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Miss Lily's Lovely Ladies

By Jackie French

Book Summary:

A tale of espionage, love and passionate heroism.

Inspired by true events, this is the story of how society's 'lovely ladies' won a war.

Each year at secluded Shillings Hall, in the snow-crisped English countryside, the mysterious Miss Lily draws around her young women selected from Europe's royal and most influential families. Her girls are taught how to captivate a man — and find a potential husband — at a dinner, in a salon, or at a grouse shoot, and in ways that would surprise outsiders. For in 1914, persuading and charming men is the only true power a woman has.

Sophie Higgs is the daughter of Australia's king of corned beef and the only 'colonial' brought to Shillings Hall. Of all Miss Lily's lovely ladies, however, she is also the only one who suspects Miss Lily's true purpose.

As the chaos of war spreads, women across Europe shrug off etiquette. The lovely ladies and their less privileged sisters become the unacknowledged backbone of the war, creating hospitals, canteens and transport systems where bungling officials fail to cope. And when tens of thousands can die in a single day's battle, Sophie must use the skills Miss Lily taught her to prevent war's most devastating weapon yet.

But is Miss Lily heroine or traitor? And who, exactly, is she?

Themes

Woman's rights, independence, class and wealth, WW1 causes and effects. Love and sexuality, childhood, loss, colonials and empire, racial prejudice

Recommended for: Upper Secondary Students

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Introduction

'But someone like me can't change history.' (p 115)

Miss Lily's *Lovely Ladies* is the first novel in Jackie French's planned new series. It opens in Flanders, France in 1917 with Australian Sophie Higgs travelling in a vehicle on a personal mission with a man who apparently once loved her and who has been seconded to drive her to the front line of World War One at Ypres. They shelter when their vehicle is hit and she begins to tell him the background to her friendship with Miss Lily and all that followed...

The novel flashes back to 1903, and to Sophie's life in Sydney as the daughter of Jeremiah Higgs, a wealthy producer of corned beef who, because he is 'in trade' is frowned upon by a colonial society dominated by those 'on the land'. Sophie's mother mysteriously disappeared when she was a child and she has been educated by a Miss Thwaites who has been a constant and dearly loved companion. 'You're not my mother?' (p 88)

When Sophie forms an attachment to Malcolm Overhill, the son of a wealthy grazier, her father decides to send her away to England. Via a North Western Frontier (now Afghanistan) connection of her father's, Nigel Vaile, Earl of Shillings, Sophie is sent to his home, the Shillings Estate, to be 'taught' by a Miss Lily and to be 'brought out' in society. She is joined there by her companions Lady Alison, Hannelore (the Prinzessin) and Miss Emily Carlyle. Miss Lily's 'lovely ladies' are not the first to benefit from her mysterious tutelage. And what she has to teach is far more than the rudiments of English and mathematics. For she also schools the girls in etiquette, political history, and the secret skills of charm, flirtation and intrigue with which to gain greater power in a male-dominated society.

Sophie meets several men, and realises that her life has been sheltered in body and mind. When World War One breaks out, she doesn't sit idle, but pioneers Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Wooten's hospital and then a number of field hospitals in France.

This is a complex story about Sophie's struggle to discover how best to live as a woman in this society, and in these changing times, and of her friendship with four possible suitors – Malcolm Overhill, James Lorrimer, Angus McIntyre and Count Adolphus von Hoffenhausen (Dolphie) – and the unpredictable wages of war.

This is a story that explores pain and suffering and the hardships and horror of war – and there are scenes of violence. It is not a predictable story, either, for the twists and turns of the plot are often most unexpected. Readers will find this an engrossing and challenging work which invites further research and consideration of the many themes it explores.

"Sophie Higgs is an inspiring and indefatigable heroine and one senses that we have not heard the end of her travels! "

Before Reading

- What do you know about World War One and the part women played in the conflict? What do you know about Australia's part in the war?
- What do you know of Jackie French's other work?
- What do you know of colonial Australian society and its relationship to the British Empire?

While Reading

- Take note of major themes or issues to discuss later.
- Make a character chart listing the major and minor characters.
- Trace a 'character arc' for one of the characters noting changes in their personalities. eg Emily or Alison.

After Reading

Activity:

Most chapters begin with a quote from Miss Lily.

