



Clancy of the Overflow

By Jackie French

Summary

This is a love song to our nation, told in a single sweeping story.

Jed Kelly has finally persuaded her great aunt Nancy to tell the story of her grandparents. The tale that unfolds is one of Australia's greatest romances - that of Clancy of the Overflow, who gave up everything for Rose, the woman he adored, and yet still gained all he'd left and more.

But Nancy's story is not the history that Jed expects. More tales lurk behind the folklore that surrounds Clancy - the stories of the women hidden in Australia's long history, who forged a nation and whose voices need to be heard.

It is also a story of many kinds of love. Clancy's growing passion for the bush, immortalised in Paterson's poem, which speaks to him in the ripple of the river and the song of the stars, and Nancy's need to pass on her deep understanding of her country.

But perhaps the most moving love story of all is the one that never happened, between Matilda O'Halloran and Clancy of the Overflow. And as Jed brings all of these stories to life in her book, Matilda and Clancy will once again waltz beside the river and the forgotten will be given a new voice.

Key Learning Outcomes

ACELA1564, ACELA1565, ACELA1571, ACELT1639, ACELT1812, ACELT1774, ACELT1644, ACELY1749

Themes

Survival, Hope, Connection to country, Women in Australian history, Colonisation and racism, Family, Love, Wealth, Class and power

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Characters

- Maria is a woman of great intelligence and empathy. Like Rose, she is dismissed because her body marks her as 'lesser' in the social and class hierarchies that surround her.
 - How do others react when they meet Maria for the first time? Consider Flora's reaction (p 18), and Ethelred's (p 147). How do they differ?
 - What does Ethelred reveal to Clancy in the moments after Maria's death (p 321-22)?
 - Where would you go if you could move through time?
 - Try to find a relevant current example in which someone has been marginalised or discriminated against because of their physical appearance. What laws exist to prevent this kind of discrimination? Do they work?
- Books are driven by the desires of the characters in them. 'Sometimes, just sometimes, Flora thought she caught a look of boredom on her sister-in-law's face. But how could Maria be bored, now that she had companionship and a life beyond her housekeeping?' (p 90)
 - What do you think Maria wants in the story?
 - What barriers stand in her way?
- Choose a character from the book and make a note of all the moments that reveal what they desire.
 - How is the narrative shaped or pushed forward by these desires?
 - How do their desires influence the choices they make and the way they interact with others?
 - Is a story interesting if all the characters get everything that they want?
- Think about something that you've wanted. Write a scene in which you try to get what you want. What's stopping you? What makes it difficult?
- *Clancy of the Overflow* is as much a story about women and their complex relationships with each other as it is a love story.
 - How have women been erased from the history books?
 - How do writers like Jackie French critique this male-centric narrative by disrupting traditional gender roles, and examining themes such as female friendship and motherhood?
 - How different does the love story become when the whole experience of the female characters is centred?
 - Choose one of the characters in the book and analyse the ways in which they are limited by, and also resist, the gender roles constructed for them by society.
 - Have you ever felt limited by something outside of your control?
 - Interview a significant woman in your own life and ask her about any experiences where her gender affected the options available to her.
 - What did you learn that surprised you?
 - In what ways are your experiences similar to hers, and in what ways are they different?

Setting

- 'The drought-stained air outside the hospital smelled of dust and snakes, coiled under hot rocks in sun-seared paddocks, lucky to have eaten enough spring frogs to keep the reptiles alive for a further year of drought before summer drank the pools' (p 7). French writes a landscape that is not only clearly and uniquely Australian, but specific to a time and a place.
 - How familiar is the landscape in this book to you? Do you recognise the trees, the earth, the hills?
 - Australia has gone through many droughts, as French refers to in the book. What can you discover about Australia's droughts? Have they, as Nancy and Flinty imply towards the end of the book, changed or worsened over time? What impact has colonisation had on this process?
- Consider the role of trees in the novel, which act as a complex marker of the state of environmental and personal affairs.
 - What do the trees in the novel tell us about the climate, and people's relationships with the place and with each other?

