

My Story: Our Enemy, My Friend

Written by Jenny Blackman



◀ The Back Story ▶ with Jenny Blackman

***Our Enemy, My Friend* is your first book. What made you want to write for children, and specifically about the treatment of German Australians during the First World War?**

I've always liked reading children's books, in fact today I would read more children's books than books for adults. I've always wanted to write and in 1995 I was on six months chemotherapy for breast cancer. I needed a project to keep me occupied at home. When she turned eighty, I gave my mother a bound leather book and she wrote down for me the stories she had told me about her life in the Adelaide Hills. I thought it would make a good children's story, so I just sat down and typed. It proved to be very good therapy as it gave me something to focus on which was much more challenging than feeling sorry for myself.

I entered the manuscript inspired by my mother's memoirs in the Children's Book Council of New South Wales' Frustrated Writers Mentor Program in 1999. To my surprise it won the adult section. Then in 2001 I was awarded a fellowship to Varuna ('the Writer's House') at Katoomba, where it was suggested that I rewrite my book in diary form and send it to Scholastic, who publish quite a lot of historical fiction. I rewrote fifty pages and sent it to them. They wanted to see the rest, so I got to work.

You based your story on stories that your mother told you. How much did her experiences contribute to the story?

My mother's childhood in the Adelaide Hills during the years of the Great War must have made a great impression on her, because she had very vivid memories of it. Her memoirs gave me the backbone of the story and I filled in around it. My mother's father was the minister of the church at Gumeracha, so Emma in the story is really my mother, Dorothea. John and Hugh are her brothers Bill and Basil. Hope, their sister, is the baby. Hers is the only name I didn't change; we need Hope with the war going on. I knew Mother's family as grown ups. In the book I had to imagine them as children.

One thing that I did change was the name of the town where the story is set. My mother lived in Gumeracha, which means 'a plentiful water supply'. I called the village Wirreebilla, which is another Aboriginal word meaning the same thing.

I saw the cover before the book was printed and I was very thrilled to see the picture of my mother, as Emma, on the front cover.

Did writing the story as a diary offer any special challenges?

The diary form is a different kind of writing than a normal novel. It took a lot of work for me to change my manuscript and make it fit the diary form. I did find the lack of conversation in the diary form hard. There was a lot of conversation in my original manuscript.

What sort of research did you have to undertake while you were writing *Our Enemy, My Friend*?

I did a lot of background research about the war, the Lighthouse and the Germans in Australia in libraries, including my local library, the City of Sydney Library and the Mitchell Library. I was helped with historical research by the staff from the Gumeracha Historical Centre, who found references to my grandfather (Emma's father in the book) mainly in church papers and some of the church accounts.

Two of my friends also helped me with my research. One was a German teacher. She helped me with German traditions and could always supply a German Christian or surname when asked. Another lived at Mount Barker in the Adelaide Hills and took photos of the church, the rectory and other places. This was a great help as I haven't been to Gumeracha.

Which elements of your writing did you pay special attention to in order to make Emma's voice seem like a girl living in 1915 in the Adelaide Hills?

I tried to get inside the skin of a twelve-year-old girl and think and write like she would have done. A thirteen-year-old girl lived about four doors down from me. She read the first draft of my book. I asked her a lot of questions and we talked about the book. Several of my friends' grandchildren read the book and gave me feedback.

I spent some time during the 1960s living on a property at Bathurst. I used to have to cook the midday meal for six men at shearing time on a wood stove. To get water for washing up, cleaning and to have a sponge bath we had to boil the kettle on the stove. We only had tank water and there were times when drinking water was scarce. So, you see I have a background of farm life without the luxuries of modern living. My experience at Bathurst helped me realise what life might have been like in 1915.

About the author:

Jenny Blackman

During my early childhood years we lived in Melbourne. My grandparents (Emma's parents in *Our Enemy, My Friend*) and Aunt Hope lived in the same street. When I was ten we moved to Sydney, first living in Epping and then Turramurra.

When I finished school, I studied history and English at the University of Armidale. Then I became a librarian and worked in university, technical and school libraries. It was working at the Maritime Services Board that I met my husband, Ted. We married in 1966. I left work when our first child

was born in 1967. Ted and his elder brother had a property near Bathurst. We spent many happy days there. They sold the property in 1974. We have always been pleased that the children had a taste of country life. I went back to work part-time in 1977. Now we are retired. We have two grown-up children and five grandsons.

As well as writing, I love going to symphony concerts and the theatre and work for Probus, Cansupport and the Friend's Committee for Elizabeth Farm in Parramatta. At the moment I'm halfway through writing a life story with the working title 'Without an Echo'.

Teaching Ideas ✓

Before Reading ✓

■ Ask students to look closely at the cover of *Our Enemy, My Friend*. Pay attention to the title, the back cover blurb and the photos. Ask the students to give you short phrases describing what they think the book will be about. These could be listed on butcher's paper to remind the students of their original ideas as they read the book.

■ Discuss what life must have been like for the people at home in Australia during the war. How did they try to support the soldiers who had gone to fight? What sort of hardships did those at home face because of the war? How anxious would those at home have felt about their sons, fathers and brothers away fighting?

