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Notes by: Robyn Sheahan-Bright

## *Readers Notes for Facing the Flame*

By Jackie French

### **Book Summary:**

There have been fires before, but not like this.

In 1978, as the hot wind howls and the grass dries, all who live at Gibber's Creek know their land can burn. But when you love your land, you fight for it.

For Jed Kelly, an even more menacing danger looms: a man from her past determined to destroy her. Finding herself alone, trapped and desperate to save her unborn child, Jed's only choice is to flee - into the flames.

Heartbreaking and powerful, *Facing the Flame* celebrates the triumph of courage and community, and a love for the land so deep that not even bushfire can erode it.

### **Themes**

Family saga, an environmental drama, an historical fiction, a thriller, and a romance

### **Senior Curriculum**

ACHMH194, ACHMH189,

### **Modern History**

Humanities and Social Science

ACOKFH023, ACDSEH109, ACDSEH146, ACHMH213

### **Cross Curriculum Priorities**

Sustainability

**Suitable for Students in Grades 9-12**

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## BOOK DESCRIPTION

'In bushfire we unite again

This land of love and flame.'

'Our land. Our people. The heart of our lives. Things worth fighting for, whether against enemy or bushfire.' (p 131)

In 1977, Jed Kelly and Sam McAlpine, who is also a member of the large connected family Jed has recently become part of, are finally being married and are also awaiting their first child, at Dribble Homestead. Set in the aftermath of Gough Whitlam's shock dismissal as the first Labor Prime Minister in 33 years, this novel is again set in the closely knit rural community of Gibber's Creek, against one of Australia's most feared natural disasters – bushfire. The action begins in August 1977 and ends in May 1978.

Jed's wedding attendants are adopted sister Scarlett Kelly-O'Hara and close friend Julieanne Durand, still working in publishing in London. Scarlett Kelly-O'Hara has left her home, first as a disabled inmate at River View, and then with Jed, and is studying medicine and living independently in Sydney in the apartment Jed has bought for her, despite being in a wheelchair. She has a burgeoning affection for fellow student Alex Romanov but is still unsure whether her love for him is unrequited.

Disabled Vietnam veteran, Nicholas Brewster, has lost his job as Labor member for Gibber's Creek and is assisting his wife Felicity with her veterinary practice. Nicholas and Felicity are also expecting a child. Nicholas is adjusting to new prosthetic legs which offer him more mobility, but he is still feeling unfulfilled by his situation.

Nicholas hears of a new inmate at River View, a teenage girl named Lu Borghino, who has been blinded in a car accident, in which her mother lost her life, thus thwarting her dreams to become a top jockey. He decides to take Flinty's prize stallion Mountain Lion to Drinkwater to see if Lu can learn to ride again. Lu's stepfather, Joe, is a trainer and although she loves him, she has distanced herself from him, because of the pain of what she has lost.

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Bushfires threaten the district, and when they erupt no one is safe. Flinty McAlpine, Felicity's grandmother and acclaimed writer, has an understanding of the land which alerts her to the impending crisis before others are aware of it; Andy and Mah McAlpine are still very much in love, but are battling his early onset dementia; Dr Joseph McAlpine, although retired, is called in when the bushfires break out as is his wife Blue McAlpine; Michael and his wife Nancy Thompson similarly understand the land and sense danger before it strikes; Carol, Leafsong, and Mark provide food for the firefighters and local evacuees. Meanwhile, the villainous Merv who had raped Jed as a teenager re-appears in her life determined to wreak havoc.

Matilda Thompson, the matriarch, is two years dead, but not forgotten, and the traditions and morals she insisted on are being maintained, although Drinkwater Homestead remains empty.

But in February 1978 a terrible bushfire leads to a new beginning for Drinkwater and possibly for them all.

Once again, Jackie French has drawn on her personal experiences and memories of the 1970s, and also on extensive research, to weave together the story of this small rural community as a microcosm of Australia at the time. This, and previous books in this series, explores nationally significant themes – the ties that bind us to home, to land and country, social injustice, women's rights, the rights of the disabled, the responsibility of governments to their citizens, our multicultural and Indigenous heritage, coping with natural disasters, and resilience and courage.

Facing the Flame (1977–78) is the seventh title in the powerful historical series 'The Matilda Saga'. The first in the series was A Waltz for Matilda (1892–1915); the second The Girl from Snowy River (1920–23), the third Down the Road to Gundagai (1932–35), the fourth To Love a Sunburnt Country (1941–46), the fifth The Ghost by the Billabong (1968–69), and the sixth was If Blood Should Stain the Wattle (1972–75).

