

The Secret of the Black Bushranger

By Jackie French

Illustrations by Mark Wilson

Book Summary:

By the 1790s orphaned Barney Bean finally has his own farm in the early NSW colony. All his dreams are coming true!

But now we are to learn of Barney's biggest secret yet: how he helped Australia's first bushranger escape.

Was Black Caesar a wronged man, an ex-slave who vowed to be free? Or was he a laughing villain, a trickster who planned to terrorise the colony?

And in helping him, did Barney do right or wrong?

You decide.

Key Learning Outcomes:

- Language and Literacy
- SOSE
- Indigenous Issues

Appropriate Ages: 7-10

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Notes by: Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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BOOK SUMMARY

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'I am John Black Caesar. I will not be a slave!' (p 4)

'I was free, but there had been no freedom for Black Caesar, nor would there ever be.' (p 137)

This novel begins in 1789, the year when Barney and Elsie, who were orphaned children taken in by Chaplain Richard Johnson and his wife, first met Birrung, but after she had left them to return to her people. It is the third book in a series and in this one Barney returns to the story told in *Birrung the Secret Friend* to 'fill in a gap' in the narrative.

Barney is visiting the outhouse one night when an escaped slave named Johnny Black Caesar accosts him and asks to see Chaplain Johnson. Barney wakes his employer and protector, and the slave begs Johnson for sanctuary. He explains that he has escaped from Garden Island where he was imprisoned for stealing bread and doesn't want to be enslaved again. He says that he had been the son of a king in Madagascar when first the Dutch captured him, and then the English took him with other slaves to England. Although slavery was outlawed there, he was still a slave in his heart. Johnson cleverly allows him to escape without actually agreeing to do so, and later, when caught again, has him sent to Norfolk Island. John is offered opportunities there, but escapes again and is caught and lashed viciously, but survives. He embarks on a career as a bushranger while Barney is granted land by the newly arrived Governor Hunter. Black Caesar visits Barney one more time before disappearing from his life forever. The story canvases the nature of slavery and the ethics of keeping men and women in bondage. It also questions the lack of understanding of Indigenous people by the European settlers. These questions are viewed through the eyes of Barney, once an orphaned child, now a free settler whose appreciation of his good fortune has determined that he will try to lead an honourable life. The novel also 'fills in the gap' left at the end of the previous book *Barney and the Secret of the Whales*; we learn more of how Barney was offered land by the new Governor Hunter and how he took up that selection.

This is the third in a series about Australia's 'Secret History' which offers new insights into the nature of colonial life, how the arrival of Europeans changed the country inhabited by Indigenous Australians, and how individual lives were influenced by this new land – and changed forever.

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.

Jackie was the Australian Children's Laureate (2014–15) www.childrenslaureate.org.au

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

www.jackiefrench.com.au

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

Jackie French writes of her inspiration in her notes, in **Author's Notes** (pp 151–162).

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: Discuss the character of John Black Caesar.

- **Major Characters:**

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

- **Minor Characters:**

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

- **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.

THEMES

- **Slavery**

Activity: 'Black Jemmy, he said you were an abolitionist, sir. That you and Mr Wilberforce would free the slaves.' (p 9) Research the Abolitionist Movement and how it relates to Australian history.

Discussion Point: 'The voyage took longer than they thought it would because there was no wind. A ship needs wind to keep on sailing. There was not enough food to keep all the slaves alive. Only the most valuable were kept. It was better to have some slaves strong enough to walk ashore than have all of us weak and dying.' (p 23) What sort of picture does this quote paint of slavetraders' attitudes to their slaves?

Discussion Point: This novel suggests that even when slavery is abolished people are often still in chains by virtue of servitude or mindset. Some convicts were granted freedom, and many prospered,

but many never escaped the shackles of their psychological pasts. Black Caesar fails to take up opportunities offered to him, because he never recovered from being enslaved.

Discussion Point: Jackie French invites readers to consider the nature of slavery in her **Author's Notes:** 'Even today... Are we guilty too?' (pp 155–156) This is a sombre and salutary question for discussion.

Colonial Society

Discussion Point: 'The Watch was made up of convicts who were the colony's police, for the soldiers just lazed around, saying they were only here in case the French attacked, or the Indians.' (p 12) Research the role played by convicts in early colonial life in particular their role as 'policemen'.

Discussion Point: 'The new officers who had come when Governor Phillip had left only wanted to make money, and didn't care what laws they broke to make it. What decent officer wanted to come to a wild place at the end of the world, filled with convicts? I reckoned we'd got every crooked or no-hoper soldier in England.' (p 70) Research the New South Wales Corps known as the 'Rum Corps'.

Discussion Point: Sally's fate (p 95) is evidence of the terrible scourge of the rum trade on the colony. Like many others, she descends from a trusted cook and servant to the Johnsons, to a vagrant, due to her addiction to alcohol.

