

IN FLANDERS FIELDS

Norman Jorgensen

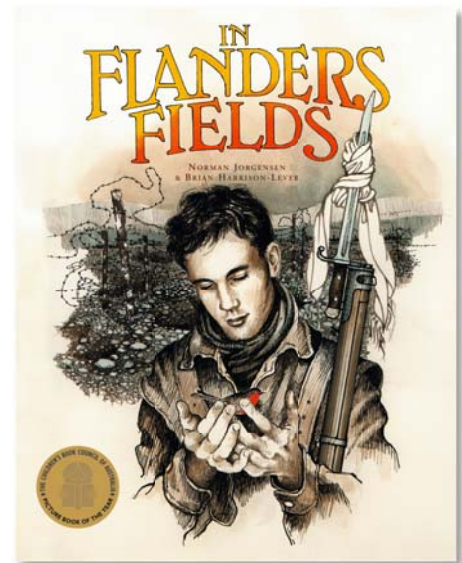
Illustrations by Brian Harrison-Lever

ISBN (PB): 9781920731038

Themes: World War I (Western Front), Christmas, futility of war

Year level: Y2 to 7

Awards: Winner, Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year 2003; Shortlisted, Western Australian Premier's Book Award 2002; Honour Book, American SPCA Henry Burgh Award, 2004.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Early on Christmas morning the guns stop firing. A deadly silence creeps over the pitted and ruined landscape. A young soldier peers through a periscope over the top of the trench. Way out in no-man's-land, he sees a small red shape moving on the barbed wire. A brightly coloured robin is trapped. One wing is flapping helplessly. Tying a white scarf to the bayonet of his rifle as a sign of peace, he ventures out nervously to try to free it. German soldiers in the opposing trenches watch him with loaded guns and watch the bird take flight. 'Merry Christmas, little bird,' the man whispers.

This book will make a valuable addition to your classroom in exploring Anzac Day and Remembrance Day with your students. Although the story takes place in the midst of a long and brutal war, the fighting has paused and no violence is explored. The focus is instead on the similarity of the soldiers on both sides of the fence and the futility of war. This makes it a particularly accessible text for younger readers. At the same time, the historical context and thematic concerns lend themselves to upper primary/lower high school analysis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman Jorgensen was born in Broome in 1954, the eldest of four brothers, and lived in several country towns throughout Western Australia during his childhood. At the age of ten his family moved to Kalamunda, in the hills above Perth. Norman became an avid reader after being given *The Secret Seven* by Enid Blyton at age seven. His love affair with books has never ended and for the past twenty-five years Norman has worked in the book trade. He and his wife Jan, a school librarian, are currently restoring an old federation house near the city. They have five goldfish named Errol Fin, Elizabeth Taylor, David Blowie, Salmon Rushdie and Wanda. Norman spends his spare time reading and watching old movies, and enjoys travelling, woodworking and photography.



ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

With a career that started in television and film, Brian Harrison-Lever later lectured in design and drawing at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. His first picture book, *In Flanders Fields*, won the Children's Book Council of Australia Picture Book of the Year Award in 2003 and was shortlisted for other awards. Two follow-up books, *The Call of the Osprey* and *Photographs in the Mud*, have attracted critical acclaim. His most recent book, *Three Kings*, was Brian's first attempt at the challenging dual role of author and illustrator.



STUDY NOTES

LITERACY: COMPREHENDING TEXTS THROUGH LISTENING, READING AND VIEWING

(A) Before Reading

Considering the context of the book

1. Discuss the history of World War I:
 - a. How and when did the war break out?
 - b. Which countries were involved? (Cross-curricular link – Geography: have students locate different nations on the world map)
 - c. How long did the conflict last?
 - d. What was Australia's role in this war?

Visit the Australian War Memorial website with your class to explore this information and view some photographs from the time period: www.awm.gov.au/atwar/ww1

Alternatively, you may like to have older students research these questions and compile a written report using the above points as subheadings. Older students may also like to research the technologies/weaponry involved, trench warfare and statistics surrounding casualties (while for younger readers this is not yet appropriate).

