

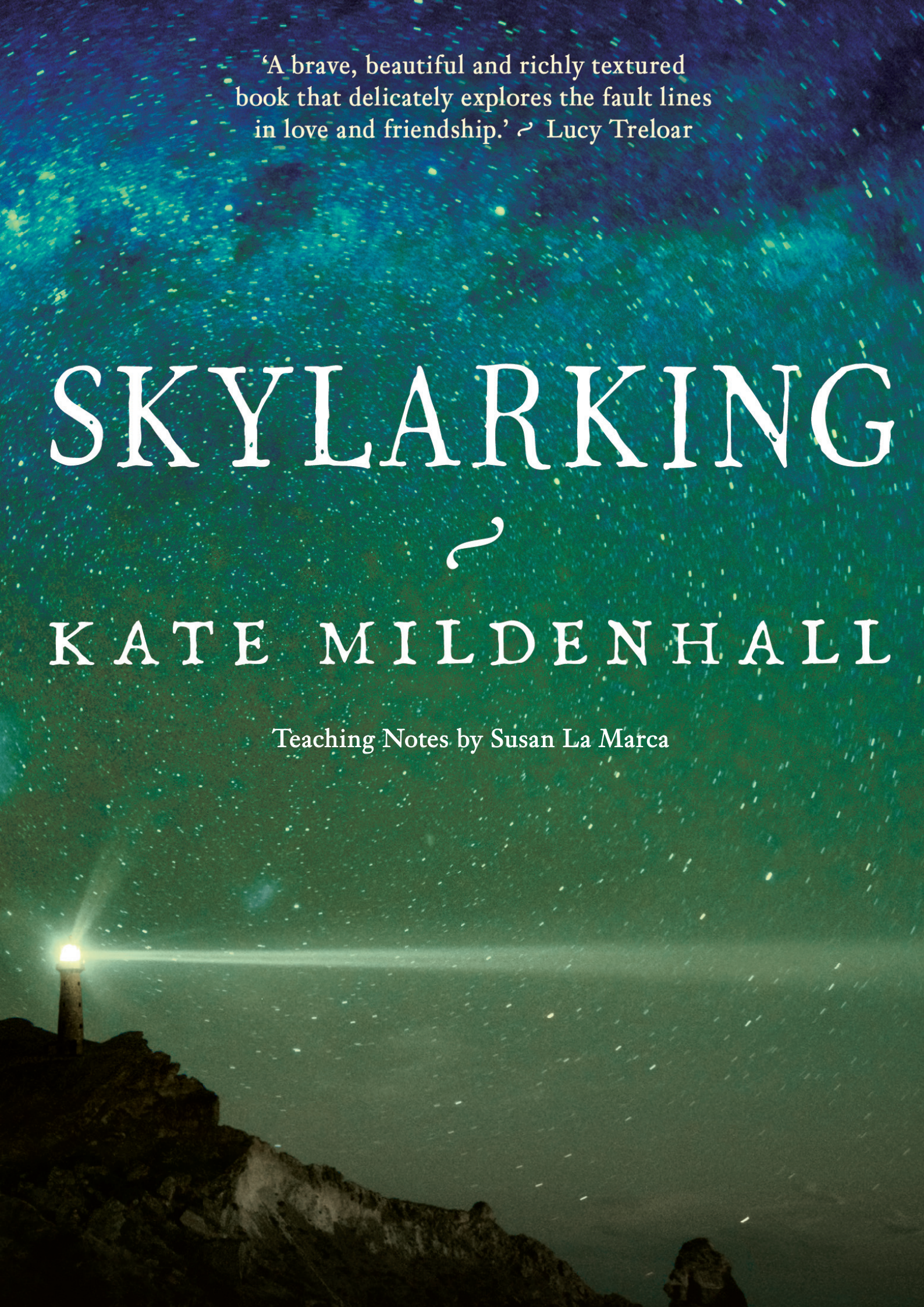
‘A brave, beautiful and richly textured book that delicately explores the fault lines in love and friendship.’ ~ Lucy Treloar

SKYLARKING



KATE MILDENHALL

Teaching Notes by Susan La Marca





Kate Mildenhall is a writer and education project officer, who currently works at the State Library of Victoria. As a teacher, she has worked in schools, at RMIT University and has volunteered with Teachers Across Borders, delivering professional development to Khmer teachers in Cambodia. *Skylarking* is her debut novel. She lives with her husband and two young daughters in Hurstbridge, Victoria.

Skylarking

By Kate Mildenhall

Abstract

Kate and Harriet are best friends, growing up together on an isolated Australian cape in the 1880s. As daughters of the lighthouse keepers, the two girls share everything, until a fisherman, McPhail, arrives in their small community. When Kate witnesses the desire that flares between him and Harriet, she is torn by her feelings of envy and longing. But one moment in McPhail's hut will change the course of their lives forever.

