

## *If Blood Should Stain the Wattle*

By Jackie French

### **Book Summary:**

The 1970s was a time of extraordinary idealism, when anything seemed possible. A nation filled with dreams of a better world, but deep conflicts about exactly what that better world might be. Jackie French, author of the best-selling *To Love a Sunburnt Country*, has drawn on her personal experiences and memories of that time and woven them into a sweeping story of a small rural community which, like all of Australia, was affected by the tumultuous political events of 1972 to 1975. Events that are still being debated to this day.

### **Themes**

Australian Politics 1972-75, the Dismissal, Vietnam War, Sustainability.

### **Australian Curriculum**

#### **Senior Curriculum**

ACHMH194, ACHMH189,

#### **Modern History**

Humanities and Social Science

ACOKFH023, ACDSEH109, ACDSEH146, ACHMH213

#### **Cross Curriculum Priorities**

Asia and Australia's Engagement with Asia

Sustainability

**Suitable for Students in Grades 9-12**

ISBN: 9781460753118

eBook: 9781460705933

Notes by: Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## BOOK DESCRIPTION

'This was a time to harness the anger of Australia.' (p 457)

The year is 1972, and Gough Whitlam is about to become the first Labor Prime Minister in 33 years. In Gibber's Creek, and across the nation, the catchcry is, 'It's time' which recalls the old battle cry of the nineteenth century labour movement and their rebel chorus.

This novel is about both national and personal decisions. For it's also time for Jed Kelly to decide her own path in life including her future occupation and her choice between past love, Nicholas Brewster, the new Labor member for Gibber's Creek, and Sam McAlpine, from the Halfway to Eternity commune, who is also a member of the large connected family she has recently discovered. It's time for Scarlett O'Hara to leave River View and find new friends, live with her adopted sister, Jed, and to fulfil her dream that one day she might walk – and become a doctor – despite being in a wheelchair. And it's time for those in the commune – Leafsong, the mute but divinely talented chef, her angry sister Carol, and Sam, whose engineering and other talents may be wasted in a small unbalanced community – to discover what they need. It's also time for ninety year old Matilda Thompson to face her ghosts and reflect on an extraordinary life that began by a billabong in 1894 – a life that took a young girl from the slums of Grinder's Alley to formidable matriarch of the district. But as political ideals drift from disaster to the Dismissal, Ra Zacharia plots a new world led by aliens. And he will sacrifice whoever he must to achieve it.

The 1970s was a time of extraordinary idealism, when anything seemed possible. It was a nation filled with dreams of a better world, but deep conflicts about exactly what that better world might be. Jackie French has drawn on her personal experiences and memories of that time and woven them into a sweeping story of a small rural community which, like all of Australia, was affected by the tumultuous political events of 1972 to 1975 – events that are still being debated to this day.

This novel is a symbolic reflection of a poem '*Freedom on the Wallaby*' by Henry Lawson, although the poem is not mentioned. The title refers to the poem which was published by

William Lane in the Worker in 1891 and was his comment on the shearers' strike of that year. This is the final stanza:

*So we must fly a rebel flag  
As others did before us.  
And we must sing a rebel song,  
And join a rebel chorus.  
We'll make the tyrants feel the sting  
O'those they would throttle;  
They needn't say the fault is ours  
If blood should stain the wattle.*

Lawson, Henry 'Freedom on the Wallaby' The Worker 16 May 1891

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/70863379>

Such statements at the time were sometimes considered sedition and Lawson himself was accused of such in the press. Previous books in this series also explored nationally significant themes – the ties that bind us to home, to land and country, class inequality, social injustice, women's rights, the responsibility of governments to their citizens, the myths which form nationhood, our multicultural heritage, and the threat of racism and prejudice to national and international cohesion.

*If Blood Should Stain the Wattle* is the sixth title in the powerful historical series 'The Matilda Saga,' and covers the years 1972–5. The first in the series was *A Waltz for Matilda* (1892–1915); the second *The Girl from Snowy River* (1920–3) the third *Down the Road to Gundagai* (1932–5), the fourth *To Love a Sunburnt Country* (1941–6) and the fifth *The Ghost by the Billabong* (1968–9). Although they traverse several generations characters of the previous novels return in or are mentioned in this one again – Jed Kelly, great-great granddaughter of Thomas Thompson whose widow Matilda Thompson (nee O'Halloran) still owns Drinkwater, Michael and Nancy Thompson, Jim Thompson, Nicholas Brewster, Flinty (nee McAlpine), Joe and wife Bluebell McAlpine, Mah and Andy McAlpine, Felicity, Flinty's granddaughter, now engaged to Nicholas, Scarlett, Jed's adopted sister.