Discussion Point: The whipping of convicts was a barbaric torture, in this book meted out to John Black Caesar, who survives because of his extraordinary strength and determination. Research the forms of control exercised over convicts by their captors. Were they ever justified? Should prisons employ violent tactics?

Activity: Read and compare with Jackie French's other books set in colonial Australia to gain further insights into this time.

Indigenous History and Culture

Activity: 'Birrung was this land and this land was her, and she could vanish in the bush whenever she wanted to. I shivered. I think even then I knew that one day Birrung would leave us, no matter how much I loved her.' (p 35) Barney's observation is very mature; he acknowledges the hold that 'land' has over Birrung and her people.

Activity: Barney calls his land at Rose Hill 'my place' (p 107). Discuss with reference to the original owners of the land and their claims to territory.

Activity: 'John Black Caesar had attacked Pemulwuy, the Indian who had speared and killed Governor Phillip's game shooter years back.' (p 125) Research the incidents referred to here.

Discussion Point: Barney describes native people assisting him in collecting corn from his newly planted crops, to take to market to sell. How common would this sort of cooperation have been?

Bushrangers

Activity: Black Caesar was a real figure although his origins are obscure. He is said to be the first bushranger. Research his life and that of other bushrangers in this era.

Activity: ‘Wounded him — Black Caesar was such a big brute I reckon it’d take more shot than he was worth to bring him down proper. They carried him to Rose’s hut, and he died there. Did you hear the price of wool is up? You’ll make enough money at the next shearing to double your herd, with luck.’ (p 148) Black Caesar’s death is described in casually unsympathetic terms. What made early colonists so lacking in empathy towards bushrangers? Were they such a threat? Base your responses on research. Read Jackie French’s **Author’s Notes** on Black Caesar (pp 151–162).

Agricultural Self-Sufficiency

Discussion Point: ‘And that was what Mr Johnson had given me, with that lamb. A future.’ (p 45) The Johnsons’ birthday gift to Barney is an example of their belief in self-sufficiency. Instead of money or toys they give him an animal which would provide food, and might also form the basis of a breeding program.

Activity: ‘Grand dreams — a hut at first, but one I could add more rooms onto, one with a proper stone chimney and fireplace for a kitchen, and then another room, and another, till it became a right good house. And fruit trees laden with apples and plums, damsons, apricots, pears, figs, peaches, lemons and limes, trellises of grapes just like Mr Johnson had, a field of melons, and paddock of corn, with convict shepherds minding my sheep.’ (p 110) Barney’s dreams relate to European notions of cultivation. What else might he have done with this land, and grown on it? What natural resources were already there?

Friendship and love

Discussion Point: Barney’s feelings for Elsie, for the Johnsons, and for Black Caesar are all different manifestations of affection. Discuss the nature of his feelings for each of them.

Discussion Point: Barney’s feelings for Black Caesar are complicated, as are all feelings. He doesn’t approve of all his actions and yet feels an affection and respect for him. Are all feelings ambivalent like this?

Morality and Choice

Discussion Point: Compare these three quotes: ‘I looked at Mr Johnson’s face. And then I knew. Mr Johnson would keep God’s law, give food and drink to those who hungered and were thirsty. In the morning he would keep the law of the land, and tell Governor Phillip that John Black had escaped and that he had come to us. But in the morning, Black Caesar would be gone.’ (p 30) and ‘Did I help a slave be free, or did I give a thief the means to kill another man and to steal again?’ (p 42) and ‘I broke

man's law. But I kept God's law, feeding the hungry, doing unto others as I would have them do unto me, knowing a man in want was my brother, even though he was black and a bushranger.' (p 150)

Discussion Point: What other moral issues are canvassed in this novel?

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:

<p>'Ma stole stuff to keep me fed. Even if Mr Johnson said stealing was a sin, I knew Ma'd only done it because she'd had to.' (p 7)</p>	<p>'He had no choice, sir. Better some be sold as slaves than the whole village be captured. He needed muskets!' (p 16)</p>
<p>'An old slave woman came and rubbed my skin with pig fat. I thought it was to ease my pain from the chains and the sores from being so long in the filth and water below. But it was not.' John Black looked straight at Mr Johnson. 'It was to make me shine in the daylight. Naked and in chains but with shining skin we were led to a platform: me, women, boys, girls.' (p 21)</p>	<p>'John Black laughed. 'Not a slave? My chains were still there, even if they could not be seen. I had to obey my master and his servants. I had to smile and bow to every man or woman whose skin was white.' (p 27)</p>
<p>'All at once I realised that maybe we three on the rock were the only truly free people in the colony. The convicts had to stay till their prison term was up.' (p 34)</p>	<p>'I remembered John Black saying how his father had many wives, how he'd have Indian wives. Maybe a wife wasn't as important to John Black as it was to someone like me, who'd have only one wife — if I were lucky. There were so few women in the colony; if it didn't change I reckoned most men would spend their entire lives unmarried. There'd been a plan to bring women to the colony from Tahiti, but it hadn't happened.' (p 67)</p>
<p>'I thought about freedom, and what chances a man had in life. We'd both had nothing, me and John Black. We'd both had lucky chances too. It looked like my choices had been good ones.' (p 129)</p>	<p>'Most men lead small boring lives, lad. Their words are small and boring too. But you do things. Good things, like this farm here.' (p 139)</p>
<p>'John Black held out his hand, so big, so black, but paler on the palm just like Birrung's had been. As I shook it, I wondered if I'd have been as happy to help this black man if I'd never known Birrung, and loved her.' (p 144)</p>	<p>'A slave is forever. Forever, agreed Black Caesar's deep whisper. Once you have sold a man as a slave he can never truly feel free.' (p 149)</p>

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CURRICULUM TOPICS

Language and Literacy

- ***This novel is a work of Historical Fiction or 'Faction' — it tells a story set in the past including real (Black Caesar, Lieutenant-Governor Grose, Governor Hunter, and Chaplain Johnson) and imagined (Barney and Elsie) people.***

Discussion Point: Jackie French uses historical research as the background to this fictional text in a creative, lively and imaginative way. She also admits in her Author's Notes that she has imagined the existence of Barney and Elsie, and also supposed the background for Caesar's life and his relationship to Johnson. What strategies does she employ to make history 'come alive' for the reader? [See also SOSE below.]

Activity: Read some of the historical fiction listed in the **Bibliography** and compare to this novel.

- ***Suspense in a story hinges on the intended ending and also on what the reader or audience expects to happen.***

Discussion Point: The **Prologue** sets the scene and teases the reader with hints about what is to be revealed. How does this serve to enhance suspense?

Activity: What was the most excitingly suspenseful moment in the novel, in your opinion?

- ***Narrative Structure — Relies on chapters leading the reader from one to the next, and requires both strong chapter beginnings and endings.***

Activity: Chapter endings are dramatic turning points. Choose a chapter ending. What might have happened immediately after the ending of that chapter?

- ***Narrative Perspective*** — this story is told in first person past present by Barney Bean.

Discussion Point: How might the story have changed if it had been written by Elsie, Chaplain Johnson, or even Black Caesar?

Discussion Point: Write a diary entry as if written by Milbah as an old woman remembering her parents' stories of Black Caesar, as told to her as a child?

- ***Use of Ornate and Poetic Language — Devices such as Simile and Metaphor***

Discussion Point: This simile is evocative for the convicts are actually made to feel like animals, 'bowed like monkeys in our heavy chains.' (p 21) Discuss.

Activity: Choose other quotes which include effective usage of literary devices:

Simile	
Metaphor	
Personification	
Alliteration	
Other	

- **Setting:**

Activity: The landscape is very clearly described, particularly when Barney takes up his land. Create a map of the area as it is described in this novel.

Discussion Point: Setting is evoked via all the senses. Find examples in this text of description which employs sight, hearing, taste, smell and feeling.

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

Activity: Why might Elsie have lost her voice? What hints to her background are revealed in each of the three novels?

Discussion Point: If there were a fourth novel in this series which suggested event or character (from any of the three novels) might it further explore?

- **Visual Literacy** — Images enhance text in many ways.

Activity: The cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents, and a marketing tool as well. Examine the cover of this book. What does it suggest about the narrative?

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 by Mark Wilson at the head of every chapter, and to relate them to the action and themes explored in that chapter.

Activity: Create a Book Trailer based on this book. (See Bibliography for resources.)

- **SOSE**

- **History** — Although this is a fictional story, it does give you insights into the historical background as well.

Activity: One of the points Jackie French makes in her **Author's Notes** is about the need to elaborate on history when there are gaps in the record. She researched carefully and then makes suppositions about events or characters based on that research. Research this topic further with reference to some of the examples in this text.

Activity: Brainstorm the aspects of history revealed in this text and make a list of topics. Then invite the class in groups to research any aspect of history which is outlined in this text. eg Rum Corps, land settlement, Indigenous dispersal, health in the colony.

Activity: Choose any historical figure introduced in this text and make a study of their lives eg Governor Hunter.

- **Social Class** — This is an aspect of life in colonial Australia which was a determinant in how people developed as a culture.

Discussion Point: What role did class play in early Australian colonial life? Was it a classless society or one which developed new notions of class?

Discussion Point: Barney rises from a humble orphaned servant to a landholder and respected pioneer. Many convicts, too, became aristocrats in this new society. Is 'class' often based on chance as much as inheritance?

