

AUDREY OF THE OUTBACK

Teachers Notes

Written by **Christine Harris**

Illustrations by **Ann James**

Published by **Little Hare Books**

SYNOPSIS

Audrey Barlow's family lives in the Outback in South Australia. Her dad is a 'dogger', a dingo trapper, who is away for weeks at a time. The Barlows live too far from anywhere for her to go to school and other children hardly ever come to stay.

But Audrey is never bored or lonely. She helps Mum do jobs around the house, has lessons with her big brother, Price, and watches the antics of her little brother, Dougie. Sometimes visitors drop in, like Toothless the swaggie with his mysterious bag of bones, and Mr Akbar the camel driver who brings the mail. And Audrey has plenty of time to ponder the big questions in life, like do dogs go to heaven and does the sky touch the ground?

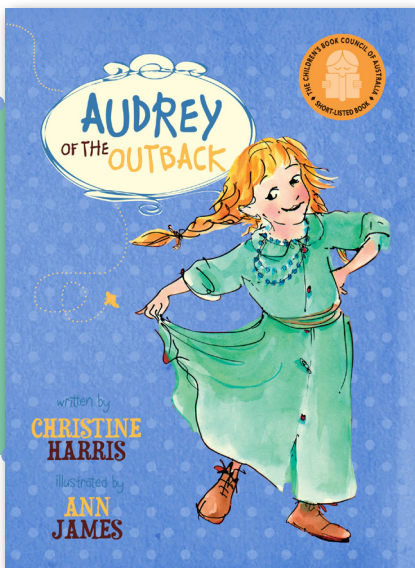
Whether she's checking a tree for possums, camping behind the house like a real swaggie, or cleaning the chook shed, Audrey has her best friend, Stumpy, to keep her company and discuss the big questions of life. What would she do without him?

THEMES

Audrey Barlow's family lives in the Outback in 1930. They face many challenges – they don't have much money, there are no doctors, neighbours, shops or schools close by, they live in a harsh environment, and have to be virtually self reliant. Although this life of poverty and isolation might seem bleak or even deprived to us, Christine Harris's book shows how one child thrives under these conditions.

Audrey may have very simple toys and go to school at the kitchen table, but she has many other things that make her life rich and full of learning experiences. The bush, full of interesting animals, surrounds her and gives her lots to wonder about. Her responsibilities, such as cleaning the chook pen and helping to dig a new dunny, give her confidence in her abilities. The interesting, capable adults who surround her are always willing to listen to her questions and talk things over.

Audrey's biggest asset is her vivid imagination. She tries out different roles, such as being a teacher and a swaggie, and asks questions about the world, including if dogs go to heaven, would their legs hang down? Through all her experiences, her imaginary friend, Stumpy, accompanies Audrey. More than anything else, *Audrey of the Outback* is about how Audrey's imagination helps her discover who she is.



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WRITING AUDREY OF THE OUTBACK

Christine Harris's new series focussing on Audrey Barlow, a little girl growing up in Outback South Australia, grew out one of her earlier books. In *Outback: The Diary of Jimmy Porter*, written for Scholastic Australia's My Story series, the main character was Audrey's cousin who had come from the city to stay for a while. Readers became fond of the character of Audrey, among them Margrete Lamond, editor at Little Hare Books, who suggested Audrey could have a series of her own. Once Christine started to listen to Audrey's voice, she found the character took over.

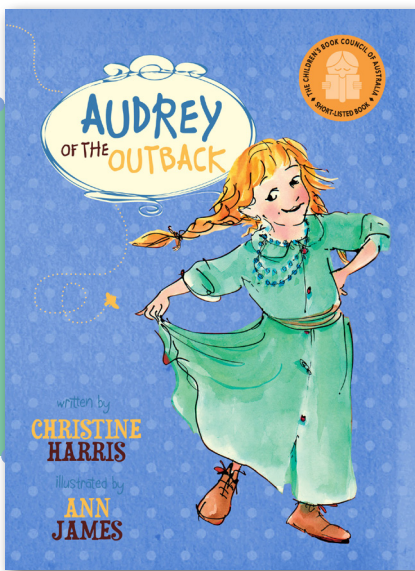
Christine's ideas for her book about Audrey came from all sorts of places. Some of the events were yarns she has heard friends or family tell. Other events happened to members of her family, or even herself. Christine also undertook formal research into Australia in the 1920s and '30s. The resources she used included going to museum exhibitions, reading about books about Beltana, about life in the Outback in Australia during this era, and general history books that list the major events of each year, such as *Australia Through Time*. She found that seeping herself in the writing of the time, including books written for children and the books of Myrtle Rose White, she got a strong feeling for the atmosphere of Outback Australia in the 1930s.

Much of the authentic atmosphere of the book also comes from Christine's use of language. She used some of the funny Australian expressions used by her family, especially her dad, which make her laugh. She was also careful not to use modern expressions and constantly checked that they were in use in Australia before 1930 in books of Australian slang and sayings.

