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The Last Dingo Summer

(The Matilda Saga, Book 8)

By Jackie French

Book Summary

A body has been found in the burned-out wreckage of the church at Gibber's Creek — with older skeletons lying beneath it.

The body is identified as that of Ignatius Mervyn, the man who attempted to kill Jed Kelly and her unborn child.

Newcomer Fish Johnstone is drawn into the murder investigation, convinced that the local police are on the wrong track with their enquiries. But as she digs beneath the warm and welcoming surface of the Gibber's Creek community, more secrets emerge.

And Fish must also face her own mystery — the sudden appearance and then disappearance of her father, a Vietnamese refugee she never knew.

Set during the Indigenous rights and 'boat people' controversies of the late 1970s, this haunting story shows how love and kindness can create the courage to face the past.

Themes

Family saga, an environmental drama, an historical fiction, a thriller, and a romance

Senior Curriculum

Modern History

ACHMH194, ACHMH189,

Humanities and Social Science

ACOKFH023, ACDSEH109, ACDSEH146, ACHMH213

Cross Curriculum Priorities

Sustainability, Politics, Current Affairs, Indigenous, Immigration

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

A killer lurks behind the kindness of the Gibber's Creek community. Under the burnt timber of the church, the police have found the body of Merv Ignatious, the man who so viciously attacked Jed Kelly when she was fifteen, and tried to kill her and her unborn child in last year's bushfire.

And also in the church lie skeletons from many years ago.

Newcomer Fish Johnstone refuses to believe Jed Kelly's husband, Sam McAlpine, killed Merv to save his wife and child, as the police suspect. Nor could heavily pregnant Jed have killed him nor Scarlett, who is now at last managing to leave her wheelchair to walk a few steps.

But Fish must also face her own mystery - a father who recently appeared as a Vietnamese 'boat person' refugee, but has vanished once again.

As the last dingo howls on the hills above the river, Fish finds that Gibber's Creek has many secrets. And some of them are deadly.

Set in the late 1970s, this haunting story shows how love and kindness can create the courage to face the past.

About the Author

Jackie French AM is an award-winning writer, wombat negotiator, the 2014–2015 Australian Children's Laureate and the 2015 Senior Australian of the Year. In 2016 Jackie became

a Member of the Order of Australia for her contribution to children's literature and her advocacy for youth literacy. She is regarded as one of Australia's most popular authors and writes across all genres — from picture books, history, fantasy, ecology and sci-fi to her much-loved historical fiction for a variety of age groups. 'Share a Story' was the primary philosophy behind Jackie's two-year term as Laureate.

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Authors Note

The Matilda Saga began as a single book, with no intention to make it a series that will continue possibly as long as I am able to write it. But as it has progressed closer to the present day, its similarities to my own life and community have become more obvious.

The fiction in these books is inspired by real life, including the histories and stories of my ancestors, but apart from the brief and obvious references to real people, these books are still fiction. They are also based in the past, and so the terms used in them are the ones used in the time they are set, including the references to Indigenous Australians, refugees, even Scarlett's and Sam's medical conditions or the way the police force operated in 1979, when men like William Ryan's 'Dad's friends in the force' would have been able to wield far more power than today to protect one of their own. Writing about the world of 1978 and 1979 does not mean that I condone everything I write about. If you feel indignant about something in the text, it is possible that I deliberately described it in a way that would make you indignant. It is easier to make your own views obvious in time-slip books, where a modern protagonist can give their own commentary, or where the protagonist is looking back at what happened in their past. Part of the reason for writing this series is to trace the way our nation has changed.

Mostly, though, of course, the Matilda series has always been a love song to a people and their land.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The Last Dingo

I had a dingo uncle when I was young.
He wore black fur. I had bare feet.
We lived on an island of sand dunes and scrub.
Each morning he waited, watched, protected
Lying panting in the shade of thin-clothed casuarinas
As we swam and built castles vast enough to pierce the sky.
His hackles rose if strangers came too near
And once he patrolled the lacy edges of the waves
Refusing to let us paddle.
That was when we saw the shark.
He was not our pet
Nor were we his.
As a girl I heard the dingo's song
So often that I failed to listen to it.
They baited 'wild dogs' up in the mountains
Dropped poisoned meat from helicopters.
Was it months or years before I missed their cry?
That was fifty years ago
And yet last night, midnight, driving home
A shadow tore at road kill on the gravel
Long legged, skinny and gold eyes.
He did not even glance at me, and then was gone.
Maybe somewhere in the mountains dingoes hide
But do not let a human hear their song
They've learnt that we aren't worthy to be uncled.
"One day earth's last rose will bloom
The final gum tree wither.
We'll turn on a screen to escape the magnitude of loss
And assume there'll always be another season of the green.
Meanwhile the hills are silent.
But tonight, as the moon bounces above the ridge
And the valley grows its silver shadows
I will hear the dingo howl again
And imagine it's not just echo
Of memory and of love." By Jackie French

- What is the **imagery** in the poem?
- Understanding poetry begins with visualizing the central images in the poem. What do you see, taste, smell, hear, and feel?
- What is the **mood** of the poem?
- Who is the **speaker** of the poem?
- What structural or stylistic techniques does the poet use?
- Is there a **message** in the poem?
- Why do you think Jackie French chose to start her novel with a poem?

