

# Miss Franklin

How Miles Franklin's brilliant career began

LIBBY HATHORN

ILLUSTRATED BY PHIL LESNIE



TEACHERS RESOURCES

# MISS FRANKLIN

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# INTRODUCTION

'I can see you want to make your mark. Just like I do.'

**Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin (1879–1954)** is an iconic and famous figure in Australian literature. But her humble beginnings on a station called Brindabella, her early occupation as a governess, and her family's gradual financial decline did not immediately bode her later acclaim. Although *My Brilliant Career*, published in 1901, was an immediate success, she struggled to continue her writing, took up other work, moved to the USA, and later to the UK, returned to live in Australia in 1927, and, after further time in the UK, returned home for good in 1932.

This picture book tells the story of how Stella decided as a young governess to concentrate on her writing. It imagines that a feisty and unconventional young girl named Imp advised her to follow her dreams. Writing is not something one dreams of doing 'one day'. It is the product of dedication, hard work and often involves the denial of one's other pleasures for the inherent 'pleasure' of creating something anew. Miles Franklin's writing was achieved while she worked first as a governess and later as a trade union secretary, a cook, a journalist, and while she supported the WWI effort, and pursued her many socially conscious ideals.

Her story is also one of female empowerment. The singing bird in the story is symbolic of her bid for freedom. Imp brings the injured bird to Miss Franklin and after its wing is repaired and it is able to fly, 'She went home with the mended bird, and singing like a bird.' Miles Franklin's story, too, is of a woman who wanted to 'sing' and to stretch her wings to see where her dreams might take her. She lived in an age when women were fighting for universal suffrage and were still hampered by the male domination of society. A nationalist Australian literature, too, was only just emerging, dominated by male writers, and she had to fight to have her voice heard above the popularity of bush poetry and larrikin yarns. She was encouraged by male writers such as Henry Lawson and A.B. Paterson. Stella had marriage proposals, too, but chose to resist marriage in order to maintain her independence. She also endured WWI and the Great Depression before returning to Australia to become a great supporter of her fellow writers and their interests. Her legacy in establishing the Miles Franklin Literary Award has ensured that her name and reputation continue to thrive.

Stella's 'brilliant career' was forged in this tumultuous time in our history, and her resilience was born of both her upbringing and the social context in which she developed her formidable skills.

# THEMES AND CURRICULUM TOPICS

Several themes are covered in this book which might be related to the Australian Curriculum, including:

## STUDY OF HISTORY, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

- **Women in Society**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Miles Franklin was an unconventional woman for her times. She was determined to become a writer and eschewed marriage, financial security and a settled life in Australia to travel abroad in order to pursue her own interests. How difficult might it have been to live as she did?

**ACTIVITY:** Research the life of Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin. Her influence is reflected in the Miles Franklin Literary Award, first awarded in 1957 (which she funded via a bequest) and The Stella Prize, founded in 2013, which honours women's contributions to Australian literature. Miles Franklin was her pseudonym in a time when men's writing was often considered superior to women's. She also used the name 'Brent of Bin Bin' in some of her later writing.



**Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin**

**ACTIVITY:** Research the lives of other early Australian women writers such as Dame Mary Gilmore, Louise Mack, Tasma (Jessie Couvreur), Ada Cambridge, Rosa Praed, Henry Handel Richardson, Katharine Susannah Prichard, May Gibbs, Dorothea Mackellar, Nettie Palmer, Pamela Travers, Ethel Turner, Barbara Baynton, Mary Grant Bruce, Pixie O'Harris, Christina Stead, Jean Devanny, Flora Eldershaw and Marjorie Barnard (the latter two writers published as M. Barnard Eldershaw), Ruth Park, Nettie Palmer, and Dymphna Cusack.

**ACTIVITY:** Research the lives of other Australian women who have achieved in their chosen careers. Read, for example, Pamela Freeman's *Amazing Australian Women: Twelve Women Who Shaped History* (Lothian Children's Books, Hachette, 2018) in order to learn about other such women.

