

The Last Dingo Summer

Reading Group Guide

About the book

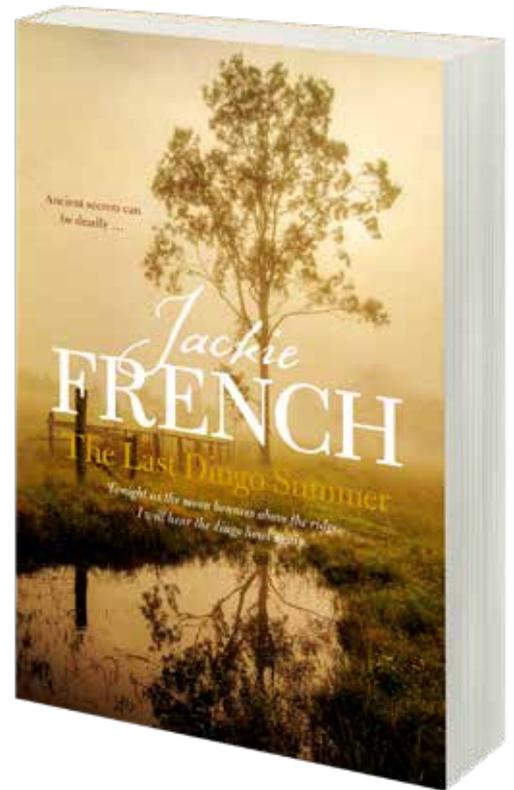
A body has been found in the burned-out wreckage of the church at Gibber's Creek — with older skeletons lying beneath it.

The corpse is identified as that of Ignatius Mervyn, the man who attempted to kill Jed Kelly and her unborn child.

Newcomer Fish Johnstone is drawn into the murder investigation, convinced that the local police are on the wrong track with their enquiries. But as she digs beneath the warm and welcoming surface of the Gibber's Creek community, more secrets emerge.

And Fish must also face her own mystery — the sudden appearance and then disappearance of her father, a Vietnamese refugee she never knew.

Set during the Indigenous rights and 'boat people' controversies of the late 1970s, this haunting story shows how love and kindness can create the courage to face the past.



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 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.

jackiefrench.com
facebook.com/authorjackiefrench

Jackie FRENCH

on female perspectives in the Matilda Saga

The Matilda Saga is the story of our nation: the women's story. Women have for so long been written out of history. It begins with Matilda, the shearer's daughter who watched her swaggie/unionist father leap into the billabong to escape being set up by the squatter and the troopers, and drowned tangled in waterlilies. 'But they never mentioned the daughter in the song', the older Matilda says. 'They never do think to mention the women who were there.'

Flinty McAlpine is 'The Girl from Snowy River', the counterpoint to the machismo of the songs and poem; Nancy of the Overflow is the granddaughter of Clancy, and the dark-skinned woman he married, which was why he'd 'gone to Queensland drovin', and we don't know where he are'. Jed Kelly, Blue McAlpine, Scarlett Kelly-O'Hara — each era has its own heroine as we see our nation reflected in the changes of Gibber's Creek.

But the saga is a love song, too. Each of the strong women in this series loves her land and her people, and fights for them. But women often have different ways of loving — and fighting for what they love — than men.

And yes, there is possibly a little of myself in every one of them, from Matilda's growing understanding of country through the lessons of Auntie Love, to Jed, who uses the written word as the tools to love and protect her country. History is so often white men in cities, told in dry facts. This history is a women's history, a history of the land, the farms, the country towns, told with scones and apple cake and cups of tea, and stories.

Reading group questions

- Merv is portrayed as a villain, but is anyone ever wholly bad? Discuss what might have been other aspects of his character. Did he deserve his fate? Can he be seen as simply exemplifying the masculine ideas of his time of ownership of women?
- Jed sits by the bed of her unconscious husband, and even takes her child there. If Sam does not regain consciousness, how much of her life — and that of their daughter's — should be devoted to someone who may, or may not, know they are there and cannot communicate with them?
- The Matilda Saga is primarily about women. Is this why food plays such a large part in creating the atmosphere of the various households? Discuss the role of food in the houses of Moura, Dribble and Overflow in this book, and Rock Farm and Drinkwater in earlier books in this series.
- This is a book about secrets. In this #metoo era, should some stories from the past not be told? The women in this book hide assault, rape and anguish from their descendants. Are they right to do so, so that they do not have to share the pain? Or should all the evil of the past be exposed, even if hearing the stories may give pain to the innocent?
- Jackie French has been quoted as saying that fiction reveals more about the author than non-fiction, and that all her stories are based on real events. Which of the places, events and people in this book, and others in the series, do you think are based on her own experience?
- This novel is written from many points of view, including that of the killer. Could it have been written from the point of view of only one person? Or does appreciating the points of view of so many characters help the reader develop understanding and empathy for lives and circumstances beyond their own?
- Jackie French began her Senior Australian of the Year acceptance speech with the words: 'A book can change a child's life. A book can change the world.' Do you agree?