

Miles Franklin's Growing Voice: Revisiting *My Brilliant Career*

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<https://doi.org/10.30608/HJEAS/2022/28/1/7>**ABSTRACT**

Rather than any of her more mature writing, Miles Franklin's debut romance, *My Brilliant Career*, has been cemented into the canon of Australian literary nationalism. The novel received ambivalent immediate responses upon its publication in 1901 for its unflattering representation of the author's kin and society. Subsequent criticism soon accepted Franklin's oeuvre as part of the dominant male discourse of late nineteenth-century Australia, but after the 1970s her writing came under new scrutiny from a feminist aspect. Recently, she has been placed in a long tradition of female writing and discussed for gendered ventures. Nonetheless, however dedicated a feminist Franklin later became, she did not yet search for women's greater self-realization in her debut but for her own identity and place in the world as an adolescent. This article argues that although Franklin's classic has become an icon of both nationalist and feminist literature, the dichotomy of these readings can best be appeased through the adolescent ramps of its protagonist. It is an adolescent novel, in which a growing voice argues with her superiors, peers, and self, thereby exploring her authorial, gendered, and national identity.

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KEYWORDS: Miles Franklin, adolescent novel, Australian literature, literary nationalism, women's writing

Any primary and secondary text may be driven by their own age and agenda; hence, it is necessary and justifiable to reinterpret canonized classics to adapt their critical understanding to newer generations' reading experience. Miles Franklin's iconic novel, *My Brilliant Career*, received ambivalent critical responses following its publication in 1901. Soon, however, it became a key text of Australian literary nationalism, only to be revisited in the 1980s when earlier patriarchal constructions were problematized. My survey of twentieth-century criticism on Franklin and her romance identifies two trends that either interpret her as a disciple and the product of the dominant, nationalist discourse of late nineteenth-century Australia, or discuss the gendered aspects, thus mapping a tradition of Australian women's writing. I revisit *My Brilliant Career* to liberate it from the constraints of earlier readings from a primordial ethnocentric standpoint as well as from that of feminist criticism since the 1980s. I argue that however dedicated a feminist Franklin subsequently became, she did not yet search for women's greater self-realization in her debut romance, but for her own identity and place in the world as an adolescent, regardless of other women's status or opinion. Later indeed she developed a feminist agenda both in writing and in activism, but this was the result of adolescent failures. In the novel, a growing voice argues with her superiors, peers, and self, and a close reading of her words would assist in disclosing established critical opinions for review.

Major treatises of Australian literature posit the heyday of literary nationalism to be the late nineteenth century (Green; Hergenhan; Wilde et al; Webby in Jose; Huggan), when the Bulletin School of writers—Henry Lawson, Joseph Furfy, Barbara Baynton, Andrew Barton 'Banjo' Paterson, and others—explored and criticized, and sometimes celebrated life in the outback. Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin (1879-1954) was brought up in this rural setting and atmosphere, which determined her authorial voice. Graeme Huggan establishes literary nationalism as definitive of Australian literature well into today's transnational era, arguing that "a measure of the compulsive, collectively self-mythologizing storytelling . . . has remained a

feature of Australian literature, from the mock-demotic yarns and bush ballads of the 1890s to their more self-consciously sophisticated counterparts in the present day” (1-2). How “the bush”¹ formed an idiosyncratic Australian national character has been discussed and revised in seminal cultural histories, from Russel Ward’s *The Australian Legend* in 1958 through Donald Horne’s *The Lucky Country* in 1964 to more recent, selected reinterpretations by conferencing academics and essayists, such as Adi Wimmer and Richard Nile. Critical stances have then developed into monographs discussing the many facets of Australia’s quest for identity, including aspects of gender, race and ethnicity, citizenship, and the environment, by John Carroll, Shirley Walker, Stephen Castles, Kay Ferres and Denise Meredyth, Libby Robin, and Brian Dibble.