While being careful to make Audrey's world as authentic as she could, Christine also believes that, 'Stories cross time, so even though Audrey Barlow lived in 1930, a connection can still be made from a character to a reader, from one heart to another.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRISTINE HARRIS has lived in many parts of South Australia, including some isolated rural locations. As a child her best friend, Jennifer Hobbar, was imaginary. Christine has always loved reading books and she had her first go at writing one perched in a tree when she was nine years old. She hasn't stopped writing since.



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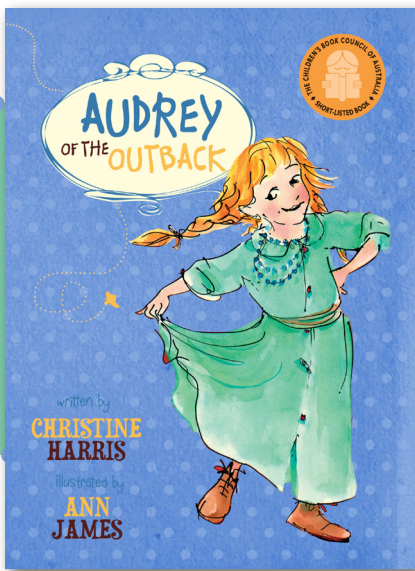
To date Christine has written more than fifty books including short stories, historical fiction, thrillers, horror, speculative fiction, humour, plays and picture books. She has received many awards for her writing, including being shortlisted for the Children's Book Council Book of the Year Award (*Jamil's Shadow*, 2002) and an Aurealis Award for speculative fiction (*Foreign Devil*, 2000). In 2006 she was honoured to receive the Carclew Fellowship.

Today Christine lives in the Adelaide Hills with her family. She travels widely, taking up writer-in-residence positions, speaking at conferences, holding writing workshops and visiting schools to talk about her books. This doesn't stop her writing because she usually has a laptop handy, though when she doesn't, she has been known to resort to a pen and a serviette.

Find out more about Christine and her books at: www.christineharris.com

STUDY NOTES

1. Discuss the themes of *Audrey of the Outback*, especially the idea that you don't have to have a lot of money or other material things such as toys to have a rich life.
2. To help children compare their lives with Audrey's, have them draw up two columns, one headed 'Audrey', and the other 'Me'. Have them pick two things from the book, such as 'toys', 'bathroom', 'transport' or 'house'. In the first column they, write a short description of the object in Audrey's world, and in the other, the comparable thing in their own.
3. There are lots of funny sayings and words in *Audrey of the Outback* that are particularly Australian. Discuss what they mean, and perhaps try to find some more Australian sayings by looking at books or asking family and friends if they know any.
4. After the children have read *Audrey of the Outback*, ask them to draw or paint a picture of what they think Audrey's house looks like. They can put in as many details as they like. Make a gallery of the pictures on the wall, titled 'Audrey's world'.
5. The 1930s was a tough time in Australia. Have the children research the era – looking at the kinds of jobs people did, how they got by without much money, and what life was like for children. Looking at photographs could be interesting.



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6. As a writing exercise, have the children write a letter to Audrey, or perhaps to Price if they would rather. They can pretend to be either another Outback child, or a city child. Then have the children swap letters and write a reply.
7. There are many interesting characters in this book. Have the children choose one, draw a picture of what he or she looks like, then write a little bit about what the person is like. They could even add details about what they think the character's favourite food or colour might be.

INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTINE HARRIS FOR LITTLE HARE BOOKS

3/2/08

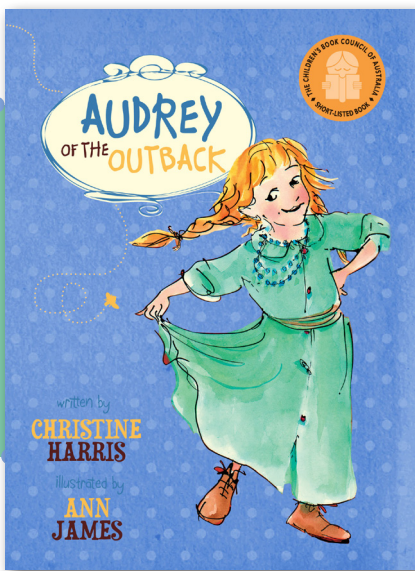
LH: Can you remember what first inspired you to write about Audrey and her family?

CH: I wrote a book in the My Story series called Outback: The Diary of Jimmy Porter and it is the story of Audrey's cousin, Jimmy, who comes from the city to stay with the Barlows in their little outback house. It is set two years earlier than the Audrey series – 1928. Audrey's story is set in 1930. People, including Margrete Lamond, the new publisher at Little Hare Books, became fond of that particular character, Audrey Barlow. Margrete suggested that it might be good for Audrey to have her own series. And once I listened to Audrey's voice, she took over. But I didn't mind one bit.

