



Barney and the Secret of the Whales

By Jackie French

INTRODUCTION

Barney Bean is keen to make his fortune and he hears a secret; a sailor's secret about the treasure of the colony.

But how can chasing whales make you rich, and is an adventure at sea worth leaving everything you love for?

In this second book in The Secret Histories series, award-winning author and Children's Laureate Jackie French explores a little-known topic about Australia's past that is beautifully illustrated by Mark Wilson.

Curriculum Areas and Key Learning

Outcomes:

**ACELT1618, ACELT1808, ACELT1610,
ACELT1622, ACELT1616, ACELT1803,
ACELT1621, ACELA1518, ACELA1531**

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CONTENTS

- **Introduction**
- **Book Summary**
- **About the author**
- **About the author**
- **Author Inspiration**
- **Characters**
 - The Significance of Character
 - Major Characters
 - Minor Characters
 - Character Arcs
- **Themes**
 - Whales and Whaling
 - Conservation and Environment
 - Indigenous History and Culture
 - Colonial Society
 - Agricultural Self-Sufficiency
 - Friendship and Love

- **Key Quotes**

- **Curriculum Topics**
 - Language and Literacy
 - SOSE
- **Further Points for Discussion**
- **Author's Notes on the Text**
- **Bibliography**
- **About the Author of the Notes**

BOOK SUMMARY

'What do you say, boy? Are you sailing with us? Going to feel the green waves galloping like horses? Challenge the winds and the sea and creatures that make every building in this colony look puny? Will you make your fortune too?' (p 23)

It is 1791, and young Barney Bean is still in the employ of the Johnsons on Sydney Cove, when Captain Melvill of the *Britannia* comes to dinner. This dedicated seaman and experienced whaling captain has just brought the third fleet of convicts to Australia. As their guest he regales the Johnson household with tales of his journey. Meanwhile, he takes notice of Barney's skills and youth and offers him a job on his ship. Chaplain Johnson and his wife have proved to be a benevolent master and mistress to Barney and Elsie, who have lived with them since finding themselves orphaned and alone in this new country. The Johnsons are reluctant for Barney to leave them, but recognise his desire to make his own way in the world.

This novel is a companion to *Birrung* in which Barney and his sister Elsie first met and befriended Birrung two years earlier. Barney yearns to see his friend again, but Birrung has returned to her people.

Barney, who is ambitious regarding his future, does decide to go to sea but it proves a salutary experience. For life on board is tough, and every day includes new risks. Although he equips himself well as a seaman and even saves one of his fellow sailors, he realises how much he hates seeing these majestic creatures die and that his real home is on dry land. He witnesses the killings and can't stomach the way these huge creatures of the deep are captured, killed and dismembered. Barney has, however, signed up for three years and his dream of returning to live with the Johnsons, and to eventually own his own land seems very remote. 'Three years of hunting whales and fighting waves, far from the song of the trees that I now knew I loved.' (p 99)

This is the second in a series about Australia's 'secret history' which offers new insights into the nature of colonial life and how the arrival of Europeans changed the country inhabited by Indigenous Australians. How they changed the country forever.

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.

Jackie is the current Australian Children's Laureate (2014–15) and the 2015 Senior Australian of the Year.

<http://www.childrenslaureate.org.au/>

Jackie's website offers further detailed and fascinating insights into her life and work: www.jackiefrench.com.au

AUTHOR INSPIRATION

Jackie French writes of her inspiration in her notes, in **Author's Notes** (pp 122–9).

CHARACTERS

- **The Significance of Character:**

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:

Discuss the character of Barney.

- **Major Characters:**

Discussion Point:

Which of the main characters did you find most appealing, and why?

- **Minor Characters:**

Discussion Point:

Is there a minor character who might have played a larger part? Why would you have liked to have seen more of this character?

- **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 Sally.

