



RECOMMENDED FOR

Lower and upper primary
(ages 6–10)

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KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English, History, Music

THEMES

- Australian history
- Music history
- Australian identity
- Perseverance
- Perceptions of Australia and Australians

PREPARED BY

Penguin Random House Australia

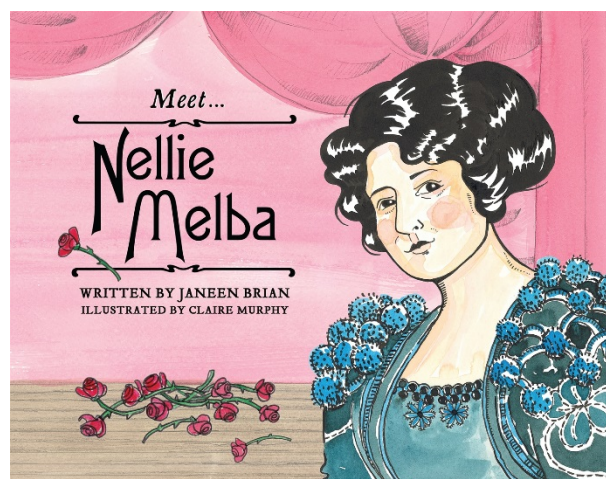
PUBLICATION DETAILS

ISBN: 9780143780298 (hardback)
9780143780304 (ebook)

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Meet... Nellie Melba

Written by Janeen Brian

Illustrated by Claire Murphy

PLOT SUMMARY

Helen (Nellie) Porter Mitchell was born in Melbourne, Australia in 1861. Her mother first taught her to sing and play piano. Her father encouraged her learning but believed it improper for a young woman to perform professionally.

Despite both her father's and husband's objections, Nellie pursued her dream of becoming an opera singer, first in Australia and then in London and Europe. Nellie's persistence and natural ability led to her becoming the first internationally recognised Australian classical musician, and the world's most famous opera star. She commanded huge audiences and mixed with the rich and powerful.

Nellie spent much of the First World War in Australia and worked to raise money for the war effort. She was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in recognition of this, and later a Dame Grand Cross of the British Empire.

Nellie toured rural and remote parts of Australia that rarely hosted such events. On one tour, Nellie set the tickets at a low price so that average Australians could afford to attend, and not just the wealthy.

Later in her career, Nellie established a singing school in Melbourne, so that she could teach young Australians her techniques and help prepare future world stars. She performed at the opening of the first Parliament House, Canberra, in 1927.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Janeen Brian is an award-winning author of picture books, short stories, poetry, non-fiction, short fiction and novels for young people and the educational market. She grew up in Brighton, South Australia, graduated as a primary teacher and taught for over twenty years before becoming a full-time writer. Janeen lives in Glenelg, South Australia with her husband Jon and has two grown-up daughters.

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

How did you become an author?

I grew into writing, without any thought of actually becoming an author. In my thirties, I began writing small poems for my daughters and family friends and little snippets for magazines. I went to a weekend writing course, which astounded me. I had so little knowledge of writing and this was like an avalanche on my brain. I began to write a little more and then I gave a story to an ex-teaching acquaintance, who had begun his own successful educational publishing company. The story wasn't accepted but he gave me a chance to write more.

In 1990, I left my part-time teaching position and I've been a full-time author since.

How did you research Nellie Melba?

Funnily enough, the first thing I did was to pull up a copy of the \$100 note, and stare at the woman whose picture had been etched onto it. Nellie Melba. I knew so little about her. I gathered armfuls of research material from the internet, read her autobiography and several biographies and contacted the Heritage Centre in Lilydale, Victoria, which houses many items of Melba's memorabilia.

Did you know much about Nellie Melba before doing your research?

