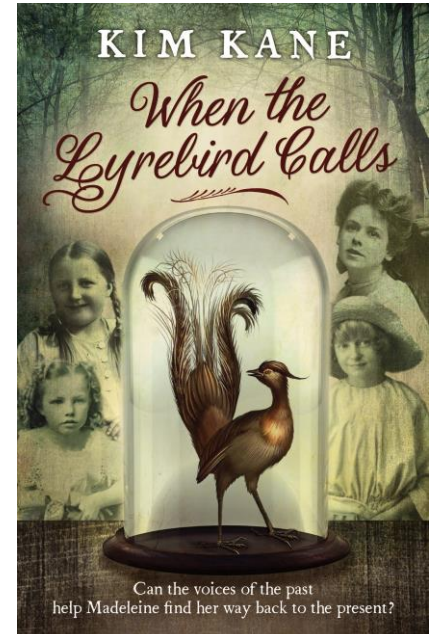


# When the Lyrebird Calls

By Kim Kane

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## Summary

Madeleine is a sporty modern 12 year old girl. When the lyrebird calls, she tumbles back into the past and into a well-to-do family during the lead-up to Australian Federation.

The father, golden-haired Mr Williamson, is a lead player in the push for Federation. His four surviving daughters are: glamorous, older Bea – who must find a 'suitable' husband; clever, awkward and lonely Gert – who befriends Madeleine and shares her secret; bold Charlie – who insists she be treated as a boy; and baby Imogen. Mrs Williamson is a vaguely kind but sad woman who has fallen for the current vogue of séances with spiritualist mediums. Also living with the family is Mr Williamson's unmarried suffragist sister, Aunt Hen(rietta). Rounding out the household are Nanny (strict and conservative), Anna, the maid (Aunt Hen's secret lieutenant), Cook and Percy Hops (an Aboriginal man from Coranderrk who does outdoor work on the property).

With Gert's help, Madeleine tries to 'pass' as a good Victorian school girl. She discovers the discomforts of their clothing and the formal social rules that govern people's behaviour. She is shocked at their casual racism and sympathetic to Aunt Hen, whose opinions are derided by her brother in often brutal language. She notices that Gert is the ugly duckling of the family, subtly overlooked and snubbed by her parents and Nanny. Like insecure Gert, she wrongly attributes this to Gert's plain looks and clumsiness. With Gert and Charlie, she plays in the large gardens, with secret hideouts and a strange folly.

But during this summer vacation leading up to 1900, larger adult issues are pressing in on the domestic life of the girls. They watch as important men gather at the house to plan political strategies to achieve Federation; they become involved in Aunt Hen's secret suffragist work, seen as a threat by the men; Madeleine asks Percy about his country and discovers the story of Coranderrk, William Barak and Aboriginal political activism. And Mrs Williamson's glamorous young German cousin, Elfriede, arrives for a visit.

Elfriede brings beauty and European sophistication to their world. She befriends Bea and shares secrets about husband hunting: Elfriede makes flirting seem an enchanting aspect of European manners. Mrs Williamson becomes more and more withdrawn and sad and her husband is angry with her. The girls overhear Mr Williamson and Elfriede together without realising what is going on. Finally, they surprise them kissing.

The unveiling of the flirtation coincides with another dramatic event in the life of the family, in which Madeleine's twentieth century skills save Gert's life. There is a hint that this has been the 'purpose' of Madeleine's time travel: shortly after, she falls asleep and wakes in her own time. In a coda, her grandmother reveals that she is the daughter of Charlie, and Madeleine learns the fates of the Williamson family.

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# In the classroom...

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As with so many time-slip stories, physical objects from the past, discovered by Madeleine in a secret compartment of a cupboard, precipitate the adventure. On her return to her own time, Madeleine discovers further touching and significant objects, possibly left long ago by Gertie for her to find 'in the future'.