BEHIND THE BOOK TEACHER'S NOTES

- Encourage students to research an aspect of the lives of the soldiers fighting in World War I, for instance, how men were recruited, conditions in the trenches, the battles in the deserts or how they were helped when they returned home.

- Discuss why it might be a good idea to write a historical story as a diary. What do real diaries tell us about the past? Are diaries reliable historical sources?

Activity

The German question

Hold a formal class debate to discuss the topic, 'Australia is at war with Germany. All German Australians should be watched closely as they are likely to betray their new country for their old one.'

During reading ✓

- Which features of the writing in *Our Enemy, My Friend* shows that it is a diary? How is it different to a novel written as a plain narrative?

- What attitudes do people in *Our Enemy, My Friend* show towards the German Australians living in the community? What are some of the incidents of hostility against them? How do they try and protect themselves?

- What reasons are given for the young men volunteering to go and fight?

- What are some of the German traditions that Emma writes about?

- How do the people at home try and support the men who are away fighting?

Activities

Comparing lives

Divide a page into two columns. In one column, jot down things in Emma's life that are similar to your own, and in the other column jot down the things that are different.

What does that mean?

Our Enemy, My Friend is full of words and terms that today's readers might not readily understand. Find four words that you aren't familiar with (they could be words in German, or names of things we no longer use, or words that refer to the war). Find out what these words mean. Then compile a class list of these words and their definitions.

Make a timeline

Our Enemy, My Friend covers a year. As they read, write down the main events that occur each month on a timeline. As a diary is written in fragments, the plot can be hard to follow. This timeline may help you see that there is still a strong plot underlying the story.

Soldiers wanted

Make a recruitment poster that you think would inspire men to sign up to fight in the war.

After reading ✓

- How does the war change the way that people think of each other in Wirreebilla? Discuss whether this sort of change is typical in war situations. Can the students think of other examples when Australians of particular ethnic, religious or political backgrounds have been discriminated against?

BEHIND THE BOOK TEACHER'S NOTES

- Both Pete and Kurt die at the front. How do their deaths affect their families? Is there a great difference in the effect that their deaths have?
- How does the war affect Emma's friendship with Hannelore? Is it true that because Hannelore is being treated so badly, Emma has to work harder at their friendship? Why might this be so?
- Australians made the German community in an attempt to protect themselves from possible betrayal. Could they have done the war effort more harm than good by locking up working men and shutting shops down?
- Talk with students about what everyday living was like in 1915 as depicted in *Our Enemy, My Friend*. What things do we have to help around the home and at work that they didn't have? What jobs do Emma and the other children have to do that we don't do? What toys do they have and what games do they play? Were their lives better in some ways?
- How close were the predictions students made about the contents of the story based on their first examinations of the cover?

Activities

A letter from Hannelore

Our Enemy, My Friend is Emma's diary so we don't learn first-hand about Hannelore's feelings. Write a letter from Hannelore to Kurt at the front, perhaps based on an incident in the story. What has been going on in her life? How does she feel about the way she and her family are being treated? How does this make her feel about her friend, Emma?

Charcoal sketching

Emma loves to draw and gives her drawings as presents. Choose one of the places that Emma describes and make a charcoal sketch of what they think it looks like.

Parcels for the soldiers

Life was miserable for those fighting in Europe. Design a parcel that a soldier would have been grateful to receive. Bring in items that you think a soldier would need and, remembering that the parcels must be sent overseas by ship, try to make up parcels that will last the trip and weigh less than one kilogram.

When the war is over

Pretend that it is three years after the events of *Our Enemy, My Friend*. The German men who were interred have returned, the soldiers have returned and the children have all grown. Write three entries that show what is happening in Wirreebilla. Write the entries as if you were Emma, or one of the other characters if you prefer.

Literature study

Use the following ideas to prompt class discussion about *Our Enemy, My Friend* and the ideas it contains.

- What themes or messages do students think the author is trying to share with them? Are they relevant to any other situations that existed in Australia in the recent past?
- *Our Enemy, My Friend* is set not only in a particular place, but also a particular time. How does the author set the scene for her story?
- In what ways does the fact that Emma's father is a church minister allow the author to show her readers much of what is going on in Wirreebilla?
- In Emma's diary, how does the author manage to give us an idea of what is happening outside of Wirreebilla and of other character's points of view?
- Why has the author chosen to tell us what happened to two Australian soldiers, one of English and one of German backgrounds?
- Although the times that Emma lives in are hard, her life is also a happy one. What are some of the good things that happen to her? What would the story be like if the author had not included them?
- Because Emma's story is written as a diary, she notes things down as they happen. Many pages might separate events and thoughts that are related. For instance, Pete's story pops up in several places. Is it easy to piece these fragments together as you read? Try finding all the fragments of one story and writing them as a single narrative.
- The war brings change to Wirreebilla. What are some of the changes that take place? How do some of the characters change over the course of the year?
- How does the central relationship between Hannelore and Emma develop and grow during the course of the story? Could their troubles actually make them stronger friends than they might otherwise have been?