

THE GIRLS WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

# MING & FLO

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE



JACKIE FRENCH

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Angus & Robertson

An imprint of HarperCollins *Children's Books*

*I write my books on Dhurga land of the Yuin nation.  
I give my love and gratitude to elders past, who created  
the living larder and the beauty of my home Country;  
my love, respect and endless admiration to the elders  
of today, who give their knowledge so generously and  
profoundly to us all; and my love and confidence in the  
all the elders of the future. — JF*

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*'Men must work and women must weep'* is a  
quote from the poem *'The Three Fishers'*

by English poet, novelist and priest  
Charles Kingsley in 1851.

*The first pub we come to,  
There we'll have a spree,  
And everyone who comes along  
It's 'Come and drink with me!'.*

Lyrics from the traditional Australian ballad,  
*Click Go the Shears*

*To Lisa, who changes the world in the  
thousand ways of a brilliant editor;  
and to Jack and Tom, always*

## PROLOGUE

*Ming gazed at the tiger. Its bloodstained teeth  
grinned at her. She lifted her skirts to run ...*

*But there was no escape.*

*Of all the stupid things she'd ever done,  
this was the worst. And all because of goat  
droppings ...*

# CHAPTER 1

## THE DAUGHTER OF TIME

*The deck lurched as the wrecked ship sank.*

*‘We need to use the goat droppings, sir!’  
gasped Jonathon.*

*Captain Cook stared at the young man.  
‘Goat droppings?’*

*Down in the hold sailors screamed as the  
water rose ...*

Ming Qong could feel the bite of the coral that had shattered the *Endeavour* on the Great Barrier Reef. She could even smell the goat droppings.

If only she *were* there ...

‘The dry droppings absorbed water to seal the sail

to the damaged hull so Captain Cook could get the ship to shore,' droned Mr Boors.

The class snickered at the word 'droppings', except for Kayla, who was texting under the desk, and Karuna, trying to balance a pen on his nose, and Tuan, who was reading the last page of the textbook. Again.

Ming sighed.

Mr Boors had a rare talent. Exciting history became dull as soon as he opened his mouth.

'Jonathon Monkhouse changed history,' said Mr Boors with no sign of interest at all. 'Without him Cook would have never returned to England. There wouldn't have been a British colony at Sydney Cove or today's Australia. Now if you all turn to page forty-five ...'

Ming's hand shot up before she'd realised it. 'Sir, why don't we ever learn about *girls* who changed history? I mean girls are changing the world right now, like Greta Thunberg and all the girls demonstrating and inventing. Where were girls at all the important times in the past?'



‘That’s a very good question,’ said Mr Boors, which was what teachers said instead of ‘Can we just get this lesson over with?’ ‘Can anyone suggest a girl who changed the world? Yes, Tuan?’

Be quiet, Tuan, thought Ming, exasperated.

Brothers! Especially twin brothers. *Especially* Tuan, who thought he knew *everything* about history just because they’d both read all Dad’s textbooks from when he did history as well as engineering at uni. Tuan liked the kind of movies where the pirates wore shiny leather boots. Pirates never wore shiny boots at sea because they’d have slid off the deck in the sloppy droppings of the animals ships had to take to sea just so people could *survive ...*

Ming imagined Tuan sliding off the deck in sloppy goat droppings.

Tuan flashed a grin at Ming. ‘It’s a stupid question, sir. Girls *couldn’t* change the world back then. Women didn’t even get the vote till last century. Girls in the past stayed at home or were servants or dairymaids and stuff.’

This is revenge, thought Ming. Last night she'd caught Tuan watching that movie where the Americans captured the German Enigma code machine *months* before the US entered World War II. *And he hadn't even noticed they got it wrong till Ming had pointed it out to everyone in the boarding house!*

Mr Boors nodded absent-mindedly. 'Exactly. Now, everyone turn to page forty-five.'

Tuan sent Ming another grin, the same grin she sometimes saw in the mirror, just like she and Tuan both had Dad's Chinese-Vietnamese face shape and hair but blue eyes that had probably come from some Viking ancestor of Mum's — not that their mum had been around long enough to ask her.

Ming gazed around. Wasn't *anyone* going to come up with a suggestion? But the class were turning to page forty-five, except for Kayla, who was still texting, and Karuna, who'd decided to balance his history book on his head.

And the problem was, Tuan was probably right, even if he *had* told her to hush last week when she'd tried to tell the rest of the boarding house

how Mel Gibson shouldn't have worn a tartan kilt in *Braveheart* because tartan kilts hadn't even been *invented*, and blue face painting had gone out of fashion more than a thousand years before, not to *mention* the white car in the background of one of the battles. How could teachers allow schools to show movies that got stuff wrong like that?

Boarding School was Boring School. Except for Tuan her most interesting friends were all in books and lived at least a hundred years ago ...

Ming shut her eyes again, trying to let the whole of time seep through her mind. She could almost smell the centuries.

