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The Ghost by the Billabong

By Jackie French

Book Summary:

Hippies wear beads, demonstrators march against the Vietnam War, and the world waits to see the first human steps on the moon's surface.

But at Gibbers Creek, Jed Kelly sees ghosts, from the past and future, at the Drinkwater billabong where long ago the swaggie leaped to his defiant death.

But is seventeen-year-old Jed a con artist or a survivor? When she turns up at Drinkwater Station claiming to be the great-granddaughter of Matilda Thompson's dying husband, Jed clearly has secrets. As does a veteran called Nicholas, who was badly wounded in the Vietnam War and now must try to create a life he truly wants to live, despite the ghosts that haunt him too.

Set during the turbulence of the late 1960s, this was a time when brilliant and little-known endeavours saw Australia play a vital role in Neil Armstrong's 'one giant step for mankind' on that first unforgettable moon walk.

The fifth title in the highly acclaimed Matilda Saga, *The Ghost by the Billabong* is a story of deep conflicts and enduring passions - for other people, for the land, and for the future of humanity.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning Outcomes:

English, History,

Appropriate Ages: 12+

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- **Book Summary**

In 1969, Neil Armstrong's words "That's one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind" echoed across radio and television throughout the world. At the time Jed Kelly, the possible great-granddaughter of Thomas Thompson, one of the richest men in Australia, was making tea and serving biscuits to the men and women at the Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station who were assisting in the operation. *The Ghost by the Billabong* is part of Jackie French's Matilda saga and protagonist Jed Kelly shares similarities to the other strong-minded, tenacious, insightful women in the series. But Jed is unsure of her claim to be a part of the legacy and it will take an old man, his loving family, and a ghost by a billabong to help her see who she really is.

- **Author information:**

Jackie French has been writing fiction and non-fiction for more than 25 years. She has been the recipient of multiple literary and children's choice awards and continues to deliver outstanding works. Jackie French offers young people narratives that provide historical insight as well as exciting stories with characters that are relatable and engaging.

Jackie French lives with her husband in a stone house surrounded by gardens in the Araluen Valley in NSW. She knows a lot about wombats and is an awful speller due to her dyslexia. For more information visit www.jackiefrench.com

- **Reasons for studying this book**

The Ghost by the Billabong introduces students to an era in Australian history that is difficult to define and harder to imagine. The 1960's were a time when sheltered and conservative Australians were developing a greater awareness of their world. The introduction of television meant events, like the Vietnam War and moon landing, were suddenly very real and visible. For students of the 21st century, who are instantly connected via the Internet and rapid technology, Jackie French provides an excellent insight into the history of Australia with characters that students can relate to and events that are compelling and engaging to read about.

- **Themes**

Vietnam War

Women's history and rights

Family

Space Exploration

- **Curriculum Links:**

The following content descriptors have been identified in the Australian National Curriculum at Year 7 for two Key Learning Areas. This is not an exhaustive list, merely a suggestion of key content that could be addressed through reading the text and completing the activities.

English

Identify and explore ideas and viewpoints about events, issues and characters represented in texts drawn from different historical, social and cultural contexts (ACELT1619)

Reflect on ideas and opinions about characters, settings and events in literary texts, identifying areas of agreement and difference with others and justifying a point of view (ACELT1620)

Identify and discuss main ideas, concepts and points of view in spoken texts to evaluate qualities, for example the strength of an argument or the lyrical power of a poetic rendition (ACELY1719)

Compare the ways that language and images are used to create character, and to influence emotions and opinions in different types of texts (ACELT1621)

Plan, rehearse and deliver presentations, selecting and sequencing appropriate content and multimodal elements to promote a point of view or enable a new way of seeing (ACELY1720)

Discuss aspects of texts, for example their aesthetic and social value, using relevant and appropriate metalanguage (ACELT1803)

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts, selecting aspects of subject matter and particular language, visual, and audio features to convey information and ideas(ACELY1725)

Understand how to use spelling rules and word origins, for example Greek and Latin roots, base words, suffixes, prefixes, spelling patterns and generalisations to learn new words and how to spell them (ACELA1539)

History skills and competencies

Sequence historical events, developments and periods (ACHHS205)

Identify a range of questions about the past to inform a historical inquiry (ACHHS207)

Identify and locate relevant sources, using ICT and other methods (ACHHS208)

Use a range of communication forms (oral, graphic, written) and digital technologies (ACHHS214)

Key Questions

- Can ghosts be real, or are they imaginary?
- In the same way that cars, trains and radio made Australia, did space travel make the world?
- Is the genre science fiction a predictor of the future or purely speculative?

