



Just a Girl

By Jackie French

Summary

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a truly extraordinary woman. And after 2000 years, the story of her brave and remarkable life continues to inspire and enthrall us, as that young woman from Nazareth was never 'just a girl'.

Based on primary sources, this book tells the story of the Mary behind the legend, of her life and her extraordinary legacy, still an inspiration after 2000 years

Themes

Judean History, Life and Customs
Christianity, Roman Empire, Women's Rights and Roles, Slavery, Love, Importance of Reading and Writing,

Learning Areas

English, History

General Capabilities

Critical and Creative Thinking

Ethical Understanding

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Notes by: Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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BOOK SUMMARY

'Shepherding wasn't a job for a girl. Except when the boys and men were gone.' (p 5)

This is the story of five unlikely refugees in Judea in 71 AD, as the Roman army swept like bloodstained locusts across the land. It is also a story of many kinds of love.

It is a 'story within a story'. Two young Jewish sisters, Judith and Baratha, Caius, a Roman slave left for dead, and a goat, hide in a cave with the girls' great-great-grandmother Rabba who remembers the young Maryiam of Nazareth seventy years earlier — a woman who was never 'just a girl'.

And the narrator, too, is not 'just a girl'. For Judith has already learned that since the men have left their village she is able to take on roles not allowed to her before. Her betrothal to Jakob had been organised after three meetings; her sisters were also betrothed – Rakael to Nathaniel and Sarah to James. But now all the men, including their father and brother Samuel, have gone to war and the women must keep the home and farm working.

Sawtha Rabba had, however, lived another more prosperous and elevated life before this current conflict, as the wife of Gideon, a tax collector in Jerusalem, and knows what Romans can do. She understands the power of this empire and how quickly things can be destroyed.

When two bronze chariots ride through the area Rabba knows that they are an advance party and that more will follow. Judith's mother doesn't want to listen. So in the quiet darkness Rabba instructs Judith to carry her to a cave, and to then secretly collect her youngest sister Baratha, as well as the goat, and some supplies. Judith must watch helplessly as her village is destroyed – her mother is murdered and her sisters carried away, after the farms and houses ransacked.

The cave is a secret storehouse. It can meet their physical needs for a very long time - including those of Caius, the Roman slave Judith wounds with her slingshot who is left to die by his compatriots. But the cave's occupants must also survive attack, flood, freezing winter, wolves, and the arrival of Jakob, who has come not to rescue Judith but to steal supplies for his men.

To survive they need courage, and the stories of women who had the strength to survive before them. But the most moving is the one Rabba is unwilling to tell: the tale of her childhood friend, Maryiam of Nazareth, who faced scandal, childbirth among strangers, and the hardest loss a mother can bear - and yet who taught these stories as ones of hope, and joy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jackie French AM is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide-range of topics, genres and age groups, from adult historical fiction and non-fiction, to books for every age group including *Hitler's Daughter* and *Miss Lily's Lovely Ladies*, including her classic picture books like *Diary of a Wombat*.

Of her books she tweeted:

What makes me write:

A letter from a 12-year-old who says books saved her life

A whisper from the past that says, 'remember me'

A paragraph from a great book that sings 'I am reality & beautiful. Make more of us.'

Jackie was the Australian Children's Laureate (2014–15), Senior Australian 2015, Ambassador for the Centre for Children Literature at the University of Canberra Patron, Monkey Baa Theatre Company, Patron Book Links, Patron SPELD QLD, Patron, Wombat Protection Society, Ambassador, Code Read Ambassador. Her website, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram account offer further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work.

[w. www. jackiefrench.com](http://www.jackiefrench.com) [f. @jackiefrenchauthor](https://twitter.com/jackiefrenchauthor) [t. @jackie_french](https://www.facebook.com/jackiefrench) [i. @jackie_french](https://www.instagram.com/jackie_french)

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

When I was 12 years old I wondered who had handed down the Christmas story. The one told every year with the manger, the shepherds, and the wise men. It couldn't have been told by the father, who had died long before the stories began to be collected. Babies don't tell the story of their birth. There was only one person who could have told that tale.