Jed, Scarlett and Leafsong are like Matilda and other heroines in previous novels, feisty, strong-willed, resourceful, idealistic, and compassionate.

This is also a romance (like the earlier novels) in which Jed has to choose between Nicholas and Sam, thus continuing a series of connections between these generations which are powerfully symbolic of the legacy owed to the past.

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

[www.jackiefrench.com.au](http://www.jackiefrench.com.au)

At the back of the book, there are **Author's Notes** (pp 531–534) by Jackie French on many of the historical and cultural issues referred to in this text. This should be an invaluable resource to teachers in using the book in the classroom or for adult book groups to discuss.

## WRITING STYLE

**1. 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.

**Discussion Point:** Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why? Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character? e.g. Carol.

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. eg Leafsong.

**2. This novel is a work of Historical Fiction or Faction** — a genre which relies on the author weaving together fact and fiction seamlessly.

**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?

**3. Narrative Structure** — The novel follows a chronological structure, but also refers to key events which have taken place earlier in the series, and in the history of Australia.

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

**4. Narrative Perspective and Alternate Voices** — Jed's story is written in third person subjective and also includes chapters in a mixture of other voices such as Sam, Leafsong, Scarlett, Matilda, Nancy, Sam, or Ra Zacharia. The story is also told with most chapters opening with articles from the Gibber's Creek Gazette or letters from Julieanne to Jed, or others such as Mrs Taylor to Scarlett. These various texts add to the story by creating an interplay between public and private experiences of these times, revealing how they overlap.

**Discussion Point:** How do these various viewpoints enhance the story being told?

**Discussion Point:** How might the story have changed if it had been written in first person? Choose a passage and translate it in Sam's voice as if written as a diary or letter?

**Discussion Point:** These texts add another layer to the core narrative of Jed's community and the political events overshadowing it.

#### 5. Use of Literary Devices such as Simile, Metaphor, Literary Allusion, Humour

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

**Discussion Point:** The poem 'Freedom on the Wallaby' by Henry Lawson lies at the heart of this narrative and how it relates to the action and themes. Discuss its relationship to the novel's themes.

**Discussion Point:** The humour in the novel is poked at both the leftist notions of the commune, and the conservative attitudes of the local residents of Gibber's Creek. e.g. John and Annie's laidback lifestyle relies on their fellow commune dwellers doing all the work! The recipe for sweet and sour fish fingers (p 142) is deliciously ghastly but typical of the conservative eating of the times. What did you find humorous?

#### 6. Suspense —

Mysteries abound in this text. When Scarlett admits her real name is Sharon Taylor her real mother is nearby and appears to be shocked by the revelation (p 201) but how did she come to be in the Blue Belle Cafe? Is Ra Zachariah a real doctor? Will Jed marry Sam? It also includes 'Cliffhanger' ends to chapters such as: 'A small miracle to change her world, and make her see she needed to share it with him.' (p 251)

**Activity:** Make a list of the events which contribute to suspense and how they are resolved.

#### FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. 'Should the commune become a learning centre for peace studies and alternative technology? How many long-drop dunnies did they need? When exactly would the world run out of oil and other resources, causing global catastrophe and the withering away or violent self-destruction of established societies?' (p 4) Jackie French speaks from experience in slyly making fun of the questions asked in the early days of this commune. Idealism mixed with egocentricity and naivety are a heady mixture! What picture do you glean of the beliefs of John and Annie, Sam, Carol and Clifford?

