

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host Allison Tyra and today I'm joined by Dr. Rachel Franks. Dr. Franks is the coordinator of scholarship at the State Library of New South Wales, and she joins us today to talk about one of Australia's literary legends, Miles Franklin.

Now, Dr. Franks, Miles Franklin's best known work, *My Brilliant Career* was published in 1901 when she was only 21 years old, and it was made into a film in 1979 starring the incomparable Judy Davis directed by the fantastic Gillian Armstrong. Why do you think that this story holds up so well for modern audiences, given you know that it was published so long ago?

RF: I think with this particular novel, she had impeccable timing. And she is also, in her own right, she is an exceptional writer. She has a great grasp of language. She knows what a good story is. But with this particular work, she really encapsulates this whole idea of the new woman. And this is something that we talk about quite often, but at this particular point in time, 1901, the new woman really was you know, it's a proper noun, we've capitalized New and we've capitalized Woman. It's so important at this turn of the century moment, because it's not just about women having a bit more of a voice and lobbying to have the right to vote. Women are also wanting to do different things with their lives. They want to work and they want to be on committees and they want to make decisions about their communities. They want to go to the pub and they want to go dancing. It's all of this sort of thing. And I think too the new woman was, in concept at least, perhaps not as well articulated or as obviously seen in the real world, but the concept of it was classless. It wasn't just rights for the leisured elite. It was rights for all women, no matter how they spoke or how they dressed or where they had come from. Everybody, every female was entitled to this sense of equality and there was some hope with that, that it could be realized.

AT: And so for anyone who doesn't know the story, I feel like she put a lot of herself into the main character. If you want to tell us a little bit about Miles Franklin's background and a little bit about the main character and story of *My Brilliant Career*.

RF: So we have Miles Franklin, she's writing under an androgynous names, so she was very careful. She talked about pseudonyms quite a lot throughout her literary career, and she used them herself, with varying levels of success. So this woman, Stella Maria Sara Miles Franklin's quite a mouthful, so she was always Stella to her family and her closest friends but she was Miles to her readers and she picked that specifically because she might sound a little bit like a bloke, right? And so therefore, it's not as overtly autobiographical as now looking back on it, we can see the parallels between Stella and then Sybil in the book. And it is really all about this country girl, if you like, because she was still very, very young. Both the character in the book and as the writer of the book, as you mentioned in your opening, she's really a teenager when she's writing this story. And she is, also important to Franklin, a girl of the bush. So it's really this grand story of this young girl growing into womanhood in regional Australia and discovering herself and while she doesn't always know exactly what it is that she wants, she knows that often the circumstances she's experiencing is not it. So she might be pursued by you know, the very handsome lad from not too far away. In the film, of course, it was Sam Neill looking incredibly young and very, very gorgeous. And about her rejection of that, because while it was a very natural path for women to take advantage of and to go down at that time, she knew she wanted something else. And while romance may have been a little bit tantalizing, she wanted to be different and part of that was to be a writer. And one of the really interesting things about this book is if you look at the title, *My Brilliant Career*, it sounds almost egotistical, doesn't it? You know, like who gets to claim that when you start writing your sort of fabricated autobiography at 19. Like, that's just outrageous. But the original manuscript of it, the title of the book, after the word brilliant, there were two brackets and a question mark: **My Brilliant Career (?)**. So she was questioning if she was going to have a brilliant career. But of course, by the time that was published in Scotland in 1901, they hadn't quite gotten up to 1980s postmodernism. They weren't doing whole bunches of brackets in the middle of sentences like that. It was just, it was almost too modern for a modern book. And so we have this kind of doubt within the text, and within Franklin herself as she's writing and imagining what her

life might be like, and that we lose some of that in the title which I think is a little bit sad. I think it's a little bit unfortunate. It does her a disservice. And you know, if you've ever written something, what is it - get your name right. And please get the name of my book right too, so I do feel sorry for her every time I see a cover of that book.

AT: You would think at least in later publications, they could have changed it. So even though My Brilliant Career sold more than 2,100 copies in the first two years, she actually had trouble getting another book published, including when she wrote a sequel, and then when she was able to get a romance novel published in 1909, so that's eight years later. It was called Some Everyday Folk and Dawn and it ended up being a flop. So she didn't publish anything else under her own name for more than 20 years. And her 1915 Net of Circumstance was also unsuccessful. So do we know what happened there? Because it seems like she went from this big success at a quite young age, and then nothing.

