



Our Australian Girl – series 2

General Introduction

Australia is a country of immigrants, apart from our original inhabitants, and this series continues to explore how some came to live in this country through a focus on the experiences of children, particularly girls.

Exploration of this series of books provides excellent source material for supporting the focuses of the Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2010): *'...helps students to engage imaginatively and critically with literature to expand the scope of their experience'* (p1). Students at this level can read to expand their repertoire, find out about other times, places and aspects of Australia's history.

These carefully researched books demonstrate how language is dynamic *'and that changes to English are related to historical developments and the geographical differences of users over the centuries...'* (ACARA, 2010, p3) This series will also support the English curriculum and its relation to history *'Literature, with its emphasis on studying texts from a range of historical and cultural contexts helps students understand the perspectives and contributions from people around the world and both the past and present'* (ACARA, 2010, p14).

The units of work around this series will involve reading, viewing, speaking, writing, creating and reflecting on various aspects of each text.

Meet Alice

By Davina Bell



It's 1918 . . .

Alice lives with her big family by the Swan River in Perth, while on the other side of the world, the Great War rages.

Alice's deepest wish is to become a ballerina, and when she auditions for a famous dance teacher from London, it seems as if her dreams might come true. But then there's a terrible accident, and Alice must ask herself whether there are more important things than dancing.

Meet Alice and join her adventure in the first of four stories about a gifted girl in a time of war.

Life in Australia during World War 1

- From the outset the reader is given a clear indication that Alice and her family are very different from other families in their town. Ask older students to identify examples in the first chapter that illustrate these differences in their reading journals.

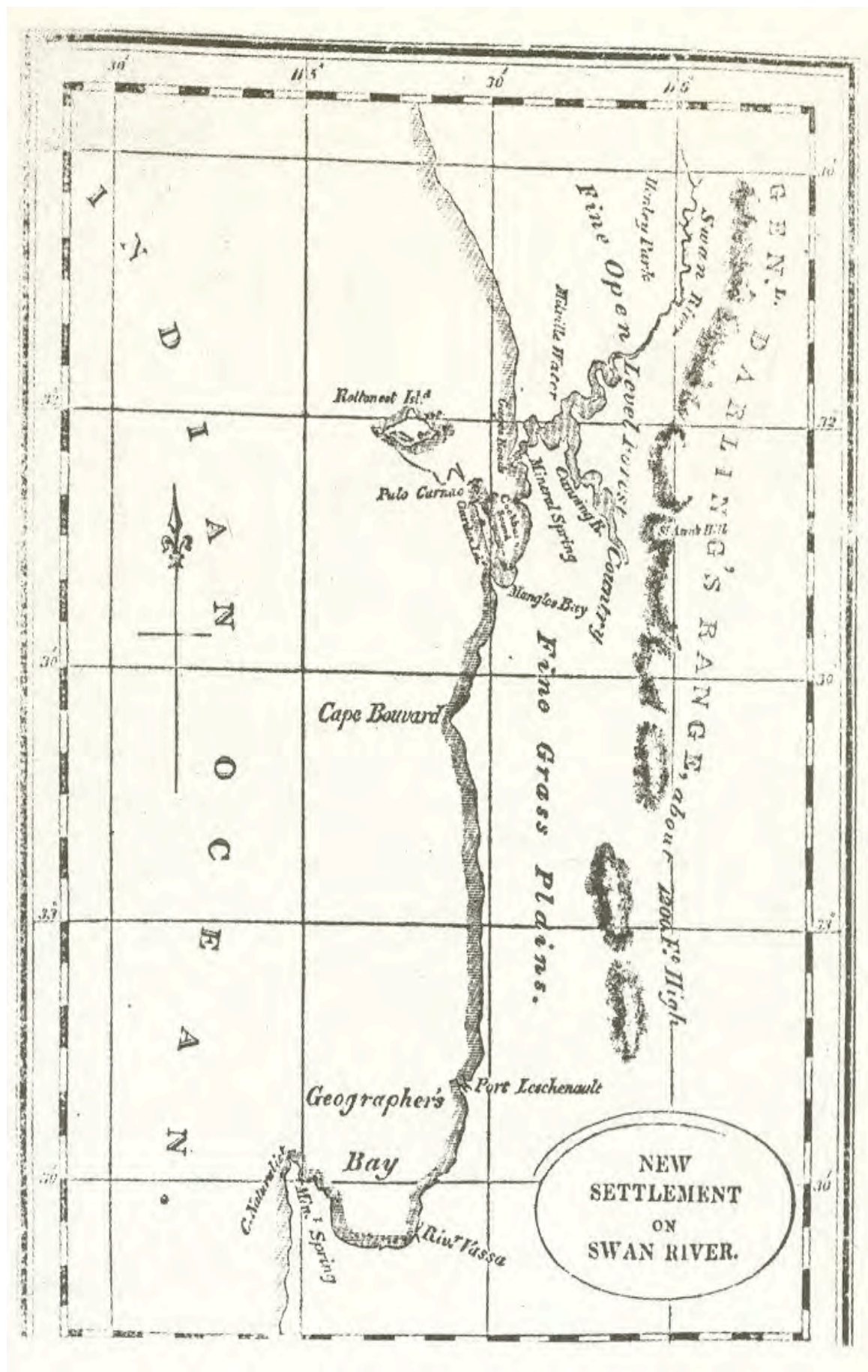
The map below gives students an idea of where Alice lived. This map or another could be enlarged and put on a smart board or chart.