- **Life in Late Nineteenth Century Australia**

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ' "She has to do her chores at the dairy," Henry said. "The poddy calves and the mucking out and all!" Bertie explained.' Such tasks wouldn't be commonly asked of children today. Research the types of work which children did in this time.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** Imp makes a doll out of twigs, and a castle out of stones which she destroys with a catapult (slingshot). What other pastimes did children in this era engage in? [See **Worksheet 1.**]

**DISCUSSION POINT:** In this story, Stella is the governess to the imagined Davis children and teaches them in an old shed. Children were often taught by governesses and/or in one-teacher schools in these times. Research education in the nineteenth century. Read Mark Wilson's *Never Lose Hope: The Story of Australia's First School* (Hachette, 2018), which is also about early education.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** ' "Never! Waste of time, learning to read when you work all day on a farm," Imp said loudly as she turned away.' Discuss Imp's comment and how her attitudes to reading and education change after she meets Miss Franklin.

**ACTIVITY:** Study the clothing worn by the children and by Miss Franklin. What items of clothing are unfamiliar? What features are different to what we wear today?

**ACTIVITY:** Miles Franklin is depicted writing her novel in pen and ink on paper. In the classroom they use chalk on slates and a board. Research

writing implements in this era.

**ACTIVITY:** Read *My Place* by Nadia Wheatley and Donna Rawlins (1987) and watch some of the ABC series *My Place*. <<http://www.abc.net.au/abc3/myplace/>> based on the book. Discuss what it reveals about nineteenth-century life.

**ACTIVITY:** Many seminal movements took place during Miles Franklin's life, including the growth of both nationalism and Australian art and literature, Federation, women's suffrage, the Great Depression, World War I and World War II. Research any one of these events or historical movements. What part did Miles Franklin play in any of these movements?

**DISCUSSION POINT:** *My Brilliant Career* 'was the only Australian novel published in the year of Federation' (Maloney and Grocz 2009). What does this tell us about the state of Australian literature at the time? Franklin was a fierce advocate for literary life in Australia, but after she returned to live here in 1932, she also often wrote scathingly in her diary about Australian writers' insecurities:

'Authors' Week, 8–13 April 1935 Why should Australian authors have a week like the Blind, or the Crippled or Animals? (be kind to them). The author has lost his authority – it is to be seen. He comes forward as a seller of mere commercial wares who lacks customers.

Our authors' week also showed painfully our circumscription to the English Garrison. It was beaten into retreat a generation ago by such full-sized men as Archibald, Stephens and Lawson, Tom Collins. One more would have saved the city. Perhaps the war killed too much talent in embryo, or it may be that it merely hastened the confusion, the impasse sure to occur when an economic system no longer functions and transition to another is resisted by the privileged of the old order & their echoing minions. We are more enervatedly and mediocrely a mental Colony of England (& Hollywood) today than we were physically in the old garde-major days.' (*The Diaries of Miles Franklin*, edited by Paul Brunton. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin in association with State Library of New South Wales, 2004, p 17.)

In another diary entry of 23 November 1946, Franklin reports on meeting a Professor Trendall at the annual dinner of the English Association:

'As the toasts were literary, I asked what phase of Australian literature he was going to discuss. "Is there any?" said he with the quintessence of superciliousness, with the further indication that could there be such a spurious commodity it would be unnecessary.

Good lor!

'Then what are you going to speak on?' 'Greek vases?'

Why Greek vases? Why not Phoenician or Etruscan?

He said Australian literature was all nonsense, it should be literature in Australia.' (*The Diaries of Miles Franklin*, edited by Paul Brunton. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin in association with State Library of New South Wales, 2004, p 179.)

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

The text of this book might be studied in relation to the following aspects:

**ACTIVITY:** Read an excerpt from Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* (1901) to your students. Invite them to respond to it and how it relates to what they have read in this picture book. For example:

'Nothing ever happened there. Time was no object, and the days slid quietly into the river of years, distinguished one from another by name alone. An occasional birth or death was a big event, and the biggest event of all was the advent of a new resident.' (*My Brilliant Career*, Chapter Three, 'A Lifeless Life', Sydney, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1986, 1966, Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1901, p 8.)

OR:

'This was my life – my life – my career, my brilliant career! I was fifteen – fifteen! A few fleeting hours and I would be old as those around me. I looked at them as they stood there, weary, and turning down the other side of the hill of life. When young, no doubt they had hoped for, and dreamed of, better things – had even known them. But here they were. This had been their life; this was their career. It was, and in all probability would be, mine too. My life – my career – my brilliant career!' (*My Brilliant Career*, Chapter Five, 'Disjointed Sketches and Crumbles', Sydney, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1986, 1966, Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1901, p 21)

**ACTIVITY:** What might have happened to Imp in later life? Write a story about an experience she might have had as a result of meeting Miss Franklin.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The text suggestively hints at aspects of Stella's life. Her symbolic connection to the bird is outlined above in the **Introduction** to these notes. Imp's reputation, described by the Davis children, mirrors Miss Franklin's rebellious discontent:

'I can see you want to make your mark. Just like I do.'

