



Birrung the Secret Friend

Jackie French

Book Summary

This is the story of Boots, the ten-year-old orphaned son of a convict woman. Boots has survived Newgate and the voyage to Australia and his mother's death, and he now hides his younger sister Evie from the predominantly male colony, only venturing out to get the daily rations, slipping through and hiding among the colony of mud huts to try to get the food to his sister before it is stolen.

Birrung becomes Boots's friend and protector, introducing him to the Johnstones and their abundant vegetable garden. As the colony sinks into despair, terror and hunger, Birrung helps Boots and Evie survive and eventually to understand enough indigenous language and lore so that eventually Boots becomes a prosperous farmer, having been led to good land where the 'aunties' will predict the floods and droughts to help him succeed. But as the Johnstones gently explain to Boots, his friendship with a 'native' girl - and all he owes her - must stay a secret all his life.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes

ACELT1618, ACELT1808, ACELT1610, ACELT1622, ACELT1616, ACELT1803, ACELT1621, ACELA1518, ACELA1531

Appropriate Ages:

7-10

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Book Description

'I've tried to understand and, because of Birrung, known I can't.' (p 104)

Birrung the Secret Friend is the first in a new series for younger readers called The Secret Histories. It focuses on a 'secret' part of our national history – and also on one boy's particular secret.

The novel opens in 1789 when orphaned Barney Bean and his friend Elsie meet a beautiful fifteen year old Indigenous girl named Birrung who is living with Mr Johnson, chaplain to the Australian colony, and his family. Unusually generous in spirit, the Johnson family also take in Barney and Elsie who have only just been surviving on their meagre daily rations.

Despite her contentment, in living with the Johnsons, Birrung remains connected to her people and often disappears to collect or hunt for food. Although she decides to stay with them after her brother comes to collect her, she is obviously feeling some dislocation and when the Second Fleeters arrive she feels their contempt keenly. Mrs Johnson also observes Barney's growing feeling for Birrung. But, despite their Christian values, they obviously feel that 'native' ways are not appropriate in this new society. Another mysterious sub-plot is why Elsie does not speak; she obviously has a past which has

traumatised her in some way; and Barney is desperate to find out her story.

This novel reveals the nature of early colonial society and the fact that so many people were either damaged or displaced in it. But the overwhelming message is that new encounters can bring not only hope but new empathy, and that despite the secrets of the past, many were enriched by what they experienced. Barney learned from Birrung, as much as she was a mystery to him.

'It was the summer of 1793 the last time I saw Birrung.' (p 100) But Barney never forgot her.

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



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Author Inspiration

I had always taken the Johnson's at the valuation most historians have accepted: well meaning, but ineffectual. But as I read their letters and other writings, I became stunned that such an extraordinary and compassionate couple had been so misremembered. Their very struggles to educate and help the convicts and to stop the abuses of the officers made them the enemies of those whose opinions influence the writers of our history. While very little was written about their relationship with Birrung, the fact that they gave their own daughter an indigenous name, and their later work with ex-slaves, made me realise that they would not have taken Birrung into their home as a servant, but as one of their family. Birrung herself was a young woman with the courage to choose between the two societies she could belong to.

Creating this book was a fascinating jigsaw, putting together thousands of small pieces of data to try to find the truth of more than 200 years ago.

We have so many secrets in our past that society tried to forget. Facing them helps us not just understand our country, but ourselves and our future.

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: How do the characters' actions in this novel illustrate the nature of the times in which they lived? Choose a character and analyse his or her character in relation to societal influences.

• **Major Characters:** Barney Bean, Elsie, Birrung, Mr and Mrs Johnson.

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

Activity: What does this passage tell you about Barney's character?

'We were stranded here, hungry and ragged. Except I'd been hungry and ragged back in England too. At least here I had the harbour and the bright birds — Ma had loved those birds — and no rats trying to bite my face like there'd been back in prison. Now I had Elsie too. And today we weren't even going to be hungry!' (p 11)



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• **Minor Characters:** Sally, Old Tom, Scruggins.