Inspired by a true story, Skylarking is a stunning debut novel about friendship, love and loss, one that questions what it is to remember and how tempting it can be to forget.

Prologue

The first paragraph of the prologue and the first paragraph of the first chapter are both evocative descriptions of place. They conjure up an environment – both beautiful and harsh – with which many Australians can identify. Discuss how Mildenhall makes the reader feel with both of these descriptions. What aspects of the environment does she focus on? What makes the descriptions particularly Australian? This aspect of the book could be cleverly contrasted with poetry about the Australian environment. It would also be worth considering early Australian landscape paintings. Consider colour and light in these artistic mediums. How do your observations relate back to Mildenhall's novel?

1. Consider the repetition in the second paragraph of the prologue. The phrase 'I remember' is used over and over. How does this impact the reader? How does it position your view of the narrator? Does it create a particular emotion? Does it give the reader a feel for what might be coming in the story?
2. The paragraph ends with the phrase: 'After that I try not to remember.' (2) This generates a very effective sense of foreboding. How?
3. What do we learn about the relationship between Harriet and Kate in the prologue?

CHARACTERS

This novel is very much a study of two characters, though we see all of the action through the eyes of only one of those characters: Kate. Kate is writing about events that took place in her past (the notion of memories is discussed in a later section), remembering what happened at a pivotal moment in her life. We see the events through Kate's eyes: how does this colour our reading of those events? How does it affect our perception of each character?

KATE

Kate is described as having 'bravery and cheek'. (4) For her, stepping out on the cliff edge 'was surely joy. And terror.' (7) Do you think Kate grows into the woman she might have been, or does the shooting incident change Kate? After the shooting is she still brave and cheeky?

Kate is a conflicted character. She attempts to understand her own disquiet, to analyse what it is that drives her, and to understand how others perceive her. Consider the following reflections:

- 'Some part of me, deep inside, grew stronger when Harriet was scared.' (6–7)
- 'How could I want one thing so much and its exact opposite at the same time?' (22)
- 'There seemed to be an aspect of my interior world that troubled others ... It was my inside that was awry.' (64)

Do you think Kate is accurate in her analysis?

Why does Harriet being scared make Kate stronger?

Do we all experience wanting two opposing choices in some situations? Life can be complicated and, often, more than one option in a given circumstance can be attractive.

Do you like Kate? What attributes does she possess that you admire?

Is it important for protagonists to be 'likeable' characters? Why or why not?

Kate is flattered but uninterested by the attention of Albert. She feels that 'Albert likes her but only because Harriet is beyond his reach'. (98) She claims that Albert's interest gives her a 'strange feeling'. (119)

Do you think this is attraction? Would Kate have paid Albert any attention if there had been other potential love interests?

Kate refers to herself as Albert's 'imagined sweetheart'. (131) Later, Kate refuses Albert's clumsy proposal, saying: 'Then your father is mistaken. For I will not make a good wife and I will certainly never be yours.' (166)

Is Kate being unfair? Cruel? Might she have reacted differently if Harriet or McPhail had not been at the cape?

Later Kate says: 'Perhaps Albert could remake the world for me.' (263)

How does she imagine a future with Albert might look? What is she comparing this to?

Kate says of Albert: 'When he looked up at me I detected a trace of scorn in his blue eyes. As though I were not the girl he thought I was and yet I was everything he predicted.' (194)

What does she mean by this?

A great deal of Kate's angst revolves around her maturing identity as she moves from being a girl to a woman. The physical and emotional changes are unsettling and, at times, contribute to her conflicted emotional state. Consider:

- When Kate begins menstruating she says: 'I knew it was a line I was crossing, from childhood to adulthood, and I wanted to stay and I wanted to go, and I wanted to be able to be in both places forever more.' (48)

- ‘I wasn’t at all sure what it was my body was doing and whether I liked it or was afraid of it.’ (105)
- ‘I was not accustomed to the strange new lines of my body and where I had once felt completely at ease in the sand and the waves, running amok with Harriet and the boys, I now felt like a stranger to myself, as if I could not move so freely in the world.’ (161)
- ‘I was very nearly a woman.’ (176)

How much do you think these changes impact on the story?

Do you think these changes would have been easier for Kate if there were more young women around her dealing with similar issues? How does the era in which Kate is growing up – 1880s Australia – affect her experience of moving from girlhood to womanhood? What were society’s expectations of young women in terms of education and career at that point in time?

HARRIET

We know Harriet through Kate; she is described as being ‘a lazy type of beautiful, sweet and curly’. (5) As Harriet grows into an attractive woman, Kate tells the reader: ‘Harriet, of course, had become a more elegant version of herself, while I felt somehow unrecognisable.’ (60)

Why does Kate say ‘of course’?