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Discussion Points

- Which of the main characters did you find most appealing and why?
- Is there a minor character who may have played a larger part?
- How much did you recognise from the history you have read? What was similar and what was different to actual events or people?
- There is humour throughout this novel despite the dramas which take place. What did you find humorous?
- The 1970s was a decade of great economic, political, social and technological change discuss some of the events that are highlighted in the novel.
- Discuss issues mentioned such as
 - Indigenous Rights
 - Vietnamese 'boat people '

Activities

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.

- Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour.

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.

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

Locate examples of the use of literary devices such as Simile, Metaphor, Literary Allusion, Humour.

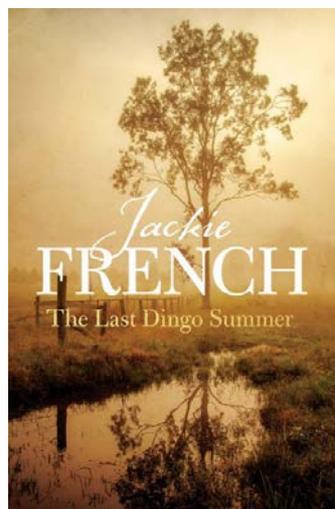
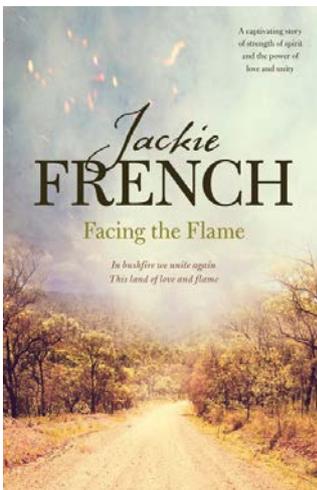
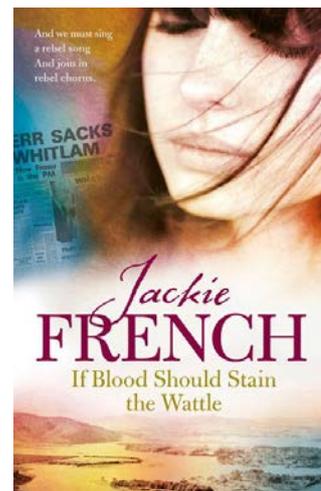
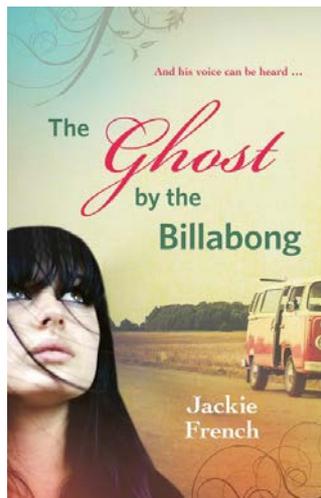
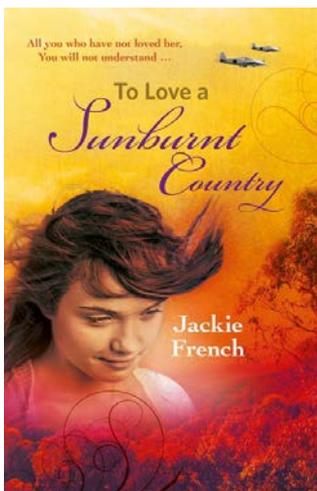
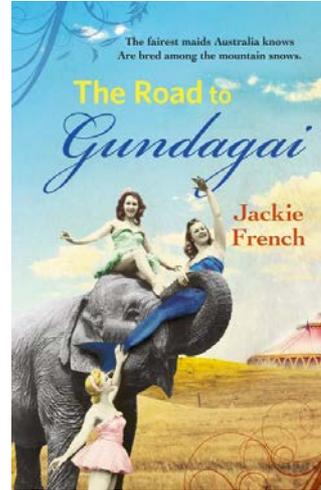
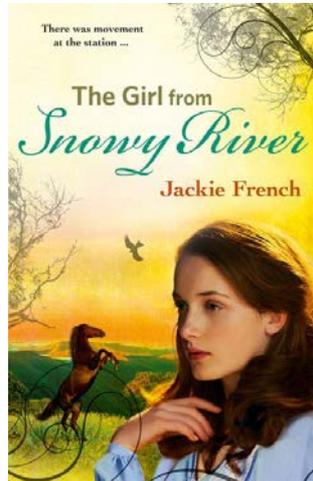
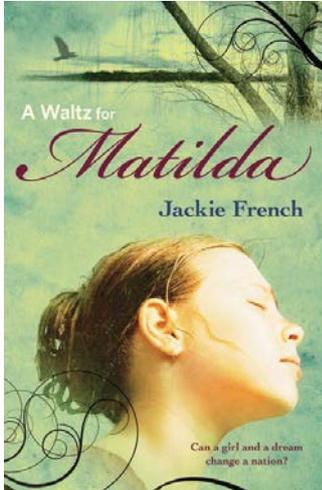
- Discuss their meaning and effect.

PRAISE FOR THE MATILDA SAGA

'The perfect read for anyone who loves immersing themselves in Australian fiction. Gripping, emotional and moving, Facing the Flame is a great book to curl up with on a warm spring night.' - New Idea

'Highly recommended ... this was a complete binge, read in one night because it was just too good and too gripping to put down ... a cracking story filled with rich characters both old and new and imbued with all that we hold dear about Australian love of country and mateship' – ReadPlus

'An entertaining and fascinating read that accurately captures the feel of the early 1970s' - Canberra Weekly



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