I knew a little about Nellie Melba, but the moment I began to delve into her life, I realised how utterly ignorant I really was. Nellie grabbed my interest because she was such a strong, determined and incredibly talented woman, often flying in the face of convention. I found out that she loved and owned many cars and that she enjoyed learning opera pieces whilst driving. I also found out that, despite spending a great deal of her life with royalty and the rich and famous, Nellie was still very much a down-

to-earth, Australian girl. To get to grips with the calibre of her incredible voice, and to try to understand how greatly she was revered worldwide, came as a revelation and I grew to respect this woman. She had human flaws, but she brought beautiful music to the world, and to all classes of society. As such, I have dedicated this book to Sing Australia, a choir which is open to anyone, and because it has brought music into my life.

What was the most difficult part of writing about Nellie Melba?

The hardest part was distilling the great amount of fascinating material and research into a narrative of about 1000 words. It needed to both shine light on Melba's incredible achievements, while hinting at her flaws and showing her human side. There was so much material that it was difficult to decide what to include. It came down to selecting details that showed a particular aspect of her character; such as refusing to wear a wig in a particular singing role.

What was the most rewarding part?

My own learning and respect that came from researching this great woman and the fact that, hopefully, many children will come to know her as part of our history, well before I did. I would have liked to have met her!

Did your opinion of Nellie change as you researched and wrote the book?

Absolutely. Nellie ceased to be a portrait on a bank note or a photo of a woman in furs or elaborate costumes and became a person in my heart and my head. She became a hero. A charismatic, independent woman who worked hard and realised her dream of singing to the world. She was a true diva.

Do you think Nellie would be a star if she were a young musician starting out today?

I think anyone who is passionate about any area in their life has to be very strong in order to make their dream come true. Luck or unexpected opportunities can often play a part, as well as hard work.

If Nellie began as a musician today, I think she would have been a star. She had ambition, but she also had enormous energy, drive, commitment, and a supremely fine voice. I don't think she would've allowed herself to be seen as less worthy than she considered herself to be.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Claire Murphy studied illustration at Queensland College of Art where she discovered her love of comic art and graphic novels. She lives in Melbourne with her daughter and husband, where she works as a freelance illustrator. She collects vintage brooches and dresses and publishes zines people can have a giggle at.

INTERVIEW WITH THE ILLUSTRATOR

How did you become an illustrator? What other kind of projects do you work on?

I have always loved drawing and studied illustration at university a couple of years after finishing high school. I illustrate comics, stationery and works on paper. This will be the first book I have illustrated.

How did you research your illustrations for *Meet... Nellie Melba*?

I started researching online and then read the biography *Melba: A Family Memoir* by Pamela, Lady Vestey, Nellie Melba's granddaughter. I also visited Nellie Melba's former house, Coombe Estate, which has a small gallery exhibiting some of her belongings and paintings of her.

Could you tell us a little bit about how you created the illustrations for *Meet... Nellie Melba*?

I use ink, pencil and gouache on watercolour paper. I start with pencil sketches to get the positioning, expressions and perspective correct. I use photos and myself as reference for the drawings. Then I complete the finished illustration on good quality paper and add colour.

Everything from the outfits, hairstyles and buildings Nellie Melba lived in determined the look of the illustrations. I had read that Nellie's favourite colour was blue, so decided to continue this theme throughout and put her in a blue dress to distinguish her from other characters.

What was the most challenging part of creating *Meet... Nellie Melba*?

Because Nellie Melba has such an important part in Australia and the world's history, it was important that the illustrations complimented her story and brought her journey to life.

What was the most enjoyable or interesting part of creating the book?

I learnt a lot about continuity (making sure you could still tell who Nellie was at different stages through her story), layout of pages (the balance between the text and the illustrations) and collaboration between myself and the publisher.

Did you know much about *Nellie Melba* before working on the book?

I knew a little about Nellie Melba; that she was an opera singer and that her portrait is on the \$100 note. After reading Janeen's text and researching her life I grew to appreciate her determination and how ahead of her time she was as a woman in the late 1800s/early 1900s.

Did you learn anything unexpected while creating the book?

Creating the book took me out of my comfort zone and pushed me to use different materials, techniques and draw things I had never drawn before.