Setting the Context:

Before reading the novel it would assist student understanding to complete an inquiry on at least one of the following topics. Investigation questions have been suggested to align research with the context of the novel. Students could share their findings with classmates, or display work on a poster, possibly working in teams, with clear roles to ensure equal participation and efficiency.

Space – What involvement did Australia have with America on space missions in 1968 and 1969? Where is Honeysuckle Creek and what is its significance to Australia's contribution to space exploration? Where is Cape Canaveral and what is its significance to space exploration? Who was the first human to go into space? What is the significance of the Apollo 8 space mission?

Women's liberation movement – What expectations were inflicted on women during the 1960s? What has changed for women since they started to speak out against the unfair rules and stereotypes that governed society? Who were important women around the world who fought for women's rights?

Vietnam War - Why was Australia's involvement in Vietnam controversial? What happened at the Battle of Long Tan? How was Vietnam a different experience for Australia at war in comparison to WW1 and WW2?

Japanese Prisoner of War Camps –What were the conditions like in the POW camps in Japan during WW2? Who was held captive in these camps? How do the terms of the Geneva Convention govern how prisoners of war are to be treated?

Childhood diseases - What is polio? Who was affected? Why do we not have as much incidence of polio now? Discuss with someone older, a parent, or possibly a grandparent what sorts of diseases, illnesses or conditions were prevalent when they were younger and evaluate what has resulted in their limited spread in today's society.

During reading:

Read the first page and then allow students the opportunity to draw a picture of what they visualize after reading the descriptions.

What sort of a person is the protagonist Jed? Start a mood board for students to add words, pictures, colours and quotes to that describe the main character. Review this throughout the reading of the novel to see if there are changes in the character and if these are reflected in what is being added to the mood board.

Fred, the ghost at the billabong, asks Jed to 'be' in the present, not spend her time in the past. He grounds Jed by forcing her to use her senses to smell and listen, to try to keep herself in the present. Ask the class to be silent for two minutes, and in this time they need to listen to the sounds around them and share these afterwards. How did it make them feel to really stop and listen?

Send groups of students out to different parts of the school for five minutes to sit and 'be' in a place. What do they hear, smell?

In Chapter 3 the reader discovers more out about Fred. Is Fred really a ghost?

He uses the term ghost as a metaphor to explain what kind of human behaviour? Discuss what might make people act like ghosts?

After reading:

Use the website below to make a Wordle Word Cloud to display an understanding of the novel. Summarise the events, characters and themes by creating bigger, or smaller words to demonstrate greater significance to the story. Ask students to compare and contrast their Wordle summaries with others and discuss the reasons behind the decisions.

<http://www.wordle.net/>

Activity

Create a family tree that links the characters in the novel. Be creative, this could be presented on a map of the district (if students have read the other books in the Matilda series they could add more). The following characters could be included:

- Tommy Thompson's and first wife (deceased) had Anna
- Anna (deceased) and husband (deceased) had a daughter, Rose
- Tommy married Matilda, the daughter of Jim O'Halloran who was killed by anti-unionists (Waltzing Matilda), and had Michael and James (Jim)
- Jim married Iris and they had two boys
- Michael married Nancy, the granddaughter of Clancy of the Overflow, and had two boys
- Nancy's brother Ben (deceased) married Moira (Matron Clancy) and they had Gavan (deceased)
- Fred (real name is Ben) married to Blue, who was Belle the mermaid during their circus years. Fred faked his own death during WW2.
- Blue remarried Doctor Joseph McAlpine, who works at River View
- Fred has a sister, Mah, who married the Doctor's brother, the manager of Drinkwater, they have a daughter Cheryl
- Dr McAlpine's sister is Flinty McAlpine, an author, who Nicholas goes to stay with
- Nicholas is the son of a friend of Dr McAlpine's and is Jed's boyfriend

Review the poems Clancy of the Overflow and Waltzing Matilda, written by Banjo Paterson, add a verse or alter the lyrics to reflect the revelations discussed in the book.