Younger students

- Mark or highlight the area they think Alice lives in.
- The atmosphere of the town where Alice lives is evocatively illustrated by the author. Ask students to draw their own interpretation of Alice's town.

Older Students

- As they read have students put sticky notes in the pages to mark things they would like to discuss and/or to find out more about.
- Pg.8 Alice's father is a doctor. What do you think working conditions were like for doctors in World War 1? Do some research into medical staff on the battlefields in World War 1?
- Pg. 7 "Peppermint Grove was filled with ladies who knitted and sewed for the soldiers, and put on fetes and balls to raise money. But since the war had started four years ago, Alice's mother hadn't stitched a sock or rolled a bandage, and everybody knew it." What does this mean? Ask students to look at the WW1 poster below and discuss why Alice's mother might be frowned upon by others for not 'doing her bit'.
- Are the places mentioned in the book still in existence today? Find out.

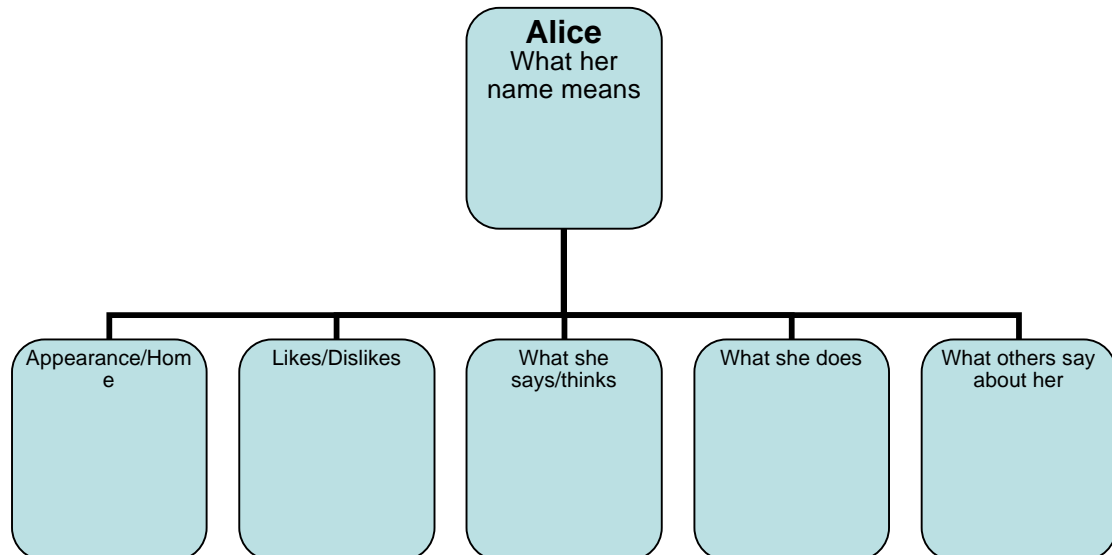


she is
doing her
part to
help win
the war



Character profile of Alice

The novel focuses on one character, so the following are suggestions about how students might build up a picture of Alice. It can be made simpler for younger students and more in-depth for older ones. It could be done graphically, such as



- Authors choose the names of their characters carefully. Find out what Alice means and discuss why the author might have chosen that name.
- The author doesn't tell us what Alice looks like, but she tells us what she likes and doesn't like. For instance she likes ballet. Find out what else she likes and doesn't like.