What else does this text suggest about Stella Franklin?

**ACTIVITY:** Invite students to write a poem in ballad form about the life of Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin.

**ACTIVITY:** Older students might watch the film *My Brilliant Career* (1979) starring Judy Davis and Sam Neill. Directed by Gillian Armstrong. Produced by Margaret Fink Productions, New South Wales Film Corporation and Greater Union Organisation (GUO).

**ACTIVITY:** Test your students' **comprehension** by asking them questions about the written and visual text. [See **Worksheet 3**.]

## VISUAL LITERACY

The visual text of a book combines with the written text to tell the story using the various parts of the book's design and illustrations, as explored below:

**ACTIVITY:** The **cover** of a book is an important part of its message. Miss Franklin is depicted from behind, opening an umbrella, with her hair loose under her hat and blowing free in the wind. On the back cover the singing bird is watching from a tree branch. What does the cover suggest about this book?

**ACTIVITY:** The **front endpapers** depict an empty Australian landscape and then the **back endpapers** depict the same landscape with Imp leaning against a tree reading a book; symbolic of the influence Miss Franklin has had on her. Discuss what the endpapers contribute to 'meaning making' in this book.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The title page depicts Imp climbing a tree and Miss Franklin gazing admiringly up at her. This sets the scene for what follows in this story of young women making decisions for themselves and bucking conventional mores of behaviour.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** The **format** of the book is portrait, rather than landscape or square. Invite students to comment on what effect the format has on reading a picture book.

**DISCUSSION POINT:** How does the **layout of the storyboard** and the **format and design** of the book influence your reading of it?

**ACTIVITY:** Creating characters entails studying **facial expressions and 'body language'**. Choose a frame and discuss what the image suggests about the characters.

**ACTIVITY:** Study the **style of art** employed by Phil Lesnie in this book. For example, it is illustrated in a delicate gouache and watercolour medium and is reminiscent of the works of great nineteenth century masters such as Tom Roberts. The **colours** used in this book are a combination of the green

hues of plant life and ochre colours of the earth. The Australian landscape is thus beautifully and realistically evoked. Invite students to execute a picture responding to this picture book, in a similar style.

**ACTIVITY: Pictures invite close reading and interpretation.** Imp's red hair, facial expressions and demeanour echo those of Miss Franklin. Imp's advice to the teacher may therefore be interpreted as the advice of Miles Franklin's younger self to her older self. In turn, Miss Franklin advises Imp to learn to read and the endpapers suggest that she heeds her advice. What other such 'sub-texts' did you find in this book?

**ACTIVITY: List any aspects of nineteenth-century life** which were revealed in these images. [See also **Worksheet 2.**]

**ACTIVITY:** Invite students to **draw, paint, or collage a scene** to accompany the story you wrote above about Imp's possible future. Create a classroom mural using all the images created by class members. [See also **Worksheet 1.**]

**ACTIVITY:** Create a graphic novel/comic version of an event in this book. [See **Bibliography.**] [See also **Worksheet 4.**]

## CREATIVE ARTS

There are many creative activities suggested by this text:

- 1. Write a short script** based on any scene detailed in this picture book and have students act out the scene.
- 2. Invite students to suggest appropriate music** to accompany this scene.
- 3. Create a diorama** of the school room with Miss Franklin and the Davis children inside, and with Imp outside on a bench.
- 4. Create a poster** to advertise this book.
- 5. Create a Book Trailer** to promote this book. [See **Bibliography.**]

## LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

**Activity:** Research the topics above online.

**Activity:** Research the author and illustrator online. [See **Bibliography.**]

## MATHEMATICS

**ACTIVITY:** Discuss loan re-payments and set students the task of calculating how long it might have taken Mr Franklin to pay off the debt of £500 at 4 % interest or £20 per year in interest (p 161 of *My Brilliant Career*) which he owed Mr M'Swat. To give students some idea of what this represented, study wages at the time:

'In 1896 Victorian wages boards set the first minimum wage rates in Australia' ... The Act set an overall minimum wage for any factory or work-room in the colony of Victoria of 2 shillings and sixpence per week.'