Activity

Make a timeline, including important people, dates and places of innovation for the following:

Steam age
Electricity
Combustion engine
Nuclear power
Space

Research popular science fiction released during the 1960s-1980. What predictions did authors make that came true? Create a display for the library and find all the science fiction books that might interest other students.

Discussion and writing opportunity – The transmission to the public of the first steps on the moon was delayed in case tragedy happened and the public needed protection (p.387). In our age of instant connections how do our immediate connections, news and information leave us vulnerable and exposed?

Vocabulary:

photosynthesise (p.2)	larder (p.22)	degradations (p. 31)
conscription (p.44)	manoeuvre (p.49)	manipulated (p.54)
derision (p.60)	temerity (p.65)	vehemence (p.66)
crassness (p.67)	mollified (p.68)	vagrants (p.73)
incredulity (p.81)	callipers (p.98)	vaccinations (p.99)
thalidomide (p.99)	forage (p.106)	bunyip (p.107)
blasphemy (p.124)	subsonics (p.126)	apathy (p.131)
dilapidation (p.137)	lechery (p.138)	prognostications (p.175)
fortitude (p/179)	chauvinist (p.184)	accusatory (p.215)
surreptitiously (p.234)	delineating (p.238)	copperplate (247)
jargon (p.248)	inveigle (p.250)	ensconced (p.254)
circumscribed (p.262)	haberdashery (p.264)	magnitude (p.268)
perilous (p.268)	sceptical (p.281)	bereft (p.283)
dastardly (p.309)	reprobate (p.312)	impertinent (p.313)

hoodwink (p.317)	beguile (p.317)	monosyllables (p.327)
pragmatic (p.332)	myriad (p.336)	reprimand (p.337)
omnipotence (p.339)	exoneration (p.367)	fervently (p.383)
oscilloscopes (p.383)	telemetry (p.383)	desolation (p.387)
exultation (p.400)	inert (p.402)	proselytise (p.402)
elation (p.402)	incongruous (p.409)	skedaddled (p.419)
titivate (p.426)	imminent (p.431)	talisman (p.450)
reproachful (p.452)	lanolin (p.453)	imperceptible (p.458)
rebuke (p.458)	emphatic (p.460)	derelict (p.464)
envisaging (p.476)	epitaph (p.478)	charismatic (p.485)
laboriously (p.486)	speculatively (p.486)	bolstered (p.487)
preamble (p.489)	begrudging (p.506)	unanimous (p.513)
eddies (p.516)	natter (p.517)	balk (p.517)
hindering (p.523)		

Extension reading:

- If you haven't already read the Matilda series, catch up on the four previous novels: *A Waltz for Matilda*, *The Girl from Snowy River*, *The Road to Gundagai*, *To Love a Sunburnt Country*
- *To the Moon and Back* by Jackie French and her husband Bryan Sullivan (it's about Honeysuckle Creek)
- More information about Honeysuckle Creek can be found, <http://www.honeysucklecreek.net/>
- NASA <https://www.nasa.gov/>
- The Australian Poetry Library <http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/paterson-a-b-banjo>
- Vietnam War <https://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/vietnam/>

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About the Writer of the notes

Ria Coffey grew up in the country town of Wycheproof in Victoria. Wycheproof boasts the smallest registered mountain in the world and a train line running through the main street. Ria lives in Melbourne and works in a wonderful school library. She is busy making sure all the students and staff have great books to read, which is her life passion, but she always makes time to return to Wycheproof and hike up the mount to watch the sun set.