Oh, there were heroines and lots of queens, but had any one of them really entirely changed the world? And they'd all been a lot older than her. She focused as hard as she could. She *had* to find at least *one* girl who'd changed the world ...

'Brothers,' said someone with loathing, just behind her.

'Tuan's okay,' said Ming absent-mindedly. At least Tuan didn't call her Princess Nerd. She blinked.

Who'd said that?

Suddenly she realised the class was silent. No scuffling shoes, no droning voice. Even the traffic no longer muttered in the distance. Kayla's fingers had stopped and the book toppling from Karuna's head seemed suspended forever. Tuan was studying page forty-five, even though he knew what was on it just as well as Ming did.

Ming looked around.

The woman sitting on the windowsill just behind her seemed tall, though she wasn't, and old and young and both close and very far away. Her skin seemed more gold than tan and she wore a long purple garment and purple joggers, and held a mauve umbrella over her long silver hair.

And Ming knew her, even though they'd never met before. This woman had been with her, sensed but not seen, every time Ming imagined the past. 'You're ... History?' What am I saying? she thought desperately. This couldn't be happening!

'History's my brother.' The silver-haired woman sighed. 'He's okay too, just a bit too sure of himself.'

It's not his fault you humans only tell his side of the past. I'm Herstory.'

Ming shook her head. Had her brain broken? 'I don't understand.'

Herstory looked annoyed. 'Most people don't. Most people don't even *see* me. At least you can.'

Ming stared as the figure in the window crossed her legs in their purple joggers. This was no hallucination. 'What do you mean *his* side of the past?'

'Think about it! Ancient humans faced mammoths armed with bone-tipped spears — and the women hunted with the men,' said Herstory enthusiastically. 'People sailed on flimsy rafts to new continents or islands, and if there hadn't been women on those rafts, there'd have been no new humans. Who do you think baked the first bread? Bred wild red jungle fowl to become tame chickens? And we're talking girls too, not just women, because through most of human past women and girls worked together just like boys learned from the men.'

'Then why aren't girls in the history books?'

‘Did you hear what you just said? *His* story. We’ve had a long period of time in the most powerful parts of the world where men have controlled the way the world worked. Men have been the rulers, the property owners. Men wrote the history books — and they mostly wrote them to please kings or generals or male politicians.’

‘You mean they lied?’ People who lied about the past deserved to be trodden on by cockroaches.

Herstory shook her head, making her umbrella wobble. ‘No. They mostly just told only part of the truth. The bits they thought mattered. *History*, not mine.’

Ming glanced around the silent class, then back at the figure on the windowsill. ‘Why are you here?’

Herstory looked amused. ‘I’m always here.’

‘Why have you *appeared* now then?’

‘Because you called me.’

‘But I didn’t ...’ Ming hesitated. ‘Maybe I did.’

‘You longed to see a girl in the past change the world.’

Suddenly Ming realised she did, more than anything she could think of. ‘Can you show me that?’

‘Of course. On one condition.’

Ming tried not to bounce up to the ceiling with excitement. ‘Anything!’ she said enthusiastically.

‘You make a note of what you see. Everything you see that has been left out of all the history books you’ve read, all the “herstory” that’s been ignored. You write it down, all of it. Then you show it to everyone, including your brother — and I can show it to mine.’

‘Of course! I’ll write about *everything!*’ Ming could just imagine Tuan’s face when she told him where she’d been. This would be a billion times better than telling him about Braveheart’s fake kilt. What happened in the past explained the present. It *mattered*. ‘But how do I prove that I’ve actually seen the past?’

‘You don’t. But women’s stories are there, waiting to be found in old diaries, in letters, even sometimes in newspapers. Once you’ve seen the past, you’ll know what to look for. Write it as an essay, even as a

story, just as long as people know that the things that happened in it were true.’ Herstory grinned. ‘Any other questions?’

‘Why the joggers?’

‘Sometimes Time goes fast.’

‘And the umbrella?’

‘It’s going to rain some time. Ah yes, here it is.’ Herstory held her hand out the window to catch raindrops that scattered in a brief sunlit shower. She looked back at Ming, the drops in a small blue glowing pile in her hand. ‘Do you truly want to see the past?’

‘Of course.’

‘You’re not frightened by what you might see? The past isn’t always pretty.’

‘I’m not worried.’ Crocodiles, sword fights, the spears of advancing armies — Ming could face them all. She and Tuan had studied judo since they were seven. When other kids had been playing video games, they’d been bushwalking with Dad. And due to her education she’d know more than anyone she met back in the past. That had to help.



‘You should be worried. The past is — uncomfortable. Even the best of times lacked things like phones. Or air-conditioning. Or safety from wolves or sabre-toothed tigers. Dentists. Queen Elizabeth’s rotting teeth ached most of her life.’

‘Queen Elizabeth was wonderful!’ Though she’d been almost old when she led England against the invading Spanish, banished from court or imprisoned when she’d been a girl.

‘Queen Elizabeth still didn’t have a dentist.’

Herstory looked down at the raindrops in her hand, then poured most of them out. The drops shone as they hit the ground, then evaporated.