'Establishing an Australian Minimum Wage 1907–1922' *Waltzing Matilda and the Sunshine Harvester Factory*

<<https://www.fwc.gov.au/waltzing-matilda-and-the-sunshine-harvester-factory/historical-material/methods-wage-adjustment-1>>

There are 20 shillings in a pound. The average worker therefore earned a pound every two months and six pounds a year.

**ACTIVITY:** Try to calculate what that loan amount might be worth today based on average wages then and now.



# FURTHER TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND RESEARCH

- Research the work of Libby Hathorn. Compare this book to her other books.
- Research the work of Phil Lesnie. Compare this book to his other books.
- Students might research this book in comparison to reading other picture books such as those listed in the **Bibliography**.
- Investigate any other topic not covered in these notes which you consider is suggested by this text.

## CONCLUSION

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin is now regarded as a luminary in Australian literature. Reading this picture book will introduce young readers to her life and inspire them to realise that we are all capable of surmounting social and economic obstacles in order to achieve our dreams. It is both a story of a writer's struggle to be heard, and a woman's struggle to assert herself in a male-dominated society. Franklin was a trail-blazer in writing realistically about the country where she was born and her later years were spent vehemently supporting the cause of Australian literature:

'See the oak & its leaves & acorns in English handicraft, the acanthus leaf in Greek & Roman architecture & then return O, Australian painters & liberate ... the gum tree and what it stands for.' (*The Diaries of Miles Franklin*, edited by Paul Brunton. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin in association with State Library of New South Wales, 2004, p 17.)

# AUTHOR'S NOTES

I've had a burning idea to write about Australian women poets and writers for many years. People like May Gibbs, Judith Wright, Mary Gilmore. But it was Stella Miles Franklin who jumped out at me as a wonderful subject. I've always loved her story: feisty, innovative and daring, she was a young woman who was ready to take on the world, to travel and work abroad – not such an easy thing to do in those days, especially for a woman. And then back home to champion Australian writing and Australian writers at a time when everything British was considered superior.

Many sources provided a means for me to imagine a likely story in a real setting: Stella's rather unhappy time governessing to help her family, whose fortunes were dwindling; another reading of *My Brilliant Career*; another look at the movie of the same name; then some research in the bountiful archives of the NSW State Library with its treasure trove of Miles Franklin's diaries. And memories of a long-ago visit to Talbingo Primary School (near her birthplace) where I was awarded my own 'Miles Franklin Award' for addressing the school about my work!

All this was good, but not enough. I needed to conceive a story that connects with young readers and lives in its own right. I needed children in the story. That much I knew!

Then Imp arrived, kind of bouncing into my consciousness with a frown on her young face, and I was off and away with the story. Imp was feisty, clever and angry with the world in the same way as young Stella Miles Franklin was, and it seemed perfect to bring them together.

Artist Phil Lesnie and I had worked together on *A Soldier, a Dog and a Boy*, which won the special Asher Peace Prize and was a CBCA Notable Book, and I loved the way in which he brought characters and settings to life. In his inimitable fashion he was able to do the same with *Miss Franklin*. He realised Imp with such panache there were gasps of surprise from the publisher, Suzanne O'Sullivan, and from me, the first time we saw his clever and just-right depiction of her. And it got better from there. There was a yearning in the young girl, as there was yearning in the young Miles Franklin to create, that each recognised. And through this picture story book we can witness that now.

Phil worked painstakingly over a year and every now and then another picture would arrive for me to study and enjoy. The final artwork was delivered and then there is that special moment, months later, when you at last hold an advance copy in your own hands. It's hard to describe the

addictive joy one feels at this moment! And then it is time for *Miss Franklin: How Miles Franklin's brilliant career began to go out into the world.*

## ILLUSTRATOR'S NOTES

I spent about half of my time on *Miss Franklin* falling in love with the fiery women in it, and the other half terrified of not doing right by them. If there's any mention of Stella's actual hair colour in the texts I read, I completely missed it. I needed a different connection to the text and that connection wound up being emotional.

