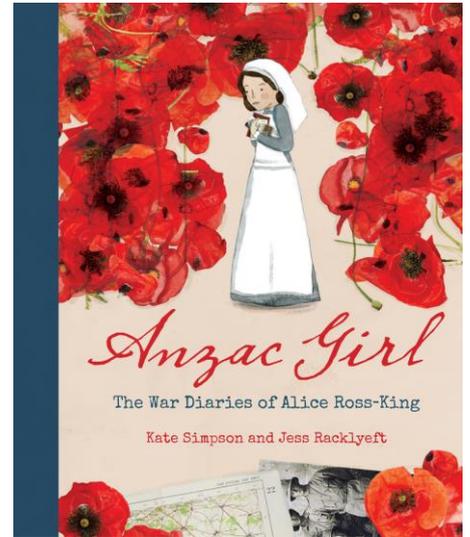


Anzac Girl: The War Diaries of Alice Ross-King

By Kate Simpson
Illustrated by Jess Racklyeft



March 2020 ISBN 9781760637019
Non-fiction picture book
Recommended for 6-10+ year olds

Summary

It was 1914 when Sister Alice Ross-King left Australia for the war. Nursing was her passion – all she had ever wanted to do. But Alice couldn't have imagined what she would see. She served four long years and was brave, humble and endlessly compassionate.

The true story of the young nurse who would one day become the most decorated woman in Australia.



Anzac Girl is a spare but powerful story about the experiences of one young female nurse in World War I. Using extracts from Alice Ross-King's actual diaries, which are kept in the Australian War Memorial, Kate Simpson has woven a narrative that captures the nurse's experiences, heartache and war history. Alice's voice rings clear as a bell across the years and the author's narrative voice seamlessly connects the dots. The book's title references Peter Rees's 2008 book, *The Anzac Girls*, as well as the ABC TV mini-series based on Rees's book. An Author's Note at the end of the book reveals that Alice Ross-King was Kate Simpson's great-grandmother.

Jess Racklyeft stunningly combines and contrasts faded images of war (propaganda posters, documents, maps and photos) with her watercolour and mixed media illustrations, all the while intensifying the drama of the story with splashes of blood-red throughout, either in the form of poppies – a symbol of remembrance of World War I – or Alice's own nursing uniform.

Use in the curriculum

Anzac Girl: The War Diaries of Alice Ross-King suits upper primary school classes and, in the right context, lower secondary classes. It suits a number of learning areas, including English, History, Philosophy and Art. There is great potential to consolidate Australian Curriculum content descriptions in these learning areas in a unit of work on War, WWI, Heroes and Heroines or Graphic Communication. However, these notes are largely directed towards the English learning area in primary classes.

This book is particularly fruitful for teaching visual literacy and knowledge of text types. The collaged endpapers sum up its sophistication: general knowledge of past

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times and WWI is necessary to really 'read' them. They mix real photos with painted images and are strewn with images of poppies, the symbolism of which may or may not be known to students. The diary excerpts are in a handwriting font and are direct, or almost direct, quotations from the actual diaries kept at the Australian War Memorial. They are mixed with the author's narrative text, in a plainer font. The book has some textual features of non-fiction books (Author's Note and Image Credits). Yet emotional identification with the heroine is also achieved, as in a fictional narrative.

The text follows Alice's nursing and personal life during WWI, including moments of first love, grief, doubt and almost despair. Her strong sense of duty and love for her patients pulls her through and we learn of her long and fulfilled life after the war. The Australian Department of Defence has described Alice Ross-King as 'the most decorated woman in Australia'. These themes should prompt rich discussions in the classroom and develop students' understanding of the depth that can be achieved in seemingly simple texts and the continuity and change of cultural ideals and experiences over time.

Themes

- WWI
- nursing
- ANZAC
- duty
- remarkable women
- bravery
- family
- doubt and despair
- women in war
- Australian history
- death and grief
- love

Discussion questions

Pre-Reading research

Before reading the book, spend one lesson in your school library researching World War I. Break the class into smaller groups to find out about one or more of the following topics.