2. Individual ownership is frowned on in the commune: 'The sandals were Clifford's, or had been, because all property was theft, and what belonged to one belonged to everyone, even if they didn't fit everyone, quite.' (p 6) And yet each have established their own homes. Is community ownership a real possibility?
3. Ra Zachariah's experiments are deeply disturbing until the final horror of his delusion is revealed. 'The tumour was still there. Oneness with the universe meant you knew your body. He knew his extremely well indeed. The tumour might be smaller, but it lurked within his brain. Only when the Elders had the Sacrifice they demanded would he be free, whole and clean, eternal as the universe. Forever.' (p 231) Discuss his actions and how Scarlett deals with them.
4. Jed's uni friend Julieanne introduces her to student politics. 'Instead she had brought Jed into her world: demonstrations against the visiting South African Springbok rugby team; marching in moratoriums against young conscripted Australians being sent to the Vietnam war; arguing about Germaine Greer and should women lead separate lives from men to free them from inevitable tyranny; drinking coffee and eating raisin toast at Gus's till midnight.' (p 21) Research the role that students played in the politics of the 1970s.
5. It's hard to believe that people took the 'End of the world' prediction by Nostradamus in 1972 so seriously. But then the Millennium Bug had us all fooled as well. **Discuss.**
6. 'Jed had a deep suspicion of charities, especially those set up for children. She had seen too much to trust in their goodwill.' (p 30) **Discuss** charities and how carefully they need to be regulated.
7. 'I have always thought that instead money is like water. Let money flow to you and past you, like swimming in a river, and it's good, because then that money can be used for good. Keep it and you will drown. But most rich men don't even know they're drowning.' (pp 32–3) Debate his topic.
8. 'But a Whitlam Labor government seemed impossible. The Liberal Country Party coalition was the government. Labor had come close to winning in the last federal election in 1969 and failed. Even though they won over fifty per cent of the popular vote, the gerrymander meant that each vote in conservative rural electorates with few people living in them counted for more than votes from those in Labor-voting inner-city areas. Why should this year's election be any different?' (p 36) The change in government was a milestone in our politics. Why? [For background to the election win see: 'List of Australian Ministries' Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Australian\\_ministries](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Australian_ministries)]
9. Has the Labor Party fulfilled the policies outlined (p 36)?
10. 'I've done my best for this land we love ... And yet she hadn't, quite. For her flocks of sheep and herds of cattle had plundered the land of the bettongs and bandicoots. Dingoes howled no more along the ranges, lost to traps and baits and guns, even if none had been

set by her. Even Matilda's promise to herself to let the land rest had been broken by the urgencies of two world wars, with cattle needed for corned beef for the army; and because jobs were so badly needed to give men wages and dignity during the Depression. By the 1950s keeping the land at its maximum stocking capacity had become a habit.' (p 46) How difficult is it to use the land in a sustainable way?

**11.** Read any one of the articles included at the head of chapters and discuss the issues raised: land rights (p 63), women (p 69), equal opportunity and export profits (p 75), water pollution (p 82), conscription (p 86), national heritage (p 98), early election (p 103), gerrymander (p 116), impending election win (p 126), alternate views of first actions of Labor government (p 151), farewell Britain (p 162), Labor raid of ASIO (p 180), local action about saving a tree by Cheryl Gladstone (p 202), Sale of Empire Tea Biscuit Company (pp 210–1), New editor announced Ms Cheryl Gladstone (p 214), new parent benefits (p 232), May manifesto (p 244), report of another commune (p 248), heritage protection (p 252), Labor legislation/block for sale (p 256), Christmas (p 271), Sir John Kerr appointed (p 260), Arts funding (p 283), aftermath of floods (p 296), lamb producers' costs (p 312), retirement of Country Party member (p 321), Labor Party has won too few seats (p 327), new wing for Gibber Creek Hospital (p 336), switchboard to be donated to museum (p 343), historic parliamentary joint sitting (p 354), banks collapse (p 362), Treasurer Cairns and June Morosi (p 356), local sewage works (p 371), Cyclone Tracey (p 374), New Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (p 381), Khemlani Affair hits the news (p 386), Racial Discrimination Act (p 391), Vietnamese orphans (p 403), Cairns and other ministers dismissed (p 406), inflation forces a property owner to sell (p 409), Vincent Lingiari and Gurinji people handed land rights by Gough Whitlam in NT (p 416), Albert Field appointed by Joh Bjelke-Petersen to fill formerly Labor Senate seat (p 420), Malcolm Fraser stops supply (p 425), heritage grants and Fraser strategy questioned (p 426), letter to editor about prices (p 430), unpassed bills threaten double dissolution (p 437), rumour that Whitlam intends a double dissolution (p 454), ABC Radio – we want Gough (p 458), world ends – ABC Radio (p 459), Kerr's cur (p 462), Whitlam urges to retain the rage (p 465), Tom Uren (p 466), protests across Australia (p 470), ABC Radio report of dismissal (p 474). Election date (p 478), editorial (p 488), silence in chamber (p 404), opinion polls (p 495), polls open (p 502), liberal victory (p 518), farewell to Matilda (p 519).

