The Cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents and a marketing tool as well.**

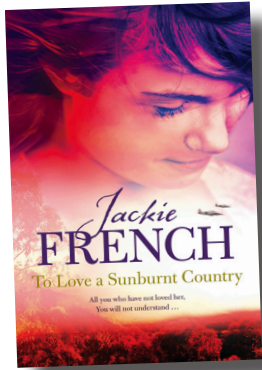
Activity: Create a new cover for the work drawing on either theme or incident to create the image. Use techniques such as collage. Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

SOSE

• **Whose History?** —There are as many versions of history as the **Themes** above would suggest. In the **Bibliography** below there are websites tracing Australian history from multicultural, Indigenous and women's perspectives as well as from the Eurocentric views which often feature in such historical overviews.

Activity: Read this passage and discuss:

'War was for *real* countries, like England and those in Europe. Malaya, Thailand, Australia floated in the southern seas, forever untouched by war.' She frowned. Or had they been? She had never learnt the history of this part of the world at school. Schools taught English history, with just enough European to make sense of English wars, like with Napoleon and the Battle of Waterloo and the Kaiser in the Great War. She had not even learnt the history of her own land, except for the First Fleet, the early governors



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and the crossing of the Blue Mountains. Only Gran had given her that, on their Sunday afternoon walks, her small hand in Gran's big-knuckled black one — stories that she only later realised were history too, far-off stories, some older than humanity, of rock and ancestor animals and water. And tales of only a few generations before too, of Gran's grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, of battles with the white men who were her relatives on Granddad's side, and Mum's.

Her ancestors fighting her ancestors.' (p 16)

Activity: Read any first person accounts and diaries as an introduction to this topic.

Activity: Choose an incident referred to in the novel and then write a diary entry as if the story is being told by Moira or Mrs Hughendorn and not from Nancy's perspective.

Discussion Point: 'We'll be history one day. If we do anything interesting enough.' 'I think,' he said, 'that being history is uncomfortable.' (p 61)

• **Social Class** — Colonial society is torn apart by the war, and at home in Australia, too, old rules such as married women not being employed, are torn asunder as well. Nancy is very aware of social prejudices against her as a part-Aboriginal and also of racial prejudice in Malaya where colonialists ruled until the war.

Discussion Point: What does this novel demonstrate about war's effects on class and social morays?

• **Values** — This novel (like others in the series), is about 'character' and the qualities or values necessary to make your life meaningful.

Discussion Point: Discuss quotes above in relation to such values.

Activity: Create a table and list some of the values demonstrated in any of the scenes or events in this book with a corresponding quote to illustrate it.

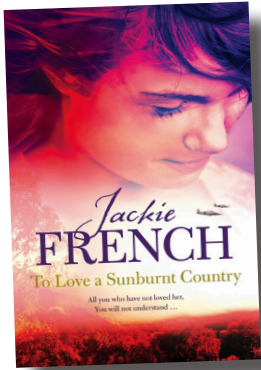
• **Individual/Community** — This novel (and series) constantly records the interplay between individual action and community responsibility. Nancy survives because of the small community of women with her in the camp (and the hidden villagers who leave gifts of food for them) and also because of the strength of the community she has left at home. The Gibbers Creek residents are also a supportive community.

Discussion Point: Invite students to consider how the characters in this novel play a role in their community.

Further Points for Discussion

1. Michael thinks of the death of A.B. (Banjo) Paterson that:

'An era seemed to have vanished with him.' (p 54)



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Discussion Point: What did this mean? What era? And why was Paterson so important to it, or to Australian ideals of it?

2. This novel describes the experiences of a wealthy girl during World War Two, but her advantages are reduced to dust when she becomes embroiled in this conflict.

Discussion Point: How did life change for the colonial classes after the war? (Base your answer on research into life during this time.)

3. Jackie French includes intriguing details to enhance the historical flavour of the book, e.g.

‘Telephone operators were instructed to say ‘V for Victory’ as they connected calls, but the order was withdrawn after too much stumbling and mumbling.’
(p 55)

Discussion Point: What other historical details did you find interesting, entertaining or intriguing?