- You can create a character by showing what they eat, wear, do, say, without having to describe them directly. This can be helpful to students when they create characters in their own writing. Find descriptions of Alice and what she likes to eat.
- Writers also use what characters think, do and say to show us what they are like. For example, on page 10 the author tells us "Every night, Alice would stretch and point and glide and unfold until she felt that she had done everything that a perfect ballerina would be able to do. A *real* ballerina." Have students find other examples of what Alice thinks and says that give a picture of what she is like.
- Alice shares a memory of riding on Teddy's bike with her siblings on Pg.4 What does this memory tell us about Alice's feelings for her siblings? Do you think they are close?
- How many siblings does Alice have? Record their names and ages.

- Dancing is an important part of how Alice sees herself. How does this change throughout the book?
- Find examples of what other characters think of Alice.
- On pages 11 – 16 Alice and Teddy have a conversation that tells us a great deal about their family and what they think of the other people and families in Peppermint Grove. Ask your students to record what they have learned about these characters in their reading journals.
- What are Alice's strengths and weaknesses?
- Ask students if they would like her as a friend. Why or why not?
- Does Alice change during the story? Is she different at the end than at the beginning? How?

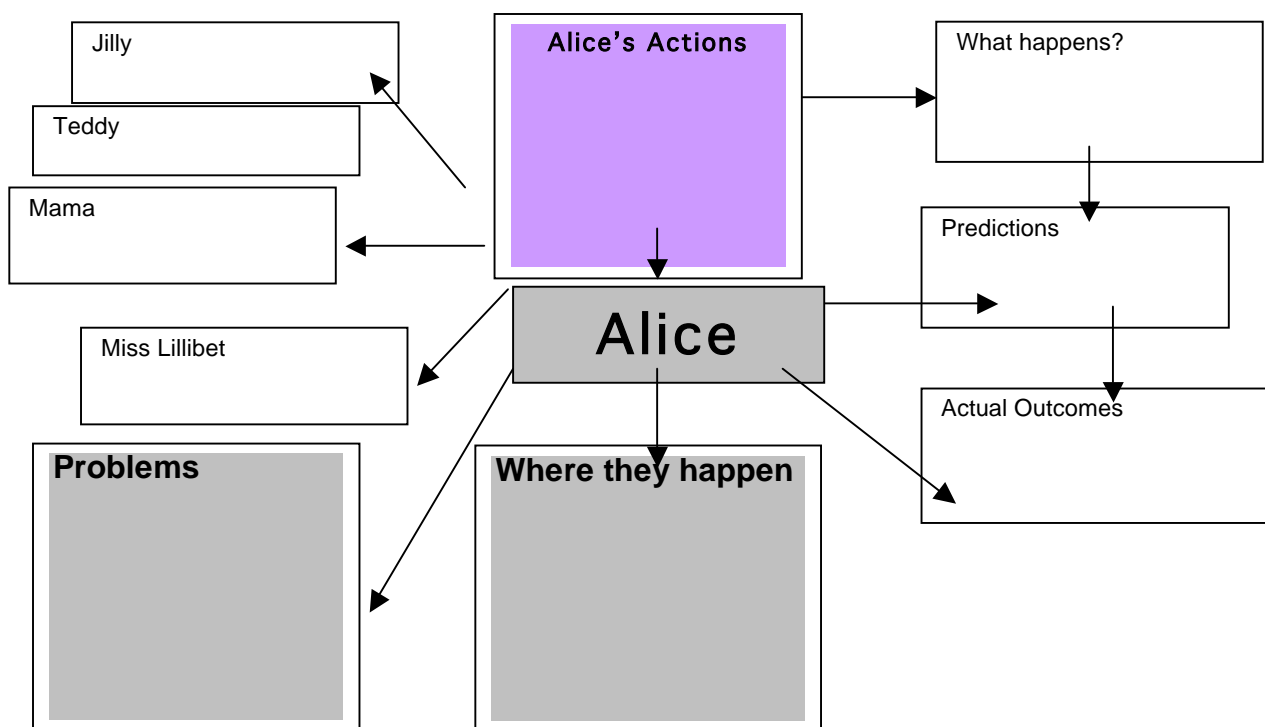
Create a wordle for Alice at <http://www.wordle.net/>

