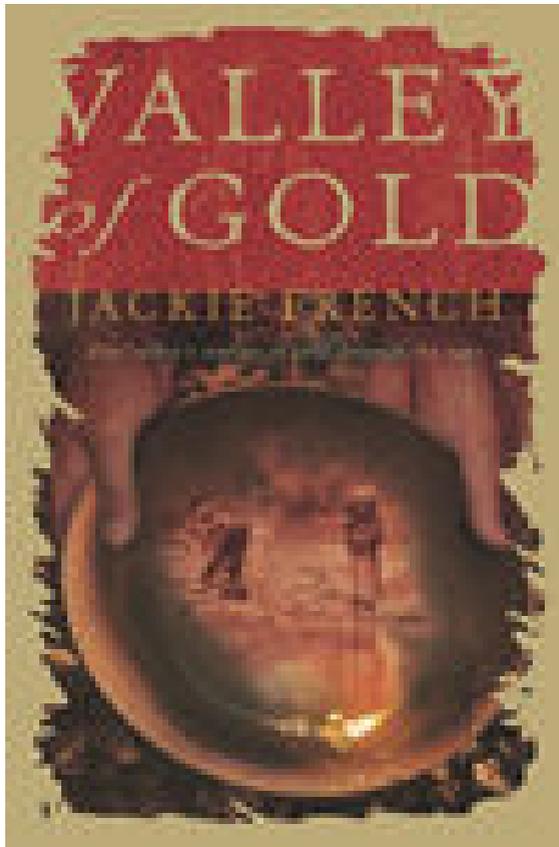


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TEACHING NOTES
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Re-inventing learning with rich fiction

'Valley of Gold'

Jackie French

Angus & Robertson

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Teaching notes by Neil Béchervaise

for teachers

An introductory note

One of the great challenges of teaching is to show how all knowledge can be applied across all fields. How to establish that science and art are inter-related, that maths is a creative process of inventing systems to describe observed behaviour, that literature is more than the sum of its words or their spelling and grammatical placement. Questions of relevance tie in with questions of common sense or meaning-making. Questions from the past link with questions about the present and future. Fears and hopes are tied together into needs that can be answered coherently if approached with a little intelligence and imagination.

The integration of historical 'fact' with current understanding of how that 'fact' is transformed into accepted and emerging 'cultural wisdom' provides for powerful fiction. The regularity with which Jackie French scoops up literary awards for her fact-ional novels supports the view that she is striking powerful chords among that group of adult literati who presume to judge the quality of novels written for younger readers. More importantly, she is establishing accessible links with some of the tougher concerns facing the world, and perhaps Australia in particular, today.

Anguish for runaway children, justice for war criminals, concern about real parent identity, response to an enemy in war and to the indigenous issues facing contemporary society have each been explored in powerful yet various novelistic forms. French's experimentation with prose evokes film treatment without ever begging for it in the manner of the similarly powerful Australia novel for older readers by Brian Caswell and film director David An Chiem, 'Only the Heart'. Her unapologetic use of identifiable locations and events provide powerful synergies for her readers.

Setting and structure

The setting for 'Valley of Gold' is French's own 'territory'. Braidwood lies in the Araluen valley, off the edge of the tableland in southern New South Wales. Half way between Canberra and Bateman's Bay, it is close to national parks and rich in early Australian history. Braidwood is where Jackie French has lived since her later childhood [see 'Hippy Gold, p.76]. It is her 'safe place', a place where the trees, the streams and the animals are a part of her life .

'Valley of Gold' provides a sequence of stories dated from 35000 years before the coming of English settlers (BCE) to the present day. The stories are based loosely in history and tightly in the lived experience of their author. In French's hands, however, they are more than a set of loosely connected stories and reminiscences for readers growing into their readership but out of their childhood. Instead, 'Valley of Gold' offers, more challengingly, the chance to explore how history is made while establishing what history is.

...sometimes stories can give you more of an idea of how people thought and lived than pages from a history book. [Author's Note]

Fiction as education

Jackie French quite openly and unapologetically blends her own and her family's experience with the events that form the history of the town.

All animals change the land where they live, and they are changed by it in turn. But humans change the land more than any others.
[p.3]

In the notional mythology of the opening story, French establishes the history of human interaction with nature as a history of irreconcilable loss. Her closing note is less pessimistic. It presents history as the recording of a continuum, a reflection on the past that projects us towards the future.