(Exceptions are: Ch. 45 Dodders to Soapy 1915; Ch. 49 Sophie Higgs 1918; Ch. 51 Sophie Higgs 1918 ; Ch. 52 Sophie Higgs 1918; Ch. 53 No quote; Ch. 54 Dodders to Soapy 1917; Ch. 55 Chaplain Roger Merryweather's sermon, the morning he died, 1916; Ch. 56 Chaplain Merryweather's final sermon, 1916; Ch. 57 The Dowager Duchess of Wooten to Miss Lily, September 1917; Ch. 58 and 59 and 60 No quotes; Ch. 63 Sophie 1958; Ch. 65 No quote; Ch. 68 The Earl of Shillings to the Dowager Duchess of Wooten, 1919; Ch. 69 Sophie, writing many decades later to her granddaughter, undated.)

Discuss one of these quotes in relation to the themes of the novel.

Activity:

Choose a major theme and analyse how it is presented in this novel, choosing passages which relate to it. [See also Suggested Tasks for Assessment below.]

Activity:

Which character would you like to have seen more of and why?

Activity:

What other title or cover might this book have had? Design your own cover.

Style and Structure

Discussion Point:

The story is told in alternating chapters set in 1917 and in the nearly two decades leading to it. (So, for example, in Chapter 2, we find Sophie in Sydney in 1903.) This oscillating view of the action allows the writer to both maintain suspense and to lay tantalising clues to be guessed at and discovered.

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Discussion Point:

Several characters in this novel evince a wry and satirical sense of humour, for example, Dolphie: 'The other guests are out walking up hills,' said the count. 'If I had wanted to go on a march up hills, I could have stayed at home and joined the army.' 'I am sure you march divinely, Dolphie.' 'I waltz divinely. I march reluctantly. Do you know German officers are forbidden to waltz? It might corrupt them.' Dolphie waggled his eyebrows at her. 'Will you waltz with me one evening, Miss Higgs?' 'I would adore to waltz with you.' She gazed at him through her lashes. 'I would adore to talk to you properly too.' (p 246) Her Grace: 'I never did enjoy petit point or embroidery, and as for tapestry ... This house is full of the handiwork of ten generations of bored women, and a nice job it is protecting it from the mice and moths too. The Abbey doesn't need my contributions.' (p 351)

Who or what incident did you find most humorous and why?

Theme: - Women's Rights and Independence**Discussion Point:**

Sophie has been reared to a life of idleness and luxury and yet her father values her independent spirit. Is his attitude unique in this society?

Discussion Point:

Miss Lily encourages her young ladies to be well-read and to take an interest in politics. Her philosophy is also to teach them to charm and flirt their way into positions of power. Is such advice useful in your opinion?

Theme: Class and Wealth**Discussion Point:**

Sophie is very aware of inequity in Australian society. Her father, Jeremiah Higgs, is looked down upon because he is involved in 'trade' as a corned beef producer. Is this sort of attitude still prevalent or have we become a more egalitarian society today?

Discussion Point:

When Sophie visits his factory, she discovers that part of his success is drawn from the poverty of his employees and she determines to change things. Does she make a real difference?

Discussion Point:

Without her wealth Sophie would not have achieved what she did. So her wealth does make a difference, even though she refuses to be defined by it.

Theme:-World War One – Causes and Effects

Activity:

Research the conduct of this war by visiting sites such as: 'A Guide to World War One Battlefields and History of the First World War' The Great War 1914–1918 <<http://www.greatwar.co.uk/>> and Flanders Fields Museum <<http://www.inlandersfields.be/en>>

Discussion Point:

Research the loss of lives and the terrible injuries of World War One. A century later there are still discoveries being made of lost soldiers and their stories. Why was this such a brutal war?

Activity:

Research the hospitals in Britain and France where the wounded were treated during World War One.

Activity:

Research the new weapons used (such as mustard gas and tanks) which made this such a bloody conflict.

Discussion Point:

What caused the war and what brought it to an end?

Discussion Point:

Why was Australia involved?

Activity:

Read and discuss WWI poems such as 'Flanders Fields' by John McCrae and 'For the Fallen' by Laurence Binyon Australian War Memorial <<https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/customs/poems/>>

Activity:

Read other fiction and non-fiction and watch films about the war. [See List of References below.]

Theme: - Love and Sexuality

Discussion Point:

Miss Lily gives each of the ladies a book containing Japanese woodcuts of eroticism (pp 159–65). How might such an action have been viewed by their parents or guardians?

