

## The Road to Gundagai

Jackie French

### Book Summary

The third book in Jackie French's Matilda series, *The Road to Gundagai* is set in the years 1932-1935 during the Depression. With epic prose and beautiful Australian settings, this series continues to enchant readers of all ages.

### Curriculum areas

*The Road to Gundagai* is an excellent resource for Years 6-9 and could be used for the following subjects:

- English
- History
- SOSE

It could also be used to achieve the following learning outcomes:

- ACELT 1626 -1632
- ACELT1806
- ACELY 1729

### Themes

- The Great Depression
- Racism and Prejudice
- Women's History and Rights
- Circuses and Travelling Players

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Appropriate Ages: 11+



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### Introduction

How could she laugh, with tragedy and terror all about her? Someone was trying to poison me, she thought. I have lost my family. Lost my home. I am scarred and misshapen. But somehow that was a world away. (p 82)

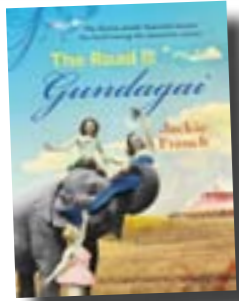
Bluebell (Blue) Laurence has survived more in her young life than most people do in a lifetime. Her parents and baby brother have been lost at sea; her house had burned down and she herself was badly burned and sent to stay with two aging aunts who clearly don't like her much. For some strange reason she becomes increasingly nauseous and to top things off her hair begins to fall out. Her only comfort is that their former servant and her friend Mah is with them as well, and frequently smuggles little comforts into her room. When Uncle Herbert visits he is outraged that the aunts have taken her so far from medical attention, but the aunts remain fixed on keeping their charge in close proximity, although their dedication seems based more on duty than affection. Meanwhile all around her other people are suffering as well. For this novel takes place during what has come to be known as the 'Great Depression' during which unemployment was rife and food in short supply. Bluebell has to cope with the restrictions of her new life until the Magnifico Family Circus moves into view. She is 'rescued' by the circus entertainers and this begins a new and exciting chapter in her life, during which she discovers what she is capable of, finds a 'family', and begins to take control of her own destiny.

The third title in a planned series **The Matilda Saga**, covers the years 1932-35; the first was *A Waltz for Matilda* (1892-1915); and the second *The Girl from Snowy River* (1920-3) and this will be followed by another two sequels. Characters of the previous novels return in this one – Joseph (Joey) McAlpine, Flinty's

brother, who is now a medical student, advises Blue to seek further treatment for her burns; Matilda and Thomas O' Halloran still own Drinkwater, managed by Andy McAlpine, and they offer refuge to the circus workers. This novel, too, is a symbolic reflection of another Banjo Paterson poem 'The Road to Gundagai'.

*The Road to Gundagai*, *The Girl from Snowy River*, and *A Waltz for Matilda* each explore nationally significant themes – questions of ownership of land and property, social justice, women's rights, the responsibility of governments to create social harmony, the myths which form nationhood, our multicultural heritage, and the threat of racism and prejudice to national cohesion. Bluebell discovers that as a woman she has fewer rights than men, but will fight such inequality and choose her own path in life. She feels a sense of home at Drinkwater, but also declares a commitment to the businesses her father built up, and realises her own commercial ambitions. Like the heroines in previous novels, she is strong-willed and yet compassionate. One senses that, like Matilda, she will be very generous with her wealth in later life. She has survived several challenges and overcome her own health issues. This is also a romance (like the earlier novels) in which Blue falls in love with Joey, thus completing a series of connections between these generations which are powerfully symbolic of the legacy owed to the past. Blue confronts her future with the strength of her convictions and the support of her loving partner.