- Have students paste in the words they have used to describe her, and what others have said about her from the above profile.
- Choose a font that best suits her.
- What words appear the largest for Alice?
- Share wordles in the class.
- Discuss similarities and differences.
- Have students draw how they imagine Alice to look, giving her a clear facial expression. Are the images of Alice anything like the one on the cover image? Compare class images. Why do readers imagine such different portraits?

Narrative structure

Year 4: *'Discuss how authors and illustrators make stories exciting, moving and absorbing and hold readers' interest by using various techniques, for example, character development and plot tension'* (ACARA, 2010, p27).

- **Produce a story map of what happens to Alice** throughout the story. This could be added to for further instalments of the series. Again this can be made simpler or more complex as appropriate.



The following are informed by the Australian Curriculum: English for Year 5:

'Students understand experiences, ideas and information beyond their immediate experience. They select relevant textual evidence to support opinions about texts, and recognise that narratives and experiences in texts are shaped by different viewpoints. Identify aspects of literary texts that convey details or information about particular social, cultural and historical contexts' (ACARA, 2010, p29).

- Imagine that Alice can time travel and she comes to visit your class. Think of at least two questions you would like to ask her.
- In a small group take turns to *be* Alice. Write some questions to interview her.
- Write a letter to Alice telling her what Perth and the Swan River area will be like. You will need to do some research to do this. You might like to include images and maps.
- Make a prediction about what the telegram that Alice and Teddy receive on the last page of the story, might say. Is it good news or bad news?

Create

- You have explored a lot of historical detail through this story and there is more information given at the end of the book. Alice's story is written in the first person so we see events only from her point of view.
- Write your own story about what you imagine your life would be like in 1918, using historical detail found in the back pages of the book.

Language

- [Students] *learn that changes in English are related to historical developments and the geographical influences of its users over the centuries, and that there are many differences in dialect and accent'* (ACARA, 2010, p2).
- Below are some examples of uses of language in the period. Invite students keep their own records of unusual words they find, and to suggest contemporary equivalents. This could be compiled on a chart or a wiki with new words added during the reading.
- Here are some unusual or old-fashioned words in the book. Write your own definition with a partner, suggest a word that would be used today, and then look up dictionary definitions.

- Ø Governess
- Ø Crochet
- Ø Croquet
- Ø Gramophone
- Ø Nightdress

Research

- This is a most interesting period in history – indications are given at the end of the book. A possibility is to offer readers further research, especially children who are interested in 'facts' – add to the list of events.

Teachers'

Further resources, image, maps and articles can be found here

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

Take time to explore the Our Australian Girl Website

<http://www.ouraustraliangirl.com.au/>

Meet Nellie

by Penny Matthews

It's 1849 ...

