

***India Dark* by Kirsty Murray**

The evocative pen of Kirsty Murray has once again delivered a captivating story, one filled with heartbreak and suspense. Set in the early twentieth century, Poesy, at just thirteen, becomes enamoured by her friend Tilly's enthusiastic talk of travel. Successful in her audition for Percival's Lilliputian Opera Company, it takes little more than the promise of monthly payments of 30 shilling to her family for her mother to sign a two year contract which seals her daughter's fate. Entrusted to the care of just a few adults, Poesy and 28 other child performers, all aged between 7 and 18, set sail in 1909 upon a voyage that is to change their lives forever. The unfathomable truth that their journey is to take them to India, not America, unfolds only once they are far out to sea.

Life aboard the boat is relentless. Cramped conditions, lengthy rehearsals, searing heat and diabolical disease are a backdrop to the forging of unlikely friendships which endure jealousy, fighting and distrust. Arthur Percival, Manager and Musical Director of the Lilliputians and dubbed 'Butcher' by the child performers, is a cruel and controlling figure who beats, smacks, humiliates, criticizes and belittles the children constantly. In the cooped-up conditions of the children's home aboard the boat, trains and hotels for months on end, his wish is their command. Murray's deft penmanship ensures that characters leap from the pages. Stench, misery and squalor of both the disease-riddled ship and the towns and cities of India are so believable, so real and so convincing that we feel we are living and breathing the same air as the children. Based on the true story of a troupe of travelling child performers, Murray engages her audience, weaving a credible story around historical fact, sharing with us a glimpse of hardships endured by children a century ago.

Historical Fiction could have no better writer than Kirsty Murray. A well deserved honour is the Saturday Age newspaper's "Pick of the Week" (August 21st, 2010)

Bev Novak, King David School, VIC

This novel revolves around the story of a troupe of child actors in the Lilliputian acting company in the early 1900s. The actors embark on a world tour taking them through South East Asia. What starts out being a chance for freedom and adventure for Poesy Swift ends up being filled with secrets and personal contentions. The novel is told through the parallel perspectives of Poesy and Tilly as the troupe journey through exotic locations. The troupe increasingly grows discontented with their manager's heavy-handed approach and plan a rebellion against him. The novel effectively explores issues associated with lies, betrayal, secrets and friendship and could raise debates within the classroom. This is a very engaging read either as a class text or as part of a wide reading unit.

Gersha Shteyman, Kesser Torah College, NSW

India Dark is based on the true story of Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company. Told through the eyes of Poesy Swift and Tilly Sweetrick, the story follows the troupe's journey to exotic locations, the tensions between troupe members, the growing dissatisfaction with Mr. Arthur Percival, friendships, betrayals, and eventually the collapse of the company.

India Dark would be suitable for Stage 4. In the English classroom, *India Dark* would work well in units that focus on narration, historical fiction, character and thematic studies. There's a variety of sources about Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company available on the Internet. After reading the novel, students could research the troupe and events that the novel is based on. Sections of *India Dark* could also be effective in stimulating class discussions and debates on children's rights and moral dilemmas.

India Dark could also be a useful resource across KLAs. It offers insights into Australia before World War I, India pre-independence and could also be used for mapping activities.

Lauren Sims, NSW

The Author's Note, as well as the front cover, tells us that this book is based on a true story and it's good to keep this fact in mind as one reads the novel. A quick look at Kirsty Murray's website reveals that more than half of her several published books have won or been shortlisted for awards. Many of them are following an historical theme and this new book seems a worthy accompaniment to its fellows.

The novel is written in 60 chapters, some of them just a couple of pages in length and the longest no more than seven, in the voices of Poesy Swift and Tilly Sweetrick, often demonstrating contrasting points of view regarding described events. Poesy, we learn, is just thirteen years of age when she joins the troupe of young performers traveling around the world under the watchful eye (or not!) of the adults who should be responsible for them.

This is the story not just of the troupe's adventures as they travel from Melbourne through the East Indies and to India but also of the unfolding of Poesy's understanding of just what is going on. In the course of the book she moves from being a sweet, naïve and trusting child to the realisation of horrors she wishes she hadn't come to know: "The truth that I had pushed away whenever it crept close to me. The terrible, ugly truth" (p.211).