At the opening of the novel, Kate thinks: ‘Harriet’s trust was so warm and damp in the grip of my hand; I could take her with me.’ (8)

Why do you think Harriet trusts Kate? As the book progresses do you think this changes? Do you think Harriet perceives the relationship between them in the same way that Kate does? Find evidence in the text to support your assertions.

At one point in the text, Harriet, discussing her future, says to Kate: ‘I always thought I just wanted what I was supposed to want, but I sometimes wonder whether I might want something else.’ (148)

To what do you think she is referring?

‘There had always been something of the princess about her, and usually I found it endearing. Lately, it had become tiresome.’ (219)

Why does Kate feel this way? Is Harriet tiresome?

OTHER CHARACTERS

Skylarking focuses so closely on Kate and Harriet – and their friendship as seen through Kate’s eyes – that other characters are less clearly realised.

Does this impact upon the story? Would you have liked to know more about the motivations, views and ideas of any of the other characters?

Kate’s father is described briefly on pages 18 to 19, and Daniel McPhail on pages 52 and 55.

How well do you feel you know either character? What do you learn of other characters, such as Kate’s mother and siblings, or Harriet’s parents?

Could the story have been approached in other ways so that there was less focus on just the two girls?

DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS

The environment plays a very immediate and powerful role in this text. Consider how three elements of the environment are described throughout the book: the sky, the ocean and the wind.

The Sky

- ‘clear and blue forever’ (1)
- ‘endless and vivid’ (3)
- ‘a bank of slate-grey clouds roiled on the horizon’ (32)
- ‘thin streamers of cloud’ (132)
- ‘until dusk started nibbling at the corners of the sky’ (150)
- ‘curdling the clouds’ (172)
- ‘A cloud scudded across the sky, shadowing the moon, until it reappeared, bright, illuminating the cape once more’ (274)

The Ocean

- ‘stretched out in the silky blue of a lady’s skirt’ (3)
- ‘the pulsing rhythm of it, a quiet roar, as familiar as my blood pumping through my veins’ (132)

The Wind

- ‘The sound of the wind out there was a high whistle in my ears, and I clapped my other hand up to stop the cold prick of it worming into my brain’ (7)
- ‘stealing the breath from our lips’ (18)

WRITING TASK

As an exercise in creative writing, and responding to the text, students could try to describe either one of these aspects of the environment, or others such as sunshine, rain, a single tree or the bush, for example. Consider the way Mildenhall has given life to her descriptions through metaphor or well-chosen descriptive words to evoke a sense of the environment in the text.

Mildenhall also uses personification to good effect in some of these descriptive sections. Replicating this approach would make for an engaging exercise.

Mildenhall uses personification on other occasions as well. Explore how she describes the lighthouse: ‘juted out, decisively’, ‘confident’, ‘arrogant’ (3)

Emotions also come to life in Mildenhall’s writing in the form of animals:

- ‘Something beat like a little trapped fish high and fast in my chest.’ (67)
- ‘... and a slippery, dark thought, like a snake, sidewinds in the undercurrents of my thoughts.’ (238)
- ‘That snake again, glistening and black, sliding through my mind down to my chest, and it is looping, looping around my heart and squeezing and squeezing and, heavens, I am gasping, gasping, gasping.’ (239)
- ‘Dark thoughts like snakes again in my mind.’ (248)

Mildenhall also makes emotion palpable and powerful by aligning – or connecting – it to an object. Consider:

- ‘It was as though a single thread had been plucked from my dress and stretched all the way to the cottage’ (6)
- ‘... there was this weight on my chest. A cold heaviness.’ (265)
- ‘... thin grey strands of memory’ (247)

This novel champions the power of words. Kate relishes words, and it is her descriptions of their surroundings that evoke the Australian bush so beautifully. The power of the written word is also celebrated, and Mildenhall’s description of the effect of written words on Kate is very evocative:

‘The words impressed a certain pattern on my mind and the back of my tongue, and I felt them thudding softly there as my eyes flitted across the page.’ (13)

SENSE OF FOREBODING

Cliffhanger endings to sections or chapters are a sure-fire way of keeping the reader engaged and eager for the next instalment in the plot. Mildenhall does not employ traditional ‘cliffhanger thriller’ chapter endings, but she does often use the very last sentence of a chapter to throw up doubt or contribute to an overall sense of foreboding. This is usually couched in an acute observation or a comment from Kate that highlights the conflict within her or the unsettled state of her emotions.

READ

Read back over the following chapter endings and discuss how each works to both inform and cause disquiet in the reader.