Anzac Day

Have students discuss the following as a class:

2. What is Anzac Day?
3. What does the acronym ANZAC stand for?
4. Why is this day special to Australians?
5. How does Australia remember its fallen soldiers? (e.g. Dawn Service; national Anzac Day ceremony)
6. Allow students to pair-share memories of how they have previously commemorated Anzac Day or Remembrance Day with their families or schools.
7. Do you have any children in the class whose parents or grandparents serve/have served in the armed forces?

Visit the Australian War Memorial website with your class to access information about Anzac traditions: www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac/anzac-tradition

Incursion

Invite a war veteran or current member of the Australian Defence Force to talk to your class about Anzac Day and their own experiences of military service.

Considering the title of the book

8. As students if anyone knows where Flanders is located.
 - a. Locate Belgium on the world map. Locate the Flanders region on a map of Belgium.
 - b. Research the language, climate and culture of this region.
 - c. Briefly explore the context of the situation on the Western Front. On your map of Belgium locate the town of Ypres, which was the centre of the battles between the German forces and Allied forces in World War I. 'Flanders Fields' therefore refers to the battlefields of this region during the war.
 - d. For older students, read and analyse the famous war poem 'In Flanders Fields' by John McCrae.

Predicting

9. Create a whole-class prediction chart detailing what students think may happen in the story.
 - a. Consider the cover image: what does it depict? What clues about the plot can students deduce?
 - b. Read the blurb together. What events are foreshadowed?

Note: It is often interesting to keep this chart to look over at the end – have the class count how many predictions were true/false.

Expanding vocabulary: clarifying unfamiliar terminology before reading

Younger readers may be unfamiliar with some of the words in the story (e.g. bayonet). Before you commence reading, go through the following list with your students and explain each term. Alternatively, have students work in pairs to use the dictionary to locate definitions. Students who are already familiar with a word can explain it to others.

First Mention	Word	Meaning
p. 2	pitted (adjective)	
p. 3	shells	
p. 4	scalding (adjective)	
p. 4	trench	
p. 6	periscope	
p. 6	no-man's-land	
p. 11	bayonet	
p. 11	truce	
p. 14	sniper	
p. 22	desolate (adjective)	

(B) During Reading

Comprehension strategies

In Flanders Fields can be used for several different reading sessions including:

- Modelled reading as a whole class
- Shared reading in student pairs
- Guided reading in small groups
- Independent reading

Comprehension strategies to practise (Y2–4)

- Sounding out words aloud (not only in your head)
- Phonics (blending and segmenting)
- Slowing reading rate for comprehension
- Self-monitoring for understanding
- Using illustrations to help predict unknown words
- Predicting words by recognising familiar letter patterns
- Re-reading to crosscheck graphophonic information
- Monitoring, questioning and re-predicting

Comprehension strategies to practise (Y4–7)

- Inferring
- Summarising
- Identifying key ideas/themes
- Drawing conclusions

Visual art as a storytelling medium

- Point out to students that in picture books, illustrations are equally as important as written words in communicating the story.
 - Compare and contrast *In Flanders Fields* with a novel or biography about World War I. What do the children notice? What makes a picture book different to a novel?
 - List some conventions of the picture book genre.
- Have the children read a transcript of the book without images – does the story lose some of its impact? Why/why not?
- Have the children look at the succession of images without the writing below – does the story lose some of its impact? Why/why not?

13. In groups of four, have students examine the illustrations in detail.
- What style has the illustrator used to draw the characters – realistic, cartoon, artistic, fantasy?
 - What medium has he used – collage, black and white, watercolour etc.? What effect does this create?
 - What colours have been used?
 - What shapes can students see?
 - Where has the illustrator positioned objects on the page and what effect does this create?
 - Can students identify any patterns?
 - What recurring artistic devices do the children notice?
 - Why has the illustrator used mainly brown and grey in the pictures?
 - What impact does the robin have and does its colouring change the mood of the story?