- **Values** — This novel conveys a strong sense of moral values.

Discussion Point: What values are particularly evident in this text?

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.

FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discussion Point: This novel further explores the influence that European settlement invasion had on Australia's original inhabitants. Make a list of any obvious effect it had and research further.

2. Discussion Point: Chaplain Johnson's unpopularity amongst the men who answered to Lieutenant-Governor Grose demonstrates how tenuous a hold on power individuals had in this new society, no matter what position they held. His later 're-instatement' as a person deserving respect, under Governor Hunter, only serves to cement this impression.

3. Discussion Point: Lawlessness is a hallmark of this new society in which convicts were recruited as guards; officers sold rum rather than upholding the law; a chaplain could have his efforts to build a church pilloried; brutal public lashings and executions were common and women were often treated as little more than sex slaves. Discuss the rule of law in colonial times with reference to your research.

4. Discussion Point: What do you imagine might have happened to Birrung? Discuss the possible life she might have led after leaving the Johnsons.

5. Discussion Point: Where might Elsie have learned her cooking skills? What hints to her background appear in this text?

6. Discussion Point: Barney skins possums, and sends produce back to the Johnsons. They in turn send him home with puddings and cheese. Was this sort of bartering or sharing the most productive currency in these times, given the lack of a local 'currency' apart from rum?

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7. Discussion Point: What turning point determined Black Caesar's fate? Might he have taken advantage of the opportunities offered in the colony's new society or was his past too heavy a burden to carry?

8. Discussion Point: 'The only way Elsie was going to any man's farm was as his servant — or his wife.' (p 121) Discuss women's rights in this time. Did this new society improve their rights, or maintain the status quo observed in England?

9. Discussion Point: Barney's ability to look beyond Black Caesar's violent past and frightening exterior and to feel empathy for him, is influenced by the lessons learned from loving and understanding Birrung, despite her difference. His own past life as an orphaned child also assists in developing this empathy.

10. Discussion Point: Barney's life is one of 'rags to riches' and overcoming adversity. It is also one of overcoming innate prejudice.

AUTHOR'S NOTES ON THE TEXT

At the back of the book, there are Author's Notes (pp 151–162) by Jackie French on many of the historical and cultural issues referred to in this text.

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<<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/aboriginal-history-timeline.html>>

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Australian History! in Pictures and Narratives

<<http://www.australianhistorypictures.com/AustralianHistoryPictures.com/WELCOME.html>>

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Websites – Teaching Resources

'Book Trailers - Resources: Ipswich District Teacher Librarian Network'

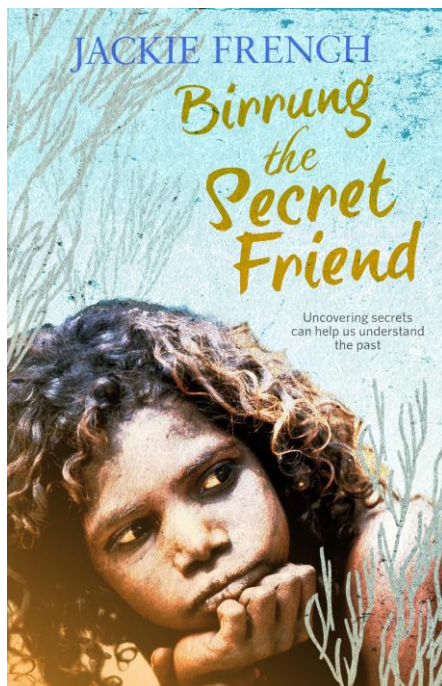
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'Book Trailers' *Insideadog* <<http://www.insideadog.com.au/teachers/book-trailers>>

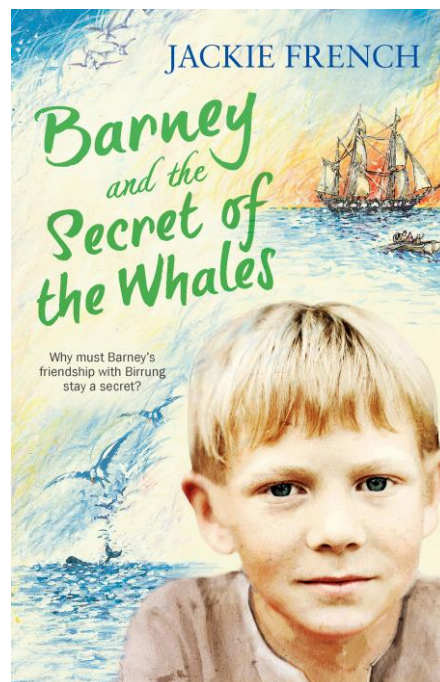
'Book Trailers for Readers' by Michelle Harclerode

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