- End of prologue: ‘After that, I try not to remember.’ (2)
- End of chapter two: ‘I never dreamed that it would be Harriet who left before I did.’ (14)
- End of chapter four: ‘... the frightened hurt of her words – I thought you were dead – warmed me from within.’ (30)

- End of chapter eleven: ‘I would always wonder, when I had cause to return to the scene again and again in my mind: how did she know that one touch, placed just so, was all that was needed?’ (75)
- End of chapter fourteen: ‘Which left me with my imagination, and that was a far more dangerous thing.’ (91)
- End of chapter fifteen: ‘I wasn’t at all sure what it was my body was doing and whether I liked it or was afraid of it.’ (105)
- End of chapter twenty: ‘There it was again – the strange distance that came between us. Harriet’s refusal to share her secret with me. I dreaded being left behind.’ (142)
- End of chapter twenty-one: ‘For it was such a small moment, meaningless really, except that it was their last real encounter.’ (223)
- End of chapter thirty-two: ‘... and I promised myself I would not even know they were there. Well, that’s what I thought I’d done.’ (229)
- End of chapter thirty-three: ‘... and we let ourselves in, as bold as you like, to take our picnic at his table, to drink his tea, to pretend.’ (235)

Many other authors use this device in their fiction. For example, the concluding sentences of *Catching Fire* by Suzanne Collins and *The Knife of Never Letting Go* by Patrick Ness, both first instalments in respective series. J.K. Rowling does an excellent job of creating some very good cliffhanger chapter endings in her *Harry Potter* series.

READ

Brainstorm other authors who effectively use cliffhanger endings, or similar devices, to drive their story forward and emotionally engage the reader. Discuss how this approach can be both infuriating and/or satisfying from the reader’s perspective.

FRIENDSHIP

In a short YouTube clip, Kate Mildenhall discusses the friendship between Kate and Harriet in *Skylarking*:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=itvoGoNDqL4

Mildenhall mentions a number of texts that contain strong, powerful relationships:

- *Picnic at Hanging Rock*
- *Cat's Eye*
- *Heavenly Creatures*

To support the reading of this text, incorporate an appropriate extract from one of the above-mentioned books or watch a scene from a film version. Compare the similarities and differences with those in the relationship between Kate and Harriet in *Skylarking*. Brainstorm other examples of strong female relationships in fiction and film.

How do all of these relationships differ from strong male relationships or strong male–female friendships?

Mildenhall contends, in the YouTube clip, that *Skylarking* is a story of strong female friendship that could have taken place in any time period. Do you agree? Is there anything about the setting or time that contributes to the particular friendship between the two girls?

Mildenhall describes the relationship between the girls using certain words: love, competition, jealousy, envy, passion and obsession. Do you see examples of these aspects in the text? Use examples from the text to discuss these strong and powerful emotions and the part they play in the story of Kate and Harriet.

The following pieces of text may assist (see also the section below on 'Jealousy and Obsession'):

- 'I hated that I was laid before her.' 'I knew she would chase after me – she always did.' (5)
- 'Some part of me, deep inside, grew stronger when Harriet was scared. I needed her beside me, to feel her trembling hand in mine, to have the courage to get to the edge myself.' (6–7)
- '... we became Kate and Harriet. Harriet and Kate. One did not fully exist without the other.' (9)
- 'It made me fearful. For if God held such power, the power to make me so infinitely complete, could he not also hold the power to make me the opposite?' (9–10)

- ‘I was dark, and Harriet was fair. I, loud; she, prim. Harriet of the golden curls. Harriet, who seemed to absorb light and burnish it and throw it back out through her hair and her skin and her eyes so that to be in her presence was to be bathed in it. When visitors came to the cape they would gasp and put their hands out to touch Harriet, as though it were incredible to find such a glowing, radiant being on this ragged bit of coast. She collected ribbons, and I coveted books.’ (10–11)

In a Booktopia blog interview, Mildenhall responds to the question ‘What do you hope people take away with them after reading your work?’ by saying:

All the feelings! I sobbed writing the end of this book. And I love being moved by the books that I read, love the kaleidoscope of emotions they inspire. I hope readers reflect on the friendships in their own lives, on the people they have loved, and the ones they have lost. (Booktopia Guest Blogger, 2016)

Are you moved by the story?

Is it the emotions in the book that most resonate with the reader?

McPHAIL’S IMPACT

If one reads Mildenhall’s description of what inspired her to write this story, the true accounts that she found of the incident at the centre of the story, it is clear that Mildenhall takes inspiration from Harriet being shot at McPhail’s hut.