It should be the most tragic story ever told: the scandal of an unwed pregnancy, terrible enough back then for a girl to be cast out, or even killed by her family. Far worse, perhaps, was that journey to Bethlehem, the young man and the girl, alone, terrified, with no women of her family to help her. The birth not in an inn, or the 'visitors room' (depending on which translation you use) with a midwife and birthing herbs, but among the animals. The first visitors shepherds, so low in Judean society that they weren't allowed to give evidence in court.

But this woman - who had also witnessed the agony of the crucifixion - made that memory a story of joy. What can we deduce from that? That Mary/Maryiam became a teacher, like the female students of Rabbi Akiva soon after. That this woman, so famous that she has become almost a cliché of history, was intelligent, resilient, a woman of extraordinary strength and love.

I began to hunt for the historical Mary (or Maryiam or other versions of her name) of Nazareth over half a century ago. This book is based on the archaeological and written evidence from the time. Apart from the scene with Maryiam and the wolves, it can all be substantiated either by a contemporary or near contemporary source, or by deduction from those sources.

But this is a woman who existed. To say I admire and revere her is so great an understatement that I cannot even explain how I feel. I could not write a novel about her, fictionalising 'he said' and she 'said'.

So, this is the story of Maryiam told by three young people asking questions, just as I asked questions, and seen through the memory of one who knew her as a child and as a grieving mother. A story told three young people who, as I did, desperately needed the inspiration not just of courage, but of facing hardship and tragedy with love and joy.

CHARACTERS

- **The Significance of Character:** 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 novel, there are a few major characters and a cast of minor ones.

- **Major Characters:** Judith, Rabba, Baratha, Caius.

Discussion Point:

Discuss the characters of Judith and Caius.

- **Minor Characters:** Ma, Judith's mother, Sarah and Rakael, her sisters, old Elishiba, Jakob.

Discussion Point:

Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?

- **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. Trace the character arc of anyone in this novel, eg. Judith

Connecting to Prior Knowledge

- What did your students know about any of the topics below before reading this novel?
- What did your students know about first century (CE) Judean history before reading this novel?

Exploring the text in context

Invite students to explore aspects of the novel which reflect a particular context such as those listed in the themes below.

Rich Assessment Task

Research any of the topics suggested in these notes more thoroughly and create a unique project related to one of them.

Responding to the text

Invite students to respond to the novel in the following ways:

- Discuss any of the themes listed below.
- Write a review of the novel.
- Create a new cover and back cover blurb for the novel.
- Create a book trailer for the novel.
- Write a synopsis for a sequel to this novel.

Exploring Theme, Plot, and Setting

Themes

Judean History, Life and Customs

Activity:

Research Judean history particularly of the first century (CE).

Activity:

Research Judean life and customs, and discuss how they are revealed in this novel, including, for example, food customs (p 13). Read Jackie French's *Author's Notes* (pp 235–253).

Discussion Point:

The novel describes the destruction of Jerusalem and suggests that Masada is the next place that the Romans are going to after they have sacked Judith's village. Research and discuss both the massacre at Masada and Jerusalem's destruction which were key influences on Jewish history.

Discussion Point: The description of Jerusalem's destruction includes mention of the 'giant siege wall' (p 76) around the city, and that only one part of it was 'left to shelter the army' (p 77) after the city was destroyed – this is referred to as both the Western Wall and the Wailing Wall. Research its significance in Jewish culture.

Discussion Point:

Jackie French discusses language in her *Author's Notes* (pp 235–253) and points out that some words have been misconstrued in translation leading to a misinterpretation of some stories and sayings. Read and discuss this section of her notes.

Activity:

Judith retrieves a text written in Hebrew from her village. This village was situated in the area of Judea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Research their discovery and what they revealed about this cultural history.