### Links to the curriculum

#### English

*When the Lyrebird Calls* links well with the Yr 6 and Yr 7 National English Curriculum in presenting 'non-stereotypical characters and elaborated events including flashbacks and shifts in time [and] exploring themes of interpersonal relationships and ethical dilemmas within real-world and fantasy settings.' Realistic, historical and fantasy genres are deployed.

The writing is relatively simple yet sophisticated in both the concepts expressed and the use of figurative language. The novel contains an epigraph, the design of the chapter headings deliberately evokes historical novel design and the Acknowledgements at the end of the book provide an insight into the research that underlies a historical novel and one that touches on Indigenous issues.

#### Australian history

The novel also fits perfectly the National History Curriculum for Yr 6. It 'focuses on the social, economic and political development of Australia as a nation' and, through Madeleine's surprise at colonial attitudes, 'reflects modern 'Australia's role within a diverse and interconnected world'. It deals directly with 'the events and developments that shaped Australia as a democratic nation...and the experiences of the diverse groups who have contributed to and are/were affected by these events and developments, past and present'. Through this book, students can investigate the importance of rights and responsibilities, civic institutions, Federation, women's suffrage, the Aboriginal struggle for rights and changing attitudes to non-British migrants. Other changes in society, such as attitudes to illegitimate children, marriage, racism and sexism, are also explored.

#### Sport and PE

Girls in sport is a theme of this novel. Madeleine loves her cricket, is a good swimmer and uses her life-saving knowledge to save a child. At the end of the story, she discovers that her great-grandmother (a little girl in the novel) even played cricket for Victoria in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Madeleine also observes the games that girls and boys played at the time of Federation. The restrictive nature of 19<sup>th</sup> century clothing for girls and women is a constant irritation for her. Aunt Hen stands out as an early 'liberated' woman in her use of freer corsets and membership of the Rational Dress Society.

### Themes

- Secrets
- Action for change
- Federation
- The plight and rights of women
- The plight and rights of Indigenous Australians
- Suffrage



From the author...

When the Lyrebird Calls by Kim Kane

## About the author

Kim Kane was born in London in a bed bequeathed by Wordsworth for '...a writer, a dancer or a poet'. Despite this auspicious beginning, she went on to practise law. Nowadays, Kim lives in a house with very widely spaced eyes right near the beach in Melbourne, Australia. There, she can laugh at the German tourists (asleep in their vans) and the English tourists (burnt in their cozzies) right from the comfort of her own veranda.

Before 20 October 2008, Kim wore staggeringly high heels and worked exactly part time as a lawyer and exactly part time as a writer and the combination was perfect.

Kim is now a mum, a step mum, a wife and considerably messier. She wears flat shoes. She also sits on the board of the Australian Children's Literature Alliance which is the organisation supporting the Australian Children's Laureate. This is great fun and a real honour.

Kim was a shy child and because she was shy, she was an observer – not a participator. This perhaps explains why she is able to recall so much from her school days. When she was at university, however, Kim decided to become an extrovert and she has never looked back. Or recalled anything since.

## About writing this novel

This book has taken me a tremendously long time to write. Some scenes were written almost a decade ago and in many ways those scenes continue to be the most powerful. It is, at its heart a story about four sisters and the changes to their family when visitors arrive.

I decided to write a time-slip novel as a nod to the genre which I adore. Unlike straight historical fiction we get a contemporary narrator and that makes it an infinitely more enjoyable romp.

The book was initially about Federation. I studied law at university and won a prize in a subject that looked at Australian democracy. I discovered, however, that federation was in fact a fairly dull tale and the thing I kept coming back to was suffrage. Representation of women in Parliament was in fact the subject of my legal honours thesis so this is perhaps not that surprising. Suffrage completely eclipsed federation in my novel and suddenly the novel took off in a new and exciting direction. The suffragist sister had always been in the novel to show that change is not effected by people who tow the line but she went from a minor character to a lead player.