Here I'm a part – a very small part – of an enormous complexity. It's fascinating. It's ever changing. [p.149]

In this context, the history of Australia becomes a history of

settlement, for better and for worse, of humour, invention and keenly observed detail that links people with action and action with place.

As an educational instrument, 'Valley of Gold' becomes a guide to survival, an interpretation of how civilisation really develops, of what grief and sickness and death really mean, of what friendship actually costs, and of what faith might achieve in the hands of the faithful.

Jackie French's 'Valley of Gold' is not a curriculum on its own, nor is it a textbook. Instead, it provides a strong incentive for educators to explore the potential for developing integrated syllabus units around rich and accessible texts. A month of reading, research and discussion might re-establish the traditional classroom as the centre for education it has long been assumed to be.

These activities have been designed to use Jackie French's stories as a:

- * way of presenting information in an entertaining way,
- * starting place for research about the history of Australia,
- * way of helping us understand how our values and beliefs change over time, and as a
- * means of learning how history is made by people.

The activities vary in difficulty and there are far too many to be used at a single reading. Instead, it is expected that they will form the basis for revisiting the stories over an extended period. Most importantly, they clearly show that a single book, or even a single event, can be seen as the opportunity for a broad range of learning experiences among readers with a wide range of personal experience and ability.

Student Activities

Four billion years BCE

Library research & Map drawing: Not one of Australia's volcanoes remains active today. Use your library to find mountains that used to be volcanoes. Use your research to draw a map of Australia's old volcanoes. Where are most of the extinct volcanoes?

Model making: Use the information you have gathered your research to make a model of a volcano.

Story-writing: Imagine that you lived on Gondwanaland at the time of dinosaurs. Make a list of the ten different things you might see and hear if you walked outside of your cave house. Describe one event that happened when you went out to look for food.

35000 BCE - The last of the tigers

Library research and projects: Use your library and the internet to find out when the last Tasmanian tiger is thought to have died. Work in small groups to make a poster about the extinction of one Australian animal.

Story-writing: Jackie suggests that meat-eaters smell different [p.5] from other animals. Imagine you are a small non-meat eating animal who lives in Mirrigan's hunting area. How would you decide which animals were dangerous to you? Write a story about your narrow escape from one of your predators.

Map-making: Use your volcano map to add the places where tigers have been seen in Australia in the past. Suggest why the habitats of the tigers might be near mountain regions.

40,000 BCE – 1850 ACE

Discussion: Jackie writes about different ways of clearing the land – some natural and some human. Think about why aboriginal people might have wanted to clear the native growth from an area. Are their reasons the same as the reasons we have for clearing forests today?

Maths: Use the internet and your library to find figures about how much land has been cleared in each ten years for the past 150 years. Use these figures to make a bar graph and a pie chart to show the rate of clearing since free settlement began in Australia.

Geography: Discover when the ice ages came to Australia. How long did they last? How much of the land did they cover? Try to discover if the ice ages affected the animals of those times.

1853 Gold!

Story-writing: Mary Anne is afraid of vampires [p.15]. Everyone is afraid of something. Often we do not know why we are afraid and sometimes we do not even know what we are afraid of. Write about one thing you are afraid of. Try to write about why you are afraid. Suggest how you might be helped to overcome your fear.

Research and discussion: The construction of history - Mary Anne remembers her mother dying before the family reached Australia. She worries about the stories her father tells about the past and his ideas for the future. She says, "And if the beginning of the story wasn't true, maybe the end wasn't either" [p.17]. Think of some stories that you know are not true and discuss the way we use stories to help us understand the past. Consider how we can know if stories about the past are true.

Research and discussion: The authority of truth - Sometimes we believe things because we are told by people we trust. We usually believe our parents, our teachers, our text books, the newspapers and the television or radio news broadcasts. Mary Anne says, "the dingoes ate the heart out of you, the paper said ..." [p.19]. Discuss ways we can use to decide when we should believe what we are told? When can we be sure that we are not being told the truth? Jackie French says that "None of the stories happened but they *might* have happened'. How can we understand history if we cannot be sure that the stories are true?

Activity: making damper – baked bread was not available for the early settlers because there were no shops to buy it from. When they had flour, the settlers made a simple bread called damper. It was a mix of flour and water baked in the ashes of the campfire. To taste what it was like, make a firm 'dough' using about one cupful of flour and adding water and mixing it until you have a mix that sticks to itself and not to your hands. Shape the dough mix into balls the size of bread rolls and place it in an oven heated to 180 degrees [you will need help adult with this to be safe and sure]. Bake your damper for 30 minutes, remove it from the oven and let it cool. Then taste your 'damper'. If you have some jam, it will taste much better.