**12.** Carol lectures Jed about their sustainable lifestyle being necessary when the capitalist world crashes, but Jed has reservations: 'But 'voluntary poverty' was all very well, as long as it was voluntary. She had been broke, starving, homeless. Her life had been simple, but it had most definitely not been voluntary. Nor was poverty voluntary for much of the world's population. Carol, Leafsong, Sam and probably John and Annie all came from well-off families. They had security bred in their bones.' (p 76) **Discuss.**

**13.** 'She had been so passionate about democracy and women's suffrage when she was young, as if votes for women might make a difference. She doubted it had. Most women still, when asked, said, 'My husband makes the political decisions in our family.' All that the dearly won women's suffrage had achieved had been a doubling of men's votes.' (p 136)

How have women's rights been compromised, and are they continuing to advance?

**14.** The problems the government had with a hostile senate and the prospect of a double dissolution is discussed (p 167). Research and write an analysis of this subject.

**15.** Matilda describes her complex heritage: 'They'd had a daughter, who married a white stockman, and died giving birth to my father. I suspect Auntie Love was the secret behind old Drinkwater's early fortune. She told him where the grass would be, when the droughts, the floods, would come. When to buy and when to sell. She taught me too ... and then she left him. I don't know why, but I can guess.' 'He was ashamed of her?' 'Maybe. I don't know. I do know he loved her as deeply as anyman could do. But you can still be ashamed of those you love.' (p 174) Matilda excuses Drinkwater's actions; but was he to blame for Auntie Love leaving?

**16.** The new 'constitution' of the commune (pp 205–6) humorously reveals the difficulty of maintaining such a system. **Discuss.**

**17.** Sam reflects on the variable climate at Gibber's Creek being just right for growing. 'Seasons: that was it. He liked seasons. And Nimbin had only one.' (p 249)  
**Research and discuss.**

**18.** 'The rest of cabinet says we need a stimulus package to create jobs with more government spending. But the more we spend the less the dollar is worth — that's what's causing the inflation. That and the rising cost of oil, of course. And we can't do anything about that.' (pp 357–8) Economic policy is complex; is Nicholas correct?

**19.** Faced with rising tariffs and companies paying cheap labour costs overseas Jim suggests moving Thompsons' offshore too. 'Your father was proud that Australia led the world in aircraft design, motorcar manufacture, the first refrigeration, movie-making long before Hollywood, ship building and new wireless techniques.' Matilda glanced at Jed. 'Without Australian ingenuity, humans would never have gone to the moon and back. This is the heritage you'd move from our shores now?' (p 377) This is a turning point in Australian manufacturing generally. **Research and discuss.**

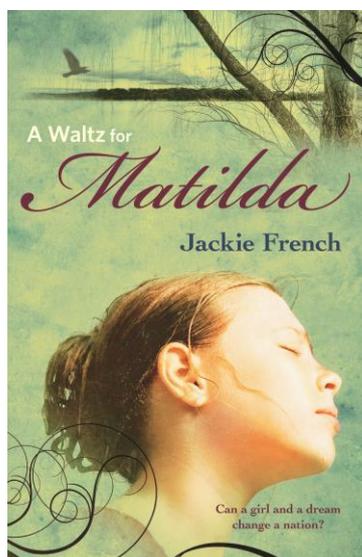
**20.** 'String was not just string. It connected you to your ancestors, to all other women who used it or might do so, to the land itself — so harsh if you did not know it, so generous once you could read its moods and gifts.' (p 427) Matilda has quietly included Indigenous practices and beliefs in her property management. **Research and discuss.**