THEMES

Whales and Whaling

Discussion Point

'We harpoon the whales, and fight them till they give up their lives. And then we take their oil. A whale can give seven hundred pounds of oil and a goodly amount of whalebone too, for everything from umbrellas to, er, ladies' garments.' (p 13) Find out more about the products made from the whale's carcass.

Discussion Point:

'So our ship has a platform that doesn't burn. That's the tryworks. And those openings that you called mouths are mouths indeed: mouths for the whale skin. Those mouths are our furnaces and whale skin is what we burn. No ship can carry enough wood to boil down a whale. We carry a little to get the blaze started, but after that the whale itself provides the fuel for the process.' (p 20) Captain Melvill gives Barney a lot of information about whaling. Read some of the texts listed in the **Bibliography** to find out more about whaling.

Discussion Point:

Read pp 20–21 describing the objects aboard ships made from parts of the whale. Read some of the texts listed in the **Bibliography** to find out more about whale crafts such as scrimshaw.

Activity:

Research Spermaceti (see p 76). [See relevant references in **Bibliography**.]

Discussion Point:

'But it was not a storybook giant. This was real. A great eye gazed at me as if to say, 'Why are you doing this?' (p 57) The ethics of whaling is a key theme in this novel. Barney was excited by the prospect of an adventure on the high seas, but his first whale killing makes him realise that he loathes the practice of killing these majestic creatures. Read the passage: 'I looked into the eyes of the whale again and I saw death and majesty... The whale was dead.' (p 59) Discuss its meaning.

Activity:

Chapter 10 *Harvest* (pp 68–78) describes the process of killing and processing the parts of the whale. Read and discuss what you learn.

Activity:

Research the various movements to stop whaling up until the present day. [See also **Bibliography**.]

Activity:

Mark Wilson illustrated this book. His picture book *Migaloo: the Great White Whale* (Hachette, 2015) might be studied in conjunction with this one. [See also books listed in **Bibliography**.]

Activity

Read Jackie French's **Author's Notes** on whaling (pp 122–9).

- **Conservation and Environment**

Activity:

Jackie French's books often include evidence of her love of nature and her interest in conservation and sustainability. Choose a passage which gives you insights into this, and discuss it further.

Discussion Point:

What other aspects of conservation are raised, apart from saving whales?

- **Indigenous History and Culture**

Activity:

'I thought of Birrung again then. I don't know why. Maybe because she had dived like that, as if the water was her home as much as the land. Maybe because we were taking her land, much like we were conquering the whales' seas. Maybe because she was beautiful, and so were the whales.' (pp 94–5) Barney's friendship with Birrung has taught him things such as how to swim. What else has he learned about Indigenous culture?

Activity:

How unusual was it in these times to befriend an Aboriginal person? Read about famous relationships between black and white people in colonial society. Read also Jackie French's *Nanberry: Black Brother White* (2011) and compare it to this novel and its prequel, *Birrung: The Secret Friend* (2015).

- **Colonial Society**

Discussion Point:

'Wealthy? Sydney Town?' I looked at the huddled huts below us. Most were collapsing already, the cabbage-tree roofs rotting and the bark walls too. The colony wasn't starving, but we hadn't been far off it for a while. Most convicts still lived on gruel made from their rations. A colony of rags and pannikins the bloke next to you would steal soon as look at you.' (p 23) This picture of the early colony is at odds with impressions sometimes gleaned from texts which tell a tale of unmitigated growth, progress and prosperity. The reality was far more difficult. Research the life lived in these first years, and why colonists and convicts were so short of food, and so desperate.

Activity:

Read some of Jackie French's other books set in colonial Australia to gain further insights into this fascinating time.

- **Agricultural Self-Sufficiency**

Discussion Point:

Jackie French's books often include details of how the landscape can yield food. Find passages in this novel which provide evidence of this interest in agricultural self-sufficiency.

Activity:

Make a list of some of the food eaten and crops grown in colonial Australia.

Activity:

Research how Indigenous people ate and what they collected in the bush.