Literary nationalism, vested in the period of “old nationalism,” as Graeme Turner refers to it in *Making It National*, provides potential insights into conflicting imperial and national interests, for being conveniently situated at the end of the colonial era, with Federation achieved in 1901 (10).² It offers a pragmatic starting point for new observations from many angles, validating multiple approaches to once “sacred” texts, such as Lawson’s bush story, “The Drover’s Wife,” debunked and reimagined on canvas by Russel Drysdale and in rewritten stories of the same title by Murray Bail, Barbara Jefferis, and Frank Moorhouse. Imperial/national, colonial/postcolonial, patriarchal/feminist, however, need not be presented as binary oppositions but, rather, as various positions on a broad, transitional scale. Such synthesis is pursued, for example, in *The Australian Legend*, an iconic sample of Australian nationalist historiography—much criticized, often anachronistically, in later decades. My purpose with revisiting *My Brilliant Career* is not to reposit the book into an entirely new context, but rather to highlight an aspect of its creation—being written by an adolescent author—which explains why it lends itself so easily to at least two different critical trends, and which makes it persist in the Australian literary imagination.

Miles Franklin's nationalism would most probably be categorized today as primordial and ethnic, "the truest" to Australia (Lawson, "Preface"). In tune with the "great Australian silence,"³ her first novel, *My Brilliant Career*, is set in outback New South Wales in the 1890s; its characters are divided along gender and class lines, but hardly ever along race, as if none but white people lived in Australia. Curiously, such a lacuna in the perspectives covered in the book accords with Huggan's observation that "Australian literature has been constitutive, rather than merely reflective, of the history of social relations in Australia, and . . . this constitutive role is perhaps most visible in the discourse it has produced, and continues to produce, about race, both within the national context and beyond" (vi). With this stated, however, it would be unjustified to suppose that only two homogeneous narratives existed in Australian literature: one Black, being always silenced, and one White, always in power. This article hence explores settler-Australia through the bittersweet and cynical voice of an ambitious adolescent woman—Sybylla Melvyn of *My Brilliant Career*—whose life is governed not only by men, but also by an irony of fate. Franklin takes note of the controversial nature of power while writing, which leads to her personal empowerment and more books to write.

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin grew up in colonial New South Wales in a native-born, pioneering family, whose large farming estate, however, diminished into various unrewarding smallholdings. One of her biographers, Jill Roe, captures the effect of hopeless rural struggle on her: "[d]ownward mobility heightened Stella Franklin's pride and self-awareness, and contributed much to the making of Miles Franklin, nationalist, feminist and novelist." Between 1906 and 1927, she lived and worked in Chicago and London, mostly in secretarial positions for feminist and philanthropic organizations. Literary and political efforts, as well as wartime aid, weakened her health, and as her disappointment with chauvinistic America increased, so did her enthusiasm for reestablishing her nationality in Australia. Besides *My Brilliant Career*, which she published well before expatriating to the United States, it is the

rural Australian “Brent of Bin Bin” series (1928-1933) and the pioneering family saga *All That Swagger* (1936) that established her place in literary history.

Perhaps it is the unique voice of Sybylla Melvyn, an irrepressible young lady in *My Brilliant Career*, rather than the voice of the outback, that has captured generations of Australians. As recently as in 2018, the State Library of New South Wales lauded Franklin, because “[t]he scale and scope of her influence is extraordinary—on her family and friends, on her fellow writers and on the generations of Australians who have read her work” (Franks 13). Ann Vickery, assistant professor at Deakin University, acclaims the novel’s “uncompromising message for girls today,” including her own daughter, and time-adjusts her published opinion to the stage adaptation of the novel in Sydney’s Belvoir St. Theatre, running from December 2020 to January 2021. One hundred and twenty years later, having survived her creator by nearly half a century, Sybylla’s character still invites audiences and has made it possible for Franklin to establish and become a pillar of the Australian literary hall of fame.