This is my world, she thought. Mine to share and to create ... (p 413)



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## 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 websites offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work.

www.jackiefrench.com

## Author Inspiration

### Jackie Writes:

#### The Road to a Road

*'The Road to Gundagai* is the third of five books, the story of our nation as well as a love song to our land. *A Waltz for Matilda* began in 1892, and covered Federation to Gallipoli, 1915. *The Girl from Snowy River* begins in 1916 and covers the post war period of the 1920's.

*The Road to Gundagai* opens in 1932, in the heart of the depression. Each book is a voyage both for the characters in it, as well as Australia. The 'Matilda' of this book has grown from the frightened but determined child into very much her great grandfather's descendent, increasingly though benevolently autocratic, tempered by her great grandmother's knowledge and connection to the land.

There is no one place books begin. Perhaps this began when I learned about Poverty Gully, the 'susso camp' that was once on the lower end of our property, a place where the community worked together to build better lives, especially for their children. It comes from the family circus that used to regularly camp in the brown paddocks outside our town, where my four-year-old son fell in love with a girl in tulle and spangles, and demanded a good reason why we could not have an elephant living by our creek.



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The stories of circus life from about 1880-1930 are based on oral histories from the time, including adopting indigenous children from orphanages to train in circus skills.

Blue's injury is based on one of my own, when my legs were burnt by an alkali when I was seven years old, and for a short time the scars fused together. (It is easier to write about injuries one has experienced, like Loa's knee injury in *Dingo* or Flinty's damaged back in *Snowy River*, but I am close to running out of personal injuries to write about and in this case I am not hoping for fresh inspiration).

Perhaps this book is mostly inspired both by the fear of homelessness, and the gratitude to those who made me welcome when, like Blue, I needed places of safety to consider my future. Running away to join a circus is a dream that many kids share, whether they want to run from boredom, fear, or just that glimpse of spangles.

Running towards a dream can help you face reality too. At the beginning of this book both Blue and Australia have almost lost the power to hope. But by the end of it there are many possible paths ahead of them, though you will need to keep reading to find out what they are. For all of us, there are many possible roads to Gundagai.'

## Notes on Themes and Curriculum Topics

### Characters

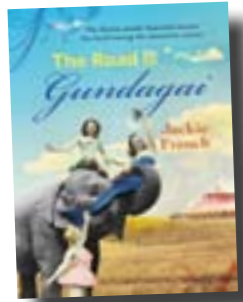
**The Significance of Character:** Characters are the heart of any narrative, the catalysts for action, and the central core around which all other narrative aspects must revolve and work. In this work there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor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

**Major Characters:** (Blue) Bluebell Laurence, Mah (Marjorie), Fred, Gertrude, Ginger and their mother Mrs Olsen, Madame, Ebenezer and Ephraim, Joseph McAlpine, Sheba the elephant.

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

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

**Minor Characters:** Blue's aunts Violet and Daisy, her uncle Herbert, Sergeant Patterson, Matilda and Thomas O'Halloran are the owners of Drinkwater Station and were main characters



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in the first novel.

**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 (e.g. Fred).

### Language and Literacy

**Colloquialisms of the era give a tangible sense of the times.**

**Activity:** Make a list of all the 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 the great Depression are juxtaposed against the imaginary story of Blue and the circus people.

**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.

The novel follows a **chronological structure** 1932–35, but also refers to key events which have taken place earlier such as the loss of Blue's parents and brother at sea and the fire at their home.

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

### Narrative Perspective

Blue's story is written in the **third person**.

**Discussion Point:** How might the story have changed if it had been written in first person? Choose a passage and translate it in her voice?



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### Use of Literary Devices such as Simile and Metaphor

Lunch was long, and dappled with silences, filled only by the chink of forks on plates and the bump of flies at the window. (p 9)

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

### Literary References

*The Road to Gundagai* becomes a sort of symbolic goal for the characters. Jackie French explains in her **Author's Note** (pp 414-25) that she has referred to other texts in this book, as well.