McPhail’s impact on Harriet and Kate is central to Mildenhall’s interpretation of the lead-up to the shooting. Look over the text for situations where there are interactions between McPhail, Harriet and Kate and examples of the impact he has on both girls. Here are a few:

- ‘Even as we stepped into the hut, the briny scent of him was everywhere. Something beat like a little trapped fish high and fast in my chest.’ (67)
- ‘Did I make it happen, I wonder.’ (69)
- ‘I noticed that Harriet’s face was lit up, as if the fire was in her and not in the hearth.’ (69)

- ‘I would always wonder, when I had cause to return to the scene again and again in my mind: how did she know that one touch, placed just so, was all that was needed?’ (75)
- Kate challenges Harriet about her feelings for McPhail: ‘Do you love him?’ (83)
- ‘When Harriet realised, it seemed as if she straightened up slightly, stood taller. As if she were meeting his gaze with her body. McPhail turned away.’ (139)
- See how Kate dreams of McPhail rather than Albert. (171)
- McPhail said to Kate: ‘Ah, but there’s enough to like.’ (177)
- ‘And yet. There would be no more moments with McPhail. Harriet would pull him back into her orbit, and I would be invisible again.’ (179)
- ‘Why will you not look at me and see me, too?’ (182)

Can you articulate how each girl feels about McPhail?

Why does he have any impact at all upon the girls?

What do you believe McPhail thinks or feels about Harriet and Kate? Go back to the text to justify your assertions.

JEALOUSY AND OBSESSION

Both Kate’s obsession with – and her jealousy of – Harriet and her experiences fuel a great deal of the action in this novel. Kate’s obsessive friendship with Harriet is to the exclusion of other meaningful relationships.

Kate refers to her relationship with her younger sister, Emmaline, thus: ‘Emmaline was always somewhat on the outer. I felt guilty for it sometimes. But not enough to let her in.’ (10)

There are many examples highlighting Kate’s feelings for Harriet throughout the text. They are often conflicting and move between passionate obsession with, at times, sexual overtones, to a distinct jealousy – paired with a strong sense of rivalry – at the changes taking place in the older girl’s life. The following list represents some of the occasions in the text that highlight Kate’s conflicting emotions.

- ‘... the frightened hurt of her words – I thought you were dead – warmed me from within.’ (30)
- ‘I remember the first time I realised Harriet had grown taller and slimmer and rounder all at once – and I recall feeling bereft.’ (31)
- ‘For everything that came after, I have held the fact of it warm in my heart: I saw him first, Harriet, I saw him first.’ (56)
- ‘After one such rejection, I muttered, “Let me know when you do have time for me, Harriet; when you’ve finished mooning over that stupid fisherman.”’ (77)
- ‘It felt good to have her focus on me so completely again. Her attention made me alive.’ (78)
- ‘... feeling the delight in our banter fill my chest until I wanted to shout: I’ve missed you, Harriet! I’ve missed you!’ (80–81)
- ‘... why was she refusing to discuss the maelstrom of her true feelings with me.’ (84)
- ‘... while I sat staring at her, my body filled with the tingling strangeness of her kiss ... I trailed behind, feeling as though something had burst open in both of us, wondrously, and yet it was not the same thing. As we made our way home, Harriet kept pulling further and further away from me.’ (87)
- ‘I noticed a quiet triumph behind her concerned face.’ (89)
- ‘It thrilled me, that look, but it twisted inside me that I had neither given nor received anything like it.’ (111)
- ‘Harriet looked at me triumphantly before noticing her father’s alert, steady gaze.’ (112)
- ‘That she could win that look from McPhail and get to go to Melbourne? I could have roared.’ (122)
- ‘For I loved her.’ (123)
- Consider that Kate gives Harriet a handkerchief with their initials entwined in the corner. (124)
- ‘There it was again – the strange distance that came between us. Harriet’s refusal to share her secret with me. I dreaded being left behind.’ (142)

Consider Harriet leading Albert on:

- ‘Albert seemed transfixed.’ (227)
- Albert makes a show of touching Harriet’s hand slowly: ‘He moved his hand from where it sat on the stone step next to him and let it brush Harriet’s, slowly, deliberately, and I saw it.’ (228)
- Kate: ‘Oh, how it hurt, so blindingly it hurt ... I was determined to lodge the feelings deep down inside me where they could do no more damage. Right down deep.’ (229)

Kate’s seesawing and conflicted emotions and the underlying sexual tension is perfectly demonstrated by this section from the text:

‘... I think I desperately wanted to orchestrate a confrontation ... And yet another, darker truth simmered beneath the surface; perhaps in this strange little play for three, I did not want my role but Harriet’s instead. Or perhaps I wanted to play McPhail.’ (144–45)

WRITING TASK

Considering these examples – and others you may have found – that illustrate the themes of obsession and jealousy that underpin the novel, respond to the following questions:

1. Do you think Harriet displays similar feelings towards Kate?
2. Does the fact that Harriet is the older girl affect the nature of her relationship with Kate?
3. How do you think the other members of the lighthouse community see the relationship between the two girls?
4. Do you think the same relationship could exist between two girls in the present time?