Discussion questions

- The story is set in the present tense. What reason would the author have had for doing this?
- A white silk scarf was sent to the soldier. What does that convey about the ideas people at home held of the conditions in the trenches?
- Consider the current conflicts in which Australian soldiers are involved. What Christmas gift would you send a soldier?
- How does the book show that we are all the same under the skin, whether a young Australian soldier or his German counterpart?
- The main character in the story remains anonymous. Why do you think the author did not give him a name?
- Why do you think the German snipers did not shoot the lone Australian soldier when he ventured out into no-man's-land?
- What do you think is the significance of the robin in the story?
- A sniper whispers to himself, 'Gluckliche Weihnacht, Digger!' and lowers his rifle.* (p. 25)
 - What does this mean?
 - Why do you think the author chose to incorporate German language into his story? What effect does it have?

LITERACY: COMPOSING TEXTS THROUGH SPEAKING, WRITING AND CREATING

(C) After Reading

This book can be used as a springboard for many different aspects of literacy study, depending on the needs and interests of your class. For example:

Letter writing

- Imagine you are the main soldier in the story.
 - Write a letter home to your family telling them about your Christmas in the trenches.
 - Proofreading for spelling and punctuation – have students swap their letter with a partner and correct mistakes in red pen.

Report writing

Cross-curricular links: Technologies (ICT) research and referencing; Mathematics (statistics); Geography (mapping)

- Have students research and write a report on World War I under the following subheadings:
 - How and when did war break out?
 - Which countries were involved?
 - How long did this conflict last?
 - What was Australia's role in the war?
 - How did the war conclude?

Teaching focus:

- Linking words to do with time, e.g. later, after, before
- Paragraph structure in time order sequence

- Action verbs
- Simple past tense

Debate

24. Debate the validity of each of the following claims in teams of four. Research and provide historical evidence/statistics to back up your claims.
- 'War can only be abolished through war, and in order to get rid of the gun it is necessary to take up the gun.' –Mao Zedong
 - 'The absence of war is not peace.' –Harry S Truman

Diary writing

25. Write a diary entry about your experience of Christmas in the trenches. Try to use new adjectives to evoke imagery for your reader, and appeal to the five senses, not merely the visual. Consider incorporating some of the words used by the author:
- pitted (p. 2)
 - ruined (p. 2)
 - limply (p. 14)
 - iced black mud (p. 15)
 - gently (p. 17)
 - feebly (p. 19)
 - tenderly (p. 20)
 - desolate (p. 22)
 - hoarse (p. 28)
26. Explore the use of personification and its impact on the reader.
- Create a class definition for this term.
 - Find examples of personification in the book, e.g. *the chatter of machine-guns* (p. 3).
 - Incorporate the use of personification in your diary entry.

Poetry

27. This book shares a title with a famous poem, part of which is included in the final page of the story. Read the full poem here: www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/customs/poems.asp
- What poetic devices have been used?
 - Research the history of the poet.
 - Read the biography of the poet's World War I experience. How might this be reflected in the tone of the poem?
 - What emotions are evoked by this poem?

Symbolism

28. Create a class definition for the term 'symbolism'.
29. Find three examples of symbolism in the book and explain what you think they may represent, e.g. poppies, the robin, the white silk scarf etc.

Writing in the present tense vs. writing in the past tense

30. The story is set in the present tense. What reason would the author have had for doing this?
31. Have students practise writing sentences in the present tense. How does it differ to writing in past tense?
32. Have students practise converting sentences from the book from present tense to past tense, and exploring different ways to structure the clauses, e.g. *Early on Christmas morning the guns stop firing.*
→ *The guns stopped firing early on Christmas morning.*

CROSS-CURRICULAR LINKS

Art

33. As a class, read the illustrator's motivation provided below. Have students create an Anzac Day artwork using the techniques modelled in *In Flanders Fields* in this order:
- Draw figures lightly in ink using a technical drawing pen.
 - Line in the background of the trenches and sandbags.
 - Colour-wash with sepia and allow to dry overnight.
 - Finally, add a single bright colour (e.g. the red robin's breast) as appropriate to the picture the children have chosen to create.

