

# KIRSTY MURRAY

[www.kirstymurray.com](http://www.kirstymurray.com)



## MINING THE PAST FOR GOLD

by Kirsty Murray

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Harry Potter and Bilbo Baggins have a lot to answer for. Ask your average Australian child what sort of history they're interested in and invariably they'll answer; Medieval. Fantasy books are almost exclusively set in European or pseudo-European landscapes so finding out more about the old world is a must. Some more daring children might answer Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome or even the American Civil War. Few will tell you they can't wait to learn more about Australian history.

"The thing is," explained a serious 13-year-old friend of mine, "there are no good stories in Australian history. It's just boring. Like, there's Captain Cook and then nothing much happens."

I remember feeling exactly the same way when I was a kid. I was a voracious reader but the stories I read were always set somewhere else. If the novel was Australian, it was set in the bush or by the billabong, in the great rural landscape that I seldom visited. I was a city slicker who rarely left the suburbs and made small connection to those stories. More often the books I read were written by English or American authors and I grew to imagine that Australian history was too dry to be interesting. These days, there are no shortage of novels by Australian children's author and a smattering of historical fiction but Australian history's profile hasn't got much better. For most children, Australian history doesn't seem to connect to anything. From the outside, it looks like just a bunch of disconnected facts. Despite Ned Kelly, the gold rush, and Gallipoli, from a kid's point of view, the big stories always happen somewhere else.

I wrote *The Children of the Wind* series to try and redress this imbalance. Australian history is a goldmine of big epic sagas begging to be told, sagas that stretch across generations. Three years ago I stumbled across an often overlooked fact that led me to a rich seam of stories. Between 1848 and 1850, over four thousand orphan girls were taken from workhouses across Ireland, the first participants in one of Australia's many child immigrant schemes. Like the asylum-seekers of today, the Irish girls of 1850 were not made welcome in their new land. They were often scorned and vilified. Their stories have been swept into the whirlwind of history but the echoes of their lives are with us still. Over thirty thousand ancestors of these girls are now fifth-generation Australians. *Bridie's Fire*, the first book in the series, gives a voice to one of those girls and tells the story of her courage and resilience in a life full of action and drama.

Indigenous history is rich in its sense of place. Every landscape is permeated with story, every tale connects its children to their homeland and to its past. But immigrants are always looking forward, hoping that the stories of their children's lives will be different to their own, unburdened by the grief of the old world. We are all 'children of the wind', whose ancestors were driven here by the storms of history and our links with the past are fragile. Often in an immigrant nation stories that are too painful to pass on to a child are forgotten. If we can unlock the past for our children we give them more than great stories. We give them a great gift – a sense of where they fit in history and the chance to make the future a better place.