The following quotations are useful starting points for a discussion or writing exercise:

- ‘In jealousy there is more of self-love, than of love to another.’ – Francois de La Rochefoucauld (1613–1680)

- ‘Love and hate are not opposites; they are siblings birthed by obsession.’ – Steve Maraboli (1975–)
- ‘O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.’
– William Shakespeare (1564–1616) *Othello*, Act III, Scene 3
- ‘Friendship marks a life even more deeply than love. Love risks degenerating into obsession, friendship is never anything but sharing.’ – Elie Wiesel (1928–2016)

THE SHOOTING

From its opening paragraph, the story is leading up to the shooting incident. The incident itself takes only a couple of pages to describe (237–239).

What is your response to that section? Does the exploration of the event ring true to you?

Re-read the section from pages 237 to 242. What do you make of the snake imagery? How does it make you feel? Does the snake have any symbolic significance?

After the shooting, Kate’s mind drifts to an event that happened ‘when we were young’. (239) What is the significance of this section? What does it tell us?

At the inquest, Kate says:

‘When they called the doctor, he said that the wound showed the gun had been only inches from the back of her head to make such a mess. I thought about inches. I thought that couldn’t be right. I thought about the doorway, and Harriet, in the light. Her smile, the way her head turned. My fingers on the trigger. My Harriet. I no longer knew what was true.’ (250)

What does this mean? Does this put the entire event into question? What do you think happened?

Read over the following short pieces from the end of the novel:

Albert asks Kate why she is in McPhail’s hut: ‘How could I tell him when I did not know myself? Because of Harriet.

Because of McPhail. Because there is a great weight in my chest and I cannot breathe for it. Because no one is angry at me but no one can look at me. Because I killed the person I love most in the entire world. Because I did not mean to. Because sometimes I think I did.’ (261–62)

‘Why, dear God, in all of your infinite wisdom, did it have to be by my hand? My jealous hand, moved at times by an energy I felt came from outside myself.’ (266)

‘Not that she could hear my innermost thoughts, the ones that whispered: You meant to do it. You meant to pull the trigger. You’re better off without her. You would always be second to Harriet.’ (266)

Do you think Kate meant to shoot Harriet?

Reconsider these two pieces of text that detail Kate’s reflections towards the end of the story:

The encounter with the Aboriginal girl: ‘As though she could see the rotten foulness of my interior, all the guilt and the grief and then back further to the envy, to the lust and jealousy. Still her hands remained, one on the great weight in my chest and the other holding my hand against her heart.’ (269–70)

‘What I lost ... was the truth: about her, about us. She made me, is always part of me. For all that came after, for every other moment that has plucked at my heart or made it sing or broken it, there was never a time, never a love, like that. Harriet, my Harriet, my love.’ (278)

How does this make you feel about Kate and the events of the novel? Do you feel Kate is being true to herself or are her memories warped, or tempered, by her own role in them and the time that has passed?

Does the ending sit well with your interpretation of the story?

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This book is set in an isolated area of Australia at a time when white settlement was becoming more established after earlier periods of hardship in which the first colonial settlers had struggled to survive in the harsh and unfamiliar environment. The discovery of gold, waves

of immigration, and the power of empire had all combined to create a fledgling colony growing into itself, but with its identity still firmly linked to Great Britain.

What is life like for the small community that exists to tend the lighthouse?

What informs us that this is 1887 and not the present day? Look for examples in the text that tell us about the lives that the community led.

WOMEN

There are references throughout the text that indicate to us that the conditions in which women lived in remote Australian lighthouse communities of the 1880s involved relentless drudgery. Life was definitely isolated, and keeping a family fed and healthy was hard work.

There is also no doubt that, during this period, women were treated differently from men and in ways that might appear alien to many young people in the present day. What does the text tell us about women during this time?

Here are some examples:

- Kate realises the book she loves is not meant for her. (13)
- Harriet is being sent away after she turns seventeen to ‘see what she can turn up in the city’. (61)
- Everyone laughs when Kate declares she may become the first female lighthouse keeper. When she talks of the adventures she might have, she is met by the ‘knowing smiles of the mothers, the blank look of Harriet’. (61–62)
- ‘... that there was a threat that had arrived with my coming of age’. (77)
- ‘What angered me was the thought that he had assumed to speak to his father of a possible marriage to me, as though I were an item that could be bargained over.’ (170)

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

In the interview on *Skylarking* in *Books + Publishing*, Mildenhall explores her interest in placing Aboriginal people into her account

of Kate's and Harriet's lives and ensuring that this aspect of the story was handled appropriately. Mildenhall is keen to write accurately about prevailing views, but in a sensitive manner that is respectful to Australia's Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people appear, or are mentioned, in the text on these occasions:

- James caught drawing with 'a little black boy' (30)
- 'thieving black' (41)
- 'a black girl ... she looked like the girl I had seen on that day in the vegetable garden' (153–54)
- 'brought in or hunted down' (157)
- 'stepping through the trees, was the black girl' (267)

Skylarking is set in 1887. How accurate are the sentiments and views represented in the text? Research may assist in determining an answer to this question.