Discussion Point:

What does this novel suggest about romantic love?

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Theme: - Childhood Loss of a Parent

Discussion Point:

Sophie never knew her mother, but feels her loss keenly. Alison and Hannelore are also motherless. How important is this loss of a mother as a theme in this novel?

Discussion Point:

Sophie finally meets her mother. Does this meeting resolve her feelings, or further complicate them?

Theme: Colonials and Empire

Discussion Point:

Sophie is considered a 'colonial' in London and without her powerful friends such as the Earl of Shillings and Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Wooten would have had difficulty being accepted into English society. What does this say about British attitudes to those countries which form part of its 'empire'?

Discussion Point:

Despite this inequality, Australians willingly joined British forces in this war. Why?

Theme:-Racial Prejudice

Discussion Point:

What evidence did you find of prejudice in this novel?

Discussion Point:

The novel refers to a range of Indigenous issues for example, Moonlight Joe and his wife, 'Bill' (pp 124–5) and the practice of Aboriginal women disguising themselves as men in order to work and accompany their partners. What other sections of the novel referred to Non-Indigenous/Indigenous relations in Australia?

Discussion Point:

Sophie is horrified to see Aboriginal workers chained at the Overhill property. What did Malcolm's attitude to this reveal about his nature?

Historical Context

Discussion Point:

After Sophie arrives in the UK she begins reading newspaper reports of world events and develops a clearer picture of what is happening around her. 'She read of the arrest of suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst on her arrival back from the United States; about an Indian man called Gandhi, who wanted independence for his country and freedom of movement for Indians who had been imprisoned in South Africa (independence from the greatest empire in the world? why?); and about the banning of

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the importation of any weapons into Ulster. She read that the Kaiser had banned his troops and officers from dancing the tango or the two-step: such effete dances would harm their morale and fitness as proud members of the greatest fighting force the world had seen; even families who allowed the dances were to be shunned by officers on pain of dismissal.' (p 112) Research and discuss any of these issues.

Discussion Point:

'Who is your great-uncle, Prinzessin?' risked Sophie. 'His Majesty Kaiser Wilhelm,' put in Miss Lily.' (p 146) This statement is ominous, if one is aware of the historical context. Why?

Discussion Point:

'But this Gallipoli?' Miss Lily smiled. 'A place we shall undoubtedly never hear of again.' (p 113) Why has Gallipoli assumed such significance for Australians?

Values

Activity:

Independence, kindness, bravery, ingenuity, fortitude, generosity, are some of the values evinced in this text. Choose one and relate it to a particular incident in this novel

Activity:

Choose a character and list the values evinced by their behaviour. eg James Lorrimer.

Responding

Read and discuss the following quotes and record the theme related to it:

Quote	Theme
'— Quong Tart was a Chinaman, so he somehow didn't count — (p 11)	
'Women couldn't be awarded degrees, even at The Best University In The World.' (p 12)	
'Love? Love all you want, my dear. But love makes a very inadequate meal by itself.' Miss Lily, 1914 (p 38)	
'Australians can only sell in the Empire, Sophie love.' (p 45)	
'I do wish girls were taught history. Without history you are a blank piece of paper. If you have nothing written in your past, it is impossible to choose a future.' (p 115)	
'The Corn Laws?' 'The tax on imported grains, on flour, from 1815 to 1846. The tax helped large landowners, but meant their farmworkers starved.' Miss Carlyle looked at her levelly. 'Your country was settled by starvation, Miss Higgs. The starving farmworkers during the height of the effects of the Corn Laws, the Scottish families turned out during the Highland Clearances, the starving Irish after the Potato Famine — did you know that even at its worst Ireland still exported food?' She shook her head. 'Politicians knowingly let people starve simply to make fortunes for themselves and others.' (p 149)	
'How can taking a ruined farmhouse matter?' 'Ask the generals that. The bloodiest battles of this war have been back and forth over a few hundred yards of mud and barbed wire. They'll be digging out bones for hundreds of years when all this is over. If it ever is.' (pp 153-4)	
'Friendship is friendship, despite boundaries,' said Sophie. 'Miss Lily taught me that.' (p 154)	
'I want to learn about power. That's what you really teach here, isn't it? How even a woman can have more control over her life? It's not just etiquette or politics. It's how to charm men so they do what you want.' 'Very good, my dear. Not quite accurate, but good.' (pp 160-1)	
'The girls who come to me each year learn how to be women of influence, and not just by making marriages that suit their own interests rather than their fathers' pockets. They also learn how to manipulate other men, not only their husbands. Sometimes that charm need be nothing more than a smile. You will learn politics here. You will also learn ... arts ... that courtesans know, but that women of breeding are denied. Are you shocked?' (p 162)	
'For everyone else it was part of centuries of alliances out of which the cloth of society was formed. We are a thread of embroidery, nothing more, she thought. And then: I hope at least I'm a charming one.' (p 231)	
'Oh, I'm so sorry. Yes, I was far away.' 'May I ask where?' 'Australia. My family property. Thuringa.' 'A lovely name. Where does it come from?' 'You know, I've never thought to ask.' (p 264)	
'How could a country spend decades preparing for war, but not preparing to treat the wounded?' (p 302)	
'Ours is not to reason why, she thought, misquoting Tennyson, from her lessons with Miss Thwaites. Ours is just to watch them die.' (p 307)	
'It's destroying this land too, the war.' 'I don't understand.' 'Look around you. No one to mend the fences, clear the drains. Sodden land turning sour, rabbits taking all the grass, the best horses gone to war, and the best timber too. Forests that have been there for thousands of years turned into pit props. It's eating us all, the war.' (p 382)	