“With the creation of this contradictory, solipsistic and depressive heroine, Miles Franklin was launched on her literary career” (Pybus 462). She wrote a dozen of other titles afterwards, but it is through the impression her debut continues to make that she is still remembered. *My Brilliant Career* was adapted to film in 1979 to such popular and critical success that “Miles Franklin has become something of a household name in Australia” (Modjeska 2). Adaptation was made possible by a dedication of the Australian Film Commission—newly established by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975—to provide an avenue for local filmmakers’ cultural and artistic merit so as to boost a unique Australian identity, and its success is due just as much to its local color as to the liberating spirit of the seventies (Goldsmith). Not that Franklin left it for posterity to judge her merits accidentally. Her legacy also survives because she felt dedicated to support unique, national Australian writing and so bequeathed her estate to establish an annual literature award, today known as the

Miles Franklin Award—“Australia’s most prestigious literature prize . . . awarded each year to a novel which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases . . . to support authors and to foster uniquely Australian literature . . . [as] Franklin believed that ‘Without an indigenous literature, people can remain alien in their own soil.’” (Miles Franklin Literary Award).⁴

Initially, *My Brilliant Career* invoked a dubious reception due to its unfavorable characterization of Sybylla’s, assumed to be Franklin’s, kin and environment. Later literary criticism, which interpreted the author’s oeuvre either as part of the mainstream, patriarchal discourse or as a representative of a “long tradition of female writers” (McInherny 71), was less concerned with the autobiographical nature of the book. The former approach features a growing Australian consciousness, epitomized in a generously-worded preface by Henry Lawson, of the Bulletin School, who applauded the book for its authentic Australianness: “I don’t know about the girlishly emotional parts of the book . . . but . . . the book is true to Australia—the truest I ever read” (n. pag.). Such readings “obscur[e] the book’s feminism by emphasizing its nationalism,” argues Susan Gardner, “a process that painfully split the authorial self; and led to familial incomprehension, biographical disgrace and, finally, for the young author, self-imposed exile” (22). Personal effects on the authorial self aside, Franklin’s circumnavigating—thus, openly confronting—the already established, male, pioneering-in-the-bush, settler-colonial ethos of Australia in the late-Victorian era would have undermined chances for the book to get published. Still, critical expectations of a mateship-based, presumably authentic literary Australianness held strongly until the 1970s, if not later.⁵ Prominent treatises, such as the entry on Franklin in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* (William H. Wilde et al.) and *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career* by the author’s trend-setting biographer Colin Roderick, either depreciate the yet incongruent and artless style of this novel or emphasize the perverse sexual ambivalence of Sybylla’s immature mind. They

would have expected Franklin to adjust to a mainstream norm more rigorously and chose to focus on the imperfections of her efforts.

Reinterpreting Australian literary classics from a feminist perspective has, since the 1980s, dusted off *My Brilliant Career*, among others, and generated a renaissance of its secondary editions, for example in the Virago Modern Classics series in 1985. The gendered film adaptation of 1979, for example—with females as scriptwriter, producer, and director—presented a more radically self-confident Sybylla than she is in the novel of 1901, highlighting her image as a fighting feminist. Director Gillian Armstrong expressed a calculated choice of interpretation: “I wanted to make the statement that the heroine is a full woman who can develop her talents and have a career. I didn’t want to reinforce the old stereotypes that a woman who has a career does so only because she can’t get a man” (qtd. in Manning 46).⁶ Armstrong’s intention resonates with the new approach that has shifted focus, as Gardner contends, from “the hegemonic Australian male-nationalist tradition . . . to thematic and stylistic concerns and continuities in 19th century . . . middle-class women’s writing” (24). Gardner’s observation is justified by several examples, such as Frances McInherny employing Elaine Showalter’s terminology of the “feminine” and “feminist” to interpret the novel; Margaret K. Butcher discussing *My Brilliant Career* as a female colonial Bildungsroman; Patricia Meyer Spacks and Annis Pratt examining it as a work of female adolescence (Gardner 26-30), and Carmen Calill, in the introduction to the Virago edition, even claiming that “Miles Franklin was decades ahead of her time” (n. pag.). Druscilla Modjeska also concludes that “*My Brilliant Career* represents a feminist intervention into the nationalist tradition in the literature of the 1890s” (34).