RF: There seems to be this idea of a curse for debut authors and massive, massive success. And how do you possibly live up to that? But I think for Franklin, there's something more complicated at play. And as My Brilliant Career was perfectly timed, I think most of her other books are just slightly out of sequence. By the time she publishes them, they either feel too old fashioned, or they're again still too model and people aren't quite ready for them yet. So some of her family sagas, for example, and some of her romance novels really are a little bit too quaint, for a world that is rapidly changing. So women are going into the workforce, women are voting. Not all over the Western world, but they are increasingly being allowed to vote, being allowed to stand for parliament, and some of her material just speaks too closely to a much earlier time and doesn't reflect the ambition and the progress that people could see in My Brilliant Career, and that's sort of hopeful, you know, "we're women. We're here, we're going to go out there and draw this great stuff," right, and have hopes and dreams. Some of the other things that she was writing were a little bit more conservative. And at the other end of that scale, when she is writing under her own name, as she did for Bring the Monkey in 1933, which is her only crime novel, and I think quite adorable, but it too was a bit of a commercial failure. Because, without giving too much of the plot away in case you haven't read it, because I do suggest it's a fun little way to go out and this is so outrageous. This is great. But a lot of people really didn't like it at the time. It didn't sell well. The critics were a bit, meh we don't like this, because she has a war hero tied up in villainy of this crime story. And you go look at all the other popular women writers of the time, you know, like crime fiction between the two World Wars really is the domain of women and Miles Franklin should have slipped straight in with that cohort of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham. She should have been there with those women. But when those women pitched ex-servicemen in their books, they were slightly damaged, but certainly much more heroic. You know, the world wasn't quite ready to see returned servicemen as possibly not the good guys that everybody still wanted to believe, and certainly all the propaganda had conditioned a society to to believe and to hold on, to try and justify all this conscience people in the fallout of it. So I think she only got her timing right just once. Which is disappointing

AT: Because I feel like a lot of those works like you said, you know, this crime novel - if you read it decades later, it's still a good book.

RF: And she's not lived long enough to see things come full circle, to see either readers quite comfortable with things that challenges what the script was, at the time these books came out, what those social scripts were, and also just not edgy enough to capture that nostalgia market either. So when she does the sentimental stuff, it's kind of too close to when that type of lifestyle was much admired and much sought after. And every now and then she'll do something and you think, "oh, Miles, you can't have a woman say that. What are you doing?" So there are these little things that kind of disrupt her narratives, and I think that we need a little bit of time and a little bit of opportunity to look back at her whole corpus of work, and to see her as a whole. She really is, in my view, and of course, you know, different readers will get different things out of her. But I think she's best

enjoyed as a body of work, as a series of messages and achievements, and thinking about between the books that were published, what she did in between and admiring her tenacity and the sheer volume of stuff that she was able to produce. The woman was a machine. She was amazing.

AT: So even when she couldn't get things published after My Brilliant Career, she was working as a journalist, but I think she wasn't making enough to support herself. She had to move back in with her parents, which you know, no one in their 20s necessarily likes doing. And so she moved to the US in 1906 and started working for the National Women's Trade Union League in Chicago. So, do you know much about that period of her life?

RF: She was incredibly hard working. So she was hard working as a writer and I always respected her for that. But she was also hard working at her day job. And she did a whole bunch of stuff. She was involved in strike actions. She did a lot of secretarial work. So as a writer, she could type and she could type fast. So she was doing that sort of similar type of labor, if you like during the day, and she would exploit her literary skills. She was doing the journalism as you mentioned. She's also helping to write campaign materials to help women get better wages, better working conditions. She's doing a lot of newsletter work, but the hours that she does during this period are extraordinary. It's sort of, you think about it and I sort of think, she's doing all of this and she's doing it all on a manual typewriter. You know, that's physical work as well as that mental and emotional work that she's doing. So I think her American year were quite good for her. She made a lot of friends. She made a lot of contacts. She saw the world quite differently. So the idea that perhaps capitalism was under a bit more of a microscope over there at that period in time, and she had this, you know, class warfare and the different layers of the class system, all converging, because there were so many women who were feminists first before they were working class or just ridiculously wealthy.

AT: And so she was in the US for, I think about nine years, before moving to England in 1915, where she lived until 1932. And she had a couple of different experiences, such as serving as a cook for the Scottish Women's Hospital in Greece in 1917.

RF: So of course, you know, you sort of think of Miles Franklin, and you think of her as very much that girl from the bush that she was through her alter ego in My Brilliant Career, but she was incredibly well-traveled for a woman of that period of time. She'd been to many places in Australia, you know, she's off to Macedonia, and she's off to the US and UK, which not might be quite so unusual, but certainly going into continental Europe, especially during the war, and you can just imagine her. She's forthright and I can just imagine her as being - bossy's an unattractive word because it's often applied to women as a negative. But she would have been very much in control, and very social and outgoing and all of the things that we see some of her women as portrayed in some of her books, you know, quite this adventurous spirit but at the same time, she was quite traumatized by war. She was traumatized by what she saw even though she was reasonably removed from the frontlines. She was very greatly impacted, I believe, by the scars on people's faces, and not necessarily those physical scars. But just that when you look at somebody who has truly suffered, and you see that etched on their face, and she became quite a pacifist as a result of her experiences of that.

AT: And she seems to have struggled with depression throughout much of her life, and I wonder how much of that is because she does seem like someone who cares a great deal, not just about, you know, her own work and wanting to be recognized for her skills as a writer, but someone who throws herself into causes and sees the suffering that those causes are about. So I'm wondering if that's maybe why she had so many issues with depression even when you know, she was succeeding and she did have what she recognized as a good life.

RF: I think there would have been a level of exhaustion with her investment in causes and in people. So chatting a little bit today about workplace reform, especially focused on improving women's working lives, but she was also very interested in political rights and having a political voice, basic opportunities like housing

education for women. So these are huge issues. And she was certainly working with women that gave her encouragement that something could be done. So you're not just sort of turning up, you know, third Tuesday of the month, then giving an hour and hoping that something might happen in a few years' time. She's giving hours and hours of paid and unpaid labor to these causes. And she is also extraordinarily loyal to her friends. Now, I don't know how many friends most people have but you know, like say you've got a core group of about 10. And then we've got, you know, next level friends and you know, casual acquaintances, and then the people that you see and try and squash everybody in December before Christmas, right? So she actually keeps all of her friends close. And there are hundreds of them. I don't even know how she kept track of everybody. But she's constantly writing letters and receiving letters and asking about their children and asking about their work and what they're up to. And she calls them her congenials. So they are an extended family and she did commit herself to these friendships. Many of us will experience friends that come in and go out of our lives depending on where we are and where we're working and what causes we're associated with, but she's tended to hang on to them, even if her friends did something quite shameful. You know, suddenly one pops up as a bit of a right-wing fascist and she will remain loyal to the person that she first met and developed a friendship with, sometimes to her detriment. She would sometimes be criticized, why are you still talking to that person? And she would just say, "they are my friend" or she would find eccentric people and she'd have something in common with them. And if they loved Australia, and they loved reading and/or writing, it was almost like often that was good enough for her. I mean, don't get me wrong. There are some people that she really didn't like, and she could hold a grudge. She was extraordinary, as far as holding a grudge, but she was a much better friend than I think many people may have deserved.

AT: And it's interesting that you mentioned both loyalty to people, but you also mentioned if this was someone who loved Australia, because she for all her international travels, she was a firm believer that literature was rooted in the culture of the writer and one of her friends called this her, quote "bias offensively Australian." And she was very critical of the idea that Australians shouldn't write about Australian experiences if they wanted to be considered literary.

RF: Well, there was this idea, the cultural cringe is not new. And some Australian writers still feel that there is a bit of this if they they try and go overseas. There are movements that are if you want to go overseas and you're from Australia or New Zealand, or the first thing you have to do is make sure you lose that accent, you know, blending, you know, be English, be whatever. And in many ways, it's a loss of identity. And a lot of women will still do this today. You know, they'll change the way they present themselves, or dress or speak or how they might voice an opinion or withhold one, more crucially, in an effort to fit in, and she really wasn't about fitting in. She was about "let's go forward like a freight train and carve out a space. And she held on to that right until the very end. There's this fabulous quote from her final years. She went over to Perth in Western Australia to give a series of lectures and she would start each one, "I stand before you an illiterate to lecture to you on a subject that doesn't exist." And that's her sort of acknowledging that she didn't have a university education. So she potentially wasn't as well-positioned or didn't have the same amount of street credibility that potentially, you know, the full professor of English literature might have had. But she didn't care so much because she knew what a good story was. And she knew specifically what a good Australian story was. And she was trying to give people confidence to tell those stories. And, you know, sure, bang on about eucalyptus trees and bang on about the bush and weather patterns and all this stuff that can make us, if you're Australian, think of home, or if you're not Australian, actually have a little bit of literary tourism. And see Australia as a place that is slightly different in, you know, landscape and environment and social contexts, but the core issues of what it means to be human in a place, any place, are kinda universal, right? And so I think that her ambition on that front, I sort of think of her as the first like grand by Australia campaigner, you know, she had the little kanga logo sort of flipping about everywhere. Saying no no, buy Australian books, read Australian material. And it was a really great cause because not only did it benefit Australian literature, but it benefits all literatures to see these

differences of place and habitual ways of facing particular problems that might be common, but might also have very different solutions.

AT: And she also put her money where her mouth was, so to speak, when she established the Miles Franklin Literary Award for novels and plays. And the criteria was that they have to show Australian life in any of its phases, and it's now considered Australia's highest literary honor.

RF: It is indeed. So the Miles Franklin Literary Award is, even to be shortlisted is considered, "Oh, wow." You know, like, it's just fantastic. And it was so important to her. She squirreled away literally every penny that she could, you know, to the point where her next door neighbors where she lived in Sydney's Carlton would throw semi-stale bread over the back fence for her chooks. And if it didn't have too much mold on it, she'd pick it up and turn it into toast, because everything she could save, she could put into this bequest, into what was at the time, the most generous pool of money dedicated to not so much rewarding, although to some people, it certainly was a reward, but a broader recognition of Australian writing. And you know, you look at some of the people that have won that prize since, you know, it's come through and usually without fail, everybody says it has changed their life. You know, it's so much easier to pitch their next book or to ask if they can go to a bookstore and sign copies of their work. It just just, you know, and it does, it impacts how their books sales go, you know, people trust her, and the legacy of how that award is run. And the judges that are appointed and how seriously everybody takes it because people realize what she sacrificed to establish it. And there's been some controversial titles over the years. But I think that kind of gets exciting. It's a bit like the Archibald Prize right, you need something a little bit different every now and then, but it keeps it in the conversation. So even if she herself may not have read a book or finished it, the idea that everybody's out and about and talking about Australian stories, I think would have made her quite happy.

AT: You mentioned earlier that she used a lot of pseudonyms; the most successful of those was Brent of Bin Bin. She published six novels of Australian country life under that name from 1928 to 1956. And it's truly impressive to me just how shamelessly Franklin herself promoted Brent, even like praising him in her own diaries as though they were different people. Like she even chaired a meeting of the Fellowship of Australian Writers in 1941 where the discussion included Brent's identity.

*RF: For all of her flaws, and you know, I like her a lot. So my bias is is there, I declare that but she could be a prickly little character and she could sometimes say things that you think, "oh doll, don't say that, that's awful." But she was also incredibly playful. And so she had this entire system around protecting this pseudonym above all, of her others, and she had heaps. She shipped stuff off and his novels and his plays and his articles. And she was going to keep it secret initially just for 12 months, but then she decided, yeah, how long can I pull this off? And even though the rumors were kind of strong, it wasn't definitively proven that Brent was her until after she had passed away. And she really benefited from this because normally a new novel comes out, "Miles Franklin just released, you know, *Bring the Monkey*, 1933, available now in bookshops." You know, that's sort of how book releases were publicized. But every time she released something, or Brent of Bin Bin released something, there was like half a page of coverage in the newspaper. Because suddenly they're going back and they're saying, "Oh, who wrote this? Was it Miles Franklin?" Like she dedicates one of the books to MF. Like, really? So people start speculating about "who that is? It isn't her and somebody else? Oh, no, it's maybe Miles's friend - so they have the same friend? Oh no, it's Miles." It's like she must have just been sitting in the lounge room, devouring all this stuff and thinking how long can I string this out? Because it's good for book sales, a little bit of free publicity and a little bit of controversy. And I really, I really quite like that. And they're kind of cutesy novels as well. They possibly feel a little bit old fashioned now, but if you if you read them as a set, I mean six of them, that's a lot of that's a lot of reading to do. But if you have all this context, and as I was sort of alluding to earlier, if you look back and you read Franklin and think of all of her work, and all of her*

efforts to promote her work, there are quite a few little moments of joy in these books. And it's kind of fun to sort of think about how much she can get away with - really, who wouldn't want to pull that off?

AT: She was offered a Queen's honor in 1937 and she rejected it but I couldn't find anything about why and what happened there. Do you know anything?

RF: So this is kind of interesting. So this goes into Miles Franklin as a patriot, so she really could see the potential of Australia. She acknowledged that we didn't get everything right. But she loved her country very much. And it also goes back to this idea that she can hold a grudge. So if you look at the patriotism side of this argument, so it's 1937, and she's offered an Order of the British Empire, as you say, or an OBE for short. And it's one of the honors, that had a little bit of a bad reputation. So very many of them were given out during the First World War, and many were given to people who had not served on the front line, you know, sort of safely back at home in war rooms, eating ham sandwiches, having a cup of tea. So it had been renamed by people who like to use a lot of slang from the Order of the British Empire to Other Buggers' Efforts. So she wasn't quite sure about the negative connotations of this particular post nominal. I mean, she liked recognition, she liked fame, albeit in sort of measured doses. She didn't like too much attention all at once. So this would have been quite tempting for her. But what really upset her was that Mary Gilmore, sort of a contemporary writer of Franklin, Franklin described her as a slipshod poet and Mary Gilmore have been given a damehood, which is much higher up that sort of the scale, when you're talking about a damehood is really good, whereas an OBE is kind of a entry-level encouragement award. And she wasn't having any of that, "if they want to give me something, I want to be a dame too, thanks very much." But of course, once you knock one of these things back, they're not always very keen to give you a second go. So she could have possibly taken the OBE and then lobbied for an upgrade in about 10 or 15 years time, eventually made it to dame, but she had a little bit of a hissy fit, and she declined. But I love her for that.

AT: But I have to say, having a damehood does not fit with my personal image of her brand.

RF: No, not really. Although I think that she might have been one of these people that had it and just pulled it out when she really needed it and wasn't a daily accessory. It was just something for special occasions. But I do think that she would have, for someone who had so much rejection in her life. So you were talking earlier about, you know, working as a journalist and doing all these jobs here at home in Australia, across America, you know, across England, but she's also going home, and, you know, she'll do 10 hours and then she'll go home, and she'll do another five or six, typing out a play, to get knocked back, trying to modernize the play, changing all the character names, changing the setting. So she's a woman who is receiving a rejection almost every week. No one wants to publish stuff. The big money was in plays and being able to sell your play and you know, be on the boards in you know, the West End or on Broadway, somewhere really fabulous. You know, a bit like today, writers want to sell the film rights or at least the TV rights. Not very many of us get to do that. But she really was up against it. There was so much competition and her plays like many of her other materials, often didn't quite have the right date stamp on them. Didn't have the right combination for the right theater or the right audience. So I think even though she may have thought a damehood slightly pompous, like most Australians do, we're kind of a little bit skeptical about these sorts of things. I think, what lay behind that, and that level of public recognition would have been quite a reassurance to her that in amongst what she would have thought of as so many failures, and so many, thank you but no thank you letters, which really would have been incredibly disheartening. I think that could have made some of it not quite as stinging that, you know, she was potentially not the right person, for this particular thing, or her writing didn't fit quite into what one other person was trying to do, whether it was publish or promote. But as a whole, she was recognized for her, her broader efforts, her writing but also her promotion of Australian literature. And I think too that it's a very different time. You know, pre-1950s. Australia is a little bit more more consistently in support of the monarchy. So to be recognized by the Crown, this little girl from this tiny country town in the middle of nowhere, that still

most people in England would never have heard of, I think, I think she would have liked that aspect of that type of award.

AT: And so instead, she just founded Australia's greatest literary award.

RF: Yeah. And you know, like, even today, there are quite a few people, she is well known, her name is well known, but I don't know if she is, as well known as potentially people who read a lot or read a lot of Australian literature might be familiar with her and her work and some of the key moments in her life because every now and then I'm still asked, "Oh, you know, it's a man." It's like, "well, no, she'd like you to think she was a bloke but she wasn't." You know, Henry Lawson actually gave that away his original introduction to *My Brilliant Career*. He wasn't supposed to reveal her gender, but he did because, you know, who trusts a poet that's had too many drinks to write your introduction, right. But anyway, he did help her get that published. But the fact that he betrayed her confidence and put that into print that which she prized most dearly at that point, and that which she had pinned much of her imagined success on, that, you know, perhaps people would think it was a male who was writing about these female experiences, and therefore, the female experience was inherently valuable, not just because another woman was saying that it was, but there was this sort of, again, going back into this quite complex construction of recognition and how you want to be recognized and what that means and how it impacts your current project, but also future projects. And, you know, even from a very young age, she's thinking, Australian storytelling quite broadly. I mean, obviously, you know, you see moments and it's really all about her, but she does keep coming back to these, what she would call an indigenous literature, which is not really a term we can use now. We use indigenous to refer specifically to storytelling and histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, but she was you know, very much this homegrown, people who are of Australia and have lived these Australian experiences. In many ways, we're still working out who we were, I mean, some of us still are, you know, as individuals and as a society and you know, can we be better and can we do this and what would that look like if we changed? You know, all of that stuff that we've taken for granted and just sort of sat back and said, "Oh, well, yeah, that's the way it is." So she is always thinking to a certain point of the bigger picture.

AT: And so she did, after her international travel, she did move back to Sydney when she was 53. So this is 1932. And she had some success with *Old Blastus of Bandicoot* in 1931, and *Bring Back the Monkey* in 1933. But it seems like her big comeback was 1936 with *All That Swagger*.

RF: Yeah. So this is, you know, it's a doorstop. If you get your hands on it, like it's really hefty. And it's again, it's great family saga. There's a lot of bush stuff in there. But she wins a prize for that, she wins the S. H. Prior Memorial Prize. And, you know, it gets lots of good reviews, it sells well. And it gives her some breathing space. I think you know, there's this idea that perhaps she was only ever going to have that one book and to have it so young. You know, that's a lot of decades to feel that you haven't kept going, that you haven't been able to meet your own standard again. But, you know, I think *Bring the Monkey*'s possibly her best book after *My Brilliant Career*. That might be a personal preference for crime fiction, but I think that it's it's a good mystery. It's very funny. There's just the right amount of snark and sarcasm. It's kind of adorable. I really like it a lot.

AT: So our key takeaway here is, go read *Bring the Monkey*.

RF: Yeah, and it's much shorter than the other books. And it focuses on one event, you know, don't have the multi-generational stuff and you're trying to keep track of who's with who and who's doing what, all that sort of stuff. You've got two strong women leads, you've got one monkey, a couple of crimes. It's easy to get a handle on and there's just all these really quite delightful asides, she picks on everybody. She picks on the class system, she picks on blokes, she picks on the Americans, she picks on writers. You know, she sort of shows that she can hold a universal grudge, but she also has quite a sophisticated sense of humor so she's very, you

know, she can get away with it. There's quite a playfulness around that. And some of it is specifically to draw attention to issues that she's passionate about, like the class system or women not being recognized for their efforts and their intelligence. But some of it is just to have a bit of a laugh, I think, which is quite incredible when you think of, as you were talking about before. A woman who's spent a lot of her life, exhausted, suffering from ill health, and often quite depressed, that she still has these little sparks, little lightning shots that bring absolute joy, and that is her in a nutshell perhaps. That is the complexity and the contradiction and the occasional awkwardness and the beauty of that is Miles Franklin.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.