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## 'Lady Dance'

Jackie French

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Reviewed by Neil Bechervaise  
University of Sydney

Every so often I am joyously reminded of how strongly I believe that all educational experiences should be linked with each other and with the world we live in. Questions of relevance tie in with questions of common sense or meaning-making. Questions from the past link with questions about the present and future. Fears and hopes are tied together into needs that can be answered coherently if approached with a little intelligence and imagination.

In this context it becomes a delight to follow the development of an author of the calibre and intellectual range of Australia's Jackie French. Since I first read her parable of continuity with a timeless past, 'Walking the Boundaries', I have been "on her side" though I have not yet become a 'groupie'.

The integration of historical 'fact' with current understanding of how that 'fact' is transformed into accepted and emerging 'cultural wisdom' provides for powerful fiction. The regularity with which French scoops up literary awards for her fact-ional novels supports the view that she is striking powerful chords among that group of adult literati who presume to judge the quality of novels written for younger readers. More importantly, she is establishing accessible links with some of the tougher concerns facing the world, and perhaps Australia in particular, today.

Anguish for runaway children, justice for war criminals, concern about real parent identity, response to an enemy in war and to the indigenous issues facing contemporary society have each been explored in powerful yet various novelistic forms. French's experimentation with prose evokes film treatment without ever begging for it in the manner of the similarly powerful Australia novel by Brian Caswell and film director David An Chiem, 'Only the Heart'. Her unapologetic use of identifiable locations and events provide powerful synergies for her readers.

Set in rural England and evoking recollections of the three field system of agriculture and the Childrens' Crusade, 'Lady Dance' has little else in common with the Camelot of Arthur and Guinevere. It will probably find its keenest readership among the girls of years 5 to 7 though it will reward every reader with an interest in medieval life and death. 'Life' because the novel is a celebration of survival in unimaginably hard times, "A woman might have twenty babies, but usually only two or three children lived – the others died." 'Death', because this is a novel of the bubonic plague in the 1340s when "possibly one person in three, between India and Iceland, died in the first two years". And life, because the novel celebrates the ironic survival of a peasant girl, through the dance of a noblewoman with severe bi-polar disorder.

Jackie French drives in where many authors flinch or fail. A novel about death and disease with strong elements of medieval Christian teaching and entrenched class division seems an unlikely winner in the putatively egalitarian context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But it is equally unlikely anywhere and at any time as an entertainment for young adults. Nevertheless, it is French's novelist gift and her confidence with characterisation that lifts her novels beyond common stereotyping. In her increasing deft hands, 'Lady Dance' becomes more than a novel for readers growing out of their childhood. It becomes a primer for survival, an interpretation of what independence really means, of what grief and sickness really mean, of what friendship actually costs, and what faith might achieve in the hands of the faithful.

This is not a novel for the faint-hearted. Rather, it is the basis for a comprehensive discussion of life's hard lessons, of AIDS epidemics, of starvation in the presence of plenty, of incalculable wealth accepted by the intolerably poor, of scientific ignorance on an international scale. And of the sublime facility of music and dance to generate a reality that renders suffering tolerable. Like an increasing number of Jackie French's works, 'Lady Dance' is a life syllabus waiting to be learnt. Taken into homes and schools in pursuit of such a lofty purpose, it will help achieve those goals so often claimed for literature and so seldom met.

Developing a coherent life syllabus is not often seen as the role of a school – despite the fact that schooling is claimed to provide each student with an education. Nevertheless, as I implied at the outset, Jackie French's 'Lady Dance' reminds me of the potential schools still hold for providing education.

As a science text, the novel provides a challenge for its readers: what is an epidemic and how is it transmitted? For many plagues, as French reminds us in her useful but sensibly limited "Author's Notes", we still cannot identify sources, still have limited understanding of transmission modes, and still have not evolved either treatments or preventive vaccines. Similarly, we do not have cures for more common, but equally disturbing, ailments.

The revelation that Lady Dance suffers an extreme version of bi-polar disorder provides a mini-climax in the story. Its more common identification in the author notes as 'manic depression' brings it closer to the reader. An introduction to the symptoms and history of the condition as it develops untreated provide the reader with an opportunity to examine broader health issues and their social and family implications. At a literary level, of course, the introduction of mental health focuses our reader minds on the careful research underpinning the novelist's craft.

For the geographer, the evolution of agricultural practices to maintain productivity levels, the range of crops, and tilling and cropping procedures support an exploration of the development of the village as an independent social and economic unit

Biologists and domestic scientists will be rewarded with studies of plant characteristics, medicinal use of herbs, propagation, nutritional value of plants and methods of preparing plants as food.

'Lady Dance' provides obvious opportunities for inquiring Art educators to apply their knowledge of materials and processes in medieval architecture, textiles and costume while Dance and Drama teachers will be similarly inspired.

Musical knowledge can be formalised and extended through the introduction of percussion and pipes while the discussion of formalised musical notations and instrument construction provide opportunities to discuss the development of music across the centuries.

While dragons are popular in literature and play, living with a suspicion that they really exist is just one of the superstitions that might lead into a powerful examination of how beliefs shape our social and personal identity. As French argues, 'Lady Dance' is not intended to represent a particular religious viewpoint. Rather, it is the acceptance of religion as a central feature in most civilisations that both informs the storyline and enhances its richness as an educational source. The accessibility of the Exultate Deo across the ages provides a powerful argument for linking any reading of the novel with a discussion of music in ceremony.

The construction of history will, of course, become a central issue for every educator working with the novel. Fictional representations of historical events remind us of the centrality of narrative to our culture. More importantly perhaps, they remind us of the need to make sense of events by locating them within our own understanding. Meaning-making is necessarily meaning invention. French provides a highly accessible literary artifact with which to approach the fact that all history is constructed in the mind of the reader.

On a more traditional level, 'Lady Dance' provides an insight into the diversity of peasant life and aspiration in the twelfth century. It gives lesser glimpses into the lives of the aristocracy of that period. The children's crusade is introduced and the social impact of crusades on women is reflected in the role of the nunnery. Ages of marriage and, by implication, fertility, are introduced and the roles of male and female in marriage partnership provide considerable scope for research and discussion. Integrating history, science and religious belief, the infant mortality rates cited in the "Author's Notes" provide a strong incentive for discussion of changing patterns of family life in an increasingly multicultural global community.

Jackie French's 'Lady Dance' is not a curriculum on its own, nor is it a textbook. Instead, it provides a strong incentive for educators to explore the potential for developing integrated syllabus units around rich and accessible texts. A month of reading, research and discussion might re-establish the traditional classroom as the centre for education it has long been assumed to be.

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