Do you have a favourite figure from Australian history that you would like to illustrate?

I am interested in women in history and have been reading about Annette Kellerman – a famous silent film star and swimmer born in 1887. She was the first woman to attempt to swim the English Channel and inventor of the first one piece swimsuit.

PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. What does the front cover of *Meet... Nellie Melba* tell you about the book?

- Who is the subject of the book?
- Who is the author?
- Who is the illustrator?
- What clues are there about where the story is set?

2. Does the back cover give you more clues about the book?

- Does the blurb explain who Nellie Melba is and what she is famous for?

3. What did you already know about *Nellie Melba*? Start a list of facts about *Nellie* and add to it as you read the book.

KEY STUDY TOPICS

English

1. Create a simple story map of the key elements in the story: Setting; Characters; Beginning; Middle; End (see *Worksheet 1*).
2. How much of the story can you remember? *Worksheet 2* is a comprehension exercise.
3. Did you know all the words in the book? *Worksheet 3* is a vocabulary exercise. Add any words from the book that you didn't recognise to the list on *Worksheet 3*. Then look the words up in a dictionary and write down their meaning on the worksheet.
4. Have you heard the expression 'will of iron' before? What do you think it means? Can you think of other expressions (from this book, other books or elsewhere) that describe one thing by comparing it to something else?
5. There is a timeline at the back of the book with facts about Nellie's life. Is reading the timeline the same as reading the story in the first part of the book? How is it different?

Activity: Think about all the things you've done today. Write a timeline version of today that presents the simple facts. Then try writing a creative and entertaining story about today.

History

1. Why do you think Nellie Melba is remembered today? Do you think her story is just about singing?
2. The author and illustrator researched Nellie's life by reading books and articles written about her. Nellie also wrote an autobiography (book about her own life). These books and articles help make sure that the details of Nellie's life are remembered.
Activity: Choose an important event or memory from your own life, and write about it. You could write it as diary entries or letters to a family member or friend.
3. Technology has changed a lot since Nellie Melba was a young girl. *Worksheet 4* asks you to compare Nellie's experiences with how a young singer might live and work today.

4. Why do you think no other Australians had become famous classical musicians before Nellie Melba? What clues does the story give? What do you know about Australia in the 1860s-1880s that might have affected this? (Answering *Worksheet 4* may help with this too.)
5. Nellie's father didn't want his daughter to sing professionally. What do you think he wanted his daughter to do with her life? Do you think Nellie's father would think the same way if he were alive today?
6. When was World War I? Why do you think a war in Europe would have affected life as far away as in Australia?
7. Nellie Melba is featured on the Australian \$100 note. Can you name other important people who feature on our banknotes? (You can find more information on our banknotes at the Reserve Bank of Australia's website: <http://banknotes.rba.gov.au/australias-banknotes/banknotes-in-circulation/>)

Art and Visual Literacy

1. How does the story of *Meet... Nellie Melba* change if you read the text only? Or look at the pictures only? How do the text and illustrations work together to tell the story? See *Worksheet 5*.
2. Look at the colours the illustrator has used for throughout the book. Are certain colours used repeatedly – how and where? Do these colours suggest specific things?
3. *Worksheet 6* invites you to analyse pp 4-5 of *Meet... Nellie Melba*.

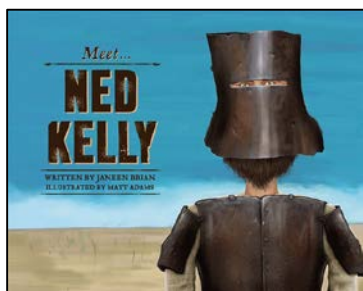
Music

1. Music was part of Nellie Melba's family and social life. Is music important in your family? What kinds of music do you listen to or play together? Is music part of celebrations or special events in your family?
2. Operas combine music, acting, dancing, costumes, scenery and props to tell a story. Imagine you want to tell two different stories via music. How would you describe music that would suit a sad story? How would you describe music that would suit a joyous story? Can you think of songs you already know that would suit those two stories?

