



The Butter O'Bryan Mysteries: The Ghost of Howlers Beach

By Jackie French

Summary

Butter O'Bryan has been told there are ghosts at Howlers Beach, but are there?

Howlers Beach, 1932

Butter O'Bryan lives in a Very Small Castle with his father and three aunts – Aunt Elephant, Aunt Cake and Aunt Peculiar. These aren't their real names, of course, just as Butter's father isn't really called 'Pongo'.

And even though Butter is only twelve years old, and the grandson of one of Australia's most successful Jam Kings, he is very aware of the hardship many people are experiencing.

Butter has been told there are ghosts at the nearby isolated Howlers Beach, but are there? And how can the children Butter plays cricket with on the beach simply vanish? Who are these children and why do they refuse his help?

Butter is certain they're hiding a secret and he's determined to uncover it.

Key Learning Outcomes

ACELA1501, ACELA1508, ACELA1516, ACELT1608, ACELT1613, ACELT1798, ACELY1700, ACELY1709

Key Concepts

Australian history, Racism, Poverty, Family and community, Friendship, Privilege, Secrets

Recommended Ages: 10+

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CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

A lot of work goes into creating a book cover. Decisions are made about the type of image (if an image is used at all); colours; fonts and where all the elements like the title, author name and blurb are placed (the book's design).

- What do you think the main purpose of a book cover is?
- Is there anything else you think the cover needs to do?
- Have a look at the cover of *The Ghost of Howlers Beach* (don't read the blurb on the back). What information do you think the visual elements (image, font, colours) convey?
- Based on your reading of the cover, what do you think *The Ghost of Howlers Beach* will be about?

'Sunlight danced across the water the day the dog dug up the skull' (p1). Read the opening line of the novel.

- What questions does it make you ask about the book?
- Does it give you a sense of what type of story this will be? Why? What other information does it provide?
- Talk about how opening lines work. What makes a good opening line?
 - Share the opening lines of some of your favourite books with the rest of the class.
 - Which ones do people like more than others?
 - How do they work to set up the story?
- Opening lines spark your imagination around a story – they get you interested in the book and give you clues about what kind of story you're about to discover. Use the opening line of the book to write your own short story. Share it with the class.

How do writers create good characters? Look at the characters in the book and make a list of things that make them interesting and unique.

- As a class, create a Character Matrix in Google Docs or Word. For each of the main characters, collect the following information. (don't forget to provide examples from the novel):
 - How do they speak? What kinds of words do they use that other characters don't?
 - Is there anything unique about the way they look or the things they do?
 - How do they respond to situations?
 - How are they described by others in the book?
 - What makes them happy?
 - What is most important to them?
 - What challenges do they face?
- Think about someone interesting that you know. How would you turn them into a character in a story? Use some of the questions above to make a list of things that are interesting about them that you might use in a story. Maybe it's specific words or pet names. Maybe it's a physical feature, or something they do. Collect as much information about this person as you can.
 - Now write a scene that shows your character responding to something that makes them feel happy, sad or afraid.

In *The Ghost of Howlers Beach*, Butter is surprised to realise that not all kids have the same resources and opportunities that he does.

'People don't die of starvation, thought Butter. Not in Australia. Then he remembered the man's sunken face, the thinness of the kids yesterday' (p55).

Butter is realising that he has privileges.

- Discuss the idea of privilege in class. Is it something you earn? Is it fair? How are people's lives made better or worse because of the privilege they have or don't have?
- Find an example in the book where someone's life is made easier because of privilege.
- Find another where someone's life is made harder. What would happen if their roles were reversed?

Have you and a friend ever disagreed about whether someone is nice to be around? Sometimes it can be difficult to tell if someone is a 'good' person. People can behave differently towards different people or in different situations. Sometimes people do things that they're not proud of or make mistakes – we're all human after all.

- Do you think Butter's dad and aunts are good people? Why?
- Even good people misunderstand each other, and make assumptions that aren't true. This happens when each of the aunts offer to help Butter feed Olive, Trish and Gil, but assume that the others would be unhappy if they found out.
- What other examples of misunderstandings can you find in the story?
 - How might these have been avoided?
- Write about a time that you've felt misunderstood or have misunderstood someone else. What happened because of the misunderstanding? How might it have been avoided? What might have been different if it hadn't occurred?

This book is set in the Depression, when one in three men were unemployed across Australia (no one counted the number of unemployed women), families starved and many were homeless, forced into illegal camps like the one in this book.

- What does this book tell you about how and why the Depression started, and what life was like then?
- How do the unemployed people in this book get enough food to eat, or a place to live?
- What are some of the ways that the characters in this book make life fun, despite the poverty?
- The families in this book who had no jobs or money are described as wearing second-hand dresses or trousers. Can you think of six ways a dress or a pair of trousers might have been reused as parts of it wore out?
- Compare the lives of the unemployed now with those in the susso camp. Their lives are very different now, but in what ways might they be worse off, and in what ways might they be better?
- If you were Prime Minister or Premier back in 1932, what laws would you have made to help the country?

Polio, Susso camps and cricket are just some of the elements that give the reader information about 1930s Australia, when this book is set.

- What other 1930s details does Jackie French include in the story? (She writes about some of them in the Author's Note at the end of the book.)
 - From this list, choose a topic that you aren't very familiar with. Starting with the book itself, write down all of the information you can find about your topic.
 - Where does it take place?
 - How do people feel about it?
 - Is there any additional information in the Author's Notes that you can add to your research?
 - Now do a research project on your topic using sources outside of the book. What else can you find out? (Your notes from the book might give you some keywords as a starting point.)
 - Present your research to the class, either as a poster or an oral presentation. Write a short paragraph that comments on how your research has given you greater insight into the lives of some of the characters in the book. Do you feel that you understand them more now than when you first read the story?

As well as the poverty suffered by many during the Great Depression, Gil, Olive and Tish face another enormous challenge: their Aboriginal heritage.

- What do you learn about the treatment of Indigenous Australians from the secret that Gil, Olive and Tish try to keep from Butter and his family?
- In the Author's Notes at the end of the novel, Jackie French outlines why the siblings were so scared of what would happen if others found out they had Aboriginal ancestry. Was there new information here, or were these things that you already knew?
- How do you think having to hide something so important about themselves made Gil, Olive and Tish feel?

Food can tell us a lot about a time, place or person. It can tell us about how much money they have to buy ingredients; where they live and what grows there; and what they enjoy.

- What else can food tell us about someone?
- Choose one of the characters in the book and find an example of when we discover something about them through food.
- Jackie French includes some recipes from the 1930s in the Author's Notes at the end of the book. Why do you think she does this?
- Have a 1930s class picnic. Bring in a plate of food to share using one of the recipes in the book or, if you know someone who lived during that time, see if you can find an original recipe to share.
 - What are your thoughts about the food?
 - Is it different to what you would normally eat? How?

'We kept looking at all the big and terrible things we could do nothing about. Somehow we lost sight of the small things we can do' (p225).

Sometimes big and terrible things can be overwhelming. As a class, talk about the things that make you feel overwhelmed or powerless.

- First, share any strategies that you have for dealing with these feelings.
- Then, time to act. See if you can find ways that people are doing small things to help. Share these with the class.
- In groups, come up with a project that you could use to help. Maybe it's volunteering in an aged care home, planting a tree or raising money for charity. Make it achievable. At the end of term share your success with the class.
 - What was your project?
 - What challenges did you face?
 - What changed because of your actions?

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 children's authors and writes across all genres.

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