These interpretations do not simply indicate matter-of-course rereadings of canonical texts—with the same fabric taking on a different meaning in a next age—which would inevitably happen when recipients revitalize what they have read. Critics hence give a fresh embedding to the text itself, in its contemporaneity. Consequently, it is not the post-1970s that

feminize the novel—as the film adaptation does—rather, it proves to be an inherently women’s piece of writing, with chance also having a feminist motivation in the late-nineteenth century. Essentially, *My Brilliant Career* epitomizes women’s legacy interlocking with men’s tradition, looking for a way of self-expression. Franklin, like her protagonist, Sybylla, explores her boundaries and trespasses into novel territories beyond limits. However rebellious she may appear, she still hides herself behind a male pseudonym, Miles being borrowed from her grandfather as a penname instead of her original Stella (Bird, “Towards an Aesthetics” 173). I propose that when Sybylla revolts against the social binding that matrimony prescribes for gentlewomen of her age, we hear Franklin’s own growing voice. It is Franklin, disguised as Sybylla, who opts for a writer’s career.

Women’s writing at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries need not be imagined as a monolith of styles defined by the author’s gender only. The genre she chose to write in and the audience providing the context of reception, if preconceived, also determined authorial voices. Susan Martin highlights that Australian authors, for example Franklin, Baynton, and Katharine Susannah Pritchard a little later, felt the need to distinguish themselves from the tradition of the female domestic novel in Britain, and that Franklin’s novel corresponds to contemporary romances by Australian women writers. She maintains that “while attacking and undermining the division of gender roles, which appears in both men’s and women’s Australian fiction, these turn-of-the-century novels are continually confronted with the void which results from the removal of imposed pattern” (63-64). As far as we know, Franklin was widely read in the British canon of her age, including her male contemporaries—today’s Australian classics. However, she began writing *My Brilliant Career* while still an adolescent, at seventeen years of age, which invalidates any proposition to assume that she could be consciously positioning herself in the identity politics of feminist writing at such a fresh budding of her career.

The word “adolescence” captures liminality between childhood when youngsters stay safe within family patronage and adulthood when they assume agency over their decisions, to describe a period of coming of age through revolt and rite of passage. Symbolic of the maturation of Australian literature over one hundred years, another novel—Kim Scott’s *Benang*, recipient of the Miles Franklin Award in 2000—constructs a narrative that depends on a young adult focalizer. A century apart, Harley shares Sybylla’s insecurity of growing up between the margin and the center of society because of race, class, and gender. Reaching the center and maintaining control over their own lives is all the more difficult because their own starting point of the self is insecure for both of them. Harley’s Aboriginal parentage had been lied about for generations, whereas Sybylla’s socialization into gender role norms had been a failure. They both face exceedingly harsh times in their adolescence due to pressures of the social circles around them. In such circumstances, it would be difficult to posit Sybylla as a feminist heroine—her decisions may seem revolutionary, but they are motivated more by the whim of adolescence struggling against social pressure than by adult agency with political determination. Nationalist and feminist readings hardly ever highlight this crucial, identificatory feature of *My Brilliant Career*, though Cassandra Pybus refers to the book as a “turn of the century adolescent novel” (460), and Gardner states that “Franklin’s writing presented the landscape of colonial childhood . . . a relationship of rapturous union rather than possession, a realm from which the roving tomboy is expelled at adolescence” (42).