The scene at the close of the text (267–70), where the young Aboriginal woman appears to comprehend, share and heal Kate's painful burden, is both powerful and otherworldly.

Is it a successful addition to the story?

MEMORIES

In response to an interview question from Angela Andrews in *Books + Publishing* – 'Without revealing too much, do you feel Kate is being honest with herself?' – Mildenhall responded:

Are any of us ever honest with ourselves? I hope that I prompt readers to think about how we remember or discard our past, and how time and perspective might change those memories.

What do you think? Do we always remember events from our past accurately? What colours our perception?

Do you think other members of the community at the cape would remember the events surrounding Harriet's death differently?

Students could choose a small section of the story to rewrite from a different perspective.

The idea of our own imaginings, views and desires impacting upon our memory of events is mentioned a number of times during the text:

- ‘I wonder what other imaginings I have mixed up with the truth of the past.’ (8)
- ‘It is funny what we choose to remember. And what is forgotten.’ (31)
- ‘How some events bed themselves down with permanence; even as they happen, we know that they will be imprinted on our memory forever. And then a scent, a change of season, a recollection of the way the wind was blowing on the day the thing happened will bring it back with such force, that we relive it all over again.’ (31–2)
- ‘Where do your memories go when you die?’ (37)
- Kate when talking about the stories around McPhail says to Harriet: “I suspect that, as with any good story, there are elements of truth and the rest has been made up to suit the storyteller” ... I believed what I was saying, that there was a bitter space between the truth and the story that was told.’ (82)
- Albert talks to Kate about an incident with Harry: ‘Maybe that’s how he remembers it. That was his story.’ (134)
- Kate says to Harriet: ‘The stories are always better than the truth though.’ (147)
- Kate says: ‘Perhaps Albert could remake the world for me. Perhaps it would be easy to pretend with him.’ (263)

Consider these passages in relation to the events of the text. Do any of these statements colour your interpretation of the story? Are any of them hints about how the author wants us to perceive the story?

THE “TRUE” STORY

Since *Skylarking* is a work of fiction based on actual events, the story described is a re-imagining of what really happened.

Watch Kate Mildenhall talking about the inspiration and the true story behind her novel *Skylarking*: [youtube.com/watch?v=_U3U4pcyC4o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U3U4pcyC4o)

Parts of the actual coroner's findings are used within the text:

“That Harriet Walker, aged seventeen years, died of a gunshot wound to the head, accidentally received –” My mother gasped. “Accidentally received,” he said again, “and that her companion, Kate Gilbert, was not to blame, as they were skylarking.” (251)

One dictionary definition for the word ‘skylarking’ is: ‘pass time by playing tricks or practical jokes; indulge in horseplay.’

Is this an accurate description of what happened?

Is it significant that this term was chosen as the title of the book?

In response to a question from Angela Andrews (2016) about the use of historical material as a basis for the novel, Mildenhall states:

Some of the source material I used extensively, including the inquest into Harriet's death. A lot of the research didn't end up in the novel, but it helped to build a world in my head that my characters could move around in. Things flowed much more naturally when I stopped trying to adhere so much to historical events.

Writing fiction based on historical events can be a difficult undertaking and there will always be different ways of interpreting the same facts.

How important is it to stay true to the objective facts? Can one ever be objective?

At what point does a story based on fact become purely fictional?

Is how one feels about these issues all a matter of perception?

The article ‘Based on a True Story’ (Geoff Dyer, 2016) from *The Guardian* website would be a most interesting addition to any discussion of the differences between fact and fiction, the way they are written, and how well both are blended in historical writing, and then received and interpreted by the reader.

The website lighthouse.org.au contains information about the lighthouse at Cape St George where the real shooting took place. It mentions the inquest and its findings.

Does the information on this website add anything to your understanding of the story?

Does knowing that the main events of the story really happened affect your appreciation of the novel?

Reread Mildenhall's 'Author's Note' on pages 279 and 280.

It is obvious that Mildenhall did a great deal of very interesting research in support of her writing on the novel. Can you see evidence of this research in the text?

Discuss Mildenhall's decision to include Aboriginal people in her story despite not finding them in the historical record.

Why do you think Aboriginal people were not mentioned in historical accounts?

Mildenhall says: 'I do not know what became of the real Kate.' (280)

What do you think might have happened to her? What would you wish for her?

RELATED READING

The following list is made up of YA titles. If appropriate, there would also be a number of historical fiction titles, written primarily for adults, that would be interesting to read in relation to this text. For example: *Burial Rites* by Hannah Kent and *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood. A simple Google search would turn up many more.