Although they traverse several generations, characters of the previous novels return or are mentioned in this novel again – Jed McAlpine-Kelly, great-great granddaughter of Thomas Thompson whose widow Matilda Thompson (nee O'Halloran) owned Drinkwater (until her death two years earlier); Sam McAlpine, Jed's new husband; Michael and Nancy Thompson; Flinty Mack (nee McAlpine); Joseph (Joe) and wife Bluebell (Blue) McAlpine; Andy, Joe's brother, and his wife Mah McAlpine; Nicholas Brewster; Felicity, Flinty's granddaughter, married to Nicholas; Scarlett Kelly O'Hara, Jed's adopted sister; Julieanne Durand, Jed's friend, living in England; George, an inmate of River View; Matron Moira Clancy and her adopted son Gavin; Carol and her mute daughter Leafsong who, with Leafsong's partner Mark, continue to run the Blue Belle Café. New characters are also introduced and include: Alex Romanov, Scarlett's fellow medical student; Grand Duchess Maria-Theresa, his grandmère; Hannah, another university friend; Lu Borghino, former champion rider, now a blinded and scarred teenage inmate of River View; Joe, Lu's stepfather; Ms Sampson-Lee, an

occupational therapist at River View; Merv, the evil man who raped Jed as a girl; several fire-fighters including Tubby and Bill.

Jed, Scarlett and Lu are – like Matilda, Flinty and other heroines in previous novels – feisty, strong-willed, resourceful, idealistic, and compassionate. Each have been challenged by violence and abuse, the loss of parents, and both Scarlett and Lu by disability. Theirs is a grand saga of the strength and fortitude necessary to confront what seem to be impossible odds.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jackie French** is a multiple award-winning author who deals with a very wide-range of topics. Of her books she says on her website that:

*There were over 140 at last count, slightly more than we have varieties of apples. If something is worth doing you may as well go heart and soul and boot leather ... I write for kids and adults, fiction, history, gardening, pests control, chooks and some that must be a nightmare for book shops to work out what genre they are. Have a look at 'which book?' for a probably not quite up to date list of what is where and for whom.*

Her website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work.  
[www.jackiefrench.com.au](http://www.jackiefrench.com.au)

At the back of the book, there are **Author's Notes** (pp 531–534) by Jackie French on many of the historical and cultural issues referred to in this text. This should be an invaluable resource to teachers in using the book in the classroom or for adult book groups to discuss.

## WRITING STYLE

**1. 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 work there are several major characters (some of whom figure briefly in the action) and a cast of minor ones.

**Discussion Point:** Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why? Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character? eg Alex or his grandmère. 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.

**Activity:** Choose a character and trace an arc on which key events indicate some aspect of their personality or change in their behaviour. eg Scarlett.

**2. This novel is a work of Historical Fiction or Faction** — a genre which relies on the author weaving together fact and fiction seamlessly.

**Discussion Point:** How much did you recognise from the history you have read? What was similar and what was different to actual events or people?

**3. Narrative Structure** — The novel follows a chronological structure, but also refers to key events which have taken place earlier in the series, and in the history of Australia.

**Activity:** Create a timeline of all the incidents referred to in the book.

**4. Narrative Perspective and Alternate Voices** — The story is written in third person subjective from the perspectives of Jed, Scarlett, Nicholas, Flinty, Andy, Lu, Merv, Sam, Joseph and George; and then a Sergeant Rodrigues (pp 283–4) is the focus character in the second last chapter – his discovery of three bodies, including that of Merv, establishes a mystery perhaps to be explored in a subsequent book.

**Discussion Point:** How do these various viewpoints enhance the story being told?

**Discussion Point:** How might the story have changed if it had been written in first person? Choose a passage and translate it in Jed's voice as if written as a diary or letter.

**5. Use of Literary Devices such as Simile, Metaphor, Literary Allusion, Humour**

**Activity:** Locate examples of the use of literary devices and discuss their meaning and effect.

**Discussion Point:** The poem 'Andy's Gone with Cattle' by Henry Lawson *Australian Poetry Library* <<https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/lawson-henry/andy-s-gone-with-cattle-0002010>> is referred to (p 267). Discuss how it relates to the action and themes.

**Discussion Point:** There is humour throughout this novel despite the dramas which take place. What did you find humorous?

**6. Suspense** — The novel uses the trope of describing the bushfire secretly growing unnoticed in a few suspenseful sentences at the end of each chapter, until it erupts.