Discussion Point: Often minor characters are not observed closely, but Barney is very impressed when he realises that Old Tom and Scruggins have been helping Mr Johnson, not 'slagging off' as he had thought. What does this tell us about the two convicts, and about the chaplain?

• **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 Elsie).

Activity: Read the following descriptions of Birrung and Elsie: 'She was tall, with lots of black hair all shiny in a halo about her head.' (p 7) 'Elsie, ... was a skinned mouse.' (p 7) What impression do these quotes give you of the two characters?

Study notes on themes and curriculum topics

a) Themes

Indigenous History and Culture

Relate this unit to the cross-curriculum priority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

<http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/CrossCurriculumPriorities/Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-histories-and-cultures>

'Birrung has lost her family too. Lost her whole people. If she can laugh, then I can too.' (p 42)

Discussion Point: Birrung shows Barney (pp 73–6) how to catch, kill, and prepare a possum for eating, and how to collect seeds to make bread. These are some of many examples of how she has the special skills of Indigenous people with which to survive. But these skills are largely not used by the Johnson family. Why?

Activity:

'the governor hopes Birrung, like Bennelong and little Nanberry, might be an ambassador to their people. Teach them to like us ...By keeping Birrung away from her pa and brother? I thought. By keeping Bennelong prisoner? It was a funny way to make friends.' (p 68)

This is a sad statement, as Bennelong's fate was not a happy one. Nor was Mathinna's in Tasmania. Such Aboriginal people who were taken into white homes became dislocated and eventually felt estranged from both the white world and their own. Research his story, and other documents



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regarding Aboriginal colonial lives further.

Activity: Johnson's care for the convicts who arrived on the Second Fleet suffering from Typhus and other diseases, highlights the terrible losses visited on the Indigenous people who died from introduced diseases when the First Fleet arrived. The diseases which the convict ships brought to this new Colony not only weakened and depleted the numbers of settlers but greatly decimated the numbers of Indigenous people. Research this topic further.

Colonial Society

'But rations got reduced again and the convicts' working hours too, so they could spend the extra time working in their own gardens to grow more food. Except most of them didn't. They just spent more time trying to steal from others.' (p 55)

Discussion Point: The novel suggests that many convicts failed to take advantage of the natural environment, and instead of propagating food, stole and schemed against their neighbours. Research this topic and discuss.

Discussion Point: Barney is offered new hope. He would have died in the streets of London; he endured the filthy transport to NSW, and then desperate poverty, but his time with the Johnsons made him a new man. In what ways has he changed?

Activity: After months without a visiting ship, the *Lady Juliana* and then other ships arrive in mid-1790. The 'Death Ships', though, are full of misery not supplies. 'Greed,' said Mr Johnson. 'No charity. No feeling. The captains kept the wretches' rations to sell when they got here. The convicts starved to death so the captains can grow rich.' (p 80) Research the treatment of convicts on these early fleets.

Discussion Point: Barney describes the difference between first and second Fleeters (p 93). What was the main difference between them?

Activity: Barney describes 'two of the new 'New South Wales Corps' strutted past us, the convicts making way for them like they were Lord Muck.' (p 94) Research the NSW Corps and their role in the foundation of the Colony.

Activity: Historical details are scattered throughout the text describing for example, the dress, food, implements used, and ways of building. These carefully researched details lend a veracity to the text which is subtle but important. Invite your students to choose some aspect of life which they have discovered from reading this text, and to research and write about it.

Discussion Point: This was a brutal society. Barney has experienced things no child should have to. When he finds a dismembered arm in



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the garden, he is initially shocked but then buries it, so familiar is he with death. What other details shocked you in this novel?

