

Miles Franklin Goes to the Show

At this time of year literary circles buzz with news of two of the nation's most prestigious literary gongs – the Miles Franklin Award and the Stella Prize. Both are named in honour of the famous author of *My Brilliant Career*, who so vividly chronicled Australian country life. One of Franklin's little-known novels was a children's story set at the Show, but it's not the only work of fiction about the Sydney Royal.

When Stella Maria Miles Franklin (1879-1954) turned her attention to the Sydney Show as a subject, it was its egalitarian nature that appealed. With everyone's normal routines turned topsy for its duration, in its magical spell all social types happily mixed:

[The Show] is a family affair of hampers and dilly-bags, packed with sandwiches and cakes and fruit, supplemented with bottles of pop or thermoses of tea, and a family consists of everyone from great-grandpa to the baby, and every class from the king to the convict. Every Easter, all the families, from the Governor-General's to the general slavery's, flock around in exhausting gregariousness.

Whoops, from Woop Woop, come to make whoopee in the wood-chopping and sheaf-tossing and sheep-dog contests, and to marvel at the ignorance of the townies, who don't know a Hereford from an Ayreshire, a come-back from a merino, or a stringy-bark from a mulga. The wallops, from Woolloomooloo, look on at them with a grin of superiority and the hope of pickings.

Writers have always known that temporarily disrupted worlds like this make good settings for books – especially children's books – because characters can accidentally find themselves with an agency they might not normally have. Miles Franklin first began tinkering with the idea of a Show-based children's novel in 1940, but the project stalled when the Second World War broke out. For several years the Show closed down, and publishing activities were curtailed while the nation struggled with other priorities.

Franklin's usual financial difficulties were exacerbated during wartime, so when peace came and she returned to the book, she hoped it would be a money-spinner.

Her publisher was optimistic: the pairing of Australia's most famous writer with one of its favourite institutions should guarantee success.