Library research: ownership of land [p.21] - Who did own the land before the settlers came? Consider why the aborigines did not

need to own the land. Why did the settlers feel a need to 'own' their land. Research the 'land selection act' [see p. 78]. How did the land selection act change the way settlers treated their land.

Model making: Jackie explains how slab huts and wattle and daub houses were built. Use her instructions to make a model house. Imagine you lived in this type of house. What problems do you think you would have in summer? in winter?

1853 – 1860

Library research: Very large numbers of Chinese came to Australia during the gold rushes and afterwards. Use your research skills to find out how many people are estimated to have lived on the gold fields at Palmer River in Queensland (near Cooktown), at Bendigo and Ballarat in Victoria, and at Kalgoolie in Western Australia. How do these figures compare with modern-day figures for the numbers of Chinese people in Australia? What other groups of people have settled in Australia?

Health and Safety: The baby found in the tree during the floods [p.34] cannot be identified. How do we now discover the identity of a found child?

Some of us are very shy when we meet new people. Sometimes we are afraid of new people we meet. Can you find reasons why the lost child will not speak? Imagine that you are the child who has been found in the tree and rescued from the flood. Write what you would say if you could talk to the people who rescued you.

Discussion: Jackie French says that the Chinese were not very well treated by many of the white settlers. Can you find evidence to support her stories? The settlers could not decide whether the child they found was Chinese, Russian or Afghan. Why do we treat people from different places differently from ourselves? Is this a useful way for us to act with each other?

Discussion and story-writing: Women who migrate to far off lands have often left their friends and relatives behind. Sometimes, they arrive in countries where they cannot speak the language. Loneliness is a common experience for people who are left alone in unfamiliar places. Discuss how you make friends in a new place. Write a story about being lonely and how you overcome the feeling.

Activity: panning for gold [p.55,56] – Jackie describes how to pan for gold in a creek. Sometimes we cannot do that. To practice panning for gold at home you can use a soup bowl or a plastic bowl and a handful of dirt mixed with water. Be sure to work in a wet area and wear old clothes. If you add a very small bead or a small piece of broken coloured glass as your 'gold', you can use the same process Jackie describes to pan for your own piece of 'colour'.

1860-1870

Library research: Jackie describes a very different school to those we have in Australia today. Not everyone goes to school in Braidwood and the teacher does not seem to be very well trained. Use your research skills to find out about when schools were opened for every child in Australia. Who paid the teachers before this time? What other differences can you discover between school then and school now.

1865 The night of the bushranger

Research and discussion: The construction of history - Jackie says that bushrangers often could not read or write and that a bushranger's life was often very short. Can you find evidence to support her statements?

Research and discussion: point of view – The story of the bushrangers is written as if it is being told by a horse. What information do we obtain from the story that is better told by the horse. Discuss how this can be history?

Story-writing: Writers as a resource for writing Some of Jackie French's writing strongly suggests that she has read books by other authors that she remembers and includes in her own writing. When she describes the bushrangers riding at night [p.64], her description is a little like the poem 'The Highwayman' by Alfred Noyes. Make a list of powerful or interesting descriptions you remember from other books you have read. Use some of these in a story about how you learned a lesson from a real experience you have had.

1870-1890

Library research: Wars - Australia has been involved in many wars during its short history. In most of these wars, we were involved as part of Great Britain. Use your research skills to find out about Australia's role in wars in south and north Africa, Turkey, Russia, India, Afghanistan, Korea, Vietnam and Kuwait.

1900 Maggie

Library research: Law and justice – Old Maggie screams when the judge sentences her to be removed from where she lives to 'the camp down the coast' [p.84]. When is it possible for the law to remove people from the living place to another place? Find out about the forced relocation of aborigines in Australia. What is 'the stolen generation'? Is Old Maggie one of the 'stolen generation'?

1890-1920

Story-writing: Before the invention of modern day medicines, many people died from quite common injuries and infections. Without antiseptics and antibiotics, a cut finger could become infected and need to be amputated. Schools were closed during the influenza epidemic because so many people – especially children - died from the disease. Imagine that you were living during the flue epidemic. It is before the age of television or even radio. You can not leave your house at all because you might become infected. Write a story about how you might have learned to read and write if you could not go to school.

1922 Alice and the yowie

Research and discussion: The construction of history - Peter Lauer is so badly injured during the war that he suffers from 'shell shock' and that he does not appear in public any more because of his appearance. He looks so bad that Alice thinks he is a Yowie. Jackie French suggests that there is truth and lies but there is also not asking. How do we find out about things that no-one wants to speak about?