Christianity

Activity: Research the growth of Christianity in this first century (CE).

Discussion Point: read these quotes: 'Messiahs!!' Rabba spat to one side. 'Fleas upon the skin of Judea, every one of them. All those messiahs are the cause of all this trouble, this rebellion. We have had enough of messiahs. (p 90) and: "The messiah is to come to save Judea!" Do we look as if we have been saved? Whoever your Joshua was, he was no messiah.' (pp 95–6) Why is Rabba so bitter about the messiah?

Discussion Point: Christians were persecuted in these times for defying Roman beliefs. Nero had Christians crucified or fed to lions (p 99); Caius has hidden his Christianity for fear of being punished or killed. How difficult would it have been to maintain such beliefs in the face of torture and brutal death?

Activity: 'You have heard it said, love your neighbour,' recited Caius, 'and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' (p 170) This is at the heart of Christian faith. How difficult is it to adhere to this tenet?

Activity: Gentile converts to Christianity included large numbers of women and slaves since this new set of beliefs promised the equality they were denied in their daily lives. Women often became leaders during this time, as Paul's letters reveal. Research the role women played in early Christianity and how that changed in subsequent centuries.

Discussion Point: Christians believe that Jesus was crucified and then resurrected from the dead. Judith responds: 'I had heard stories of the Roman Jupiter turning himself onto a swan and Daphne being turned into a bush to escape Apollo. But

surely no one really believed stories like that.' (p 97) Do you share her scepticism or do you find this story credible?

Discussion Point: Mary's Immaculate Conception (pp 163–6) is one of the tenets of Catholicism, but here Rabba explains her pregnancy as an unwedded girl in more prosaic terms – as a scandal. Discuss these two alternative views of this 'miracle'. As any unwed pregnancy was scandalous back then, do these views necessarily contradict each other?

Discussion Point: Rabba's meeting with Maryiam, and how she helped her to conquer her fear of wolves is a parable (pp 197–8) akin to many told in the Bible. Invite students to write a short parable of their own that demonstrates the need for love or courage.

Discussion Point: The familiar Nativity story told through Maryiam's eyes (pp 224–7) is recalled by Rabba. She makes the point that the experience would have been harrowing for a young woman and yet Maryiam recalls only joy. How different an interpretation is this to what you have read elsewhere? Read picture books and novels which explore this story and compare to this novel.

Activity: Caius says to Judith: 'You and I and Rabba believe in the one God, the only God. Jesus was Jewish too.' (p 169) Historian Josephus (37– 100 AD) records that in Christianity's first decades it remained a sect of Judaism. Christians prayed in synagogues which were places of community worship. It was only later that divisions were cemented, as Christians were described as heretics and developed their own places of worship. Research this history further. [See Lieu (2004) in **Bibliography**.]

Discussion Point: How and why did Christianity grow so rapidly in the first centuries (CE)? Read various theories and write a considered analysis of this topic.

Roman Empire

Activity: Research the history of the Roman Empire.

Activity: Research Roman life and customs.

Activity: Research the various Emperors and the control they wielded over the Roman Empire, in particular during the first century (CE). Take note of mention of them in this novel for example, 'Flavius Titus's father Vespasian needs the troops back home' (pp 85–6); 'Yes, the general's father, Flavius Vespasian, has been made

Caesar — the ruler of Rome.’ (p 133); ‘everyone in Rome had to pretend the Emperor Nero was the most handsome man ever born’’ (p 183).

Activity: Research the Roman and tax collection system, as well as that of the Temple and King Herod. (Rabba’s beloved husband Gideon was a tax collector.)

Activity: The Jewish were persecuted as rebels against the Roman government, and Caius explains to Judith that: ‘Most people who live in Judea are Gentiles — Romans, Greeks, people from many countries. Maybe even two out of three are not Jewish.’ (p 134) This is a shock to her as, living in a small, isolated village, she has a blinkered view of her world. Such ignorance must have made Jewish villages prime targets for Roman expansion. Discuss.