**Discussion Point:** What function do the literary quotations 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](http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poems-poetic-form/bush-ballads)

**Activity:** Listen to the song 'Along the Road to Gundagai' by Slim Dusty. <http://alldownload.com/australian-authors/banjo-paterson/road-to-gundagai.htm>

**The Literary Trope of the Orphaned Heroine is used in this novel symbolically to explore wider issues.**

**Discussion Point:** Discuss with students the role of the 'orphan' 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** 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. How different is the wealthy person's experience of the Depression to the poor person's? Read any first person accounts and diaries as an introduction to this topic.



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**Activity:** Choose an incident referred to in the novel and then write a diary entry as if the story is being told by Mah or Fred and not Blue.

### Social Class

Bluebell's time with the circus makes her aware of social prejudices and endemic social disadvantage for the first time.

**Discussion Point:** What does this novel demonstrate about Australia's social classes?

### Values

This novel (like others in the series), is about 'character' and the qualities or values necessary to make your life meaningful. Discuss quotes in relation to such values, for example, "

You are a thief," she told me. "The question is, are you a good thief or a bad one?"  
(p 151)

### Individual/Community

This novel (and series) constantly records the interplay between individual action and community responsibility. Blue would not have survived without the circus 'family'; or the community of Drinkwater Station.

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



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## Themes

### The Great Depression

This novel takes place during what is known as the **Great Depression**.

**Activity:** Do an 'image search' using the key words 'Great Depression Australia' to give students some idea of the conditions in which poorer people lived during the Depression.

The 'dole' and food rations were part of the everyday life of many people during the Depression.

**Activity:** Research this topic further. What sorts of food did people eat during the Depression? How did they stretch the family budget to ensure that children didn't go hungry? Make 'Squished Flies' with your students (pp 414-5) to give them some idea of the foods prepared and eaten then.

'Susso Camps' are mentioned (p 114) and later the life in camps and shacks is described:

When you had nothing but rags and susso rations the sea was your riches, the source of driftwood for your fire, fish for supper, or oysters or cockles or the wild spinach that Madame had told Ginger to gather yesterday. Here you could build sandcastles and pretend you were a princess, dive through froth-topped surf and know that even if poverty rode the wind outside your shanty, here you were ruler of the waves.' (p 173)

**Activity:** Find out more about such camps, and how people adapted to life in them.

Work was in short supply during the Depression and people put up with extremely poor conditions:

Too many still have dirt floors. I've seen some places where the employees work sixteen-hour days and sleep under their benches. Many products are still made by piece labour.  
(p 347)

**Discussion Point:** What was the outcome of the Depression in terms of working conditions? Did the Unions fight for better rights? Did things improve leading up to World War Two?

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

Unemployment is a difficult problem,' she said tentatively. Mr Thompson shifted in his armchair, and hand moving the other till it sat on the hand rest. 'It's not. It's a simple one.' The slurred words were easier for her to understand now. 'People just have to be less selfish.' He gestured at the polished wooden furniture of the room, the richly coloured rugs on the floor. 'Most factory owners claim they can't keep going in times like these without cutting wages.' (p 339)

**Discussion Point:** Discuss Thomas's statement about unemployment.



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Good, compassionate managers mean well-run factories. Well-run factories mean good jobs. Good jobs mean families are fed.  
(pp 349-50)

**Discussion Point:** Discuss this further statement by Thomas about management and workers.

Jackie French writes of how many children didn't attend school due to work at home or to their class or cultural background. (pp 418-9)

**Discussion Point:** What was the average school leaving age at this time? How universal was education?

**Activity:** Mah mentions the earlier Depressions in Australia (p 313). Research those as well.

### Racism and Prejudice

Australia is a country made up of many ethnic groups and yet throughout our history there have been many examples of suspicion of those who are 'different'.

**Discussion Point:** Mah is looked down upon by the aunts simply because she has Chinese heritage. Why did this sort of attitude exist? Does it still exist today?

**Activity:** Research the role that Chinese people have played in Australian history and the moves to have them return home via the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (White Australia Policy).