Even though Franklin insisted on adapting a nationalistic, male discourse in order to succeed, as attested by written communication with her agent, she successfully avoided becoming “a token male”—to refute Delys Bird’s term—in the process (“Writing Women” 100).⁷ As is reflected in her first novel, she struggled with ambivalent feelings about her country, due to actual life experience affronting a former, wishfully edenic colonial childhood—her “psychic domain” and “Garden of Eden” (Hooton 65). This confusion is

manifested in the novel's opening and concluding with Sybylla's overwhelming appraisal of Australians, yet substantiating an overtly unflattering portrayal of the society throughout the book. Sybylla's alter ego, Franklin, assumed cultural functions—high literature, performing arts—of the dominant tradition, but refused to obey the corresponding social ones, such as marriage and motherhood, because the former belonged to men's domain and the latter to women's, and she could not be both. She assumed a martyr-like behavior, trying to escape self-imposed victimization when she migrated to the USA, where she served as war-nurse, or continued fasting in secret to save up an adequate stock of money to establish a literary award. It is Franklin, disguised as Sybylla, who exclaims: "The wheels of social mechanism needed readjusting . . . Oh, that I might find a cure and give it to my fellows!" (36).

An author need not be identified with her heroine, still it is telling that Franklin's family, her contemporaries, and she herself acknowledged the autobiographical nature of the book. Sybylla's earliest childhood memories bind her to a man's world: "Daddy's little mate" (1) she used to be, with the father a "hero, confidant, encyclopaedia, mate" and "even [her] religion till [she] was ten. Since then [she has] been religionless" (4). Subsequently, however, she could not find a substitute for her role model. Having been unable to identify with the male/fatherly or with the female/motherly role accounts for Sybylla's hectic behavior and disheveled attitude, portrayed by Franklin so credibly that sociologist Havelock Ellis offered a psychoanalytical case study on Sybylla in a lecture in 1903. "Where Lawson had seen the 'girlishly emotional' sentiments of the book as something which could be separated out from Franklin's tale, Ellis found them pervasive. The over-riding mood of the novel, he noted disparagingly, was 'embittered and egotistical'" (Pybus 460). Ellis's reception of the novel as reality underscores my argument that Sybylla's adolescent emotions parallel those of the author to the point where it is possible to call the novel a *Künstlerroman*. Through Sybylla's voice, Franklin is heard, and the girl's growth into maturity involves authorial empowerment for Franklin.

Though the feminist movement was becoming more and more vocal and prominent around Federation, Franklin herself was not yet associated with it at the time of writing and publishing her first novel and therefore could hardly be influenced by their agenda. The Woman Movement in Australia emerged in the late nineteenth century, when political battle focused on the condition of married women. Louisa Lawson—Henry Lawson’s mother—and her journal, the *Dawn* campaigned publicly for women’s rights, especially the right to vote. “Like many in the Woman Movement, Lawson justified her political demands by referring to the responsibilities of motherhood; and she identified the aim as higher civilization” (Lake 20). The movement expanded to involve masses of the modern woman in the 1920s and 30s, but only in the 1970s did it break through to prominence again with the Women’s Liberationists, especially after the publication of Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, with radical goals such as sexual liberation, displaying an awareness of and sometimes embarrassment by the struggles and achievements of the predecessors (Lake 6-7). *My Brilliant Career* can be read as a novel of gendered adolescence because Franklin’s attachment to the feminist discourse was not yet conscious at the time of her debut. Even though, as Pybus claims, “Sybylla’s actions and motivations cannot be viewed in the light of the later experience of her creator” (459), it is not sheer chronology that justifies this interpretation, but the fact that young adult Sybylla conflicts with the male-driven world in order to reestablish her childhood equality, and she just as much revolts against the women she comes into contact with. Failure to be fully accepted is not Sybylla’s, or Franklin’s, fault; it is the dominant discourse that rejects her work, or so she complains in the text. As a published author, Franklin had the opportunity to choose a dedication, but not before or during her debut. Only after the publication of *My Brilliant Career* did Franklin move to Sydney, engage in journalism, and become involved in the feminist cause; later, in the USA, she also started working for the women’s labor movement. She is not alone in drawing subsequent conclusions, though: “All the major Australian women writers of the