LH: What particularly appealed about writing a story set in the outback in the 1930s?

CH: It is another 'world' and yet not that far in the past. And certainly, living in the Outback has a whole lot of challenges that are to do with isolation and having no money, close neighbours or doctors close by. It was interesting to explore how people lived then. I once read a true story about a woman in an isolated family who had one half of a pair of scissors and kept it for years in case, one day, someone might turn up at their door with a half that might match it. Nothing was thrown out.

LH: Audrey of the Outback doesn't have a traditional structure – that is, one based around a particular event. It flows rather like childhood, from one day or event to the next, the isolation punctuated by visitors. Was this a conscious decision on your part or did writing the story just evolve like that?



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CH: Isolation punctuated by visitors is how these people lived, so my story has to reflect that. False action or suspense is not what this kind of story is about. It is about Audrey's almost real life.

Audrey has a vivid life – although much of it is in her imagination. Audrey of the Outback is about discovery. Audrey's discovery of who she is. She does this through interaction with family and visitors, but also through role playing and imagining various scenarios.

There is also some mystery about Stumpy. Is he an imaginary friend – or is there a touch of magic? Can Audrey really see him? For example, in the second book she tells her new friend, Boy, that you can only see Stumpy if you believe in him.

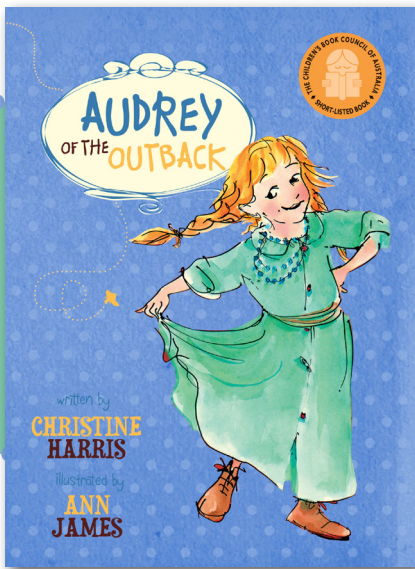
Even in barren landscapes or poverty that might appear bleak to others, a rich and imaginative life is possible.

LH: I noted in the blog on Audrey on your website that you went to northern SA to research/take in the outback, and researched the plants and animals that live there. Did you also have to research the historical details about life in the 1930s in the outback? Briefly, how did you go about that? Did some of the details come from the memories of people you know?

CH: Ideas come from all sorts of different places. Some of the yarns came from friends or were things that happened to member of my family. Some to me. For example in the second book, Audrey talks about a headless ghost that rides a horse through Kanyaka ruins. Well, somebody told me they saw that with their own eyes so when I was a teenager I would duck down in the back of the car and not look out when we drove past those ruins. But I also hunted down the few books that have been written about Beltana in antiquarian bookstores and on the Net and bought them. And I read a lot of books about life in the Outback in the late 20s and early 30s. The Myrtle Rose White books and others gave me a real feeling for the atmosphere. I also visited museums and looked at exhibitions.

LH: How did you modify your language when writing to give the book an authentic style, so we would believe it was the world of a young Australian girl of seventy odd years ago?

CH: I tried to avoid modern sayings. And when I wasn't sure, I checked with books of Australian slang or sayings to make sure that they were really in use before 1930. But I have written about other times before, including 1929, and several set in the late 1800s. I find it helps to seep myself in writing of the time to get the feel of it. And I have children's books written many years ago in my collection that I can read. My family, especially my dad, have lots of Australian expressions that are quite witty and make me



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laugh. So I have used many of these, too, as well as books like Australia Through Time give a certain year, then list all the important things that happened.

LH: Audrey of the Outback gives a touching picture of rural life in a simpler but tougher time. What do you hope kids will take with them after they've read the book?

CH: Firstly, whatever they want to take away from it. I firmly believe that the books we enjoy most are those that fulfil some longing in ourselves. And that differs from person to person.

As for me, I feel that a life without imagination and stories would be utterly bleak. I need stories almost as much as I need food and water.

I hope readers of all ages will love Audrey as I do, feel confused when she does and express joy at the same time. If readers feel what Audrey feels, then I have succeeded.

Stories cross time. So even though Audrey Barlow lived in 1930 a connection can still be made from a character to a reader, from one heart to another.

LH: Writing a story is a journey for the writer, especially an emotional one. What do you think you gained by writing about Audrey, her brothers and the down-to-earth, wise adults in her life?

CH: That we can be more than the sum of our parts. That many of us, myself included, don't always know how much we are capable of doing. And that there are things on the edge of our vision and buried deep inside us that are far greater than everyday ordinariness. Audrey is a little girl living in a harsh landscape, miles from anywhere, her family are poor, and yet, Audrey is not ordinary. No-one is.