**Discussion Point:** Gertrude has been told that she was Spanish but discovers she is Aboriginal towards the end of the novel. How common was this sort of mistaken or lost Aboriginal heritage, due to the phenomenon which has come to be known as 'Stolen Children' or 'Stolen Generations'?

**Activity:** What other types of prejudice appeared in this novel?

### Women's History and Rights

Well-to-do women in this era were expected to be ladylike, to pursue ladylike hobbies such as needlework, to 'marry well', and to aspire to the life of a wife and mother without pursuing a career.

**Discussion Point:** How does Blue's attitude to life challenge this idea?

Women were also bound by legal restrictions which made it difficult to own property or a business in one's own right,



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Blue felt faintly jealous: a man could be bald and no one cared. A man could inherit at twenty-one. A man could run a business or be a lawyer.' (p 9)

Jackie French writes (pp 419-21) about how women's lives continued to be restricted until the 1970s, and some would say that inequality still exists today.

**Discussion Point:** How have women's rights changed since the 1970s?

Does Blue entirely overcome the obstacles she confronts as a woman?

### Circuses and Travelling Players

The traditional circus way of life provided a family network and a form of security at odds with the fact that they were itinerants who never had a permanent home.

Children starve in Melbourne, families are being locked out of their homes in Brisbane, banks in Sydney fail. But our bellies have been full and we even have new tyres for the truck. We have been lucky. (p 184)

**Activity:** Research the history of circus in Australia.

**Discussion Point:** Animals appear in circus routines far less commonly than they did, due to

animal liberation and legal issues. Do you think animals should be trained to perform and be kept in cages in circuses?

**Discussion Point:** How does a so-called 'contemporary circus' differ from 'traditional circus'?

**Activity:** Design a poster for the Magnifico Family Circus.

Jackie French writes about elephants (p 421).

**Activity:** Research elephants and the role they played in circuses over the centuries.

[You might also conduct a unit on circus animals using other picture books such as those listed in the Bibliography.]

## 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:

Nice girls don't wave their hips, or wear lipstick. I've been a nice girl all my life. (p 86)	A circus is in plain sight, always. There is nowhere here where you can hide from the police. (p 71)
.. this man thought so little of the circus women that he'd use a word like 'hell' in front of them. We are not ladies to him, she thought. We are ... hussies. (p 88)	The Depression was like a hungry bear stalking Australia, devouring laughter and prosperity. One man in four was unemployed, queuing for a hessian bag of food each week — just enough to keep him and his family from starvation. Women begged in the streets or stood with hungry children in silent lines of faded hope just to get a bowl of soup handed out by a church or charity. (p 3)
'Also it is good to work. To work at what you love, with those you love, that is the heart of life. It withers the soul to sit and let others work to keep you. But also you must work to earn your keep. (pp 103-4)	But Hope Town was the largest camp they'd seen yet, a refuge for the homeless of Sydney here with the sand and the flies and the southerly wind, a greasy creek for water and the thin soil beyond the dunes to try to grow some vegetables. (pp 115-6)
But everyone at the circus knew all too well that if a small town's policeman had to choose between local lads and the circus in a real scrap, he'd choose the locals every time. If any one of them were locked up on a policeman's whim the circus would have to wait till they were freed.' (p 133)	Couldn't get a job no matter how hard I tried. A quarter of Australia unemployed — who's going to give a job to a skinny twelve year- old who looks Chinese? (p 158)
She missed her family, a deep etched scar that would never entirely heal. But this life stretched her in a way that would never have been allowed in the safe confines of her home. (p 167)	What had it been like, giving birth in a shack of corrugated iron or hammered-out kerosene tin, a hessian sack for a door? Had there been anyone to help? (p 173)
Her life was whole again, not compartments of 'before' and 'after', like Fred and Mah's magicians. I am both Blue and Belle, she thought, rubbing another bite. And now I have a past, I can think about a future too.' (p 175)	You're not supposed to know how much money your husband has. It wasn't good manners even to ask about how much something cost.' (p 193)
'But perhaps you didn't have to be born on a patch of country to put down roots there, thought Blue.' (p 344)	Is it a crime to brighten people's lives with a little pretence and glitter? (p 93)

## Questions for Reading and Discussion

1. This novel is about an orphaned girl who befriends two orphaned siblings.

**Discussion Point:** Orphans are often the subject of influential literary stories. Why is the concept of a child without parents so thematically powerful?

2. Blue and her friends Fred and Mah were orphans. The two siblings were separated and Blue has to rely on relatives to take her in. Mrs Olsen and her brother Ronald were orphans 'bought' by Lenny Frearson for their circus. Gertrude was an Aboriginal child on a mission who was bought by Lenny as well. Madame has made it her business to 'rescue' orphans who are in danger.

**Discussion Point:** Were you shocked to read about the treatment of these children? How much more protection do orphans receive today? Are social services better equipped to assist such children in need of care?

3. This novel describes the experiences of a wealthy girl and an impoverished group of circus workers during the Great Depression.

**Discussion Point:** How might experiences have differed in the city? (Base your answer on research into life during this time.)

4. Jackie French explains the history of radio (p 418). At this early stage the popularity of live shows was only just beginning to be threatened by the new communications available.

**Discussion Point:** How did radio impact on live performances? What sorts of show were broadcast by the newly created ABC and the commercial stations?

5. The very drastic use of arsenic to poison Blue (pp 59-60) is typical of the crime novel but comes as a shock in this story. However, arsenic has been used for centuries for a range of purposes, including medicinal ones.

**Discussion Point:** Research the history of arsenic usage, and discuss further.

6. The novel refers to the number of itinerants on the roads, seeking work and sometimes begging for food or handouts.

**Discussion Point:** How many people were unemployed or forced to access dole payments during this period?

7. Fred has always had to live on his own resources.

**Discussion Point:** What might have become of Fred once he ran away? Write an imagined scenario for his future life, as a synopsis for another novel in this series.

8. Ephraim and Ebenezer are revealed to be two sisters named Euphrasia and Eulalie. (p 319).

**Activity:** This sort of 'false identity' was common in a time when people were often escaping grim pasts, or prejudice.

Try to discover any fictional or real examples of such subterfuge in Australian literature or history. eg 'The Drover's Boy' is a song written by Ted Egan and later illustrated by Robert Ingpen (Lothian, 1997) about a young Aboriginal girl who dressed as a boy as many did, in order to go droving. (Aboriginal women weren't permitted to be drovers.)

9. Gertrude puts in hours of practice to achieve her flawless circus routines.

**Discussion Point:** What did you think of the efforts children had to undergo in order to perform in the circus? Should they have been allowed to work as they did?

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### Australian Folklore

[http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-  
story/austn-folklore](http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-folklore)

### 'Bush Ballads' Australian Poetry Library

[www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poems-poetic-form/  
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### Australian History! in Pictures and Narratives

[www.australianhistorypictures.com/  
AustralianHistoryPictures.com/WELCOME.html](http://www.australianhistorypictures.com/AustralianHistoryPictures.com/WELCOME.html)

### Australian History Timelines Compiled by Jackie Miers

[www.teachers.ash.org.au/jmresources/history/  
australian.html](http://www.teachers.ash.org.au/jmresources/history/australian.html)

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an-story/new-circus](http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/new-circus)

## About the Author of the Notes

**Dr Robyn Sheahan-Bright** operates **justified text writing and publishing consultancy services**, and has published widely on children's and YA literature. In 2011 she was the recipient of the CBCA (Qld Branch) Dame Annabelle Rankin Award for Distinguished Services to Children's Literature in Queensland, and in 2012 the CBCA (National) Nan Chauncy Award for Outstanding Services to Children's Literature in Australia.