nineteenth century—for Miles Franklin and Christina Stead cannot be omitted—looked toward greater self-realisation for women, and then asked whether it was compatible with marriage” (Spender 110).⁸ Nonetheless, *My Brilliant Career* was written at a time when such decisions were only in the process of being made—both for the young author and for the young country whose voice Franklin assumed.

Seeking women’s greater self-realization remains a personal venture in *My Brilliant Career*, as Sybylla explores her identity and place in the world and learns to daringly criticize other women’s status or opinion, more often in conflict with them than in their support. Franklin’s feminist dedication resulted from a rebellious adolescence, which impacted her publishing output, or the lack thereof, as Modjeska observes: “[a] number of Miles Franklin’s unpublished works from the Chicago period were attempts to come to terms with sexuality, maternity and implications of an existence for women which was independent of men” (174). Not that she was resigned to attempting to integrate in the male literary world, she invented another male pseudonym, “Brent of Bin Bin,” for her novels about pioneering. “[T]he Brent of Bin Bin novels are curiously asexual in tone” (174), Modjeska finds. “These novels represent a return to questions about the nature and function of literature in Australian society; it may have been that the use of the pseudonym allowed her to explore her own position as an Australian writer, without the legacy of *My Brilliant Career*” (Modjeska 176). In *My Career Goes Bung*, the sequel to *My Brilliant Career* published forty-five years later, Franklin admitted that she had intended the original story to be “‘a new style of autobiography’ in revolt against the ‘orthodox style’” (Ruthrof). This also means that Sybylla’s legacy follows from Franklin’s immature adolescent self which she later needs to surpass in order to consummate her real self. It is ironic of Australian literary history—as well as emblematic of the formation of an Australian national identity—to fetishize a temperamental *Künstlerroman* and its author into the greatest literary award of the country, albeit well-deservedly.

Sybylla's ambivalent attitude towards prescribed Victorian gender roles remains unresolved in the novel, which makes Pybus conclude that "it would appear to be a confusion shared by Franklin herself" (461). She is reluctant to develop romantic feelings for her beau, Harry, and resists the much-desired happy ending that frustrated lovers would deserve. In an extremely opinionated statement, she voices how she detests matrimony: "marriage to me appeared the most horribly tied-down and unfair-to-women existence going. It would be from fair to middling if there was love; but I laughed at the idea of love, and determined never, never, never to marry" (Franklin 31-32). In the orchard scene, when Harry reprimands her for presumed flirtation with other men, she revolts to the point of throwing her ring away and ranting "Marry you! Ha! Because the social laws are so arranged that a woman's only sphere is marriage" (144). Yet, when a point of decision arrives, admonished by how deeply Harry feels for her, she is ready to revise her stance and acknowledge the relevance of emotions, if not of social norms.

Marriage, for Sybylla, invokes social, financial, mental, physical, and emotional degradation. Her own mother's and aunt's love-marriages serve only as negative examples: Lucy Melvyn became helplessly disappointed in her alcoholic husband but remained afflicted with "the curse of Eve" (14), and Aunt Helen was cheated on and abandoned by her husband, to remain neither a wife nor a widow. If love-marriages of these beautiful, "most womanly of women" (49) failed, what could become of hers, when she, as she is obsessed to believe, is ugly, when the only option she may ever consider is marriage for love? What is more, Sybylla eventually convinces herself that she should oppose the idea of love, especially in its physicality, thereby entering a vicious circle typical of adolescence, which can only be escaped by not marrying at all. Beyond romantic ideas of Platonic love, as both Gardner (34) and Pybus (461) emphasize, there is her sexual immaturity, to the point of outright fear of a touch or any expression of physical attraction. Having no confidence at all in her looks and appeal makes

her mock and discredit anyone's intimate emotions, which also subjects her to due criticism by kin, beau, and lover alike.