And Nellie O'Neill is arriving at Port Adelaide on the *Elgin*, a sailing ship bringing 195 orphaned Irish girls to South Australia. All of them have lived through the terrible potato famine that has ravaged Ireland since the mid-1840s. They are part the Orphan Immigration Scheme, launched in 1848, to take poor Irish girls out of over-crowded and disease-prone workhouses and bring them to Australia to find work as domestic servants.

Nellie and her best friend Mary Connell have come from the Killarney Union Workhouse in Ireland's County Kerry. Both girls have lost their entire families to disease and starvation, and have only each other. As their ship draws near to Port Adelaide, they talk about their dreams for the future. Mary hopes one day to be a nursery maid 'in a great big house'. Nellie longs to learn to read, to be part of a family once more, and to be herself – to be seen as more than just a workhouse orphan. Both Mary and Nellie have been used to hunger, and they pray that they'll never be hungry again.

The four books about Nellie trace the fortunes of these two girls, seen through Nellie's eyes. Will they find jobs? Will they be happy? Will their dreams come true?

Background Reading

Before you begin reading, you might like to share these websites with your class to give them some background to the potato famine: www.irishpotatofamine.org/ and www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/famine/index.html There are lots of websites on the subject, with varying degrees of detail.

- Find out as much as you can about Irish workhouses. There are two useful websites at www.proni.gov.uk/index/...to.../the_workhouse_orphans.htm and www.askaboutireland.ie/.../ireland-in.../soup-kitchens-and-workhou/
- Why were these workhouses set up? What was it like to live in a workhouse? An informative video at www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDdrGaCSNLM gives a virtual tour of the Birr workhouse in Northern Ireland. The interior is now dilapidated, but it's easy to see how bleak and basic the conditions must have been.

- After researching workhouses, ask older students to write an essay, in the first person, describing a day in the life of a workhouse child. In *Meet Nellie*, look for Nellie's descriptions of her time in the Killarney workhouse.
- What happened to Nellie's family? What was Nellie's life in Ireland like before the famine? Find evidence in the stories to support this.
- Over 4000 Irish orphans like Nellie came to Australia between 1848 and 1850. Ask students to think about why these girls were shipped to Australia.
- Ask students to put themselves in the place of the Irish orphan girls. Ask them: 'How would you feel if you were leaving the place where you'd lived for your whole life and sailing to an unknown country on the other side of the world, knowing you'd never see your home again?' (Gender of the characters can be changed for rich discussion.)
- Talk about what the conditions on board ship might have been like for the orphan girls.
- In what ways would life in Australia in 1849 have been different from life in Ireland? Look at the illustration in *Meet Nellie: Historical Source from the Time* (page 110). Do you think the artist has shown a true picture of what life in Australia was like?



Captions: (1) Skibbereen, 1847: starving Irish children search the ruined potato fields for something to eat



Birr Workhouse at Parsontown in Northern Ireland is typical of workhouses that were built throughout Ireland in the nineteenth century

Ireland and Emigration

Largely as a result of the 1840s potato famine in Ireland, many thousands of Irish people had a choice: either stay in Ireland and risk dying of starvation or disease, or emigrate to another country. Most of those who decided to leave Ireland went to England, or to the United States, Canada or Australia. It has been said that 'Ireland's gift to the world is its people.' Today a third of the people living in Australia can claim some Irish descent.