Racism and Prejudice

'It's a heathen name. We must put it into the King's English as best we can.' (p 44)

Discussion Point: The Johnsons have taken Birrung in and treated her kindly, but their attitudes still betray the fact that they don't really appreciate or understand her culture and consider it inferior. Discuss examples of this in the novel.

Discussion Point: Even Barney is intimidated by society's attitudes, and demonstrates his own prejudices in his very first impression of her:

'She was the most beautiful girl I had seen in my life, even with the black skin and all.' (p 7)

He comes to love Birrung but never reveals that to her, or to anyone else, although both Elsie and Mrs Johnson are aware of it. How easy/difficult would it have been for Barney to marry Birrung when he grew up, as he dreamed of doing?

Discussion Point: Birrung suffers from the slurs made against her when the Second Fleeters arrive. Even though they have come from the poorest of backgrounds and are filthy and disease-ridden they still feel a sense of

superiority to her. This casts a pall over her relationship with the Johnson family, and reminds her of the primary call of her own people and culture. How difficult would it have been to be a Black woman in this society?

Women's Rights

'Made me wonder how the world still had people in it, so many women and their babies dying.' (pp 59-60)

Discussion Point: Mrs Johnson's life is subject to the dangers of childbirth, and to the vagaries of her husband's career. What sort of woman is she, though? Is she a strong woman? Choose a passage to illustrate your answer.

Discussion Point: Sally's life is typical of that of a transported convict woman. How did such women fare in the Colony? Were they better off than they would have been in England?

Agricultural Self-Sufficiency

'Learning about plants was as interesting as I thought it would be. Who'd have thought a giant orange carrot could grow from a seed like a speck of dust? Or that potatoes grew under the ground and you had to dig them up? I wondered who was the first person who ever thought of digging up the ground to see if there was food under there.' (pp 38-9)

Discussion Point: Food in the early colony was seemingly short, and rations included: 'three cups of flour, a lump of salt pork, rice'. (p 3)



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Barney later reveals that: 'There was no sugar left in the colony now, not even treacle or molasses.' (p 70) But the Colony was actually well-supplied with natural foods which the colonists either scorned or failed to identify. Why did they fail to use what was abundant around them?

Discussion Point: What does Barney learn about agriculture during his time with the Johnsons? Read the novel carefully and write a list of at least three things he discovers.

Activity: Jackie French's love for gardening and the nature world is evident in the descriptions of plants and crops in the novel. Choose a particular description and what it reveals about the nature of the landscape.

Religion

'Mr Johnson gave thanks as he always did for what we were to eat, for what God had given us. 'And thank you too, Lord,' he added 'for the gift of letting us give help to others.' (p 92)

Discussion Point: The values observed in the Johnson household are very Christian; and the Chaplain refers to such values often. How does his religion inform the things he does in this novel?

Discussion Point: 'At last she said, 'Good people. They share makes happy.'(p 35) Birrung says this to Barney, and there is a sense that she

understands this generosity, since her people's sense of community is founded on similar concepts. What values do they share?

Friendship and Love

'Every morning when I woke up I thought: There's going to be breakfast. Then my second thought was: Birrung will be there.' (p 40)

Discussion Point: Elsie is obviously jealous of Barney's affection for Birrung but later becomes her friend. What was the turning point in their relationship?

Discussion Point: What is the bond which unites Barney and Elsie?