Other mysteries appear in this text. Will Merv return? Will Lu ride again? How will Andy and Mah cope with his dementia? Will Nicholas find contentment and purpose in life? Each question is eventually answered. (But who tied Merv up? Perhaps the next novel will tell us.)

The novel also includes 'cliffhanger' ends to chapters such as Ch 47: 'Because his death took a very long time indeed.' (p 235)

**Activity:** Make a list of the events which contribute to suspense and how they are resolved.

### **FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Nancy explains to Scarlett (p 14) that the beautiful 'green' of the property bodes ill for Drinkwater as it will brown off in an extreme summer, and bushfires will be likely. Later she explains to Scarlett some of the bush lore she's learned which demonstrates that a bush fire is imminent (p 82). Read more about bushfires – their prevention and responses to them.

2. The novel suggests that the members of this community copes with this disaster by helping each other with, for example, the food provided by the Blue Belle Café; the shelter offered, the clothes donated, the efforts of voluntary fire-fighters like Sam, and doctors like Joseph, and by re-building. Read more about recent disasters and how communities have recovered. eg 'Black Saturday' in Victoria, 2009 Ash Wednesday in Victoria, 1983.

3. Criticism of bureaucratic mishandling of firefighting is implicit in the discussion of the burning of Jeratgully (p 155). Later: 'What can they do to us?' asked Sam with grim humour. 'Dock our pay? Sack us?' Everybody in the Gibber's Creek brigade was a volunteer. Which was why they should be ordered to go anywhere, stay on duty for thirty-six hours at a time with no supplies. You couldn't do that to people you employed.' (pp 189–190) How well do governments deal with such disasters?

4. Andy's dementia is described movingly: 'Was this what life would become? Each room in his mind slowly emptied of furniture, people, until it vanished entirely?' (p 62) He vows to never forget his beloved wife Mah. Discuss the portrayal of this illness in the novel.

5. One of the outcomes of the Whitlam government in the 1970s was that new laws were drafted supporting equal rights. For example, anti-discrimination legislation is mentioned (p 66) which meant that the River View kids could attend a local primary school. Later in the novel, Lu envisages working in a stable again, and expecting others to take note of 'rules' in relation to her disability (p 110). Discuss this issue.

6. 'Matron tells Lu: 'It's hard for kids brought up in an institution to be individuals. To work out who they are, what they want ... It's' a joy when there's a kid who knows what they love.' (p 95) Discuss in relation to George's behaviour.

7. 'Losing her sight had not destroyed this. It had, if anything, enhanced it. Perhaps all humans relied so heavily on their sight that they forgot to use their other senses.' (p 109) Discuss the role of each of our senses in our appreciation of the world around us.

8. Both Lu and Scarlett face challenges in their future workplaces – Scarlett in being accepted in medical wards, and Lu, on the racetrack. Women still encounter prejudice. (eg jockey Michelle Payne, winner of the 2015 Melbourne Cup on 'Prince of Penzance', has spoken publicly about her struggle for acceptance.) How much more prejudice will Scarlett and Lu encounter and how will they deal with that?

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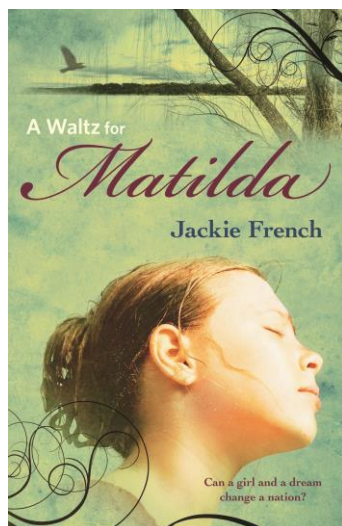
9. Alex and Scarlett discuss genetics and the possibility of her disability being inherited (pp 258–9) and agree that there may be no danger in their having children. Discuss the ideas suggested in this conversation.
10. 'She knew she was as much part of her land as any frog or pygmy possum, yet there was one great difference between her and a frog or possum – or a snow gum too. They accepted what the land gave.' (p 87) Discuss this statement.
11. 'But most of all he wanted Janet Skellowski scared of him.' (p 123) Merv's violent attitude to women is fuelled by a need to control and intimidate. His shocking rape of Jed as a teenager left him both unrepentant and also unfulfilled because she responded with such anger rather than fear. Is his anger typical of men who inflict domestic abuse on women? Read about this subject in preparation for this discussion.
12. How does this novel deal with Merv's crime? Read Constable Ryan's interview with Jed (pp 104–107). Was his advice about making Merv 'unwelcome' in the district adequate? 'Sounds to me as if this Merv was more into frightening than actually doing harm.' (p 106) Does he take this matter seriously enough?
13. 'Nature really was a male chauvinist pig, sometimes.' (p 135) What does this statement suggest?
14. Ms Sampson-Lee's Indigenous heritage is revealed to Lu (pp 199–201) – her great-great-grandfather Sampson, Auntie Love's nephew, worked for Matilda and Tom as their manager – as is her husband's connection to Doo Lee, a market gardener in the area at that same time. Indigenous cultural connections are also suggested in Flinty's memories of Rose Clancy's wisdom about managing the land. Mah McAlpine is also Chinese-Australian. How important is Indigenous history and culture, and multiculturalism in this series?
15. 'He wondered if his whole family attracted those who heard and saw ... differently.' (p 253) What does Joseph mean by this?
16. 'No police force or army could keep humans safe if they decided their default position was to not cooperate with each other, but to destroy. How had it taken Merv even five minutes to set so much tragedy in train?' (p 263) Discuss.
17. Another strand in the novel is the writing talent in the family. Flinty is a bestselling author; Jed has written a manuscript (p 277) that Julieanne is keen to develop for publication. Creative writers are also referred to in the poems which weave through the titles in the series. Discuss the classic literature of the bush that flows through this series and how various works underpin these narratives.
18. Draw up a family tree for the characters in this series of novels.