The lyrebird also came to me as a perfect metaphor for the novel. When I find the scientific metaphor for a novel I always feel a sense of relief. The lyrebird spoke of family secrets and passing on history and the Judith Wright quote – a poem by an Australian woman – seemed to capture all those ideas. I still feel that this is a novel about history and secrets.

The heroine of the novel is based – extremely loosely – on my step-daughter Madeleine. My Madeleine is very different but I did want a character who was political and my Madeleine is extremely political about women in sport. She is also an accomplished athlete and I liked the idea of putting a very strong athlete back in the 19th century.

One of the other themes I wanted to touch on was colonialism and the farce of it. When I visited Shimla in India at 20, I was struck by how extraordinary it was to see the effects of colonialism writ large. There I was in the foothills of the Himalayas in an old English

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hill station and the shops and homes and castles were varied – high Gothic, Swiss chalet, all grand, all built on cheap colonial labour. What was wonderful about this scene was that it was filled with Indian honeymooners and monkeys and because I was in India and had an expectation of seeing Indian buildings, this colonial village seemed particularly ridiculous. I realised then that we were surrounded by British colonialism every day at home but I was blind to it. The idea that you could march in and bring English customs, buildings and clothing to a foreign landscape has always seemed ludicrous and I wanted to show it in this novel. It is an environment in which, as a result of colonisation, everything is foreign. Even the native lyrebird is in fact an import in this novel, a folly. Even Percy, my Indigenous character, comes from another part of the country.

### Discussion questions and activities

1. Use a 2 column table to list the differences between life for girls in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Did any aspects of 19<sup>th</sup> century life appeal to you?
2. All societies have both informal and formal sets of rules, or manners. Practise introducing a friend to your parents, and then to the Governor General of Australia. Find out the formal rules for setting the table for a dinner party nowadays. Perhaps you can set a table formally in class and eat lunch together. Create a formal invitation to your lunch.
3. 'If our Ngurungaeta, William Barak, can walk a petition to Melbourne as an elderly man, I can make it to Cummera on these legs.' p. 227. Research William Barak's petition and the history of the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station.
4. *When the Lyrebird Calls* contains a number of examples of political activism – people working consciously to bring about change in their society. Mr Williamson's efforts were successful: Australia did become a Federation of states. What do you know about the modern campaign for Australia to become an independent republic? How successful have the campaigns of women and Indigenous people been? When did those groups gain suffrage?
5. Madeleine learns that, with hard work, some changes can be brought about but there will always be some things that you cannot change. The trick is to choose what to change and set about it 'little bits at a time'. She decides to start a blog about women and sport. How might this bring about change?
6. Writing a historical novel involves a lot of research. Read through the Acknowledgements at the end of the novel: do any parts of Kim Kane's research surprise you?
7. Use *When the Lyrebird Calls* in a Literature Circle with the class, studying time-slip novels and/or historical novels set around the same time. (See Related Texts/Further Reading bibliography at the end of these notes.)
8. Discuss the handling of the time-slip in this novel. How is it achieved? What do you think the role of the lyrebird is? What about the objects Madeleine finds in the cupboard? Did you find the ending of the story satisfactory? Were there any loose ends from the past that you still wanted to know about?
9. The lyrebird seems to be used as a symbol? What do you think it stands for? Have you noticed the epigraph at the beginning of the book?



# In the classroom...

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### Related texts/Further reading

#### Other Australian time-slip novels

##### ***Playing Beatie Bow* by Ruth Park (1980)**

Set in The Rocks, Sydney. A young girl, through hereditary magic, travels back to the early colony of Sydney and becomes involved with a family, one of whom may be her own ancestor. An Australian classic.

ALSO

*Playing Beatie Bow* (film), directed by Donald Crombie (1986)

##### ***Market Blues* by Kirsty Murray (2000)**

A boy goes busking at Melbourne's Victoria Market and finds himself transported back to the time of Federation.

##### ***Crow Country* by Kate Constable (2011)**

Modern children attempt to right a historical wrong which they witness when travelling to the past.