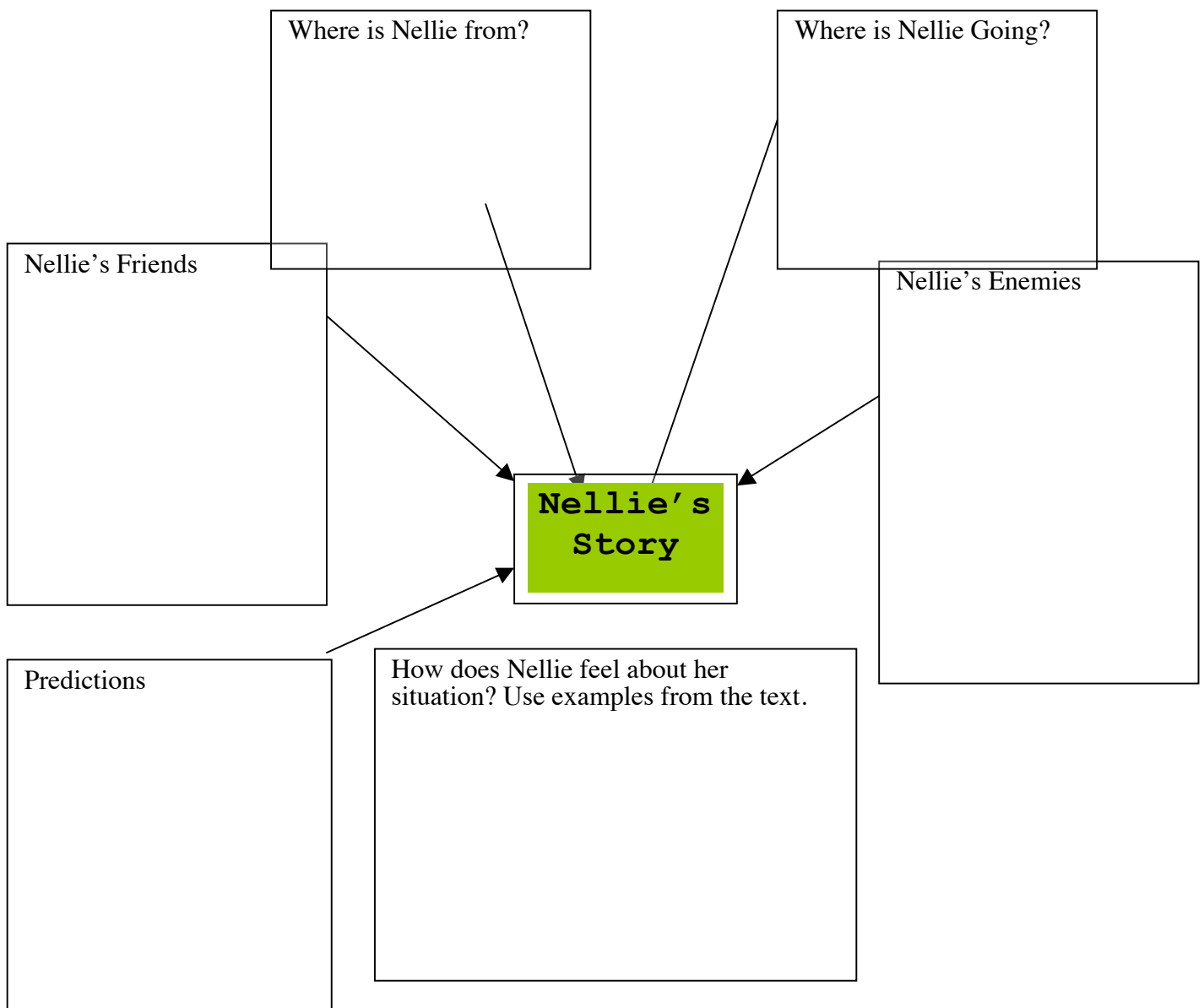
- Australia is a country of emigrants. Have students research their own families. When did members of their family first come to Australia, and why?
- Ask students to find out if they have any Irish ancestors. If they do, see if they can discover when they came to Australia, where they lived, what work they did.
- Make a list of well-known Irish surnames. Go to your local telephone directory and see how many people who have those names are listed.
- Can students think of any famous people of Irish descent? (E.g. John F Kennedy, former President of the USA; bushranger Ned Kelly; Paul Keating, former Prime Minister of Australia; writers, sports people, movie stars, etc.)
- What particular things do students associate with 'Ireland' and 'the Irish'? (e.g. St Patrick's Day, leprechauns, the shamrock, Irish dancing,

superstitions, etc). Do these associations give a real picture of the place and its people?

- In what ways does Nellie reveal her Irish heritage? Show evidence from the text to support this.