- When did World War I begin and end?
- Where did Australian soldiers fight during the War?
- Who were they fighting in Egypt, Turkey and France?
- Why did so many Australians agree to fight in the War?
- Why was this war called, 'The war to end all wars'?

During the following lesson choose some students to present their group's findings to the whole class.

Visual literacy

Carry on from the previous activity by showing the class the cover of *Anzac Girl*. From just looking at the cover, can students answer the following questions:

- Do you think this story will be happy or sad?
- Will it be set in our time or back in history?
- Do you think it will be a true story?
- Who will it be about and what do you think might happen to them?

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Finally, ask students:

- What role did colour, image, symbols, font and title play in helping you answer these questions?

[Prompt students to think about the word ANZAC, the blood-red of the poppies, poppies as a symbol of remembrance, the girl's uniform, the different fonts used for the book's title and its subtitle (one a flowing script, the other a manual typewriter), the presence of a photo and map.]

Comprehension

Have the class read the book without stopping. Close the covers and ask them the same questions as those above, regarding the cover.

- Were the guesses before reading the book correct?

Additional comprehension questions:

1. Why did Alice want to go to war?
2. What did the author mean when she said, 'But Alice wasn't ready. Nobody was.'?
3. Who was Harry Moffitt and why was he important to Alice?
4. Where was Alice sent after her time in Cairo?
5. Why was this place particularly busy for a nurse in July 1916?
6. What happened to Harry Moffitt?
7. Some soldiers didn't die but were horribly injured. Who did Alice mention when she was nursing in Rouen in October 1916?
8. 'Alice was always safe from attack when she was nursing.'
Is this statement true or false? Explain your reasons for your answer.
9. In your own words, describe why Alice wrote in late 1917 that she was 'beginning to wonder about it all'.
10. Why do you think the author waited until the last page to include Harry Moffitt's final letter to Alice? How did reading this letter make you feel?

Juxtaposition

Throughout the story, the illustrator has mixed images of real items from World War I – photos of soldiers, coins, an antique dress, maps – with created illustrations of Alice during her time in Cairo and France.

- Why do you think she decided to mix real and created images on almost every page?
- How has the *author* achieved the same effect of mixing real and created words?
[Answer: mixing Alice's actual diary entries with the author's narrative.]

Primary vs Secondary sources

Explain that a source is something that enables us to better understand history and that there are two kinds of sources, primary and secondary. World War I primary sources are objects that give direct witness of that war, while secondary sources were created after the war and by people who have looked at and evaluated a primary source.

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Divide the class into groups of two and ask each group to put a P or a S next to the following list of elements on the double-page spread beginning with the sentence, 'From the Dardanelles, thousands of wounded poured into Cairo...'

- A photo of wounded British soldiers on a ship's deck.
- A photo of Alice and Harry on camels in front of the Sphinx.
- A government poster from World War I that says, 'Join the brave throng that goes marching along'.
- A drawing of Harry Moffitt.
- A diary entry.
- A drawing of soldiers marching in line.

Visit the Australian War Memorial's website to find out more about Alice Ross-King, see images of her diaries and read the full transcripts. The War Memorial's website is a wonderful resource for teachers and students, and you will find within it a myriad of fascinating teaching ideas that are suitable for students of all year levels.

Journal writing

Keeping a diary helped Alice record her feelings and thoughts and make sense of the war around her. And it is invaluable to us a hundred years later because it gives us a first-hand picture of what she experienced and what that war was really like.

Encourage students to start their own diary and fill in entries every day. If done in class it is a good idea to schedule in 5-10 minutes every day at the same time, either first thing in the morning or straight after lunchtime. Prompt students to talk about what they did since their last entry, and what they felt or were thinking about at the time. If something has happened in the news, have them describe the event and their reaction to it. Encourage them to include as many details as possible, as simple things like describing weather conditions and surroundings will make the diary much more interesting!

