



***The Black Dress***  
**Mary MacKillop — a novel**  
**by Pamela Freeman**  
**Winner of the NSW Premier's History Award**

*The Black Dress* tells the story of the life of Mary MacKillop. The book is written in the first person, narrated by Mary MacKillop from her death bed. She reflects back on her life as a child and the driving urge she had to become a nun and do something meaningful to help others.

The book covers many issues and would be an excellent text to use for:

- religious education,
- english,
- history, or
- environmental studies.

Some of the major themes are:

**Morals:** What is right and wrong? How do we define this? Several examples of Mary and her mother's loyalty to her father and her mother's undying faith in God run throughout the book.

**History:** Life in early Australia is vividly described in this novel. Other events in history also are covered, for example, the English and Scottish rivalry and the enlightened attitude of Mary to the plight of the Aborigines.

**Conditions for women and children:** The changes in the responsibilities of children today compared to Mary's day are obvious. For example, children often supported their families with the money they earned instead of keeping it all

for themselves (P227). The novel also discusses women's rights.

The following activities and notes could be used for students in Years 8–10. Page numbers from the text have been provided where relevant.

## ACTIVITIES

### Education

Education, particularly how it relates to class, is discussed in this novel; Mary came from a poor family, but they still had 'class' as they were educated. There were few jobs for girls in those days, but if you had an education, you could be a governess or teach.

Access to books was difficult unless you had money but education bought class, so it was a vicious circle (P184, 185). Governess work was popular and, as teacher training was non-existent, anyone who could read or had access to books could educate.

1. Research jobs as governesses and see what qualifications are required today. Are these different from the qualifications required for teaching in schools?

2. In 1975, compulsory education was introduced into South Australia. When was it introduced into the other states?

3. Find out what percentage of the Australian population today rely on home schooling, as Mary and her family did for much of their lives.

Mary wanted to make a difference in her world; she chose to teach the poor Catholic children who were denied education by the state in those days. 'They're Catholic and he doesn't take Catholics' (P198).

4. Find out when Catholic schools began getting money from the government to run their schools (known as 'State aid'). Do you think this was a fair thing for the government to do? Should all schools with a 'different' ideology get government funding?

## Setting

1. Using a street directory and the Internet, research some old maps of Melbourne and identify the Darebin Creek area and Plenty. What suburbs are there now?

## Careers

Mary's father went into the seminary at 12 years of age.

1. How many people know what they want to be when they grow up when they are only 12? Ask your class if they knew.

2. Conduct a short survey of your parents and grandparents and anyone older than you who is working and ask them when they knew what they wanted to do with their lives.

## Responsibilities

1. Did Mary's father behave carelessly because he secretly knew his own father and relatives would provide for his family if he didn't?

Was he just a free spirit, a dreamer or an irresponsible man? Do we become stronger when we know we don't have anyone to lean on? Or do we go under?

2. Can you think of someone you know who has had a tough life and has become successful in spite of it?

Tell this person's story. If you don't know anyone personally, you may need to research another famous person's life.

## Farm Life

Kitchens were often built separate to houses in the past to avoid the risk of fire and to keep the heat out of the houses.

1. Construct a plan of Mary's farm property including all the features described like the outside kitchen.

Drought and the impact of sheep farming on erosion highlight the impact of European farming methods on the delicate Australian soils.

2. Find out what other farming practices have had an impact on the Australian landscape (P50, 194).

3. How did people preserve food before refrigeration? Research at least two ways of preserving food without using electricity (P51).

Most people had to farm and grow their own food in the time in which Mary lived.

4. What do most people in Australia now do for a job and where do they get their food? Research the percentage of people involved in agriculture or self-sufficiency in Australia.

## Religion

Mass was a very important ritual for Mary and her family, giving their lives shape and meaning. It was comfortable because everyone knew what to do and when to do it.

1. Make a list of some of the rituals that we have in our society today, and describe one you perform in your family, eg. Christmas day or birthdays in your house.

Catholics are not supposed to study the Bible without a priest present (P104).

2. Would you agree that the Bible is difficult for a layperson to understand?

Find an example of a passage in the Bible that you don't understand and try to interpret it. Prepare a short talk for the class on your piece of scripture.