I relished the challenge of how to approach Libby's writing. Many picture book texts are spare with their language, leaving a lot of the storytelling labour to the artist and their interpretation. Libby's approach to *Miss Franklin* is different, and it was initially very scary for me – the text stood completely alone, all the storytelling was already done; what was left for me to illustrate? But the more I sketched, the more liberating I found it. Each page had so many actions or moments to choose from, and the fact that so much of the story was carried by language gave me the freedom to portray moments just slightly to left field of the main action. In one two-page spread, Stella teaches a lesson, invites Imp into the classroom, Imp runs up a hill, children talk, bush poetry is read aloud ... so many small actions, so many verbs! But I only had eyes for Imp destroying her castle of rocks – the wildest of the actions – and devoted the entire page to that. Sometimes these were careful choices, looking for the deepest emotion or longing, but just as often they were made on a whim – I chose the moment that would bring me the most pleasure to paint, to rediscover the joy and playfulness of painting alongside Stella's own discovery.

I hope Stella can forgive me for possibly getting her hair colour wrong. Painting that hair has been the single greatest pleasure of my career as an artist – page after page, as I ran a jittery fork through three layers of drying, caked-up watercolour paint, I felt as if I were teasing out of the curls Stella's secret longing to write.

Looking into *Miss Franklin's* life gave me a lot of comfort over the year I spent painting the artwork for the book. At the time, I was beginning to build a less conventional life of my own, and Stella's spurning of what was expected of her gave me courage, both in the painting of her story and the shaping of my own.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Libby Hathorn** is an award-winning author and poet of more than seventy books for children, young adults, and adult readers. Translated into several languages and adapted for both stage and screen, her work has won honours in Australia, the United States, Great Britain and Holland. In 2014 she won The Alice Award, a national award given to 'a woman who has made a distinguished and long-term contribution to Australian literature'. In 2017 she won the Asher Award, a peace prize, for *A Soldier, a Dog and a Boy*.

Her first young adult novel *Thunderwith* has enjoyed thirty years in continuous print and was made into a Hallmark Hall of Fame movie. Two of Libby's picture books, *Grandma's Shoes* (Australian Opera) and *Sky Sash So Blue* (Alabama, USA), have been performed as operas, with a third, *Outside*, with music composed by Elena Kats-Chernin, already on its way.

Libby is a keen educator who has lectured part-time at Sydney University and is devoted to being an ambassador for poetry anywhere and everywhere. In 2012 she was a National Ambassador for Reading and travelled to many country towns to talk about Australian literature. Libby acts as a judge for various literary prizes, including the NSW Premier's Literary Awards. For more information, free writing tips and teaching resources, go to: [www.libbyhathorn.com](http://www.libbyhathorn.com)

# ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Phil Lesnie** is a Sydney based illustrator of children's books. He is also a children's bookseller. It is entirely possible that he hasn't read a title written for adults since he became one. He works primarily in watercolour, because in a watercolour painting even mistakes look lovely.

He is the illustrator of *Feathers*, which was shortlisted for the Prime Minister's Literary Awards in 2018. He also illustrated Libby Hathorn's *A Soldier, a Dog and a Boy*. His first three books were CBCA Notable Books in 2015, 2016, and 2018. But his first cat, Cassidy, is notable all of the time.

Currently, he is working on new titles by Phil Cummings and Zana Fraillon. He is very sleepy, and quite thrilled.

# WORKSHEETS

## WORKSHEET 1. MAKE A THAUMOTROPE BIRD IN A CAGE

A Thaumotrope was a simple paper craft popular in the nineteenth century. Cut out these images and glue to either side of a circle of white card. Pierce a tiny hole on either side of the circle, and thread string through each side. Then twirl the circle. This movement will create an optical illusion that the bird is inside the cage.



See: 'Thaumotrope Bird Cage Earliest Animation?' [creamofcardstv <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U32Sv99cDOs>](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U32Sv99cDOs)  
'5 Great Thaumotrope Links' [Teacher's Web Resources <https://teacherswebresources.com/2016/03/28/victorian-thaumotrope/>](https://teacherswebresources.com/2016/03/28/victorian-thaumotrope/)

## WORKSHEET 2. NAME THE IMAGE



**ANSWERS: 1. Slate. 2. Wattle. 3. Glove. 4. Umbrella (Parasol). 5. Pen and nib. 6. Split rail fence. 7. School desk. 8. Horse and sulky. 9. Catapult (Slingshot).**

