

GOLDFIELDS GIRL

ELAINE FORRESTAL

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YEAR LEVEL: Y6–10

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Sustainability

ABOUT THE BOOK

A compelling fictional account of the coming of age of fourteen-year-old Clara Saunders, a pioneer woman on the Coolgardie Goldfields in the 1890s. Based on her own unfinished manuscript entitled 'Memories', Clara's life is crammed with 'firsts': a first job, first love and first loss as one of few European women braving the harsh conditions of Western Australia's eastern goldfields.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elaine Forrestal is an award-winning author of fiction titles for young readers whose work has been published in Australia, America and the UK. Born in Perth, Elaine grew up in small Wheatbelt towns. After travelling the world and teaching for many years she settled in Scarborough with her husband, Peter, and their beagle, Fling.

THEMES

- The Western Australian gold rush of the 1890s
- Australian gold rush history
- Coming of age
- Friendship
- Love
- Courage
- Resilience

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

Y6–9 English

Y6–9 History

Y6–9 Geography

Y6–9 Science (Geology)

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Author's website: www.elaineforrestal.com.au
- Western Australian Museum – WA Goldfields resources: <http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/wa-goldfields>
- Eastern Goldfields Historical Society: www.kalgoorliehistory.org.au/towns/Coolgardie

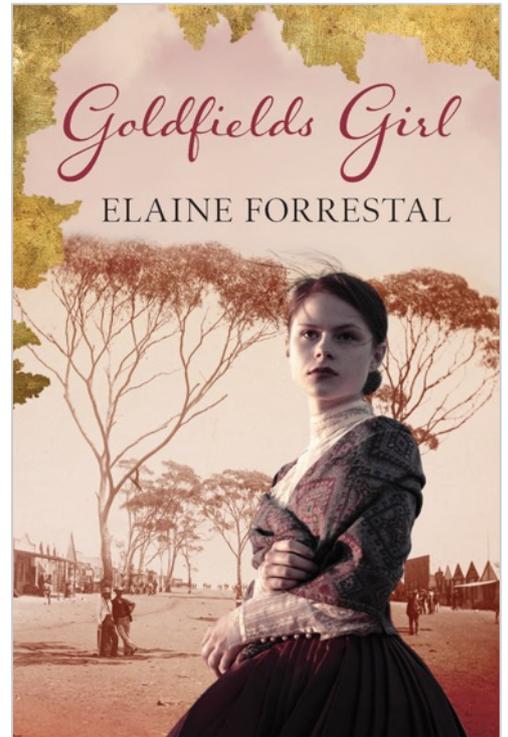
CLASSROOM IDEAS

Genre study: historical fiction

1. What is historical fiction? List some common characteristics of this genre.
2. Why is it important for authors to conduct thorough research when writing historical fiction? What is a 'primary source'? What is a 'secondary source'? What are the advantages/disadvantages of primary sources in comparison to secondary sources? How can historians verify if sources are reliable?
3. What does the term 'subjective' mean? What is the difference between memory, fact and truth? How might Clara's memories be biased or exaggerated?

Discussion questions

1. How would you describe the character Clara? Provide examples, e.g. She is courageous (as demonstrated when ...); She is hardworking (as demonstrated when ...).



2. Clara confronts many physical and mental challenges as one of the first European women living in Coolgardie. List these challenges. Would you have chosen to leave Southern Cross in her position? How does she grow and change over the course of her experiences?
3. Do you think Clara is in love with Jack or are they just 'best mates'?
4. What is meant by *gold fever* (p. 60)? Why do you think so many people were keen to try prospecting? Clara notes: *Even when Pa did strike it rich, it didn't satisfy him for long.* (p. 63) Why do you think this is?