Story-writing: Write a story in which you meet your own Yowie. How do you describe the experience to others and how do they react? How can you convince people that you really did see a Yowie?

Research and discussion: history and the future: In describing how the valley changes over time, Jackie French moves from stories of the past the stories of the present and visions of the future. Discuss ways that history can help us see what the future might be like.

1920-1972

Research and discussion: history and the family – Many old people still remember the bushfires of 1939, the economic depression from that time and several wars. Speak with older family members and their friends about their memories of war and of bushfires. Find out about the times before television and supermarkets. Discuss how your findings match with the stories Jackie French tells.

Music: Ask your relatives if they have any recordings of old songs from the time of the hippies or earlier. How did people dress when these songs were popular. How different was it to go to school in those times? Make up posters of dress and popular activities that show the times of the songs.

1976 Hippy gold

Drama: The hippies are quite sure that the townspeople will vote for the new gold-mining but they are very surprised at the town meeting. Work in small groups to write a play where the town meeting takes place. Begin by writing short scenes between groups of people who are coming to the meeting then write the meeting as Jackie describes it. Finish the play with a scene outside the meeting where the mining company people discuss what has just happened. Be sure to include some discussion of the main issues of jobs, pollution, change in population and the effect on the appearance of the town.

1970-2002

environmental science: Jackie French speaks about the irony of the hippy group bringing goats that have become feral. Research the impact of feral animals on native wildlife and on natural bushland. The loss of water flow in the river because of the need for irrigation water by farmers upstream from the town seems to be a big

problem for Braidwood. The Chinese mine sluice also changed the flow of the river. Suggest how an action that is useful for one group can be damaging for another. How can we balance actions so that everyone can have a better life without damaging the environment?

2002 A true story

environmental science meets social science: the value of gold changes because it is still used for many industrial processes, and more recently in space satellites. As the price of gold rises, it becomes profitable to mine areas that used to be too hard to get gold from. Modern opinions suggest that we now have to add environmental and social cost to the cost of mining and processing gold. Business people call this the triple bottom line. Research how the triple bottom line has resulted in increasing interest in recycling paper, glass, plastics and metals.

Research and discussion: The construction of history – very large bushfires send smoke over large areas of the country every summer in Australia. Sometimes the bushfires affect Jackie French's town of Braidwood. Every fire creates new memories and new stories for the people who live with them and the people who hear about them on the news. How do we know that the images we see on the news are from the fires they are reporting, and not from other fires that happened somewhere else at another time? How do we know that the stories are true? How can we check that the history we are told is the history that other people are told?

2003

Story-writing: Jackie French is very clear about the importance of her town to her and the people who live in it. She speaks of the remains and ruins in ways that help us understand what it was like to be there at another time. Write a story that helps your reader understand the importance of a special place for you.

General discussion activities

- Σ Jackie French has now written a number of books about historical events. Sometimes she deals with a single event – like the Plague in 'Lady Dance'. Sometimes she mixes historical events and mythical events – as in 'The White Ship'. Sometimes she plays with possible historical stories – like 'Hitler's Daughter'. Discuss the ways in which facts can be used to make fiction and how fiction can help us to better understand the way history is written.
- Σ Before most people could read and write, they had to depend on people who could. People who wanted to write a letter had to dictate it to someone who could write and, often, the receiver had to get a person who could read to tell them what their letter said. As a result, some facts got changed or left out or even wrongly delivered. Jackie tells us that her name was once spelled 'Ffrench'. Someone spelt it with a single F and she has now decided to accept that change. The Americans now put tires on their bicycles although Australians still use tyres. Computer spell-checks often tell us that a driver's license should be a driver's licence. Discuss the way spelling and grammatical structures change from language to language and across time.
- Σ Changing the spelling of our names can make it hard for us to find our relatives. People trying to find out about family history [genealogy] sometimes have to look at alternative spelling to locate ancestors. Find out whether the spelling of your family's names has ever changed. Can you discover the reasons for these changes?
- Σ History is about telling the truth of another time and, often, of another place. But whose truth are we hearing? If Jackie French did not like the place she lived in, would she write the same kind of stories? Would she use the same information and the same kinds of characters?
- Σ Futurology is about trying to predict what will happen in the future. What sorts of information do we need to be able to tell what will happen in the future? How can we be sure that this information has included the facts we need in ways we will be able to use?