When the Show finally reopened in

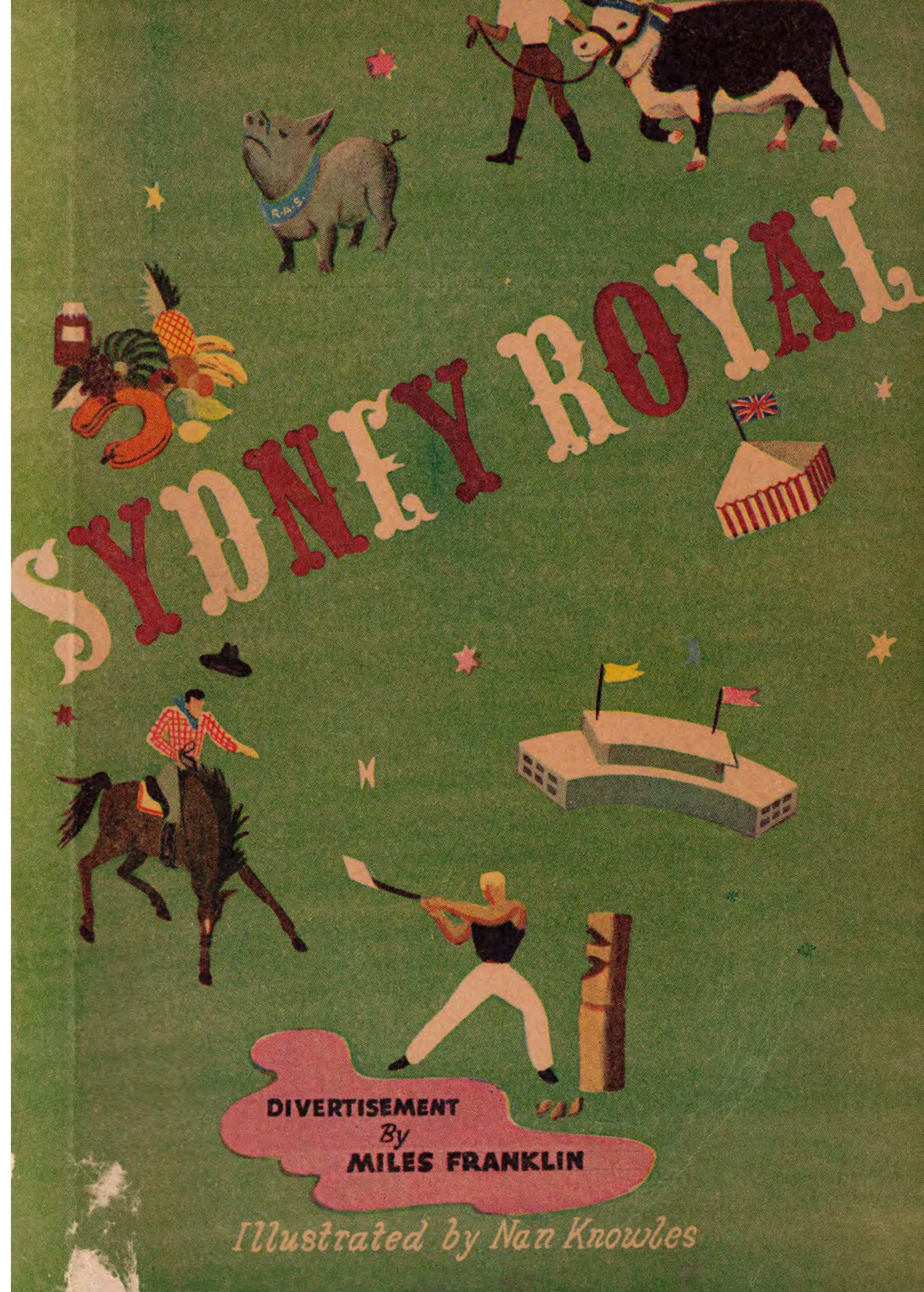
1947, Sydney Royal was ready and available for purchase on the ground. Widely advertised as 'a rich entertainment, spiced with humour, fantasy and drama,' it was aimed at readers under 16 years of age, but spruiked as a gift suitable for young and old alike.

Styled as something of a fairy tale, 'set in an age of Once Upon a Time', the story centres around two young women: Rosalie, the governor's daughter; and Queenie, a champion rider who is the illegitimate daughter of a fortune teller. Both girls are unwittingly in love with the same man. It's a case of mixed-up identities and amnesia, and it all gets played out against the backdrop of the Show, with carnival folks and a cast of kids helping out along the way.

In truth it's an uneven book, although to be fair, this may partially be the publisher's fault. Franklin is said to have disagreed furiously with some of their decisions.

Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin was born in 1879 in Talbingo, a small town at the edge of the Snowy Mountains

WORDS VICKI HASTRICH





Dora Birtles was born in 1903 in Wickham, Newcastle, before moving to the city in 1919 to study teaching at Sydney University

Its best passages are those that describe social attitudes to the Show, many of which remain familiar:

A mass of humanity, over-heated, over-fed, hungry for companionship and diversion, grumbled about the Show being the same old thing year after year, but if one feature were absent it was mourned... Overgrown and overblown, its patrons loved it still the same. It returned each year like summer and the orchard's harvest. It was fixed in their lives since infancy; it was part of them. Ever new to the children, it was a super playground to occupy them during the parental ordeal of the school holidays. Good old Sydney Royal!

Correspondence proves that Franklin did her due diligence, checking Show facts and the historical background of the RAS with her friend, Tom Mutch. Mutch was a journalist and a well-known historian, who had written papers on the subject of the RAS. (During a stint as a Labor politician and minister for

education, he'd been responsible for the establishment of Yanco Agricultural College.) But Franklin had plenty of personal experience to draw on too. As her diary entries attest, after a period of living overseas, she became a regular attendee at the Show. Sitting up in the Coronation Stand, she watched the ring events for hours.