##### ***Walking the Boundaries* by Jackie French (2006)**

A three-way time-slip set on an outback property. A boy must walk the boundary of the property in order to inherit it. He encounters two other young people with attachment to this land: Meg from almost a century ago and Wullamudulla from thousands of years in the past.

##### ***Tangara* (1960) by Nan Chauncy.**

Set in Tasmania. A young white girl meets the mourning phantom of the sole survivor of the massacre of her tribe during the Black Wars in Tasmania. With its moving but dated view of the Tasmanian Aborigines as an extinct race, could make a good comparison with modern novels. The book was very influential in its time. [See also her historical novel *Mathinna's People* (1967)].

#### Other literary novels that mix reality with the dream-like perception of innocent children

##### ***The Go Between* by LP Hartley (1953)**

A boy lost in the strange world of adult emotions. Set in 1900 and famous for its opening line: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

ALSO

*The Go-Between* (film) directed by Joseph Losey (1971). Screenplay by Harold Pinter.

AND television adaptation starring Jim Broadbent, BBC One broadcast 20/9/2015

*N.B.:* The plot revolves around a forbidden sexual affair, so may not be suitable for younger readers.

##### ***The Red Shoe* by Ursula Dubosarsky**

A young girl observes, but does not fully understand, a tragedy in her own family and a side-show of a national crisis, the Petrov Affair.

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### Books and film about Coranderrk

**Coranderrk: We will show the country** edited by Giordano Nanni and Andrea James (2013) Aboriginal Studies Press

**Coranderrk 1835 (2008) SBS. Available at:**

<http://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/video/656131651856/coranderrk-1835>

ON A RELATED TOPIC: **Lousy Little Sixpence** (film) directed by Alec Morgan (1983) Documentary set in 1930s. The sixpence referred to is the amount Indigenous children were meant to be paid for their forced labour – but rarely were.

### Novels set in the time of Federation

**Meet Rose Book 1** by Sherryl Clark

An interesting, easy to read portrayal of the many constrictions placed on a young sports-loving Australian girl at the time of Federation. There are three follow-up stories of Rose in the Penguin Random House 'Our Australian Girl' series.

**Plagues and Federation: the diary of Kitty Barnes, the Rocks, Sydney, 1901** by Vashfi Farrer (2000).

The title is self-explanatory and links to *Playing Beatie Bow* as well as the Federation theme of *When the Lyrebird Calls*. Part of the Scholastic Press 'My Australian Story' series.

### Non-fiction information and picture books about Federation

**Australian Federation** by Net Brennan (2014). Non-fiction.

'The story of how ordinary citizens became the first in the world to write and vote for their own Constitution, and how they came together to form the nation of Australia.' From the Walker Books series accompanied by on-line classroom ideas:

<http://classroom.walkerbooks.com.au/home/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Our-Stories-Australian-Federation.pdf>

**1901, Australian life at Federation : an illustrated chronicle** edited by Aedeon Cremin with David Carment et al (2000) UNSW Press

Illustrated, full-colour book about how Australians lived at the time of Federation. Includes special information on topics such as: rural life throughout Australia; life in the cities; the lifestyle of the Chinese and other minority groups; and maritime life.

### Other books by Kim Kane

*Pip: the story of Olive* – Allen &Unwin 2008

*The Vegetable Ark* – Allen &Unwin 2010, illustrated by Sue deGennaro

*Family Forest* – Hardie Grant Egmont May 2010

*The Unexpected Crocodile* – Allen &Unwin 2012

*Esther's Rainbow* – Allen &Unwin 2013

*Cry Blue Murder* – UQP 2013

*Ginger Green, Playdate Queen* (series) – HGE, June 2016

A good overview of historical and modern Australian children's literature can be found at:

<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-childrens-books>

**Allen & Unwin wishes to thank the author, Kim Kane, for contributing to these curriculum notes for When the Lyrebird Calls.**