As ambiguous liminality between childhood and adulthood is, so ambivalent is the attitude of her relatives and acquaintances to Sybylla: she is considered childlike enough at seventeen to get a doll for her birthday or to be locked up in punishment, but old enough for marriage. Her behavior intrinsically incites double readings; for example, the pillow-fight with Harry in its playfulness apparently is more instinctive and childish than that expected of a decent, gentle, and reserved would-be-lady. "For the most part the courtship is portrayed as an adolescent full romp, of practical jokes and goodhumoured competition" (Pybus 461). Sybylla does not understand the sexual implications of such behavior for adults. For adolescents, it is normal to be torn between bodily instincts and mental ambitions, yet, in the Australia of the day, both her desires and plans are constrained by rigid social norms of conformism to her class and gender. Therefore, I find the argument that "[t]he novel ultimately suggests a deeply damaged psyche, a self-hatred and lack of confidence which is frightening in its implications" somewhat exaggerated (McInherny 81). Instead, I contend that the character of Sybylla behaves like any independent-minded adolescent would, albeit deviating from contemporary social expectations.

Sybylla's frequent disobedience towards her more mature female family members arises from internal doubts that have undermined her self-confidence: "When you get me weeded out of the family you will have a perfect paradise. Having no evil to copy, the children will grow up saints" (25); "Mother, you are unjust and cruel! . . . You do not understand me at all" (27); "Why was I not like other girls? Why was I not like Gertie? . . . No one wants or cares for me" (28). Being artistic, creative, and witty, she opts for literature to pacify her conflicts, the way many adolescents take up poetry or fiction to express their otherwise inexpressible thoughts: "I arose from bed next morning with three things in my head—a pair of swollen eyes, a heavy

pain, and a fixed determination to write a book. Nothing less than a book” (29). Her rite of passage towards becoming an artist thus is fueled by a gendered generational conflict with her mother and Victorian social norms.

Men tend to accept Sybylla’s temperament and idiosyncrasies as long as they may regard her as a minor, inferior to them, so as to preserve patriarchal equality and mateship. Accordingly, by her sweet seventeen, Sybylla must learn that mateship cannot be extended to women or used as a substitute for marital bonding. She cannot possibly approximate an informal position with superior elders, such as her mother, grandmother, aunt, and employer; not the least because she regards them as conspirators for her entrapment. She feels inferior to, jealous of, and unable to communicate with her younger sister, Gertie, who, unlike her, is obedient and beautiful, but she grants gestures of affection to her baby sister, Aurora, as well as to heifers on the station—“adolescent” female cows, not yet mated, like her—who do not challenge her assertiveness.

Obsession with plainness gradually demolishes Sybylla’s confidence: “In fact I found that being a girl was quite pleasant until a hideous truth dawned upon me—I was ugly!” (33). The double pressure of sex and gender—that is, biological and social norms—initially cause her to erupt into violence, then eventually to tame her temper into a well-conditioned, creative, and acceptable form. Her use of the whip on three occasions indicates eruptions of revolt; prompted by Harry’s unexpected proposal, for example, she accidentally but instinctively strikes him in the face, to their mutual humiliation. She retreats into submission immediately after the incident and regrets her unwomanly behavior. “The event makes the connection between sex and power, and gender and power explicit, but it sites power as exclusively male and women as entirely powerless” (Martin 67). For a girl of such proposition, writing becomes empowering as well as therapeutic. Only through the moderated medium of writing can Sybylla,

and Miles Franklin, express herself and, ironically, integrate into the male discourse of Australian national literature.