In *Sydney Royal*, Miles Franklin captures the glorious muddle of the Show, but it was another children's novel, written by her friend Dora Birtles and published two years later, that gives a more intimate and informative picture of the Show and showing.

Called *Bonza the Bull*, the story revolves around a widow's decision to let her young son, Chris, take a bull to exhibit at the Show. They hope to win a ribbon, thus ensuring a better price for the beast at the sales. Accompanying Chris on the journey is his Aboriginal friend, Nobby, the station manager's son.

They are lovely responsible kids, and the adults hover on the margins, unable for one reason or another to take over the job themselves, but monitoring the children's progress.

Bonza is boarded onto the special Show train, and from then on everything to do with caring for the animal and preparing it for judging is described in thorough detail. Disaster nearly strikes when Bonza blows up as the result of a dirty trick, but he recovers in time to take the broad ribbon and pride of place in the Grand Parade. The bull fetches a record price at auction and the farm's future is secured.

Dora Birtles (1903-1992) was 20 years younger than Franklin, and it shows in the writing. Hers is the more modern book, with a cleaner style more suited to young post-war readers. Both women were socially progressive for their times, but Birtles' book is more ambitious. Race is a major theme. Towards the end of the novel, Nobby's father, Sep, takes him to La Perouse to meet Aboriginal elders. Recognising that Nobby's cultural education is important and must continue, his initiation is planned for the following Easter holidays (putting a very

different spin on the 'country coming to the city' trope of the Show). There is the implication that initiation will equip Nobby for a better future. Perhaps he could become a champion wood-chopper, a champion buckjumper or boxer, his father says.

Nobby replies that he wants to be an engineer.

"Good for that too," says Sep. Then he thinks for a moment before adding: "Maybe."

Though Dora Birtles clearly wishes for a better future for Nobby (and all Australians, because she opens up the possibility of the white boy learning something of Aboriginal culture too), Sep's hesitation shows an understanding of the more likely reality. In the end, everything is tied up neatly for the white boy Chris, but that shadow is left hanging over Nobby.

Dreams of success are a feature of a more recent show novel, *Foal's Bread* by Gillian Mears, which is set in roughly the same era as Birtles' and Franklin's offerings.

In Mears' novel, Roley and Noey Nancarrow are between-the-wars champions of the high-jump circuit. They live on a grubbed-out farm on the

Gillian Mears was born in Lismore in 1964, and grew up in Grafton, living in the old ferryman's cottage on the banks of the Clarence River

New South Wales north coast and for most of the novel their glory days are over. After the war, it is their daughter Lainey who aspires to put the Nancarrow name back in the record books. Family triumphs at the Sydney Show are mentioned, but it's the local shows which are most thoroughly and lovingly described.

Gillian Mears (1964-2016) grew up around horses and was a fanatical rider herself before she was struck down with multiple sclerosis. Her knowledge and deep love of the horse world is the life-blood that flows through the book. *Foal's Bread* is a dark story about hope and defeat and was Mears last. In 2012 it was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award.

The now-famous Miles Franklin Award was inaugurated in 1957. Before her death, Franklin secretly scrimped and saved to build the nest egg that would finance the prize. Sadly, the sales of her *Sydney Royal* book were less than

spectacular, so wouldn't have contributed much.

By the terms of her will, the award is for the novel of the year that is 'of the highest literary merit' and which presents 'Australian Life in any of its phases'.

Franklin knew firsthand of the financial hardships that writers face, and the prize would certainly help to ease that burden for winners, but her main aim was to encourage and promote Australian literature. Our unique way of seeing the world, and our unique stories, deserved more attention and respect, she believed, both at home and abroad.

Reward for excellence and innovation has long been the mantra of the RAS.

It's just another Show fiction, but could it be that as Miles Franklin watched the handing out of prestigious trophies from her perch in the Coronation Stand, she was inspired to come up with the idea of a prize of her own? ■