Themes

- Towards the end of the book Nancy feels anxious about the limitations of her knowledge. She worries that Mattie, who is like a grandchild to her, isn't learning about the land '...in the right way. She has to be out there, feeling how the air changes on her skin, seeing snakes coil and bite each other before a drought breaker. You've got to be outside, day after day for that, not locked in a schoolroom or with a TV set.' (p 413).
 - Why is Nancy so anxious about sharing this knowledge?
 - What else does she say to Jed about passing down knowledge and information about country?
 - Do you feel that we are losing the skill to share and inherit knowledge now that we are more reliant on technology?
 - What role does storytelling play in the inheritance of knowledge?
- The narrative of the white saviour, which we see when Flora 'rescues' (forcibly removes) Rose from her family, is one that has historically overridden the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and led to genocide and the forced removal of children from their families. It is one that is still prevalent today.
 - What passages in the book suggest that Jackie French is critical of this narrative?
 - What do you think she is trying to say about the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and their place in Australian history and culture?
 - Why does Flora name the child 'Rose'?
 - How does this give her power over Rose, and how does it shape (and erase) parts of Rose's identity?

- 'It no longer felt strange knowing that most white people wanted her and her people gone, all evidence of their existence in the country destroyed, from the good sources so carefully tended to the places of importance changed so deeply that the duty towards them, on which life was based, was impossible.' (p 290)
 - Write a personal response to this quote, which reflects on the colonisation of Australia, and the way the repercussions of it are still being felt today.

Literary Techniques

- The dual timelines of the novel are a century apart, but there are many parallels and echoes of the past into the present. Make a note of the similarities and differences between the characters, setting and politics. Compare them to each other and to the current day.
 - How do each of the characters fit into the story? Make a timeline or a character tree (similar to a family tree but with all characters and their relationships included) to help you keep track of this.
- Apart from the family and friendship ties between characters, many physical objects give us anchor points to connect with across the different timelines. The kitchen table, for example is described by Jed as one that has been 'sanded back and repolished a dozen times,' (p 25) and then later Clancy and Ezekiel sit 'at the kitchen table – the old bush one, handmade from split slabs that Ezekiel had never bothered to replace when a dining room had been added' (p 53).
 - How do these object anchor points help you to develop a deeper connection to the characters and their story?
 - Think of an object that's important to you. Write a passage describing it now – what does it look like, taste like, smell like, feel like? What colour is it? Is it big or small, hard or soft? What does it mean to you? Where did it come from? Where do you keep it? How do you feel when you see it? Now write the same paragraph but from the perspective of a past or future owner of the object.
 - Reflect on the exercise – do you feel connected to your imagined person because of your shared experience with an object? Did it help you bring them to life as a character?
- 'This is supposed to be one of Australia's great love stories' (p 8). What does this statement signpost in the story?
 - Discuss signposting as a storytelling technique. When is it effective? When is it not?
- How do you feel about the recipes and advice segments that begin each chapter?
 - Do you read them closely or skip over them?
 - Why do you think the author has included them?
 - Where do they come from?
 - What do they mean to Jed?
 - Write a similar piece of advice or a recipe that you have inherited from an older member of your family or close friend. How has it been passed down? Is it useful? Would you share it with your own children if you had them?

After Reading

- Where do writers get their ideas from? Read the author's note at the end of the book.
 - Who does Jackie French credit for her love of poetry and land?
 - What does she say about the influence that the works of Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson have had on this book and the series?
- Read the poem 'Clancy of The Overflow'. What lines from the poem do you recognise in the novel?
 - Where has Jackie French taken artistic liberties to make the story her own?
 - If you were to use this poem as inspiration for a piece of writing, what story would you tell, and how would you tell it?
 - Why do you think Jackie French chose to tell this particular story?

Extension

- Clancy and Rose's son, Benjamin, is treated as 'other' by both the European and Indigenous communities of which he is a member; he doesn't really fit in with either community. Because of this, he is not allowed to go to school. Many people in contemporary Australia live with different communities. These may be the different ethnicities or religions of their parents; it may be the different culture of their family that clashes with the expectations of their friends or teachers; it may be that children growing up today don't believe in or want to live with the expectations that their parents and families have.
 - Write a short narrative (approx. 500 words) about a person who lives between two different communities, and the impact – both practically and emotionally – this may have on that person.

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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