Through the afterlife of Sybylla's ambition in *My Brilliant Career*, Franklin's career has become that of Australia. Given the widely acclaimed national embedding of the text, and with the film adaptation turning a teenager's voice into a grown-up woman's, curiously, this early Künstlerroman could aspire to become the symbol of a nation's maturation during the twentieth century. While this article acknowledges the validity of attention to Franklin's debut novel for its ethnocentric appraisal of Australia around Federation, it also demonstrates how creative as well as critical rereadings of the text after the 1970s emphatically repositioned Franklin as a feminist fighting against patriarchal dominance. My revisiting *My Brilliant Career* has focused on the authorial voice, distilled in the narrating character, Sybylla, to show that Franklin's adolescent writing in a nationalist context equally criticized women as well as the male establishment of her age. Adolescence explains the whimsicality of the novel, and it develops into the author adopting both nationalist and feminist views, without regarding one as exclusive to the other. Franklin became a prominent Australian writer because of the conflicts her young protagonist struggled through, the choices she made, and her dedication to a brilliant career is more emphatically individualistic in this early novel than nationalistic or feminist, though these two attitudes determined Franklin's subsequent writing path.

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Notes

¹ "The bush" is a metonymical synonym of "the outback," standing both for the vegetation and the landscape of remote, non-urban territories. It invokes images of distant, scarcely populated, rural places where survival is tough, heroic, and questionable.

² The Commonwealth of Australia was created by the federation of six former colonies, which became effective as of 1 January 1901.

³ The term “great Australian silence” was introduced by the renowned anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner in his 1968 Boyer Lecture to indicate that the masternarrative of Australian historiography failed to address unflattering issues of race relations—such as dispossession, frontier violence, and child removal—from the indigenous peoples’ perspective.

⁴ In Franklin’s age, indigenous literature meant *belles lettres* produced in White Australia, without any connotation of Black Australian (that is, Indigenous or Aboriginal) writing, which did not yet exist. The first novel to stage an Aboriginal girl as its protagonist was *Coonardoo* by Katherine Susannah Pritchard, widely considered a radical, social realist presentation by a White Australian author in 1929. Aboriginal (Indigenous, Black, Blak) literature by Indigenous authors, in print, dates to the late-1960s (T. Espák, “Fallacies of Interpretation” 118), even though their oral tradition is ancient, and was observed and collected as such since the nineteenth century (Clunies Ross 233). Systemic research in the form of fieldwork-based anthropology combined with literary studies of printed texts commenced only in the late-1970s, generated by the impact of first-generation ethnographers of the 1930s as well as the political activism of the Land Rights Movement throughout the 1960s and 1970s (T. Espák, *Seminal Years* 125-40).

⁵ The concept of mateship in Australian culture means a special bondage—friendship, camaraderie—between men: a practical and emotional friendship that can be trusted till death do them part because it is also a key to survival in rigid, remote, and rural circumstances. Its code of conduct emphasizes egalitarianism and fellowship. In Franklin’s time, it used to be an exclusively masculine term, but by the twenty-first century it has slowly shed its sexist implications (Macquarie Dictionary Blog).

⁶ Armstrong was one of the twelve students who enrolled in the newly established Australian Film and Television School—the first and only of its kind—established by Whitlam. During her career she produced several films with strong female protagonists, including *Oscar and Lucinda*, an adaptation of Peter Carey’s Miles Franklin Award-winning novel of the same title, starring Ralph Fiennes and Cate Blanchett in 1997.

⁷ In a letter addressed to her agent, James Pinker, Franklin wrote: “Please on no account allow ‘Miss’ to pre-fix my name on the title page as I do not want it to be known that I am a young girl but wish to pose as a bold-headed seer of the privileged sex” (qtd. in Kent 45).

⁸ Christina Stead (1902-1983), highly acclaimed for her radical voice and deep psychological characterizations, is often identified as a feminist expatriate writer, though she rejected this label.

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