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Comprehension and Debating Questions

- Women in this novel demonstrate that they are the equal of men despite the restrictions placed on them. Which of the women in this novel did you find most admirable, and why?
- What hints did you find in the text to Miss Lily being not quite what she seems?
- Jeremiah Higgs is accused by some people as profiting from war and yet gives so much to the hospitals Sophie establishes. Debate his role in this war.
- The mystery of Sophie's mother's disappearance was explained later in the novel. What did you guess about her? Was it close to the reality? What did you think of her mother's attitude?
- Debate the statement: 'Australia had no option but to support Britain when WWI was declared'.
- Which of Sophie's four suitors did you find most appealing as a character, and why?

Suggested Tasks for Assessment

- Write a letter as if penned by Alison to Sophie, describing her new husband Ralph.
- Sketch an architectural plan for the layout of Her Grace, the Dowager's estate and how it is converted into a hospital. Use the text as a guide to drawing up this plan.
- Create a poster advertising for funds to support Sophie's hospitals in France.
- Study the posters used in World War One to recruit soldiers. What do they suggest about those in power?
- Choose an issue raised in this novel and research it. (e.g. Women's Rights and Independence; World War One – Causes and Effects.) Then write a considered essay outlining both sides of an argument about this topic.
- This is the first in a series. Consider the end of this novel and what it suggests might happen in a sequel. Write a plot summary for that sequel.

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About the Author

Jackie French was the Australian Children's Laureate for 2014/15 and the 2015 Senior Australian of the Year. She is also an historian, ecologist, dyslexic, and a passionate worker for literacy, the right of all children to be able to read, and the power of books.

Jackie's writing career spans 25 years, 148 wombats, over 140 books, 36 languages, 3,721 bush rats, and over 60 awards in Australia and overseas.

Jackie is also the ACT Children's Week Ambassador, 2011 Federal Literacy Ambassador, patron of Books for Kids, YESS, and joint patron of Monkey Baa Theatre for Young People with Susanne Gervais and Morris Gleitzman. She is also a director of The Wombat Foundation that raises funds for research into the preservation of the endangered northern hairy nosed wombat.

Jackie is a passionate advocate of help for children with learning difficulties as well as the conservation of wildlife and our planet. For nearly 40 years she has studied the species in the bush where she lives, with publications ranging from scientific articles on wombat ecology or endangered species to her ground breaking books on theories and practices for pest and weed ecology and more popular books on subjects like backyard self-sufficiency.

Jackie and her husband Bryan live in the Araluen valley, a deep valley on the edge of the Deua wilderness area. Most of their property is now a Conservation Refuge for the many rare and endangered species of the area. They live in a homemade stone house, with a waterwheel Bryan made as well as solar panels to power their house, with an experimental orchard of over 800 fruit trees and more than 272 kinds of fruit that show how farming can coexist with wildlife. Jackie writes columns for the Canberra Times, Australian Women's Weekly, Earthgarden Magazine, Australian Wellbeing and Gardening Australia. Her garden rambles over about 4 hectares, and there is never a time when there aren't basketsful of many kinds of fruit to pick. See her website: <<http://www.jackiefrench.com/about>>

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