I found the story becoming a little tedious, but lest the reader be tempted to give up, there are many chapter-ending enticers to perseverance: "One day, Mr Arthur would find out all about consequences" (p.57); "But then, Charlie was wrong. There was nothing right about what Ruby did next" (p.167); "we had to fight the urge to giggle. Later that evening, I realised there was nothing to laugh about" (p.203), etc.

There is a sex scene in this book. It's gently and tastefully described, nothing prurient, but it's a sex scene nonetheless. "I saw it all. The curve of her hip, as she opened her kimono, the way he covered her body with his own, the way she pulled the white shirt from his back" (p. 211). For this reason it will be a Senior High novel in our library, but not a book I think that needs to be omitted from a conservative collection altogether.

A comfortable-sized font, maps of South-East Asia (in the front) and India (in the back) and a helpful list of Anglo-Indian words complete this well-bound book.

Julie Davies, Sutherland Shire Christian School, NSW

India Dark is the tale of two young girls, thirteen-year-old Poesy Swift, who is desperate to get away from her mundane life in Melbourne, and Tilly Sweetrick, a charming but manipulative fifteen-year-old. Tilly persuades Poesy to audition for Percival's Lilliputian Opera Company, a company that tours overseas with child performers. It is the promise of tasting the good life in America that lures Poesy finally, but it is not to be when the company travels to the dark recesses of India instead.

With dwindling audiences and tension building between the troupe members, everything falls apart, culminating in a strike by the child performers. The fate of the troupe members and their quest to return home is determined by a court case in the High Court of Madras.

India Dark is an amazing historical novel by Kirsty Murray based on the true story of the final and disastrous world tour of Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company. Through the dual narrators, Tilly and Poesy, the reader witnesses alternative perspectives of the events that lead up to the strike. Who should be believed as the two "friends" grow increasingly apart?

Murray has a deft hand in exploring and writing about history, whatever the period - past or future. Her characters and settings transport the reader to a time that is so believable one can almost reach out and touch it. A dark, gritty novel that examines friendships and loyalties. Highly recommended.

Pia Butcher, VIC

If this story didn't come with the 'based on a true story' label, then you would dismiss what happened in it as a complete work of fiction, the incidents described seem so outrageous. *India Dark* is the story of the group of children in 1910 who made up the Lilliputians, a troupe of entertainers that toured the world. Their parents allowed these singing and dancing children to travel in the care of Arthur Perceval on the understanding they would be chaperoned, supervised

and taught lessons while performing and earning money. In reality, the children were not taught, were often treated harshly and were left to fight amongst themselves. After touring India, falling ill, not being paid and having a number of the troop sent home, those that remained took action to try to free themselves from Arthur and return home, and ended up in a middle of lawsuits and counterclaims.

The story is told from a dual perspective, which makes its construction interesting and different. Part of the story is presented through the eyes of Poesy, who begins the story as an innocent and ends up painfully aware of the ways of the world. The other perspective is from Tilly, who is more worldly-wise before embarking, and who schemes and plots her way to gain her 'freedom', though she is still in many ways a victim of circumstance. These contrasting narratives allow the events of the story to be looked at from different perspectives and would be ideal for a study of the impact of the narrator in a story.

Issues brought up by the events of the text include the idea of childhood and what rights a child has, what responsibilities an adult has towards children, and what constitutes exploitation. The text also lends itself to looking at bullying, friendship, loyalty, colonialism and family. Contrasting how the children were viewed and expected to behave by their parents and by the law in the past and in the present day would also be an interesting exercise.

This is a text that would lend itself to study by Year 9 and 10 students. Younger students might struggle with some of the language and ideas, and some of the concepts are for an older audience. *India Dark* is a rich text.

Anne Sim, Dromana Secondary College, Mornington Peninsula, Victoria

Once again Kirsty Murray weaves her magic in her novel *India Dark*. Based on the true story of the Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company, Murray uses two characters of Tilly Sweetrick and Poesy Swift to tell the story. Sweetrick, a seasoned performer and Swift, a newcomer to the company, flesh out the story which becomes so addictive that it's hard to put down.

Caught up in the romance of overseas travel and adventures, young Poesy quickly joins the troupe of Percival's Lilliputian Opera Company and ships off overseas. Her youth and naivety is contrasted with Tilly's sassiness and experience. Poesy quickly discovers that life in the Opera Company is not all as it seems and the thrill of the adventure quickly turns sour.