- **Friendship and love**

Discussion Point:

'Wanted to say that even if we were shipwrecked or captured by pirates or becalmed in the ocean, I'd still come back to her, that I'd look after her, always, like she looked after me.' (p 36) Barney cares for Elsie, and she for him. What makes the bond between them so special?

Discussion Point:

What other friends does Barney make on this journey? eg Call-Me-Bob.

Activity:

Discuss the scenes in which Barney and Sally appear. What do they reveal about Sally's feelings for Barney?

KEY QUOTES

The following quotes relate to some of the **Themes** above. You might like to present any one of them (or two related quotes) to your students as a catalyst for further discussion, or as the subject of an essay outlining how the quote reflects a theme which is central to this novel:

<p>'I glared at him. One thing you didn't do in the colony was ask why anyone had been sent here. Not one convict in a hundred admitted they were guilty anyway. 'I'm not a convict. Never was. I came out here with my ma. She died.' ' (p 8)</p>	<p>'Five of the ships in our fleet are whalers. We carried human cargo to cover the cost of getting here, that's all.' Human cargo. That had been me and Ma.' (p11)</p>
<p>'I told him what I can tell you too: what I would not say in Plymouth, nor Nantucket. That is the secret treasure of this colony of yours, sir. The whales of the sea.' (p 12)</p>	<p>'You'll need money to get one.' Not for the land, I wouldn't. In New South Wales all I'd need was the governor to say a bit of land was mine.' (p 13)</p>

<p>'Mrs Johnson didn't like to talk about riches. She and Mr Johnson said that true treasures are what you do to help people here on earth, then afterwards in Heaven.' (p 14)</p>	<p>'He gazed out at his ship just like Mr Johnson looked at Mrs Johnson sometimes: a look of love that hurt your heart a bit.' (p 20)</p>
<p>'Funny, I'd felt free ever since I'd been in the colony. But I was no more free than any convict working on the road gang. I might be legally allowed to leave, but how could I?' (p 26)</p>	<p>'This has been a time of service for us, to lead the convicts, the cast off and condemned, back to the Light. But when it is over ...'(p 32)</p>
<p>'Suddenly I felt proud of the colony I was leaving. We'd come across the world, even if most hadn't chosen to. And if the huts were falling down, there were good houses too, like ours and the governor's, and good gardens, and a life in sunlight and freedom, not skulking and starving in the London fog.' (p 41)</p>	<p>'Was he right? I had signed papers saying I'd work for three years. I'd been so proud that I was one of the few in the colony not a convict, and that I could write my own name too. No one had said anything about being a criminal if I didn't serve all the years. Had I trapped myself with my own signature?' (p 44)</p>
<p>'I didn't plead, 'Let them go.' What would have been the use? They would have laughed, those men who knew that whale oil meant gold, gold in their hands and gold in their pockets and for their families back home. But I could have kept silent, not told them the whales were there. I didn't.' (p 93)</p>	<p>'But the <i>Britannia</i> is no merchant ship or man o' war, impressing men too drunk to know where they're going, keeping those prisoner who'd rather be on shore.' The way he said 'on shore' made it sound as if it was a place for kittens, not for men. 'You're a landsman to the heart, aren't you, lad?' 'Yes, sir,' I answered honestly.' (p 103)</p>

'And now I'd got three pieces of silver for helping destroy that whale. But I'm better at thinking things than saying them.' (p 119)

'And the whalers will buy what you grow, said a whisper in my mind. They'll buy your apples, your potatoes, to provision their ships. If they make you rich, Barney Bean, the silver pieces they pay you will be from whales as surely as if you threw the harpoon or called out, 'There she blows!' (p 120)

CURRICULUM TOPICS

Language and Literacy

- ***Colloquialisms***

Activity:

Language used in the novel includes colonial colloquial expressions such as 'Set the grumblebumble! Splice the fimblebee!' (p 69) Make a list of those you notice in the text and find out their meanings. Write a passage using such colloquialisms and then ask another student to attempt to translate it.

