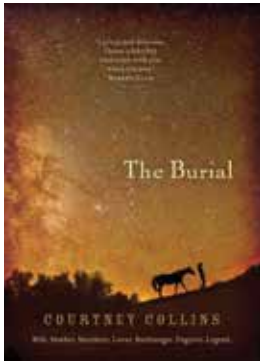


## Notes on *The Burial*

SHORTLISTED FOR THE 2013 STELLA PRIZE



*If dirt could speak, whose story would it tell?*

Courtney Collins, *The Burial*

### SYNOPSIS

In the opening scene of this book, the famous escape artist Harry Houdini performs a great escape from chains and padlocks in the murky waters of the Yarra River. Reaching towards his ankles to unlock the shackles, he finds instead the floating bones of a corpse. He rises to the surface, panicking and thinking of nothing but telling of his discovery. But on completing his escape, unable to find evidence of the body, he decides not to, wondering who, if anyone, would believe him.

The story of real Australian bushranger Jessie Hickman is chronicled here, although the fictional retelling offers a different view of her life than history books would be likely to. In a brutal moment, the character of Jessie is introduced as a mother slitting the throat of her newborn baby, burying it in the muddy earth and carefully erasing her tracks as she gallops away on her horse, Houdini.

It is hard to imagine sympathy for a woman like this, and yet that is the emotion the book manages to elicit as Jessie's story is narrated from the shallow grave of her baby. At 23, already imprisoned for rustling horses and cattle, Jessie is released into the custody of Fitz, though she comes to realise that Fitz is no escape either. She believes him to be the lesser of two evils: better a life with a sullen, unlikeable man where she is free to ride her beloved horses than a life in prison. Fitz is careful, managing to restrain his violent nature until he has woven Jessie into a situation that would land her back in jail if she crosses him. Once he has her trapped, he offers her the choice of marriage or prison.

As soon as they are married, any pretense of reasonableness ends. Fitz becomes increasingly violent, threatening and often spiteful. His returns home are frequently attached to violent outbursts. Jessie falls pregnant, but it is not until the night that she prematurely goes into labour, when she's in pain and desperate to escape, that she finally acts, felling her tormentor with a blow to the head. She lights a fire and leaves his corpse to burn with their house.

The events of this fatal night are studded between Jessie's desperate ride to the top of the mountain range. Although it is never specified exactly what solace she hopes to find in these peaks, her journey there is filled with chance encounters and brief moments of respite from the horror of her life thus far. When she first sets out, bleeding, broken and not far from death, she pushes Houdini as far as they can both go. He carries her further than even she thinks is possible and then she drops, bleeding into the shallow depths of a river. She is found by an old man and woman and their almost-feral hunting dog. The old man wants to leave her for dead. He has no time for another mouth to feed and no respect for a creature not willing to fight for its survival. The old woman, roughened by the years and the landscape, has some softness in her, a remnant of tenderness from her own failed attempts to become a mother. She insists that they take Jessie home, feed her and save her. When the old man becomes a threat and Jessie feels that she has to go, it is the old woman who helps her escape.

Further up the mountain, haunted by memories and unknowingly followed by the law, Jessie stops

again. This time she finds herself in the company of a young boy, the youngest in a group of Peter Pan-like orphans, who have banded together and formed a camp and a family of sorts. They too are rustlers, and on learning of her skills, agree to take Jessie in. Her relationship with these boys reminds Jessie of an earlier time in her life, a time before prison, when she had been the Amazing Miss Jessie, circus performer and best friend to the young Bandy Arrow. Her memories are painful, as she can clearly recall Bandy's fall from the high tightrope and her feeling of despair when she left him behind. Despite the gnawing ache of these memories, Jessie feels that she has found a kind of home with the boys. She agrees to help them vanish a hundred head of cattle.

It is this decision that brings Jessie to the attention of the men chasing her. A bounty on her head makes her an appealing target, and before long the boys can hear the hooves of the men determined to capture her, dead or alive. Jack Brown, an Indigenous man who was also blackmailed into Fitz's employ, is tracking Jessie too, determined to find the woman he once loved. He is assisting the sheriff, whose obsession with finding Jessie is driven by their earlier relationship, back when he had been a young circus orphan going by the name of Bandy Arrow.

As all of these elements are revealed, and Jessie leaves in order to protect her new family, there is an emotionally charged pursuit through the mountains. This chase reveals the characters and their secrets to each other and to themselves. Although Jessie is caught and taken to be hanged, the book ends with a moment where once again she is saved by her furious determination to live, and the ghost of a friendship that she felt she'd abandoned.

## AUTHOR BACKGROUND



COURTNEY COLLINS grew up in the Hunter Valley and now lives in Newcastle. Rights to her debut novel, *The Burial*, have been sold in the UK, France, the US and Spain.

Courtney is currently completing her second novel, *The Walkman Mix*.

[www.courtneycollinswriter.com](http://www.courtneycollinswriter.com)

[www.thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-courtney-collins/](http://www.thestellaprize.com.au/2013/04/the-stella-interview-courtney-collins/)

## THEMES

Australian history  
Women in history  
Outlaws  
Childhood  
Family  
Motherhood  
Violence  
Escape  
Hope  
Longing

## LINKS TO THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM

Alongside **literacy** and **critical thinking**, with the book encouraging the study of a female role not typically found in discussions of Australian history, there are some links to **Aboriginal** trackers used by the police. Although this is not how Jack Brown defines himself, the fact that he is seen to fit this role by the sheriff opens up discussions around the assumptions and expectations of Aboriginal people during this time.

## READING QUESTIONS

- ◆ What are the difficulties of having a murdered narrator, following the story from beneath the dirt? How does the author work around these difficulties?
- ◆ In what way might the themes, narrative style and events in this book be considered unusual for historical fiction?
- ◆ Which historical figure is the character of Jessie based on?
- ◆ Who is chasing Jessie? What are their motivations for wanting to catch her?
- ◆ Why does Jessie murder her newborn child?
- ◆ What kind of character do you think Jessie is? What does she represent to the other characters that she meets?

- ◆ Why does Jessie agree to marry Fitz? Why does she feel that killing him is the only way to escape?
- ◆ What is significant about the historical figure of Jessie Hickman?
- ◆ At which points in the book does Jessie feel helpless?
- ◆ At which points does she feel hope?
- ◆ Which characters are connected to these moments? What impact does meeting Jessie have on their lives?
- ◆ What are the parallels between the opening scene, featuring Harry Houdini's escape, and Jessie's life?
- ◆ How is motherhood represented in the book?
- ◆ How does the landscape become a part of the story? How does it affect the characters? How does it protect them? What do we learn about its shape, temperament and dangers?
- ◆ What is the role of the law in this society?
- ◆ What are the roles of women? How are they treated?
- ◆ Jack Brown is a tracker and a loner. What does the author tell us about him? How do we learn about him through his actions, and his attitudes towards women?

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. The events in *The Burial* are heavily driven by the landscape. Spend an afternoon somewhere outside and write about your experience. How were you influenced by the shapes, the weather, the colours or the animals? What were your emotional responses and physical responses? What practical issues did you come across – food, water, finding somewhere to sit and so on?

2. *The Burial* is currently being turned into a film. Consider this translation of book to script. What elements of the text will work on film? Which elements won't? Which characters will need to be extended?

Taking one of the scenes from the book, and thinking about all the elements necessary for a film, try to write a script of the scene. Include all directions, and

instructions regarding setting, costume etc. (This activity could become a larger project, where one student takes on the script, one takes on the costume, one takes on direction and so on, and then the end result is performed to the class.)

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