History and geography

1. Locate Fremantle, Southern Cross and Coolgardie on a map of Western Australia and chart Clara's journey. Research the following aspects of European settlement in the Western Australian goldfields in the 1890s: medical care; food, water and shelter; climate; relationships with Indigenous peoples; education; fashion; transport and communication.
2. *I was sweating in my long dress and petticoats.* (p. 9) Why did early settlers continue to follow European fashion even though it was unsuitable to the hot Australian climate? What other expectations did society place on men and women in the 1890s?
3. In what ways do Clara and the other female characters in the novel (e.g. Mrs Fagan, Florrie, Mother) both challenge and conform to traditional stereotypes of masculinity and femininity?
4. Clara's mother states: *'I will not have any man thinking we are less capable than he is. I hope I have at least brought you all up to be practical and self-reliant.'* (p. 71) Do you think she has succeeded? Why was this attitude unusual for the time period?
5. Moondyne Joe was sent to Australia as a *convict* (p. 50) – what does this word mean? What was a *ticket of leave* (p. 50)?
6. What is a *gnamma hole* (p. 62)? (Useful link: <http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/wa-goldfields/water-arid-land/gnamma-holes>)
7. Clara is gifted the first gold nugget found by Paddy Hannan in gratitude for saving his life. (This gold nugget, mounted as a brooch, is still a treasured possession of Clara's family today – see photo at <http://www.elaineforrestal.com.au/2016/10/connecting-with-clara>.) Compare and contrast the mining technologies mentioned in Clara's story with present-day mining in the goldfields.
8. How are relations with the Indigenous peoples of the goldfields portrayed throughout the novel?
9. Who are the First Peoples of the Western Australian Eastern Goldfields? How did the arrival of European settlers on their country affect their lives and communities? Research and present your findings in a report. Include a list of all sources used in your research. (Useful link: <http://museum.wa.gov.au/explore/wa-goldfields/first-peoples>)
10. Dysentery, typhoid and scurvy were common diseases during the gold rush. What were the causes and symptoms, and what treatments were available during the 1890s? How have treatments evolved?

Sustainability

1. List some of the negative effects on the environment caused by mass migration to the goldfields during the 1890s (e.g. camels polluting freshwater sources).
2. Water shortage is a constant stress for the rural community – why is water so scarce in the goldfields? Does Australia still face water shortages today? How can your school be more 'waterwise'? Visit the Water Corporation's [Waterwise Schools website](#) to conduct a water audit of your school and access free lesson plans, school talks and excursion opportunities.

Creative writing

1. *Short story*: Write a short story detailing a week in the life of either a prospector seeking gold, a young woman working in a hotel in Coolgardie, a doctor posted to Coolgardie or a policeman sent to maintain order in Coolgardie.
2. *Diary entry*: Moondyne Joe is the first 'bushranger' Clara encounters. What is a 'bushranger'? Research the biography of Moondyne Joe, Ned Kelly or Captain Moonlite. Write an imaginative diary entry or short story describing their exploits!
3. *Figurative language*: Find examples of alliteration, simile and metaphor in the passage below. Can you experiment with these literary devices in your own creative writing?
A wall of green water rose up so high it made the steamer seem like a toy boat. It climbed up and up to the top of each wave, balanced there for a moment, then dropped down again with an awful bang. At the bottom it shuddered and shook itself like a dog, before climbing up the next wave. (p. 14)

4. *Symbolism and foreshadowing*: How does the author use setting in the passage below to foreshadow events to come? What atmosphere is evoked? Experiment with using setting to foreshadow events in your own short fiction.
I thought about Jack coming to live here. I would be so happy if he did, but I wondered if he would come to regret it. Wispy clouds feathered out across a pale sky and thunder rumbled threateningly in the distance. (p. 132)
5. *Bush ballads*: Clara observes that *Dryblower wrote some very funny bush ballads ... He had to compete with Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson.* (p. 171) What is a 'bush ballad'? Read some examples of works by Dryblower Murphy, Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. What do you like/dislike about this style of poetry?

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What do you like about writing historical fiction?

I love the research. It takes me all over the world and lets me into other people's lives.

Why did you decide to write about Clara and her story?

I was thinking of writing a goldfields story, but I needed to find a way into it that was original and different. Because I often write stories for children and young people I started to wonder, 'where are the children?' There were lots of tall tales and funny stories about men, but very few about women and none about children. I Googled 'children on the West Australian goldfields' and Clara's was the only name that came up.

What kinds of research did you do for the story?

After a lot of digging I discovered the transcript of Clara's journal in the Batty Library of the State Library of Western Australia. It was like finding gold. There was her voice, her thoughts and feelings, in her own words. That led me to visit the Coolgardie Museum several times and to speak to Tim Moore, the historian and archivist for the Kalgoorlie-Boulder Council, and to other people who had grown up in the area.

Did you finish all your research before you started writing?

No, I didn't. I don't always know what I'll need to research before I start writing the story and developing the characters.

Why is learning about history important?

Learning about history is important because it tells us what worked, and what didn't, for previous generations. My dad used to say, 'It's a wise man who learns from someone else's mistakes.'

What advice would you give to anyone looking to write historical fiction?

Be patient. Be prepared to follow every lead and don't give up. It is time-consuming and can quite often be frustrating work, only do it if you love it.

How did you become a writer?

There is a difference between being a writer and being a published writer. I became a published writer almost by accident. Then I discovered that I have always been a writer. Even when I was very young I was fascinated by language and how you could tell a story and make it come alive.

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