- ***This novel is a work of Historical Fiction — it tells a story set in the past including real (Capt Melvill and Chaplain Johnson) and imagined (Barney and Elsie) people.***

Discussion Point:

'The only thing missing was butter, because goat's milk doesn't give it; there was cottage cheese to spread on the bread instead.' (p 7) Such detail is slipped into the fabric of the novel giving readers an insight into the life and times in which Barney lives. What other interesting details of the times did you discover?

Activity:

Read some of the historical fiction listed in the **Bibliography** and compare to this novel.

- **Suspense in a story hinges on the intended ending and also on what the reader or audience expects to happen.**

Discussion Point:

Were you surprised by the novel's conclusion? What ending did you predict in this novel?

Activity:

What was the most excitingly suspenseful moment in the novel, in your opinion?

- ***Narrative Structure* — Relies on chapters leading the reader from one to the next, and requires both strong chapter beginnings and endings.**

Activity:

Chapter endings are dramatic turning points: 'Peg-Leg Tom was gone.' (p 78) Write the beginning of a chapter suggested by one of the chapter endings in this novel. What might have happened immediately after the ending of that chapter?

- ***Narrative Perspective* — Barney tells the story in first person, past tense.**

Discussion Point:

How might the story have changed if it had been written by Captain Melvill? Describe an incident through his eyes, as if written as a diary or letter.

Discussion Point:

Write a letter as if written by Mrs Johnson to Barney while he was away.

- ***Use of Ornate and Poetic Language — Devices such as Simile and Metaphor***

Discussion Point:

'The moon rode high above me, like it was a sailing ship too, making its way across the stars.' (p 26) What device is used in this quote?

Discussion Point:

'The wind bit at me with teeth of ice.' (p 63)
What device is used in this quote?

Discussion Point:

'The headlands of the harbour were like two giant arms, welcoming us back.' (p 101) What device is used in this quote?

Activity:

Choose other quotes which include effective usage of literary devices.

- ***Setting:***

Discussion Point:

How evocative was the description of life on board ship? What devices did the author use to create these impressions?

Discussion Point:

'I looked out at the ocean, the waves curling and threading their way to the horizon, then at the land, its black cliffs with fringes of bright sand at the bays. The sky, so clear and blue. A few gulls wheeled and cried above me.' (p 51) What feelings for the ocean does this description convey?

- **Critical Literacy** — this text might be used to encourage students to use critical literacy skills.

Activity:

Read the passage: 'I had it good here, after those years in Newgate Prison with Ma, starving among the straw and rats; then nine months in the dark and stink of the ship on the way here, and Ma dying just as we were starting to hope for a new life in the colony, maybe our own hut and all the oysters and greens we could eat ...' (p 4) What does this tell you about Barney's upbringing and life before arriving in the Colony?

Discussion Point:

If there were a third book, where would you imagine Barney might be in ten years time (1801), and how might his life have changed? Read the end of the first book to give you clues to this future. Write a synopsis of the third book and give it a title.

- **Visual Literacy**

— Images enhance text in many ways. The cover and interior illustrations by acclaimed artist and picture book creator, Mark Wilson, are based on careful research and are a creative response to the themes explored in the text.

Activity:

The cover of a book is an ideogram for the contents, and a marketing tool as well. Examine the cover of this book that features a beautiful portrait of Barney foregrounded against a ship at sea and a whale breaching the water. What does it suggest about Barney's thoughts and feelings?

Activity:

Create a new cover for the work, drawing on either theme or incident to create the image. Use techniques such as collage. Write a blurb for the back cover of the book as well.

Activity:

Encourage students to examine the black and white drawings at the head of every chapter, and to relate them to the action and themes explored in that chapter.

Activity:

Create a Book Trailer based on this book. (See **Bibliography** for resources.)

SOSE

- **History** — Although this is a fictional story, it does give you insights into the historical background as well.

Activity:

One of the points Jackie French makes in her **Author's Notes** is how important whaling was to the growth and prosperity of the early colony. Research this topic further.