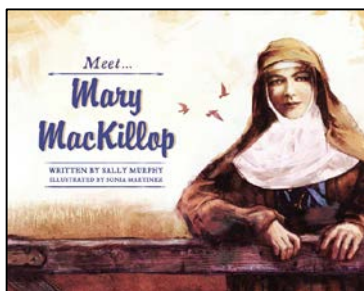


3. How have music and musical tastes changed since Nellie Melba's time to the modern day? Compare some opera pieces to your favourite songs. What has changed? What is still the same?
4. Explore the instruments used to create opera music. Research your favourite orchestral instrument and share five facts about it with your classmates.

OTHER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES



Meet... Ned Kelly
Janeen Brian & Matt Adams
Australia's most famous bushranger



Meet... Mary MacKillop
Sally Murphy & Sonia Martinez
Australia's first saint



Meet... Captain Cook
Rae Murdie & Chris Nixon
Exploration and discovery



Meet... the Anzacs
Claire Saxby & Max Berry
How the Anzac legend began



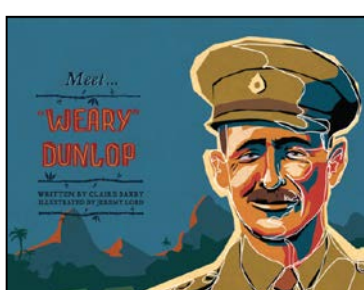
Meet... Douglas Mawson
Mike Dumbleton & Snip Green
Antarctic exploration and survival



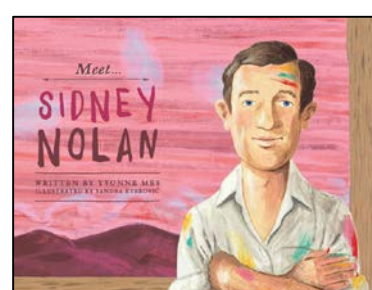
Meet... Nancy Bird Walton
Grace Atwood & Harry Slaghekke
A pioneer in the golden age of aviation



Meet... Banjo Paterson
Kristin Weidenbach & James Gulliver Hancock
Australia's most beloved poet



Meet... Weary Dunlop
Claire Saxby & Jeremy Lord
Wartime bravery and compassion



Meet... Sidney Nolan
Yvonne Mes & Sandra Eterović
A trailblazing artist.



Meet... Don Bradman
Coral Vass & Brad Howe
A sporting legend and source of pride during hard times

Teachers' notes for each book are available from www.randomhouse.com.au/teachers

WORKSHEET 1: STORY MAP

Book title:

Author:

Illustrator:

Characters:

Setting:

Beginning
Middle
End



WORKSHEET 2: Comprehension

How much can you remember from reading the book? Try to answer the questions below without looking inside the book again.

1. Where did Nellie grow up?

2. What instrument did she learn to play as a child?

3. Did Nellie's father want her to make singing her job?

4. Did Nellie get to see lots of famous opera stars sing when she was growing up? Why or why not?

5. Where did Nellie live when she first got married?

6. Did Nellie become a popular singer as soon as she got to London?

7. What was unusual about Nellie's first performance in Brussels?

8. How did Nellie earn the honour of being made a Dame?

9. At what important event did Nellie sing at the end of the story?

WORKSHEET 3: Vocabulary

Did you recognise all the words in the book? Write a short definition of the words below – use a dictionary if you need help. You can add any other words you were unfamiliar with to the bottom of the list.

Word	Meaning
soprano	
opera	
tropical	
devastated	
persistence	
nightingale	
applause	
audition	
disgruntled	
splendid	
parliament	
charities	
auction	

WORKSHEET 4: Then and now

Look closely at the text and illustrations of *Meet... Nellie Melba*. Now imagine you are a young musician. How has technology changed how you would train, travel and start your career?

How would you...	Nellie's day	Today
Listen to music at home?		
Discover new music?		
See live performances?		
Learn a new song?		
Travel to train or perform in a different country		
Audition for a new teacher or to perform?		
Communicate with your audience?		