Disher, Garry – *The Divine Wind*

Set in Broome during World War II, this is the story of the love that grows between Mitsy, the daughter of a Japanese diver, and Hart, son of a pearling master. Can they survive the prejudice and hate that surrounds them after Japan enters the war?

Eaton, Anthony – *A New Kind of Dreaming*

After arriving in the remote Western Australian town of Port Barren to live in a foster home, seventeen-year-old Jamie is unaccountably drawn to an abandoned boat, where he hears the voice of a dead young girl that leads him on a dangerous quest to uncover the townspeople's dark secrets.

Engwerda, Robert – *Mosquito Creek*

Huge floodwaters have engulfed a remote Victorian goldfield, reducing the prospect of digging up a fortune. As sickness starts to take its toll and calls mount for the rescue of diggers stranded by the raging torrent, Sergeant Niall Kennedy must try to keep order in a place where frictions can become murderous. A gripping historical crime novel that brilliantly evokes life on the margins of colonial Australia.

Fowler, Thurley – *The Robinson Family Series*

Set in 1948, this is the story of an eleven-year-old girl and her family life in the fruit-growing business.

French, Jackie – *A Waltz for Matilda*

Set against drought, flood, bushfire, war and jubilation, this is a story rooted in the words of our most famous national song. It is a love song to a land and to a nation, told from the points of view of those who had no vote in 1901: the women, the Aboriginal people, the Chinese market gardeners, the Afghan traders.

Matthews, Penny – *A Girl Like Me*

Their lives couldn't be more different, but Emmie can't help liking Bertha Schippan. She's funny and knowing and wild, and she distracts Emmie from the monotony of farm life in their tiny, isolated community. But, as Emmie soon discovers, Bertha has secrets. Terrible secrets. This heartbreaking story is based on a real crime that took place more than a century ago, capturing headlines all around Australia.

Newton, Robert – *The Black Dog Gang*

Gritty, historical novel set in 1900 in the Rocks area of Sydney describing the adventures of a gang of boys who find ways to survive.

Newton, Robert – *When We Were Two*

Dan has had it with his dad. He's not going to take the abuse anymore. He's sixteen, old enough to leave; maybe he'll find his long-lost mother in the process. What Dan doesn't count on is being followed by his younger brother Eddie. Their bond is tested by the characters they encounter and once they fall in with a small group of would-be soldiers marching over the mountains to join the fight in the Great War.

Silvey, Craig – *Jasper Jones*

Late on a hot summer night at the tail end of 1965, Charlie Bucktin, a precocious and bookish boy of thirteen, is startled by an urgent knock on the window of his sleep-out. His visitor is Jasper Jones. Rebellious, mixed-race and solitary, Jasper is a distant figure of danger and intrigue. Jasper takes him through town to his secret glade in the bush, and it's here that Charlie bears witness to Jasper's horrible discovery.

REFERENCES

Andrews, Angela (2016) 'Remaking History' (An interview with Kate Mildenhall) in *Books + Publishing*, Issue 2, page 24.

Booktopia Guest Blogger (4 July 2016) 'Kate Mildenhall on *Skylarking*: I sobbed writing the end of this book.' Accessed at <http://blog.booktopia.com.au/2016/07/04/skylarking>

'Coroner's Inquest, Harriet Parker, Cape St George', taken from the *Illawarra and Shoalhaven Mercury*, 23 July 1887. Accessed at <http://www.lighthouses.org.au>

Dyer, Geoff et al. (6 December 2015) 'Based on a True Story: The Fine Line between Fact and Fiction,' *The Guardian* online. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/06/based-on-a-true-story--geoff-dyer-fine-line-between-fact-and-fiction-nonfiction>

Kate Mildenhall's website: <https://katemildenhall.com>

Kate Mildenhall discusses the inspiration and the true story behind her novel *Skylarking* on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_U3U4pcyC4o

Kate Mildenhall discusses the friendship between Kate and Harriet in *Skylarking* on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itvoGoNDqL4>

About Susan La Marca

Dr Susan La Marca is a consultant in the areas of children's and young adult literature and school libraries. Susan has been a regular reviewer and commentator on fiction for young people across more than twenty years and has edited a number of texts in the field of teacher-librarianship. She is the editor of *Synergy*, the research journal of the School Library Association of Victoria, and is an adjunct lecturer in the School of Information Studies at Charles Sturt University. She is also the Regional Director for Oceania of the International Association of School Librarianship. Susan is currently Head of Library and Information Services at Genazzano FCJ College in Melbourne.

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RRP: \$24.99

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Black Inc.

For all other enquiries, please contact Black Inc.
Level 1, 221 Drummond St, Carlton, Victoria 3053
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