**21.** 'Money gave power and she had used it. Worse, she hadn't even known she was doing it. Money, her careless abuse of charity, had driven Scarlett away.' (p 454) Jed's realisation is a sanguine one for her. **Discuss.**

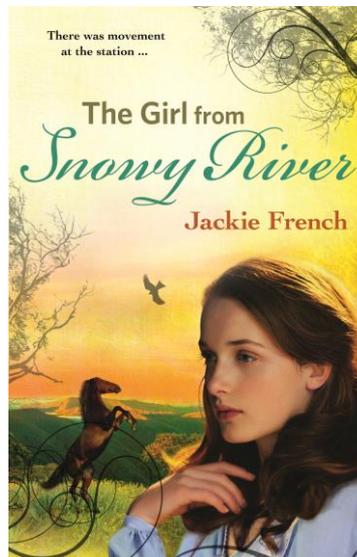
**22.** 11 November 1975 (p 456) Whitlam is dismissed and Ra believe the aliens are coming; thus the author weaves together national and personal issues throughout the novel.

23. 'It was impossible. Governments could not be sacked by a man who was there only to shake hands, cut ribbons, tell people they'd done a jolly good job. And yet it had been.' (p 456) This statement is written in anger; many GGs have demonstrated that the role is more than ceremonial. **Research and discuss.**

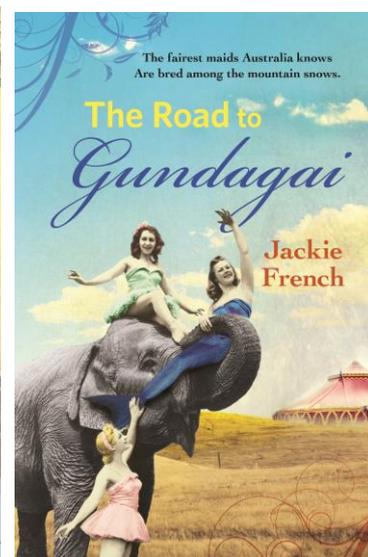
24. *If Blood Should Stain the Wattle* is a family saga, a political manifesto, and a romance. Discuss the various genres and thematic strands it encompasses.



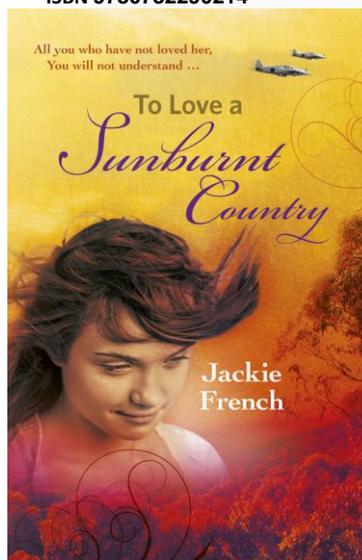
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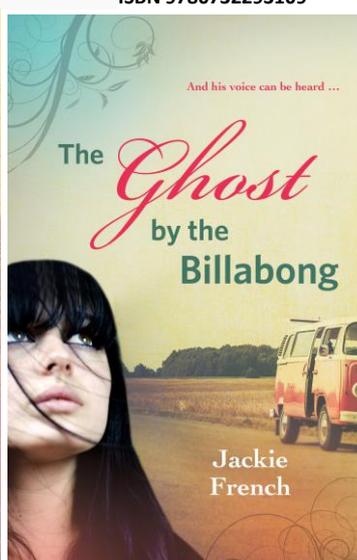
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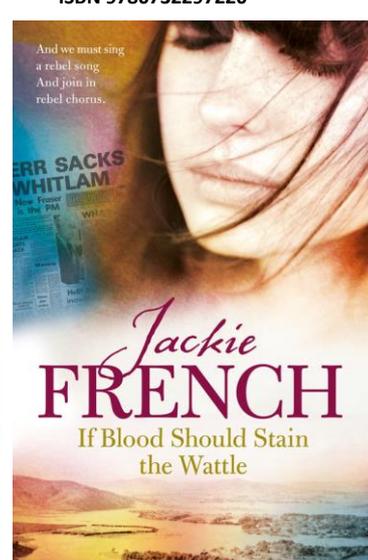
ISBN 9780732297220



ISBN 9781460750421



ISBN 9780732295295



ISBN 9781460753118

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