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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'We'd been at Port Jackson for nearly two years now, and there'd been no store ship to bring us food and new clothes or spades or pannikins or even news. England and the whole world over the horizon could have vanished and we'd never know.' (p 5)	'And then the Indians vanished, except the dead bodies along the beaches. We'd waited for the plague to kill us too. But it hadn't. Just the Indians, lying dead on the beaches all around the harbour.' (p 7)
'But when Ma was alive I'd liked the singing, and how Mr Johnson spoke to us like we were people just like him, not convict scum. Not that I was a convict, but you know what I mean.' (p 16)	'You look after a stranger? That's a true Christian thing to do, my boy.' (p 21)
'If Elsie was a soldier's or convict's daughter, I'd have seen her about the colony. There were so few of us you saw everyone sooner or later.' (p 33)	'Most be real gal in the colony would rather steal than share. They'd been sent here because they were thieves. This might have been the convicts' second chance, but most didn't seem to want to take it.' (p 36)
'The whole colony was gloomy these days, stores running low and hard work they weren't used to, and strange trees and summer when it should be winter.' (p 41)	'The king owned all this, the whole colony, even though he'd never seen it. The big patch of corn, the beans, the melons and potatoes, the fallingdown huts, the blue waves dancing on the harbour. And he owned the words we spoke too.'(p 44)
'I was the happiest I'd ever been. I learned that work can be one of the best things in the world. I'll never forget it was Mr Johnson who taught me that.' (p 71)	'Then I realised. I didn't think of England as home. The colony wasn't just where I lived. It was where I wanted to live, with the harbour and bright birds and Elsie and Birrung, who could swim and save a baby girl and her mother and get us fresh meat ... (p 75)
'Birrung knows, I thought. She knows we will keep coming and keep coming. When we were a few strangers in their land then the natives could welcome us, stare at us, stay with us like Birrung and learn our ways, think maybe one day we'd learn her people's ways and words too, like I had begun to do. It wasn't going to happen. I knew it. Now Birrung did too.'(p 92)	'Black savage,' one old lag called her. 'I ain't sitting at no table with a darkie,' said another woman, brought to help Sally with the housework, like she was a queen instead of a pickpocket and Birrung was a rat in the sewers.' (p 95)



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b) Curriculum areas and key learning outcomes

ACELT1618, ACELT1808, ACELT1610, ACELT1622, ACELT1616, ACELT1803, ACELT1621, ACELA1518, ACELA1531

Language and Literacy

• **Indigenous Language terms** — Barney learns several Indigenous language terms from Birrung.

Activity: Research such languages using resources listed in the **Bibliography**.

• **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 convicts, settlers, soldiers in early convict Australia, and how their arrival effected the lives of Indigenous people is traced through the story of Barney, Elsie, Birrung and the Johnson family.

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 Barney's life, such as his childhood in London, his mother's transportation, and his first year in the colony.

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

• **Narrative Perspective** — Barney tells the story in first person.

Discussion Point: How might the story have changed if it had been written by Birrung or Elsie? Describe an incident through their eyes, as if written as a diary or letter.

• **Suspense** — There are elements of **mystery** in the story too. Elsie's past, for example, is never explained.

Discussion Point: The use of an open ending can enhance such suspense — the story ends enigmatically and leaves the reader guessing what happened later:

'Elsie and I weren't there to see it, but why we weren't, and where we'd gone, what happened when the Frenchman came for Elsie, is a story I won't tell you today.' (p 103)

Activity: Barney hints in this quote, at the future. Write your own story based on these



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hints as to what happened to him and Elsie when they grew up.

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** — 'And above us the moon seemed to sing a lullaby, just like Ma had done, as it played among the clouds.' (p 37) OR 'Days passed in a shiver of winter.' (p 91)

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

• **Critical Literacy** — this text might be used to encourage students to use critical literacy skills.

Activity: Read some of the historical fiction listed in the 'Primary School Resources to Support the Australian History Curriculum' Australian School Library Association 2012 <<http://www.asla.org.au/site/defaultsite/filesystem/documents/primaryhistoryresourcesapril2012.pdf>> and compare to this novel.

Activity: Read the passage:

'I'd never seen a room like this one, not in prison or before. It was ... clean, even with its mud walls and dirt floor. The floor was packed down hard and all the loose dirt had been swept away. The walls looked like

they'd been swept too. And it was more than clean. There was a sort of quiet. It was pretty too. I had never thought a room could be pretty.' (pp 26)

What does this tell you about Barney's upbringing and life before arriving in the Colony?