Women’s Rights and Roles

Discussion Point: Judith has had to act as shepherd while the men are at war and when she comes home filthy her sister Sarah says to her: ‘A modest girl is as beautiful as a red harness on a white horse.’ (p 13) Such attitudes controlled and confined as much as they taught. Discuss.

Discussion Point: Rabba is determined that Judith will make something of her life: ‘I want you to carve a place in the world, girl, not be lost in a women’s courtyard, making bread and spinning wool and hearing nothing but the same gossip every day.’ (p 208) Discuss the conventions which Judith must resist in order to achieve her true potential, for example, betrothal; performing only ‘women’s work’; allowing men to make decisions for her; not being able to read or write.

Discussion Point: Rabba instructs Judith about what is expected of a wife (pp 204–6) and how to please a husband ‘almond cake will win you more than vinegar with a husband.’ (p 206) Discuss her advice.

Discussion Point: ‘It wasn’t Maryiam’s fault,’ she whispered, suddenly looking far away. ‘Things happen to women sometimes, no matter how carefully they behave. Rakael, Sarah ... no blame attaches to them for what they might endure now.’ (p 207). What is Rabba suggesting here?

Discussion Point: Rabba tells Judith to visit another cave where a dowry chest has been hidden (pp 216–7) and they discover it is full of treasures. Research and discuss the practice of dowry giving.

Love

Activity: 'Then I won't go, he said. As long as you need me, I'll be here.' (p 124) Caius has been given his freedom by Judith but willingly enters into a pact to stay and help her family; such self-sacrifice is one aspect of love which is explored in this novel.

Discussion Point: 'All my life I have remembered Maryiam in that courtyard. All she had been through, her life of loss and grief and pain. Yet her life was none of those, for it was filled with love.' (p 227) This observation lies at the heart of this novel, for faith lies in the ability to love one another and to forgive others for the pain they inflict on you.

Discussion Point: Rabba says as she lies dying in a freezing dirty cave: 'There is love here. I will die as rich as I ever was in life.' (p 228) This is one of the most moving scenes in the book for Rabba has always spoken so proudly of her former wealth and stylish life, but now speaks at last of what is most important to her.

Discussion Point: Rabba tells Judith why she saved her: 'You fought for your family. I saved you because you have the strength of love. You were never just a girl.' (p 228) Where does Judith derive her strength from?

Slavery

Discussion Point: 'A skill is the only thing a slave truly owns; that and his soul.' (p 129) Discuss slavery and why it is such a corrupt practice.

Discussion Point: 'You can't think, I want to be a Christian, like my parents. A slave is supposed to think only what he is told to think, no matter what ideas he hears, or reads in the scrolls.' (p 131) Caius has had to deny his every instinct in order to survive as a slave. How difficult would it be to continually hide your true feelings?

Discussion Point: 'Maybe a slave is someone who doesn't dream of challenging his masters.' (pp 185–6) Rabba challenges Caius in order to encourage him to learn how to use a slingshot. He is not in the habit of acting on his own behalf and has to be teased into doing so. How easy would it be to have lived as a slave and then to live freely?

Importance of Reading and Writing

Discussion Point: 'When you can read scrolls you meet every person who wrote them. You can learn the history of the world, hear people dead for hundreds of years argue about what is right and wrong. I loved my scroll work.' (p 131) Caius infects Judith with his love for the written word and begins to teach her the alphabet. This

novel confirms the role that writing plays in broadening one's understanding of the world.

Discussion Point: 'But the only alphabet I can teach you is the Roman one ... There is little written in Hebrew, even though it is fairly widely spoken. I think it will be spoken and written even less now.' (p 169) Caius explains to Judith why he will teach her the Roman alphabet; this passage suggests that writing can also be a way of excluding some people as well.