19. The novel concludes with a plan to use Drinkwater as the new River View, and to name the 'Andy McAlpine Wing' and 'Ben Clancy Therapy Centre' as their memorials. 'Because Matilda was her own memorial. She didn't need her name on a plaque.' (p 267) Thus the history of the family is recorded with a promise of another chapter in this family saga.

20. Jed, Scarlett and Lu, despite their strengths, are each plagued by self-doubt. Is this a healthy attribute? Should we each doubt ourselves sometimes?

21. What might possibly take place in the next novel in the series?

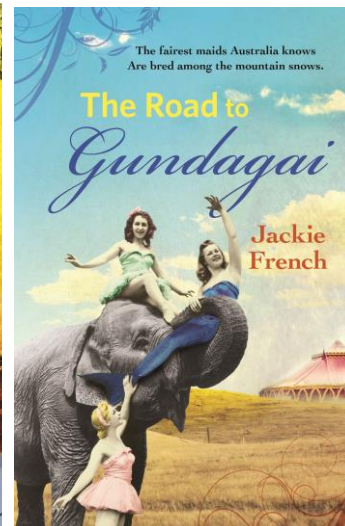
22. *Facing the Flame* is a family saga, an environmental drama, an historical fiction, a thriller, and a romance. Discuss the various genres and thematic strands it encompasses.



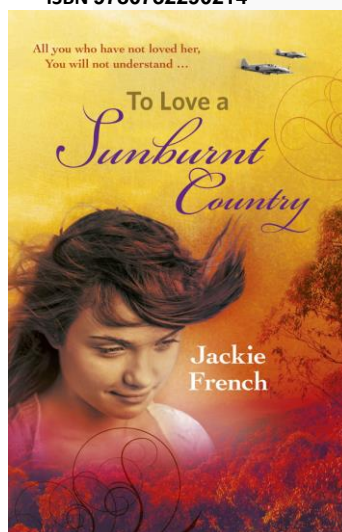
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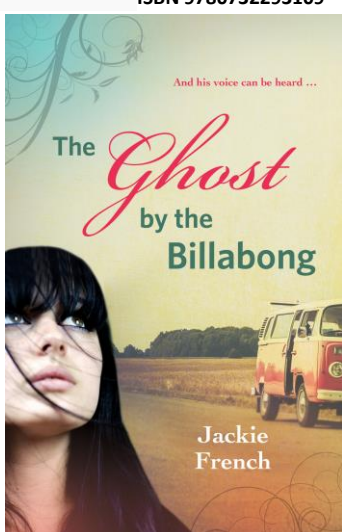
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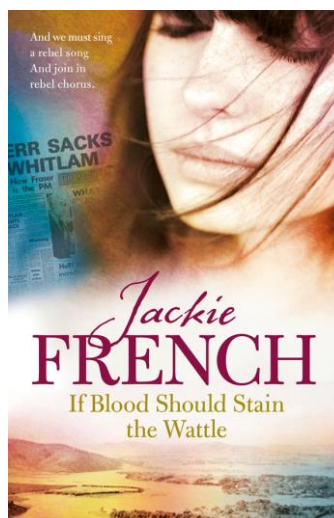
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