• **Visual Literacy** — Images enhance text in many ways. The cover and interior illustrations by acclaimed artist and picture book creator, Mark Wilson, are based on careful research and are a creative response to the themes explored in the text.

Activity: The cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents, and a marketing tool as well. Examine the cover of this book which features a beautiful portrait of Birrung foregrounded against this landscape. What does it suggest about her?

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.

Activity: Encourage students to examine the black and white drawings at the head of every chapter, and to relate them to the action and themes explored in that chapter.

SOSE



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• **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: Jackie French refers in her notes to having read Chaplain Richard Johnson's letters. Research his life and read some of his writing using resources listed in the **Bibliography**.

Activity: Lieutenant William Dawes is also referred to in the novel. Teachers may wish to read more about him in the biography and adult novels listed in the **Bibliography**.

Activity: Discuss with students the fact that some characters in this novel are real people (the Johnsons, Lieutenant Dawes, Birrung) and others are fictional (Barney and Elsie).

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 it was written by Chaplain Johnson's wife.

• **Social Class** — Barney is used to being a member of an underclass, so being treated well

by the Johnsons is a real shock to him

Discussion Point: How does he change during his time with them?

• **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 constantly records the interplay between individual action and community responsibility.

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

Further Points for Discussion

1. Discussion Point: Barney's treatment of Elsie is indicative of human need for companionship and family. They aren't related but since both are orphans, they form a very close bond.



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2. Discussion Point: 'I didn't like Sally ordering me about. She was a convict and I was free. But I had a feeling Sally was the one who cooked the potatoes.' (p 24) Barney's contempt for convicts is typical of the divisions which arose in the new Colony. It took many decades before people felt a sense of pride in their convict ancestry, instead of shame.

3. Discussion Point: 'One day, I thought, I'll have a hundred potato trees of my own.' (p 25) How likely was it that Barney would later acquire land? Research the fate of some of the early settlers and how they fared in the Colony.

4. Discussion Point: 'Elsie had a proper bed that had been used by the Johnsons' servant Elizabeth. But Sally said she'd been whipped for insolences and sent to Norfolk Island.' (p 31) Despite Chaplain Johnson's kindness there are hints in the novel of the strict rule of law which governed the lives of early convicts and settlers. Research and discuss further.

5. Discussion Point: 'If Elsie was a soldier's or convict's daughter, I'd have seen her about the colony. There were so few of us you saw everyone sooner or later.' (p 33) This comment makes the reader aware of just how small the population was in those early years. It was little wonder that they felt abandoned when supply ships took so long to arrive. It must have been

very frightening to find oneself alone on the other side of the world in what they regarded as a hostile environment.

6. Discussion Point: 'If Abaroo — Birrung — had a language, I could learn it. She and I could talk together and no one else would understand.' (p 37) How important is language in understanding another person and their culture?

7. Discussion Point: 'We could have used Jesus in the colony. Mr Johnson said He was always there but I can't say I noticed Him around much, except in the clergyman's house. But I never said that to Mr and Mrs Johnson.' (p 39) What does this tell you about life in the Colony? What impression does the novel give you of the people who were transported there?

8. Discussion Point: 'Smoke came from the bedroom, funny smoke that made me feel like I wasn't quite there, as if the hut had floated into another land.' (p 61) The smoke which Birrung makes in Mrs Johnson's bedroom as she was delivering her baby, is an example of the various forms of Indigenous cultural knowledge referred to in the novel. What other examples were there?

9. Discussion Point: 'I wanted to say that Birrung knew everything that mattered, when the stars would say the emus had laid their eggs, how the wattle flowers could tell you if it



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would be a dry summer. But this woman couldn't even see that those things were important.' (p 95) What does this novel suggest about Birrung's culture, and about Birrung?

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 105–16) 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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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.