Discussion Point: The Bible (New Testament) contains one set of interpretations of this history. However, historians and other primary sources present some alternative interpretations. (See 'Sources for the historicity of Jesus' *Wikipedia* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sources_for_the_historicity_of_Jesus> Read some excerpts from these sources and discuss the importance of examining a variety of sources when researching history.

Discussion Point: Caius prepares deer hide as vellum, makes ink from lamp black mixed with tallow, and writing quills from bird feathers, in order to record stories for his account of Maryiam's life. Such materials and implements were vital in sharing knowledge. The availability of materials for transmission of ideas – from drawings on rock walls, to hieroglyphics, to hand-lettered manuscripts, to printing and now to digital files – has always been vital in sharing knowledge. Research the development of writing.

Values

Discussion Point: Discuss some of the incidents which reveal values or morals in this text, for example, Jakob believes in the war they are fighting but is willing to raid the foodstores of Judith's village in order to feed his fellow troop members (pp 143–5). Judith is determined to save her sister Baratha, great-great grandmother Rabba, and Caius, and so tricks Jakob into following her (p 153) and he is killed by a flood. Both have strong beliefs. Were either/both of their actions warranted?

Discussion Point: Caius says: 'I cannot not believe just because it would make my life easier.' (p 100) He is referring to his Christianity but this statement could apply to anyone with a strongly held belief. How difficult is to uphold your principles in the face of a society's or a community's disagreement?

Plot

Discussion Point: The novel is suspenseful and action-packed despite the fact that it is largely set in a cave in a wadi. Discuss the elements of the plot which the author has created in order to maintain the reader's engagement.

Setting

Discussion Point: Research the setting described in this novel, for example, 'Our village had no wall, but the thick mud walls of every house abutted the next, with no doors or windows facing outside.' (p 4) What images do you glean from such descriptions?

Activity: Draw a map of the village, with the landscape surrounding it. Research building with adobe, or pise, and how the walls may be protected from rain.

Examining text structure and organisation

Discussion Point: This novel is structured as a past tense account of the year 71 (CE) with flashbacks to a time seventy years earlier. Rabba's memories of that time, frame these accounts of Maryiam and her son Jesus. The novel ends with Judith, Baratha and Caius leaving the cave (with their faithful goat) and embarking on an unknown journey. This open ending is suggestive and intriguing adding further to the reader's engagement. What might take place in a sequel to this novel?

Discussion Point: Chapters open and close with impact, for example:

Beginning: 'Rabba must have heard us.' (Ch 10, p 66) Ending: 'That was how I saw my village die. And could do nothing.' (Ch 4, p 33) How important are chapter beginnings and endings in structuring a narrative?

Examining grammar and vocabulary

Discussion Point: This novel employs literary devices in its evocative language, but only uses the images that would have been familiar to a girl at that time. Examples include: 'The sky was a cloudless cloak' (p 3); '*as still as a pomegranate tree*' (p 5); 'A sickle moon shone over us as if the wadi drank its light, clothing the cliffs with gold, the shadows flickering as clouds webbed and folded across the sky.' (p 166); 'Snow clouds hung over the valley, fat as a pregnant sheep, purple as grapes. Snow fell in sharp cold flakes and gathered into icicles that slithered down the wadi walls like

frozen snakes.' (p 184) Locate other such examples and identify the devices employed in them.

Discussion Point: Words set the historical tone, eg. a 'coney' (p 6) is a rock badger (p 248); a 'wadi' (in Arabic-speaking countries) is a word for a valley, ravine, or channel that is dry except in the rainy season; a 'quern' (p 106) was a grinding stone; grain was ground on an elongated basalt stone that was moved back and forth on a base. What other words were foreign to you? Make a list and discover their meanings.

Discussion Point: Humour appears throughout the novel, for example, in two passages about Rabba: 'Rabba was.... argued.' (p 10) and: 'She cackled ... But it wasn't Wise Mother' (p 219). What other examples of humour did you discover in this novel?

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