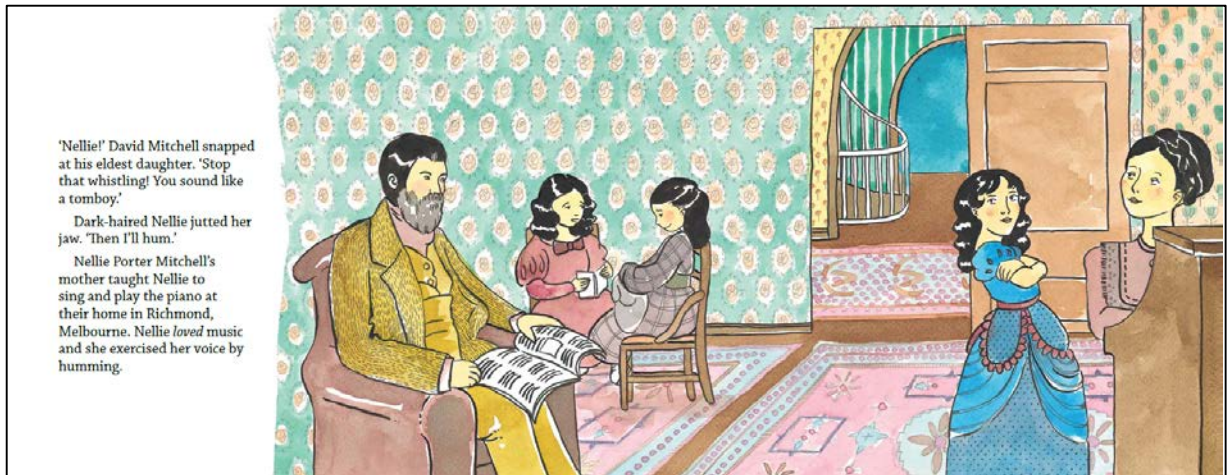


WORKSHEET 5: Comparing text and illustration

Choose one spread from the book to analyse. In one column write down everything the text tells you about the story on that page. In the other column, write down everything the illustration tells you about the story on that page. Does the illustration tell you extra things that are not in the text?

The text tells me...	The illustration tells me...

WORKSHEET 6: Analysing an illustration



1. Write some notes about what you see in the illustration.

- What does the room look like?

- What are the characters doing?

- What are they wearing?

- When do you think this scene is set – the future, the present or the past?

- How do the illustration and text match each other?

- Can you tell which of the three girls is Nellie? How?

On a new sheet of paper, draw your family spending an afternoon at home together. How is it different – and how is it similar?

ORDER FORM

TITLE	AUTHOR	ISBN	SCHOOL YEAR	RRP	QUANTITY	TOTAL
<i>Meet... Nellie Melba</i>	Janeen Brian	9780143780298	K-4	\$24.99		
<i>Meet... Don Bradman</i>	Coral Vass	9781925324891	K-4	24.99		
<i>Meet... Sidney Nolan</i>	Yvonne Mes	9780857985903	K-4	\$16.99		
<i>Meet... Weary Dunlop</i>	Claire Saxby	9780857985361	K-4	\$24.99		
<i>Meet... Banjo Paterson</i>	Kristin Weidenbach	9780857980083	K-4	\$24.99		
<i>Meet... Nancy Bird Walton</i>	Grace Atwood	9780857983879	K-4	\$24.99		
<i>Meet... Ned Kelly</i>	Janeen Brian	9781742757193	K-4	\$16.99		
<i>Meet... Mary MacKillop</i>	Sally Murphy	9781742757216	K-4	\$19.99		
<i>Meet... Captain Cook</i>	Rae Murdie	9780857980182	K-4	\$16.99		
<i>Meet... the Anzacs</i>	Claire Saxby	9780857981936	K-4	\$16.99		
<i>Meet... Douglas Mawson</i>	Mike Dumbleton	9780857981950	K-4	\$24.99		
TOTAL						

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