### WORKSHEET 3. COMPREHENSION QUIZ

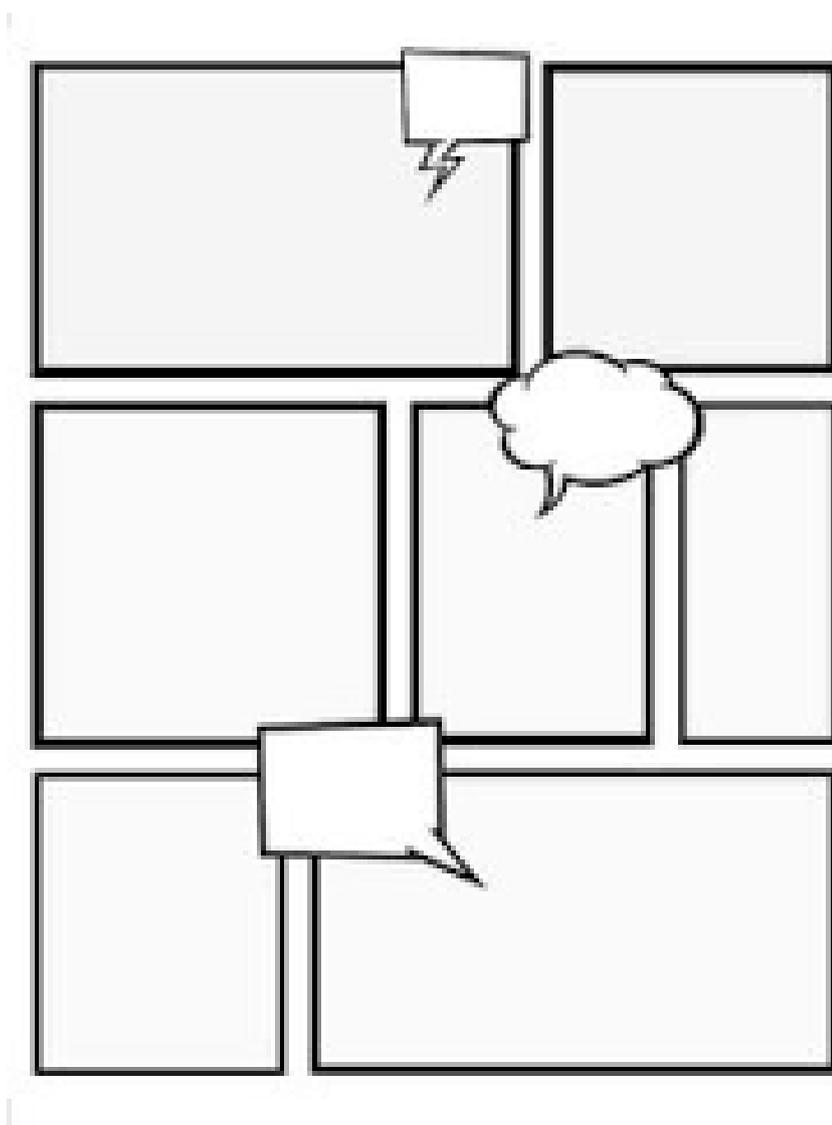
1. What is Miles Franklin's full name?
2. What are the names of the four Davis children?
3. What toy did Imp fashion out of twigs?
4. Who did she give the toy to in exchange for some blue speckled eggs?
5. Where did Miss Franklin long to be?
6. Why did Imp bring the bird to Miss Franklin?
7. What did Imp leave on Miss Franklin's desk to say goodbye?
8. What was the title of the first book which Miss Franklin was writing in this picture book?
9. In what year did she move to this property to work as a governess?
10. What prize did she establish as a bequest after her death in 1954?



**ANSWERS:** 1. Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin. 2. Bertie, Kate, Florrie and Henry. 3. A doll. 4. Florrie. 5. Sydney. 6. Because it had a broken wing which needed to be repaired. 7. A coloured stone and a sprig of wattle. 8. *My Brilliant Career* (1901). 9. 1897. 10. Miles Franklin Literary Award.

## WORKSHEET 4. GRAPHIC STORYTELLING

Create a graphic novel/comic interpretation of one of the events in this book. Use the layout below as the storyboard for your comic. Enlarge on a photocopier to give you more space.



Comic Book Template viewed at: <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/365706432212821426/>

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