Herstory looked back at Ming. ‘These will give you forty-two days in the past to watch a girl change the world. You’ll see but not touch. No one will hear you or see you either.’

‘What?’ Ming stared at her. ‘No! I want to be *in* the past! I want to be part of it!’ Watching things happen wouldn’t be much better than a movie — more accurate, but boring too, because she’d have to watch people sleeping or cutting their toenails.

Herstory shook her head. 'It's too dangerous.'

'I can look after myself.'

Herstory looked amused again. 'Against exploding volcanoes? Enemy bombs?'

'Then send me where there aren't any volcanoes or enemy bombs. Please! I want to *be* a girl who changes the world.' Excitement trickled through her. She'd be a princess or an explorer. She could invent something incredible ...

'I didn't just mean there'd be danger to you. You're going back to a time that changed the world. If the world isn't changed, the present will be different.'

'Then I might not be born?'

'Possibly. All this ...' Herstory waved her hand at the frozen classroom, Tuan, the cars stopped outside, '... might not exist either. Australia as we know it might not exist. I know what *did* happen, not what *can* happen.'

'I still want to go.'

Herstory gazed at her, suddenly serious. 'Very well, I'll give you some Time.'

Suddenly Ming's hand held two raindrops. Or Time drops, small and not quite blue, and not quite transparent either, as though Time might have been compressed like ancient forests into diamonds.

'Those are enough to *watch* six weeks in the past. Forty-two days, to see how a girl changed the world.'

Ming gazed at the drops glowing in her hand. 'Why me?' she whispered.

Herstory smiled. The sky seemed to ripple in a smile with her. 'Because you're a daughter of Time, my dear. I always know my daughters. I always have Time for them too.'

Ming looked at her, suddenly suspicious. That sounded much too sweet. It didn't *mean* anything either.

A daughter of Time? Ming didn't think much of mothers. Her and Tuan's mum had left soon after they were born. Dad hardly spoke of her. If Herstory thought of her as a daughter, why hadn't she ever sent a birthday card?

No *proper* mother would make her daughter just *watch* the past, instead of being part of it. A mother

who really knew her would trust that she'd make the right decisions and change the world, exactly as it should be changed.

Ming looked again at the two drops in her hand. Two weren't enough.

*Well-behaved women seldom make history.* Who had said that?

Raindrops still glittered on the sill. Or were they Time drops? Ming touched them gently. She half expected her hand just to feel wet. But instead the drops suddenly glowed like the ones in her hand.

If two were enough to see the past, would more mean that she was really there?

She scooped up four more drops.

'No!' Herstory slid off the windowsill and reached towards her, growing bigger all the time.

Ming grinned. Herstory really only did know what *had* happened. She'd never guessed what might come next. So much for thinking Ming was her dutiful little daughter.

Ming lifted the drops to her mouth.

## CHAPTER 2

### TIME TASTING

The corridor stretched forever, dappled with a million doors. Light came from everywhere and nowhere. Ming couldn't feel the floor with her feet, though she could see it, and when she took a step her body moved closer to the nearest door. The door handle was carved into a snarling face. She touched it cautiously.

Locked.

Had she come to the wrong place? Not to the past, but to ... to somewhere else, outside reality maybe? The air around her pulsed, as if with a gigantic heartbeat.

She crossed to the door on the other side of the corridor and tried that. Still nothing. But she could

hear sounds on the other side. An explosion and then another. People screaming ...

Maybe the doors led to different times and places. Maybe there was one that led where she was supposed to go.

Or perhaps after gulping down too much Time she'd be stranded here in nowhere forever, starving, dying of thirst. Or worse, *not* starving nor dying of thirst, but wandering always down an endless corridor.

The next door handle sneered at her with narrowed eyes. It didn't budge either, but this time she heard laughter and someone singing. There were happy times in the past too.

Another door. Another. Frowns, jeers, scowls. One door handle even poked its tongue out at her. Another, another, another ...

Some doorways were silent. Perhaps beyond them it was night. Perhaps everyone was dead. Or wearing headphones and watching computer screens. Or waiting silently with spears for an intruder ...

At the next door a small boy's voice said hopelessly, 'I'm hungry,' then he began to cry.

Ming pulled at the handle, ignoring its lion's teeth, though she didn't know how she could help the boy. She hadn't even brought her lunch with her. Note to self: always bring your lunch when walking through the past.

It was no use: that door was locked tight too. She forced herself to walk on.

She thought of Dad. Mostly these days Dad was a face on the video link, because flying both her and Tuan back and forth to the remote community where he was a mining engineer was expensive. If she failed to change the world, would Dad and Tuan disappear as well? She forced the guilt back, because there was nothing she could do about it now.

Battle noises behind this door, but not like the soundtrack of the movie Tuan had watched last night. This was agony no actor could imitate, the shriek of shells then a moment's silence before the screams.

She almost ran to the next door. The doorknob stared up at her, expressionless. Waiting. She reached it, expecting nothing.

It opened.

Ming tasted Time.