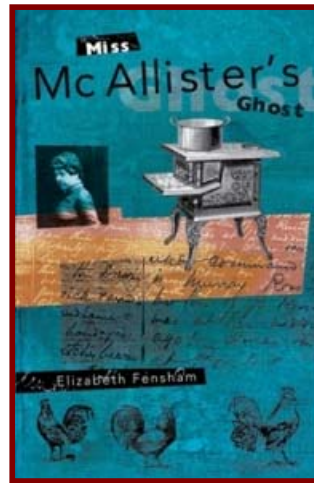


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MISS MCALLISTER'S GHOST

Elizabeth Fensham



Teachers' Notes

Written by Elizabeth Fensham

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SYNOPSIS (PLOT)

'You can't imagine how strange it is to realise that there is no one left living who knew you,' said Miss McAllister. 'It makes you wonder if you really are alive.'

'We know you,' I replied.

When Cassandra and her brothers climb the garden wall hoping to spot the ghost in the old hollow-eyed house, they have no idea what awaits within. At first violently, then seductively, they are drawn into a world long-lost, a world preserved by a woman whose memories have kept her trapped in time and place.

But do the children really know the ghostly old lady as well as they think they do, or is there something even more bizarre living under her roof - a ghost of her own?

Miss McAllister's story provides a fascinating insight into Edwardian Australia and the hardships faced by previous generations and makes us reconsider our own ideas of family, friendships and values. Inevitably, the past and the present collide, threatening Miss McAllister's very existence.

From the author of the award-winning *Helicopter Man* comes a novel of unexpected surprises that forces us to re-examine what we think we know of ugliness and beauty.

THEMES

- Australian history
- Growing old/age vs. youth
- Friendship
- Past vs. present (family history)
- Technology

AUTHOR MOTIVATION

Miss McAllister's Ghost is more fact than fiction. The novel's heroine is a Grizelda and there was a much-loved Grizelda in my own family to whom I have dedicated this novel. The real Grizelda (who died at 93) told me a lot of family history; she knew some of the principal characters in the Australian/New Zealand generations of our family, including my two great-uncles who died at Gallipoli and France respectively and these two young men both feature in the novel.

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The idea for the book came to me after hearing of a very old woman who had been discovered living on her own with no modern appliances, no electricity and so on. The authorities would only allow her to continue living in her home if she had basic utilities installed. Thus I had the basic plot to which I could add my own story.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

The intended audience for the book is young readers/teenagers and it is hoped that by reading Fensham's striking novel, that they will come to understand how many Australians of the early 20th century thought and behaved. In a way, it is a chance to examine and contrast current Australian values with those of the past. And to discuss, if in any way, how we as Australians have changed.

STUDY NOTES

- **Australian history**

Plan a class discussion on pivotal Australian historical events discussed in the book, such as Gallipoli, WW1, WW2, the first motor vehicle in Australia, the first use of electricity in Australia and the arrival of television in Australia. Ask each classroom member to research five things mentioned in *Miss McAllister's Ghost* and to validate these facts in relation to true-life historical events.

For example, what age did young men enlist? Or, what were the trenches like? Or, what year did television arrive in Australia? And why was it a black and white picture?

Use library books to form class conclusions about the historical events mentioned in the book. Using this research, ask the students to write a letter talking about a particular event, such as:

- Write a letter home from the war pretending they have been conscripted and to use the researched facts to make their letter authentic, or,
- Write a letter to your grandmother explaining how your family was the first family on your street to install an indoor bathroom.

- **Past vs. present (family history)**

Ask students to research a member of their own family or a famous member of society. Use some of the following questions, or similar, to start a discussion:

- What differences are there between the two lifestyles?
- What historical events shaped the life of this person? Did they live through a war? Lose a family member through a war? Own the first car on the street?

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- Do you think not using technology helps or hinders a person's way of life?
- Does researching someone's life help you to better understand his or her circumstances?

- **Technology**
Ask the students to write down the devices that they use in their lives that are missing from Miss McAllister's, such as:
 - Irons
 - Washing machines
 - Stoves
 - Heating
 - Cars
 - Lawn mowers/machinery

What difference do they think the lack of these appliances would make to their lives? Try and move the discussion to what impact the lack of these devices would have on you as a person. I.e. late for school because no alarm etc.

Conduct a trial in the classroom to list how many modern devices a day are used in people's lives – from the garage door opener to the mobile phone. What difficulties would result in living the way Miss McAllister did? And what benefits? Was Miss McAllister disadvantaged or enriched by her lifestyle?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Fensham lives in Victoria's Dandenong ranges, where she is Head of English at a local school. She is married to an artist and has two adult sons. Fensham has been writing in earnest for the last twenty years. Her first novel *Helicopter Man* won CBCA Book of the Year for Younger Readers. *Goodbye Jamie Boyd* is being released by UQP later this year.