Imaginative Responses

- Using the graphic organiser below, ask students to gather information about Nellie and other characters as they read.
- Use this information later and ask students to put themselves inside Nellie's shoes and write how they think and feel in the first person. Ask them to do this in their reading journals and share with the class.



The Character of Nellie O'Neill

- What does Nellie look like? There are a few details in the text: see if you can find them. Are the brief descriptions of Nellie reflected by the appearance of the girl on the covers of the Nellie books?
- There are no descriptions of Mary Connell. What do you think Mary looks like? Why do you think she looks like that?
- The author often describes what Nellie and Mary are wearing, and there is a detailed account of Nellie buying fabric to make new dresses (*Nellie and the Secret Letter*, Chapter 4). Make a list of the sorts of clothes the girls wear.
- Nellie and Mary make new clothes for Nellie by hand. There are other references to sewing in the Nellie books. Think about why it was important in the nineteenth century for girls to know how to sew.
- Research clothing in 1849 – 1850, and then draw a picture of Nellie in the clothes she might have worn, from her bonnet to her boots.
- What words would you use to describe the sort of person Nellie is?
- Nellie reveals her character in the things she says and does. Give some examples of this (e.g. in *Meet Nellie*, Chapters 3 and 8).
- Find examples of what other characters think of Nellie (e.g. Bessie Rudge calls her 'clumsy and stupid' and a 'beggar's brat' in *Nellie and the Secret Letter*, Chapter 7). Is Bessie right about Nellie?
- What are Nellie's strengths and weaknesses?
- Ask students, in the character of Nellie, to write an essay describing what she does in a working day as a housemaid for the Thompson family. When does Nellie get up, and when does she go to bed? What tasks must she undertake during the day?
- Does Nellie's character change through the course of her adventures? Compare Nellie in *Meet Nellie* with the sort of girl she is by the end of *Nellie's Greatest Wish*. Map how she changes. **Below is a diagrammatic way of doing this.**



The links between Nellie and Mary, and between Nellie and the Thompson family, are central to the story. In the first chapter of *Meet Nellie*, Nellie and Mary make plans together, and vow always look after each other. Mary is like Nellie's family, and the most important person in her life: 'Since I left Ireland, Nellie thought, the only thing in my life that's stayed the same is my dear Mary. She's all I have now ...' (*Nellie's Greatest Wish*, p. 13). The Thompsons aren't a constant in Nellie's life, but they are the family she dearly wants to belong to. It's her affection for the Thompsons, and especially her friendship with Tom, that drives many of Nellie's actions.

- How important was friendship to Nellie? Why do you think friendship was so vital to orphans especially?
- List all the people in the books who befriend Nellie and become a part of her journey. Why are so many people prepared to help her?
- Younger readers could be asked to say, write, draw or act out what they think a true friend is.
- Older students could conduct a debate around 'Friendship should be earned' or 'Friendship should be freely given', using evidence from the books.
- Is Nellie a good friend to Mary? Why, or why not?

Create a wordle for Nellie at <http://www.wordle.net/>

- Have students paste in the words they have used to describe her [see section **The Character of Nellie O'Neill**], and what other characters in the story have said about her.
- Choose a font that best suits her.
- What are the longest words given for Nellie?
- Share the wordles in class, and discuss similarities and differences.

The Geographical Background

Nellie lives in several different places over the course of her adventures: the *Elgin*, Thompson's Boarding House, the Lefroy mansion on East Terrace, The Golden Lotus (the boarding house where Li lives), the dug-out home in the Burra Creek, and the cottage on Angas Street.

- Ask students to find a street map of Adelaide city and locate North Terrace, Rundle Street, Grenfell Street, East Terrace, Hindley Street.
- On a bigger map of South Australia, find Port Adelaide. Trace the likely road by which the orphan girls travelled by bullock cart up to North Terrace.
- In *Nellie's Quest*, Nellie goes to Burra. Find this town on a map. Trace the route from Adelaide to Burra that Nellie and Li might have taken.
- Ask students to make a drawing of one of the places where Nellie lived, putting in details based on descriptions in the text.

