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Notes by: Bec Kavanagh

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The Secret of the Youngest Rebel

By Jackie French

Book Summary

The whisper in the darkness is: rebellion! (Or: death or liberty!)

Frog is an orphan, a pickpocket, starving on the streets of Parramatta in 1804.

But when the tall, commanding Irish rebel Mr Cunningham talks of freedom from tyranny and the lash, Frog creeps out to join the rebels, the 10,000 convicts who will take over the colony and proclaim the Republic of New Ireland.

Will farmers like Barney and Elsie Bean join the battle against the corrupt New South Wales Corps? For the fate of the colony -- and Australia -- will be decided at Castle Hill.

Based on eyewitness accounts, this fifth title in The Secret Histories series uncovers the secrets that the colonial government hid for over 200 years.

Key Learning Outcomes

Language and Literacy, SOSE

Themes

Australian History, Rebellion, Freedom,

Recommended Ages: 9+

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie French is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide-range of topics.

“A book is the richest, most compelling way to give children 60,000 years of history; to let them experience anguish, the Ice Ages, or war, in the safety of the pages; to teach them empathy and compassion as they become each character; to provide not just knowledge, but also context. A book gives history voices, as well as the vision and resilience to create the future. A book is where kids can explore their own and other's prejudices, anger or fears, as well as giving insights into who they are, and who they may become.” – Jackie French

Jackie was the Australian Children's Laureate (2014–15). 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 for this book in her **Author's Notes** (pp 91–108).

KEY LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Literacy and Literature (Field and Context)
- Literature and Literacy (Responding and Exploring)
- Language and Multimodality (Examining)

THEMES

- Poverty
- Hunger
- Australian history
- Rebellion
- Freedom
- Loyalty and betrayal

Curriculum Links

- ACELA1487, ACELA1488, ACELA1489, ACELA1498, ACELT1602, ACELY1689,,ACELT1608, ACELA1505

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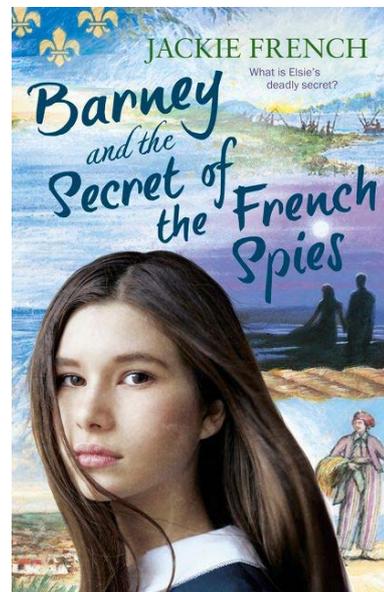
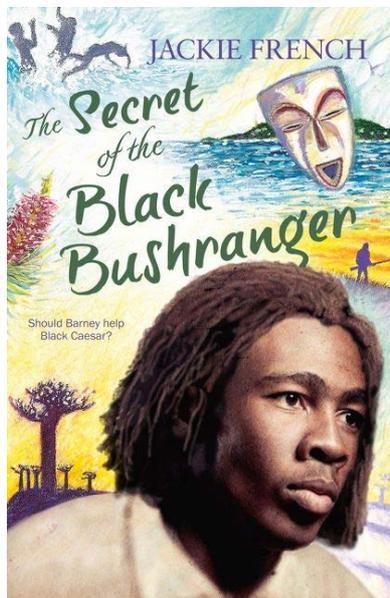
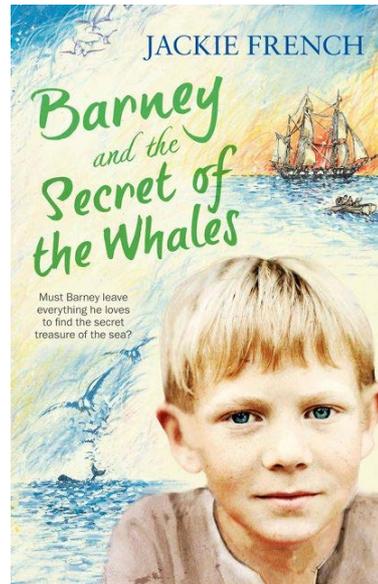
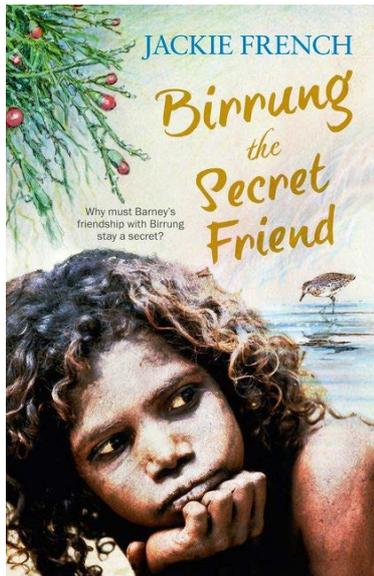
Classroom activities