Based in the early 1900's, one can imagine how exciting it would be to leave your dull and drab life behind in search of adventure and the hope of earning a few pounds to help your parents back home. Even kids these days would jump at the chance to tour the world. The lure of adventure will always be too hard to ignore.

While this story is highly entertaining and interesting it also serves as an excellent way to engage young people in history. This novel could act as a springboard into further historical research, looking at issues of child labour, life in Australia in the 1900's, forms of travel, the state of the world in the 1900's, as well as the rule of the British Empire and India before independence.

The novel also looks at issues such as adolescence, friendship, betrayal, truth, and relationships. For the more dramatically inclined students, one could also research the forms of plays and skits that the troupe performed and look at presenting them or writing their own. Costumes and music could also be explored. With so many element in this novel that can be explored there is a huge chance that you will be able to engage even the most hard to inspire of students.

Nicole Chettle, Smithton High School, Tasmania

Just over 100 years ago there were Australian children's theatre troupes that travelled the world. The families of the children would benefit from regular payments and the children would get to see and perform around the world in the company of their peers and responsible adult guardians. Sounds like a wonderful opportunity, but what happens when it all starts to unravel? Enter Poesy Swift and Tilly Sweetrick who are part of the troupe on the ill-fated tour of 1909/10, who set out expecting to go to America and find themselves, through lack of funds and political circumstances outside of their control, in a less than accommodating India, with a manager who is losing control of the troupe and himself.

The story is told from the differing perspectives of these two teenage girls and provides not only an insight into the incidents that occurred, but an interesting look at the differences in human nature, character and experience of life; worthy of consideration and discussion. Kirsty Murray has a gift for creating strong characters and coupled with the historic and cultural detail, it makes for a compelling read. Recommended for Middle School students.

Debbie Williams, Mountain District Christian School, VIC

Based on a true story, *India Dark* is the tale of Percival's Lilliputian Opera Company tour of South East Asia and India in 1909 – 1910.

We start at the end, in 1910, with a court case in Madras: who is on trial and exactly what the charges are, are yet to be revealed, but we meet the two voices of the book, Tilly Sweetrick and Poesy Swift.

Each chapter is written from the viewpoint of either Tilly or Poesy and they take us back to Richmond, when Tilly first encourages Poesy to audition for a role in Percival's Lilliputian Opera Company run by Mr. Arthur Percival, through to all the drama that occurs on the tour to the ultimate conclusion.

Tilly and Poesy each have a slightly different interpretation of how events unfold, and as the reader, you are constantly wondering which story is the most truthful and who to really believe. Instead of the expected tour of America, the company goes to Indonesia, Malaysia and India. There are many problems: illness on the ship which keeps them from landing in Singapore, a show with a ventriloquist act that turns into a disaster because the local people think the dummy is a spirit, some of the older girls are sent back to Australia in disgrace for behaving inappropriately, there are financial difficulties with wages being withheld, and accommodation and transport are becoming of an increasingly poor standard. Mr Arthur starts drinking heavily and is taking out his frustration by mistreating the children.

Tilly has enough and tries to find a way of discrediting Mr. Arthur and getting home, but does she really understand the consequences of her actions, and will things really turn out the way she plans?

I enjoyed this book; it gives a good insight into what life was like in the early 1900's. I feel that any students from year 7 up, particularly girls, would enjoy this book.

Jan O'Sullivan, Library Technician, Mooroolbark, VIC

This text is based on a true story about Pollard's Lilliputian Opera Company, a troupe of young children who travelled from Melbourne to Bombay from 1909 – 1910 and then by steam train into the centre of India.

It is a story from the point of view of the young child performers, especially from the perspective of Poesy and Tilly. We trace their adventures from their struggling backgrounds in Melbourne, by ship to Surabaya and Batavia then Singapore, overland by steam train to Kula Lumpa and again by ship to Bombay and the Indian Continent.

We are taken not only on a physical journey with these children, but also on an emotional one. We feel for these young children as their manager, the 'butcher' as he becomes known by his charges, exploits them. They are poorly fed, clothed and accommodated and are often made to carry not only their own luggage but also the props for their shows. As audience numbers fall and money becomes tight, the 'butcher' becomes crueler. Tension soon heightens and the children realise that something must be done to the butcher and that they must escape.

This text is an intriguing one and would make an excellent unit for Stage 5 students dealing with physical and emotional journeys, or ones dealing with exploring the courage needed in difficult situations.

Jane Dean, The Forest High School, NSW