



ISBN: 9781460754795

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Date of Publication: June 2019

Pirate Boy of Sydney Town

By Jackie French

Book Summary

Twelve-year-old Ben Huntsmore is the son of a shipowner, an only child who loves the farming life on his family's estate, Badger's Hill.

But when Ben's father loses their ancestral home to pay a gambling debt, Ben reluctantly joins his father in a desperate venture to win it back, capturing enemy trading ships off the west Australian coast.

While at sea, Ben must face not just the giant waves of the Southern Ocean but also Dutch guns, as well as unexpected treachery. And only the friendships of the mysterious convict Higgins and the young Indigenous sailor Guwara will help Ben survive, as well as show him the true meaning of loyalty and riches.

From renowned children's author Jackie French comes a book filled with swashbuckling adventures that uncovers Australia's hidden history as a pirate port and slavers' den.

Key Learning Outcomes

ACELA1515, ACELA1516, ACELA1529, ACELT1626, ACELT1627, ACELT1619, ACELT1806, ACELT1613

Themes

Australian history, Racism, Status and entitlement, Greed, Family, Freedom, Survival, Australian landscape

Recommended Ages: 10 +

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Father figures

- 'You are truly my son', says Ben's father (p49). What does he mean by this? Do you think it's a good thing or a bad thing? What is Ben's response? Does it surprise you?
- Discuss the other fathers and father figures we see in the book – Thomas Appleby, Higgins, Captain Danvers, Guwura – what role do they play beside father? Who are they fathers to, or who do they act like a father to? How are they similar and different from Ben's father? How does this shape the way they behave and the decisions they make? Find an example where each make a decision shaped by the way they view themselves as a father or father figure.
- Write a short paragraph about which of the characters in the book you think behaves most like a father. What do they do that makes you think this? What do you like and dislike about them? Who is their priority in the story, and what do you think they want? How do you think a father should behave? Do you think everyone feels the same as you? What other fathers from books can you think of who don't treat their children well? Is there ever a good reason for this?

Social hierarchy

- Have a discussion as a group about class structure and social hierarchies. What is the hierarchy in the novel? Draw it like you would a family tree. Where do each of the characters fit? What defines their position (wealth, status, ownership of land, behaviour, race etc). Is this different to the hierarchies in your life?
- 'White men like to feel superior' says Guwara (p104). How do the characters in the book understand and behave towards each other based on their position in this hierarchy?
- 'He had taken his birth as a gentleman for granted. One did one's duty, as the lower orders did theirs. But today he had done the work of a common sailor, and it was possibly the proudest moment of his life.' (p124) Some characters, like Ben, resist or manage to change their position. Who else manages to change their social position and how? How do social positions impact the opportunities and choices people have? Try to imagine Ben's life if he had been the son of a convict rather than a wealthy man. What might have been different for him?

Survival

- In many ways, *The Pirate Boy of Sydney Town* is a book about survival: survival against nature, against illness, against hunger, and against other humans. Find examples of each of these types of survival. Can you think of any others? What do the characters in each of these scenes do to survive? Why is surviving so important to them?

- Sometimes, in order to survive, Ben imagines the letters he would write to Sally. Imagine that you are one of the characters trying to survive. Write a letter to someone you love telling them what your life is like. What hardships are you facing? What dangers have you overcome? What do you miss about them?

Language and power

- In addition to being a means of communication, language is used in the book to highlight difference, to include or isolate, to deceive, to fit in, to show power. What examples can you find in the book of language being used in each of these ways? Who is speaking? Who are they speaking to? Who has the power?
- Is English the dominant language in the novel? What other languages can you find examples of? Discuss how language can be erased, and why this happens.
- Look at this map of First Nations languages in Australia:
<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>

Does the number of languages on the map surprise you? Why do you think we are unfamiliar with them? What projects or people can you find that attempt to reclaim First Nations languages? Share one of these with the class.

Historical fiction

- The story takes place in Sydney in 1810. What can we learn about the present from the past?
- Discuss genre, and how genre can establish our expectations of a book. Make a list of what you expect from a historical fiction novel. How much of the novel will be true? What kind of ending will it have? What other predictions can you make based on the genre of the novel?
- Do a research project that compares the Sydney described in the book to contemporary Sydney. See if you can find past and present images of the places described in the novel. Compare descriptions of place from the book with your own descriptions. What else is different? (Consider dress, jobs, transport etc). Share your project with the class.

Landscape and story

- Ben is surprised by how much he comes to love the land. 'How did I ever think this land was ungenerous?' (p198). Why does Ben change his mind?
- How does the land impact the events of the novel? Can you find any examples where the land directly changes the outcome of a scene?
- How do you think Jackie French researched this aspect of her writing? Keep a journal with you for a week and spend fifteen minutes a day writing a description of place. What do you notice? What kinds of stories can you imagine in these places? How does place shape your life?

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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 children's 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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