4. Cyril Harding quotes ‘Old Sun Tzu: “If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.”’ (p 101)

Discussion Point: How is this quote reflected in the action in this novel? Which characters ‘know’ themselves, and how does that help them?

5. Nancy is given the choice of escaping the camp, given her ‘mixed blood’ but decides to stay with Moira and Gavin (p 206).

Discussion Point: What would you have done in this situation?

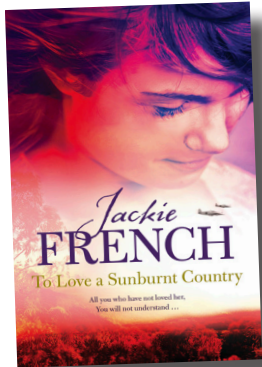
6. Fred decides to ‘vanish’ (p 277) in order to escape the authorities.

Discussion Point: How many men in war or conflict do what Fred does? How tempting might it be to escape one’s life if one had experienced financial or family problems or wished to escape the law?

7. Nancy and Moira’s friendship is changed by their experiences in the camp and Nancy is genuinely grief-stricken when she finds that Moira has returned to England.

Discussion Point: What might have become of Moira? Do you imagine that she will meet Ben’s parents and see Nancy again in future?

8. ‘We are going to live. We will leave the war behind, but keep the good.’ ‘The good?’ Her voice was rusty, as though she had swallowed nails. ‘Friendship,’ said Moira quietly. ‘And generosity and compassion. What we have given each other here. The kindness of the villagers. We must remember that. We must take the good with us and leave the bad.’ (pp 431-2)



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Discussion Point: How easy was it for war veterans to remember the 'good'? How much can a human being endure and survive as a functioning human being? Imagine those with no family support? How would they have survived? For example, when Blue meets Joe in Brisbane, they meet men who have been left stranded by the Army with no money when they arrive home.

10. What was the major idea or theme that this novel conveyed to you as a reader?

Notes on the Text

At the back of the book, there are extensive notes (pp 414-25) by the author Jackie French on many of the historical and cultural issues referred to in this text. This should be an invaluable resource to teachers in using the book, in conjunction with these notes, in the classroom.

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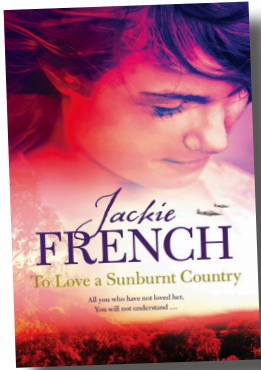
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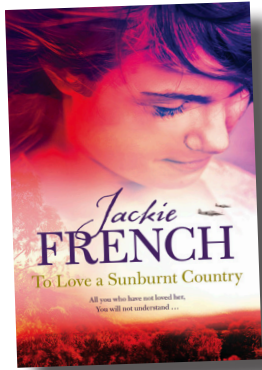
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Note: there are at least a dozen articles I've written on the subject but may not have time to reference them in the next few weeks due to travel commitments. The latest was written for Hare Collins about the genesis of the book, so should be in hand

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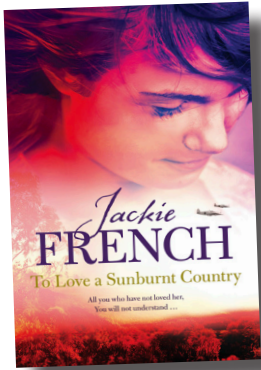
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About the Author of the Notes

Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright operates **justified text** writing and publishing consultancy services, and publishes regularly on children's literature, Australian fiction, and publishing history. She was inaugural director of and is a Life Member of the Queensland Writers Centre, and was co-founder of Jam Roll Press. Her publications include *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia (1946-2005)* (2006) co-edited with Craig Munro and *Hot Iron Corrugated Sky: 100 Years of Queensland Writing* (2002) co-edited with Stuart Glover. In 2011 she was recipient of the Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 she was recipient of the CBCA Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature.