

RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper primary and lower secondary (10–14 years)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning Areas:** English; History
- **General Capabilities:** Literacy; Critical and creative thinking; Ethical understanding

REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- Story forms: historical fiction/faction
- How an author constructs voice and character
- Learning about Australian history
- Building vocabulary
- Values: resourcefulness, charity, compassion, bravery, resilience

THEMES

- The Great Depression in Australia (1932)
- Circuses in the 1930s
- Sydney in the 1930s
- The opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge
- The importance of family
- Performance, including ballet and circus
- Coping with change
- Making a difference

PREPARED BY

Random House Australia

PUBLICATION DETAILS

ISBN: 9780857982056 (paperback);
9780857982063 (ebook)

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The Sequin Star

Belinda Murrell

PLOT SUMMARY

Everyone in the circus has a secret - Claire's is just more unusual than most . . .

After her grandmother falls ill, Claire finds a sequin star among her treasures. Why does Claire's wealthy grandmother own such a cheap piece? The mystery deepens when the brooch hurtles Claire back in time to 1932.

Claire finds herself stranded in the camp of Sterling Brothers Circus. She is allowed to stay – if she works hard. The Great Depression has made life difficult for everyone, but Claire makes friends with circus performers Rosina and Jem, and a boy called Kit who comes night after night to watch Rosina perform.

When Kit is kidnapped, it's up to Claire, Rosina and Jem to save him. But Claire is starting to wonder who Kit and Rosina really are. One is escaping poverty and the other is escaping wealth – can the two find happiness together?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belinda Murrell has worked as a travel journalist, technical writer, editor and public relations consultant. Her overseas adventures inspired her work as a travel writer for the *West Australian* newspaper and *Out & About With Kids* travel magazine. Her work has also appeared in the *Sun Herald*, *Sunday Telegraph* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. While Belinda studied Children's Literature at Macquarie University, her passion for children's books was reignited when she had her own three children and began telling and writing stories for Nick, Emily and Lachlan. Belinda's books include the Sun Sword fantasy trilogy, Scottish/Australian timeslip tale *The Locket of Dreams*, French Revolution timeslip tale *The Ruby Talisman*, Australian timeslip tale *The Ivory Rose*, Australian World War II tale *The Forgotten Pearl* and Australian colonial tale *The River Charm*, which is based on Belinda's own ancestors.

Visit Belinda's website for more information:
<http://www.belindamurrell.com.au/>

AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

Belinda says:

I have always been fascinated by circuses. One of my earliest memories is visiting The Great Moscow Circus with my father and being entranced by the performing bears. (As a vet, Dad was called out to treat one of the Russian bears when the circus first came to Australia.) I remember as a teenager trying to teach myself bareback circus tricks on my pony and getting thrown off multiple times. Over the years I managed to break several bones attempting fancy tricks on horseback.

This book was so much fun to research and write. I used multiple books, newspaper articles, memoirs, blogs, biographies and original film footage to research Australian circus life during the 1930s and the Great Depression. I would particularly like to acknowledge the work of Dr Mark St Leon, circus historian, including his biographies of famous Australian circus families such as the Wirths, St Leons, Ashtons and Bullens.

I was inspired by the stories of several fascinating young women who grew up performing in Australian circuses, including bareback riders such as May Wirth and Peggy St Leon, elephant trainer Eileen Wirth, and artists such as Dollie Lennon, La Belle Marie, Dorothy Ashton and Lilian Bullen.

As part of my research, I also watched the equestrian show *Cavalria*, and got to meet the cast and crew, who helped me out with my questions about performing with horses.

One of the fascinating things we discovered during our circus research was that early last century, my husband's great-uncle, Max Murrell, ran away from home when he was a teenager and joined a circus, performing under the name The Daredevil Balto, the man without nerve. He eloped with a beautiful girl called Gertrude and together they performed an 'Aerial Equilibrist' act for several years until his family enticed him to come home again. I loved examining the beautiful old photo album of Max and Gertrude's circus travels all over the world, including South Africa, India, East Indies, Philippines, New Guinea and the USA. One of his acts involved amazing acrobatic feats balancing on a chair on a tightrope, just like my character Jem.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

- What do you know about the Great Depression?
- Do you know any stories about the experiences of your relatives in the 1930s? Did anyone in your family struggle to find work, or lose their job, during this difficult time for many Australians?
- Have you been to a circus? What kind of circus was it? What was your favourite act?
- What do you think it would be like to live in a circus, travelling all the time and performing every night?
- If you could go back in time to any era in history, when would you choose, and why?

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

1. **Differing perspectives of life during a financial depression** – mothers struggling to make ends meet for their family, children making their own fun, families being removed from their homes, angry people who have lost their jobs, politicians and those causing political unrest, and wealthy families who are less affected.
2. **Growing up** – finding what is important to you and standing up for what you believe in, as Claire does when she realises through her experiences that she doesn't want to give up dance, and as Kit does when he stands up to his father to help the poor families and visit his friends at the circus.

3. **Coping with change** – being resilient, being away from home, starting a new life, finding ways to survive when times are tough, as Claire does when she goes back in time, and as the people in 1932 do during the hardships of the Great Depression.
4. **Making a difference** – an individual can make a difference to their lives, and the lives of others, even in a small way, as Kit does when he helps the families of Happy Valley, and Rosina and Jem do when they cheer up the children who have been evicted.
5. **History** – the Great Depression in Australia, Sydney in the 1930s, the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1932, circuses in the 1930s, political unrest in NSW government at this time.
6. **Family** – the stress of having a seriously ill family member, plus finding out about your family history, as Claire does when her grandmother goes to hospital, and when she goes back in time.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you think is the most important theme of the book? Find examples of scenes and quotes in *The Sequin Star* which explore this theme. How is this theme relevant to you and your own life?
2. Do you think Claire changes through her adventures? How does she alter? Brainstorm some of the ways Claire changes throughout the book.
3. What kind of film do you think *The Sequin Star* would make? Brainstorm ideas, including: cast, setting, key scenes, style and genre.
4. Look around your bedroom or house, and your classroom. What didn't exist in the 1930s, or what couldn't people afford back then? Would life be better or worse without those things?
5. What do you think life would have been like for your family if you had lived during the Great Depression?
6. How have circuses changed from the 1930s to now? Why are animals such as lions and tigers no longer used as trained circus animals? What kind of animals do circuses feature now?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Sharing stories

Interview a relative, such as a grandparent, about their experiences during a time when they faced financial difficulties, as many of the characters do in *The Sequin Star*. How did they cope? What tips do they have for 'making do' with what they had, such as recipes that could be made cheaply, or home sewing skills? This interview could be recorded on video or audio to share with other members of the family or your class. Remember to ask for permission before sharing stories with others as some memories are private.

Collage

Create a collage using words and images and that represent one major theme of *The Sequin Star*.

Letter writing

Pretend you are a character in the book and write a letter explaining what you have experienced. How do you feel? How has your life changed? How can you make your letter as interesting as possible for your reader?

Newspaper report: Living in Australia during the Great Depression

Write a newspaper report describing what life is like for families in Australia during the Great Depression. Consider food, work, clothes, lifestyle, entertainment and changes to society. Include quotes from fictional characters to give differing points-of-view and find images on the internet to illustrate your story.

Setting

Describe the setting of *The Sequin Star*, including the year, season and weather, the circus camp and the town of Sydney, the cultural and historical background, and the emotional atmosphere.

Find paragraphs from the book to support your descriptions, highlighting the ways in which the author has used figurative language to create character or setting.

Covers

Analyse elements of the cover design and comment on what makes them effective. Consider colour, font and images in your discussion. What is the significance of the girl, the circus tents, and the dress with sequin stars? What images would you have chosen to put on the cover of *The Sequin Star*?

Excursion ideas

- Visit a museum near you to find out more about Australia in the 1930s. For example, Museum Victoria has an exhibit about the famous racehorse Phar Lap, who is mentioned in the book. The National Museum of Australia even has Phar Lap's heart on display!
- Visit the Sydney Harbour Bridge and imagine what Sydney would have been like when it didn't exist. There is a display at the South-east Pylon of items from the bridge's construction and official opening.
- Take a trip on a Sydney Ferry.
- While you're in Sydney, visit the Museum of Sydney for more information about Sydney's past, or visit the Art Gallery of New South Wales to see their collection of paintings from the era between the two World Wars, including Grace Cossington Smith's iconic painting of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, *The curve of the bridge (1928–1929)*.
- Go on a class excursion to a circus if there is one near you, and imagine what it would be like to live in a travelling circus!
- Attend a ballet performance such as *Giselle*.
- Get active, and find lessons in circus skills or horse riding. There are numerous organisations who offer 'circus school' classes, such as Circus Oz, Flying Fruit Fly Circus or Circus Monoxide. Have fun (but make sure you stay safe and don't try circus tricks at home)!

FURTHER READING

Books about the Depression and poverty

- *Moon Over Manifest* by Clare Vanderpool is the winner of the 2011 Newbery Award, about a girl living in the US during the Depression.
- *Girl Next Door* by Alyssa Brugman is a modern-day story about a girl whose family can't afford to pay their mortgage and become homeless.
- Some of Belinda Murrell's other books are about times of hardship in Australia's history: *The River Charm* is about the challenges and hardships of life in colonial times, and *The Ivory Rose* is set in the 1890s, during one of Australia's deepest depressions.

Books that helped Belinda Murrell with her research

(Note that some of these books may not be suitable for younger readers.)

- *Sawdust in my Shoes* by Dolly Lennon
- *Circus The Australian Story* by Mark St Leon
- *The Circus Ring* by Mary Grant Bruce
- *Haxby's Circus* by Katharine Susannah Prichard
- *Depression Down Under* edited by Len Fox

Other books

- Younger students might like to read Belinda's book *Lulu Bell and the Circus Pup*, which was also inspired by her love of circuses!
- *War's End* by Victoria Bowen is a historical novel about Australia during the Spanish flu epidemic after WWI.
- *Ghost Boy* by Felicity Pulman is a timeslip novel about Sydney's Quarantine Station and its history.

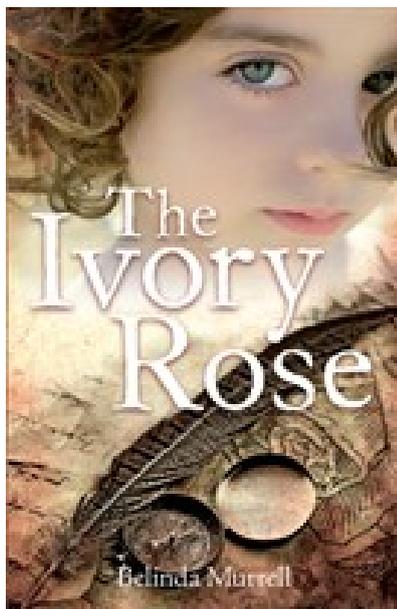
Websites

- Biographies of Australian circus women:
<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/obituaries/a-star-of-australias-circus-world-20120226-1twc9.html>
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/bullen-lilian-ethel-9976/text16965>
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/wirth-may-emmeline-9158/text16169>
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/honey-neredah-daisy-st-leon-10533/text18699>
- About the building of the Sydney Harbour Bridge:
<http://www.sydneyharbourbridge.info/>
<http://www.pylonlookout.com.au/>
<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/sydney-harbour-bridge>
- History of Australian circus:
<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/early-circus>
<http://www.pennygaff.com.au/heritage.html>
- A selection of historic films on the Holden and Wirth family circuses:
<http://aso.gov.au/titles/historical/wirths-circus-film/clip1/>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J2QtXyXcLNq>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-GI27u0mlzs>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9DVDvPJ1Ms>

WORKSHEET ANSWERS

1. Madame Petrova. 2. *Giselle*. 3. In an old carved timber box on the window sill of her grandmother's apartment. 4. She is hit by a bicycle while holding the sequin star brooch. She loses consciousness and wakes up in front of the elephant in the circus. 5. Lula. 6. A family being evicted from their home. 7. Chicken sandwiches, egg-and-bacon pie, grapes, lemonade and a chocolate cake. 8. Happy Valley at La Perouse. 9. The Sydney Harbour Bridge was officially opened. 10. Premier Jack Lang; Captain Francis de Groot. 11. That Kit has been kidnapped. 12. Elsie the elephant lifts him up, using her trunk. 13. The families from Happy Valley at La Perouse. 14. Lennie Gwyther. 15. To see the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

FURTHER READING FROM RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA



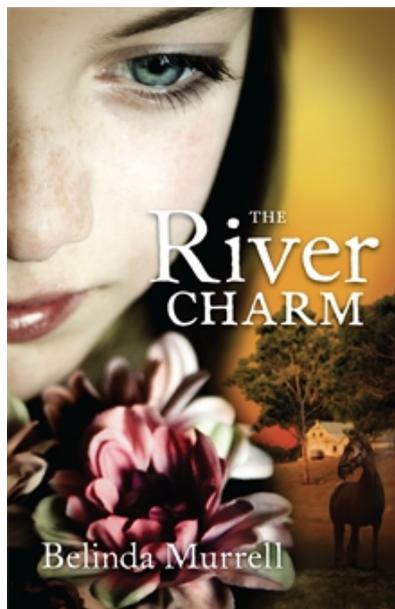
The Ivory Rose
by Belinda Murrell

Why this story? Explore the history of Sydney further with this story about the 1890s.

Jemma has just landed her first job, babysitting Sammy. It's in Rosethorne, one of the famous witches' houses near where she lives. Sammy says the house is haunted by a sad little girl, but Jemma doesn't know what to believe.

One day Jemma discovers a rose charm made of ivory. As she touches the charm she sees a terrifying flashback. Jemma runs for her life, falling down the stairs and tumbling into unconsciousness. She wakes up in 1895, unable to get home. Jemma becomes an apprentice maidservant at Rosethorne – but all is not well in the grand house.

[Teachers' resources available](#)



The River Charm
by Belinda Murrell

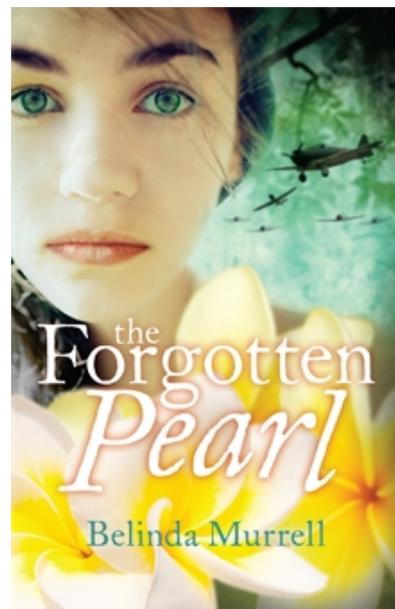
Why this story? Bravery and survival in colonial Australia . . .

In 1839, Charlotte Atkinson lives at Oldbury, a gracious estate in the Australian bush, with her Mamma and her sisters and brother. But after the death of Charlotte's father, things start to go terribly wrong. There are murderous convicts and marauding bushrangers. Worst of all, Charlotte's new stepfather is cruel and unpredictable.

The family flees on horseback to a stockman's hut in the wilderness. Charlotte's mother and the children must fight to save their property, their independence and their very right to be a family. Will they ever return to their home?

Based on the incredible true-life battles of Belinda Murrell's own ancestors, one of Australia's early artistic families.

[Teachers' resources available](#)



The Forgotten Pearl
by Belinda Murrell

Why this story? An exhilarating wartime adventure.

In 1941, Poppy lives in Darwin, a peaceful paradise far from the war. But when Japan attacks Pearl Harbor, then Australia, everything Poppy holds dear is threatened – her family, her neighbours, her friends and her beloved pets. Her brother Edward is taken prisoner-of-war. Her home town becomes a war zone, as the Japanese raid over and over again.

Terrified for their lives, Poppy and her mother flee to Sydney, only to find that the danger follows them there. Poppy must face her war with courage and determination. Will her world ever be the same again?

[Teachers' resources available](#)

WORKSHEET: Comprehension

Questions	Answers
1. Who is Claire's ballet teacher?	
2. Which ballet do Claire and her mother and grandmother see?	
3. Where does Claire find the sequin star?	
4. How is Claire transported from her own time back to 1932?	
5. What is the name of Rosina's monkey?	
6. What do Rosina, Claire and Jem see when they take the dogs for a walk?	
7. What is in the picnic that Kit brings for Rosina in chapter 10?	
8. Where do Jem's family live?	
9. What happened on Saturday 19 March 1932?	
10. Who is <i>meant</i> to cut the ribbon at the official bridge opening? Who <i>actually</i> cuts the ribbon?	
11. What does Mrs Bruce tell Rosina and Claire the day after the party?	
12. How does Jem get inside the second-storey window?	
13. Who is on the red bus that arrives for the command performance?	
14. Who was the boy who rode 1450 kilometres on his pony?	
15. Why did he ride all that way?	

Reading Group Questions

Belinda Murrell's books are a fantastic choice for book clubs, especially mother-daughter reading groups, with plenty of interesting themes and issues to discuss.

Here are some questions to inspire your reading group in your discussion of *The Sequin Star*.



- How has life changed for women and girls since the 1930s? What can girls and women do now that they couldn't do then? Are there more or less pressures and expectations for girls today?
- Mums or adults in the group might like to share a story about what life was like when they were growing up, or a story about how an older generation of the family lived – particularly in a time of hardship such as the Great Depression.
- Perhaps there's also a story of a romance in your family that you could share, like Kit and Rosina's story in *The Sequin Star* – how did your parents or grandparents meet and fall in love?
- What heirlooms do you have in your family that are precious to you in the same way the sequin star was precious to Claire's grandfather? What memories and emotions do your heirlooms evoke when you look at them or think about them?
- What are the most important things you would like your children, and future generations, to know about your family's history?
- What would you say to Claire when she is thinking of giving up dance? What does she learn during the course of the story that helps her to realise how important dance is to her?
- What would you miss most from the present day if you were flung back in time to the 1930s or another time?
- Who is your favourite character and why?
- Which character do you most admire?
- If you could go back in time to any point in history, what era would you choose, and why?

Have you read all of Belinda Murrell's books? If you loved *The Sequin Star*, you'll also love Belinda's Scottish/Australian timeslip tale *The Locket of Dreams*, French Revolution timeslip tale *The Ruby Talisman*, Sydney timeslip tale *The Ivory Rose*, Australian World War II tale *The Forgotten Pearl* and Australian colonial tale *The River Charm*.

ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QUANTITY	TOTAL
The Sequin Star	Belinda Murrell	9780857982056	5-9	\$16.99		
The Ivory Rose	Belinda Murrell	9781742750712	5-9	\$15.99		
The Forgotten Pearl	Belinda Murrell	9781742753690	5-9	\$15.99		
The River Charm	Belinda Murrell	9781742757124	6-10	\$15.99		
Lulu Bell and the Circus Pup	Belinda Murrell	9780857981998	1-4	\$9.99		
Moon Over Manifest	Clare Vanderpool	9780375858291	5-9	\$12.99		
War's End	Victoria Bowen	9781741663662	5-8	\$16.99		
Ghost Boy	Felicity Pulman	9781740519892	5-8	\$16.99		
Girl Next Door	Alyssa Brugman	9781741663389	9-10	\$19.99		
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