History

Please refer to questions 1–7 of these teaching notes.

Geography

Please refer to questions 1–7 of these teaching notes.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Author motivation: Norman Jorgensen's inspiration for creating *In Flanders Fields*

The story was inspired by a single scene in an old black and white silent film I saw many years ago. It was the first version of Erich Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* made by Lewis Milestone in 1929.

Remarque's sympathetic and realistic treatment of the common soldier, together with the filmmaker's atmospheric, stark photography has haunted me ever since.

I wrote the initial draft and called it *A Soldier's Christmas* and I used the device of the robin as a symbol of simplicity in an overwhelmingly huge and tragic background. I set the story at Christmas to add emphasis to the homesickness that the soldiers would all have been feeling.

Visiting Belgium on holiday a few years later I attempted to locate the graves of three relatives (to whom the book is dedicated), which was when the enormity of the tragedy of war hit me. Thousands upon thousands of soldiers of all nationalities lay buried in Flanders mud. The sheer waste of so many young lives touched me so much that, on my return to Australia, I immediately reworked the story and sent it for publication.

My grandmother, to whom the book is also dedicated, was still alive when I returned from Flanders and when I told her I had found her uncle James Bowen's grave at the Menin Road Cemetery, she clearly remembered him from eighty-five years earlier: 'Uncle Jim, oh, he went away to the war ... and never came back.'

For the sake of popularity I could have set the story in the more widely known Gallipoli but felt that I owed it to my ancestors who had actually died at the Western Front to use the Flanders battlefields. More Australians were killed in a few days on the Western Front than in the whole Gallipoli campaign but a lot less is known about those terrible battles.

Making the decision on the final page of the book proved to be most difficult. Opinions differed on how to end the story. After many changes, however, we returned to the original idea of endless rows of crosses and countless red poppies. Using the first verse of the famous poem 'In Flanders Fields' – by Lt Col. John McCrae of the Royal Canadian Medical Corps, who died in France in 1918 – seemed the most appropriate way to conclude the story.

Illustrator motivation: Brian Harrison-Lever's artistic process

Researching photographs through my magnifying glass I was touched by the way these poor young fellows, in the most appalling conditions – bedraggled, cold and soaked to the skin, uniforms unrecognisable, festooned and weighed down with equipment, up to their knees in slime – could still be bothered to tilt their steel helmets at a jaunty angle and raise a smile for the cameraman.

The cover drawing was my first completed illustration by which time the hero's character and personality had taken on the persona of my nineteen-year-old son, Tom. Over several months of concentrated research and actual work on the drawings, I became totally absorbed by the appalling conditions of the Western Front and the happenings 'in Flanders Fields'. Having to turn off the desk lights and close the door on it all each night, feeling at times that I was leaving my son in there, was difficult. It was necessary on some nights to open the door to his room just to reassure myself that he was sitting happily working at his computer.

For years I had hoarded a couple of reams of an extra tough French watercolour paper that allowed for multiple dunkings and washing back. I initially decided to limit my palette to Sepia, Payne's Grey, and diluted black ink, with the robin's red chest feathers being the only bright colour through the book. As the work progressed a touch of watery Vermilion and Cadmium Yellow was included in the fire tins as a concession to Christmas for the poor homesick youngsters. As morning breaks and the daylight strengthens I added a little Cerulean Blue to the sky and the morning light.

My procedure was to draw the figures lightly in ink using a technical drawing pen, then line-in the background of the trenches and sandbags. Next was to colour-wash with Sepia, then finally with the Payne's Grey. Once dry I would soak the paper in a bath of cold water washing back the colour to achieve an 'aqua tint' quality. The sheet was then hung out to dry on a rack over the bath. Ink texturing and detailing was next, before final colour was added, then final wash-back. With the battlefield landscapes, the vertical line technique and textures was the result of hours of work with a mapping pen, diluted inks and watercolour, with pale watercolour washes brushed over, before washing back again. Once the subtle washed-out effect was achieved the robin's bright red feathers were the final touch.