Activity:

What aspects of the life of a whaler are revealed in this novel?

Activity:

'The Macarthurs didn't like the Johnsons much, but they were important people in the colony. I imagined Mrs Johnson thought it

wise to please Mrs Macarthur with Elsie's cooking. 'I hope Mrs Macarthur's paying' (p 111) Research the role that the Macarthurs played in the early days of the colony.

Activity:

Research the lives of both Captain Thomas Melvill (1758–1814) and Chaplain Richard Johnson (1753–1827)? What historical sources about them are available online? Try to find out more about these figures.

- **Social Class**

— This is an aspect of life in colonial Australia, which although not as obvious as in Britain, certainly determined how Australia developed culturally.

Discussion Point:

What role did class play in early Australian colonial life?

Discussion Point:

Barney begins the series as a member of the lower classes in Britain. What class is he likely to join as he grows older, from the hints made in both novels?

Discussion Point:

'I hope Mrs Macarthur's paying her,' I muttered. 'Elsie ain't no ... I mean Elsie isn't a convict to be ordered around with no wages.' (pp 111–2) What does this reveal about Barney's attitudes and aspirations regarding his class?

Discussion Point:

On board ship there is a strict hierarchy, as there is on land. Was Barney likely to have become a senior ship's captain, had he

continued his training with Melvill? Was it possible for a poor boy like him to rise to such a level?

- **Values —**

Activity:

What values are particularly evident in this text?

Discussion Point:

What qualities does Barney value in others?

Discussion Point:

'Peg-Leg Tom doesn't like to be beholden. Says that if he pays you his share of the voyage, then once you're off the ship he can forget you, and good riddance.' (p 105) What sort of values does this quote suggest that Peg-Leg Tom adheres to?

Activity:

Create a table and list some of the values demonstrated in any of the scenes or events in this book with a corresponding quote to illustrate it.

FURTHER POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

1. **Discussion Point:** The Johnsons obviously don't want Barney to go to sea but they allow him to. Why?
2. **Discussion Point:** What role do Barney and Elsie play in the Johnson household? How does their devout religious belief influence their treatment of these two children?

3. Discussion Point: Elsie doesn't speak. What is likely to have caused her muteness? Twice in the novel Barney thinks he hears her voice. Is this evidence that she may be 'recovering' from what has caused her to become silent?

4. Discussion Point: 'I'd eaten lamb and beef a thousand times, and wrung the necks of chickens too. I couldn't tell you why killing that whale was different. Not then at any rate. But I knew it was.' (p 102) Conduct a debate using this statement as the premise.

5. Discussion Point: 'Be a gentleman, I thought. Me, Barney Bean, a gentleman. Mr and Mrs Johnson had taught me my manners and to speak properly and to read. All I needed now was money and I could be a gentleman.' (p 23) Discuss what this quote tells you about Barney's aims in life.

6. Discussion Point: Jackie French writes: 'This is Australia's secret, as well as Barney Bean's. Our nation was built on whaling.' (p 122) Research this statement and write an essay on what you discover. [See Bibliography below.]

7. Discussion Point: 'I felt like a soldier who'd been to war and seen a valiant enemy destroyed.' (p 102) What has made Barney feel this way?

8. Discussion Point: In the first novel, Birrung is a major character. In this second novel, Barney thinks of her often but she is absent, as she has gone back to her people. What impression does this novel give you of how she has influenced Barney's life? Re-read the end of the first novel in which he recalls seeing her one more time after the events described in both novels. What was the emotion described in this sighting?

9. Discussion Point: What sort of life do you think lies ahead of Barney and Elsie? Will they always remain friends, become like brother and sister, or maybe even marry?

10. Discussion Point: What idea do you think Jackie French most wanted to convey in this novel?

AUTHOR'S NOTES ON THE TEXT

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At the back of the book, there are extensive Author's Notes (pp 122–9) 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 conjunction with these notes, in the classroom.

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<http://www.theteachersguide.com/whales.htm>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE NOTES

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