## Essay Questions

1. The mass had social significance. The MacKillop family hosted the mass and then the meal that followed was held in their home for all the travellers who had come from afar.

How was this similar to the first masses celebrated by the early Christians?

2. The very strict Catholic influence in Mary's family made it easy for them to live their lives, because the rules to live by were so straightforward (P55).

Do you think life is harder today for young people? Do we have enough rules to live by? Name some of the rules that shape our lives today.

3. The Irish settlers traditionally rejected authority as it was based on English law, a law they did not respect, but they were prepared to follow the authority of the Church (P62).

Do you think this is a contradiction? Do you think that this spirit of rebellion against authority is still present in Australia today?

How is authority regarded within our school system today as compared to how it was regarded when our grandparents were attending school?

## Short Answer Questions

1. Today, many young people want to 'make a difference' in the world. Name some of the causes that young people are concerned about these days in Australia, eg. the environment, animal rights, AIDS sufferers. Describe one cause you care about.

2. There is quite a lot written about anger and the management of it in this story (P158).

a) Describe an incident in your life when you felt angry. How did you deal with it? Give an example of someone you have seen lose his or her temper. How did it make you feel? What did you think of them afterwards? Is it appropriate for sports people to lose their temper during a game? Explain.

b) 'Fear lends an edge to our anger – it's as though we turn gratefully to anger' (P118). What does this statement mean?

c) Mary's mother believes that holding anger and hatred in her heart would do her much more damage than it would her enemy (P121). Do you agree with this statement? Explain your point of view.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do promises change when circumstances change? Look at P38.

2. Mary finds out that the perfect father doesn't exist when her father constantly disappoints her, and she discovers the weaknesses of Father Woods, another dreamer like her father and an ineffective man. She learns to rely only on God (P48). Do you think this is giving up? Unrealistic? Or is it just a sign of great faith?

3. Mary's father speaks out and risks all (P244). Can you think of other people who take a stand for what they believe in? What is the price of being a moral person? Look at examples in the news.

4. 'A childhood without any pain at all...is one that ill prepares a child for adulthood' (P170). Discuss this statement and decide whether you agree or disagree.

5. Bushfires are a real threat to our homes in Australia. What would people have done in early Australia before the time of fire trucks, regular water supplies, and brick houses?

6. Mary says it is easier to blame others for our own faults and more enjoyable to snipe at them than to correct ourselves (P63). Is this an unrealistic view of human nature?

7. What effect has changing the language of mass from Latin to the local dialect had on people around the world? See pages 65-66.

8. Mary's mother didn't know about business (P83-86). Do you think this has changed for women today? Investigate what roles women play in business now.

9. In the early days of the Church in Australia, people followed the direction given to them by members of the clergy without question.

The MacKillop family was advised to send Mary's father away to work elsewhere, and the result was that they never lived together as a family again. Was this the best solution for their situation? What else could they have done?

Do you think the Church still has the same influence over people's lives today? If not, why not?

10. The novel describes Christian love as being about forgiveness and tolerance (P120). How is the message different from the message of the Old Testament?

(Answer: In the Old Testament, God was a god of judgement and punishment.)

11. In the time of Mary MacKillop, people had very large families and the care of children was often shared around, by sending the children to live with relatives or other families.

Why do you think large families were so common then? Can you think of anywhere else in the world where people have large families today? Why is this so?

12. Mary said: 'I just know this is what I've got to do. It feels like I've always known it,' (P183). Mary was a young person with vision. Give examples of today's young visionaries, the people who have great plans for the future.

13. Mary refers to having a 'calling' (P205). What does she mean by this? Do you think people are 'called' to do certain types of work?

14. Mary MacKillop's work is carried on all over the world. Investigate what work is done by the Sisters of St Joseph.

15. Mary MacKillop will be canonised as Australia's first saint in October, 2010. How does one become canonised? What is the process?

This novel has been endorsed by the Sisters of St Joseph.

## About the author

Pamela Freeman writes books for children and young adults. She has also worked as a consultant in organisational communications, as a scriptwriter for the ABC and the PowerHouse Museum, and has taught communications and creative writing at the University of Technology, Sydney and the University of New South Wales.

Pamela's books have been shortlisted for the State Literary Awards, the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Awards, the Koala Awards and the Wilderness Society Environment Awards. She lives in Sydney with her husband and son.

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