- *The darkness smelled of woodsmoke and the pies Ma Grimsby swore were mutton.* (vii)
 - The first line of the story tells you a lot about the time and place where the book is set. What does this line tell you?
 - Who do you think the story is about? What does this opening line tell you about them?
 - How important are opening lines for a story? What information do they contain? Are they important in making you decide whether you want to keep reading?
 - Bring in the opening line from your favourite story to share with the class. Who can guess which story your line is from? In a group share your opening lines and talk about why you like them. What works? What doesn't? If you were going to write a story, what would your opening line be?
- Physical descriptions can tell you a lot about a character. Ma Grimsby has '*small, mean eyes*' (vii). One of the soldiers has '*a face like an angry ox*' (61). What other examples can you find from the book where you learn something about the way a character behaves from the descriptions of their body?
 - Choose a part of your own body to write about. How would you write it into a story? How might you describe it differently if you wanted to use it to make your character seem friendly? Funny? Mean? Untrustworthy?
- In her author's notes, Jackie French talks about the way she used slang in the text to add flavour to the speech. What are some of the words she is referring to? Did you find it difficult to understand slang from such a different time?
 - The author provides a glossary to help you understand some of these words. Talk about what a glossary is in class.
 - Why might an author choose to use a glossary and slang instead of just using words that everyone can understand? What does the use of slang add to a story?
 - Think of some slang words that you or your friends and family use. Write your own glossary for these words, and try to write a piece of dialogue that incorporates some of these terms. Is it harder or easier to write words that you use every day?
- We think of stealing as wrong, but how do you feel about Frog when he steals to survive? Do you feel that he is making the wrong choice? Write a list of the ways in which Frog's life is different from your own. What choices do you think you would make if you were in his position?

- Historical fiction invites us in to a time and place different to our own. These stories come to life in the details; the way characters dress, what they eat, how they live, what their worlds *look* like.
 - Find a photo of an event that happened over fifty years ago. What details from the photo show you that it took place in a different time?
 - Write a paragraph that describes the scene in your photo using the details you have identified. What kind of story might you tell about this place?
- Part of Jackie French's connection to this particular time in history came from her own ancestor. Our families can be full of surprising stories.
 - Interview a family member about their life before you knew them. What was it like? How was it different? What stories do they share that surprise you?
 - Do your own research into the time they are describing. Try to get a sense of what the world was like during that time - what people ate and wore and did for fun, and the kind of slang that was used. Now write a fictional scene that brings your ancestor's story to life using the details you have discovered in your research. Present this alongside your interview to the class.
- Frog asks Mr Cunningham what it feels like to be free (11). How would you respond to this question? Can you imagine what it feels like to not be free? Can you think of any situations happening right now where another child might ask you what it feels like to be free? How does Mr Cunningham respond? Do you agree with what he says?
- Frog wonders if Mr Cunningham's eyes are so clear because '*they looked upon a future none of us could see*' (14). Write a short scene describing the future you imagine Mr Cunningham sees.
- What is Frog's secret? Why do you think she kept this secret from everyone? Why might it be better to be a boy during this time? Make a list of all the things that boys could do that girls couldn't. How might Frog's story have been different if she had revealed herself as a girl earlier?
- Jackie French tells us in her notes that 'it is easy to assume when we read a report written in the past that the writer is telling the truth.' (98)
 - Why might people tell different or inaccurate versions of the same event?
 - How do you know which sources you can trust? What is the most accurate kind of information?
 - In pairs, choose a moment in history and do some research to find two accounts of the same event. Write up these accounts as short scripts and perform them to the rest of the class as a debate. Ask the class to vote on which version of the story they feel is most accurate. Why do they feel this way? Talk about subjectivity and how to read critically to find out where the truth lies.

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The Secret History Series



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