Society

Society in the nineteenth century was structured very differently from the way it is today. Wealth and high social status were the privilege of very few. The social classes were very clearly defined as upper, middle and lower (or working) class, and your life, and the way people treated you, would be based on what class you were, and on your nationality. There are many areas for discussion here.

- Ask students to name a character in the books from each of the three main classes, and say why they think these characters belong to that class. If those people were alive today, would they still be seen as belonging to different classes?
- In both *Meet Nellie* and *Nellie and the Secret Letter* Mary is anxious that Nellie doesn't forget that she is a servant. Why does this worry Mary so much? Does Nellie see herself as just a servant?
- Why does Trotty say that Bessie Rudge is 'terrified to death' of the Chinese laundryman Li (*Nellie and the Secret Letter*, Chapter 3)? Is Bessie right to feel like this?
- Both Nellie and Li suffer discrimination, Nellie because she is Irish and Li because he is Chinese. Find examples of this in the text.
- Why does Nellie say (*Meet Nellie*, Chapter 1) 'I want to be only myself, Nellie O'Neill'? Does she succeed in this?
- Nellie is just twelve years old, and yet it's seen as perfectly acceptable that she should work as a domestic servant. Are there any places in the world today where children work for a living in this way, or in other occupations?
- When Nellie sees a group of Indigenous people, she thinks that 'Perhaps the Aborigines saw the settlers in just the same way as the Irish saw their landlords' (*Meet Nellie*, pp.55 – 56). What does she mean? Talk about *dispossession*.

Transport and Communications

Today we can be in touch with people 24/7, even if they are on the other side of the world, and we can travel thousands of kilometres in just a few hours.

- Find all the different ways in which Nellie travels during her adventures, starting with the ship on which she arrives in South Australia. Work out the approximate distances involved. Compare (e.g.) how long the trip from Adelaide to Burra would take today, or the trip from England to Australia.
- Research the *Elgin*. Is it a real ship? What information can you discover about ships and travel by ship in 1849?
- How much of Nellie's story is shaped by lack of instant communications?

- Ask students to write a letter to a friend, using the structure of a letter written in 1850 (*Nellie and the Secret Letter*, Chapter 6).
- Look at the writing style of 1850 (*Nellie and the Secret Letter*, p. 40). Ask students to write some of the old-fashioned words listed in the section below [**Language**], copying this style.

Language

'[Students] learn that changes in English are related to historical developments and the geographical influences of its users over the centuries, and that there are many differences in dialect and accent' (ACARA, 2010, p. 2)

Below are some examples of old-fashioned words used in the Nellie books. Ask students to discover what the words mean, and to find out if there are modern equivalents. Why have some words disappeared from our language?

india-rubber (MN, p.4)
 slops (MN, p. 8)
 coconut-shy (MN, p. 21)
 counterpane (MN, p. 33)
 tinderbox (MN, p. 35)
 skivvy (MN, p. 37)
 black-lead (MN, p.48)
 tinker (NSL, p. 4)
 battledore (NSL, p. 14)
 admirer (NSL, p. 43)
 pantalettes (NSL, p. 46)
 infirmary (NQ, p. 11)
 crinoline (NQ, p. 40)
 hostelry, (NQ, p. 42)
 wideawake (NGW, p. 31)
 humbug (NGW, p. 42)
 guttersnipe (NGW, p. 92)

Nellie often uses Irish words like *spalpeen*, *Pooka*, *eejit*. What do they mean? Are there any other words and expressions in the stories that are peculiarly Irish?

Follow on

- Visit museums that explore the history of coming to Australia. South Australia's Migration Museum in Adelaide has a website at <http://www.history.sa.gov.au/migration/migration.htm>

- Visit the Our Australian Girl website: www.ouraustraliangirl.com.au/ and see the notes for teachers on the Series 1 books at www.ouraustraliangirl.com.au/parents-teachers