Creative art

Look closely at the front and back endpapers (the double-pages found inside the front and back covers). The objects found here encapsulate Alice Ross-King's time as a nurse during World War I and create a collage. [A collage is a work of art made from numerous materials such as paper, newsprint, photographs, fabric and other found objects.]

Encourage students to choose an important time in their own lives and think about objects that might illustrate that time in a visually interesting way. Their collage might be of a recent holiday, a school excursion, a birthday party or even their life as a newborn.

Combine mediums as much as possible by including student drawings and paintings. [Hint: ensure students have permission to use objects they bring from home.]

Related Allen & Unwin picture books

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<https://www.allenandunwin.com/browse/books/childrens/picture-books/And-the-Band-Played-Waltzing-Matilda-Eric-Bogle-illustrated-by-Bruce-Whatley-9781743317051>

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Author's inspiration

'Growing up, I always knew that I had a great-grandmother who was a war hero of some kind, though I was a little hazy on the details. Mum told me she'd been awarded a medal for staying with her patients while her hospital was being bombed. I imagined lino floors, beeping monitors and bed pans. A piece of plaster falling from the ceiling, perhaps. The lights flickering. I didn't imagine mud, tents and shrapnel from anti-aircraft guns.'

'As an adult, Mum gave me a signed copy of a book by Peter Rees that featured my great-grandmother's story. I kept it on my bedside table, but I was busy and I never did find time to read it. In 2014, the ABC broadcast a mini-series based on Peter Rees's book. They called it *Anzac Girls* and my great-grandmother was one of the main characters. Suddenly, I was fascinated with Alice's story. I read Rees's book and then went looking for more. I found the transcript of Alice's diaries on the Australian War Memorial's website and read them from end to end – from Alice's arrival in Egypt in January 1915 to her return voyage to Australia in 1919. What a story it was! Love and heartbreak, determination and desperation. And above all, a clear sense of the person that she was – her passion and her strength, her empathy and her sense of duty.'

'When I decided to write Alice's story, it didn't initially occur to me to include extracts from her diaries, but I am so glad that I did. Alice's words, jotted down however hastily in a diary, are beautifully expressive and set the scene far better than I ever could. I take huge delight, as an author myself, in knowing that I have such a beautiful writer in my ancestry.'

— Kate Simpson

Illustrator's inspiration

'I was completely floored when I first read this story – to me, it had a dreamlike quality to it, while also being full of facts – the diary entries and experiences are nonfiction, while the story itself is so lyrical and at times tragic. There was something about the changing narrative from Alice's diary entries to the story itself that brought a flood of images to my mind: the electric red of poppies and the torn brown papers, the sad state of war mixed with the government propaganda encouraging soldiers to join the fight.'

'I was also challenged having never worked on a nonfiction book before and knowing little about the world wars of my grandparents and great-grandparents. I began by reading *The Anzac Girls* and watching the mini-series on ABC, accessing the digital archives of original photographs held by the State Library of Victoria, the Australia War Memorial and even images from my family – photos of my lovely great-granddad, who we called "Pop", feature throughout this book.'

'To reflect the narrative – a mix of fact, diary entries and Kate's own understandings of Alice's experiences – I decided to make my own mix of real images from the time, including photographs that Alice took herself, as well as maps and my own artworks. I also commissioned photographs of objects. The poppies I picked from a neighbour's garden, the dress was my in-law's antique outfit and the papers I stained myself with tea and coffee. My photographer friend Penny Lane did a wonderful job shooting these items. And I contacted a family member's friend who works for the ANZAC.'

'Bringing everything together on my computer, I collaged in Photoshop and assembled the many images to their final state. I feel like it came together well, and I felt honoured to be able to use my personal images and items alongside those donated by others to state archives.'

— Jess Racklyeft

About the author

Kate Simpson is a picture book author, podcast host and incurable bookworm. Kate's debut picture book, *Finding Granny*, was shortlisted for the Speech Pathology Australia Book of the Year Awards 2019. Her second picture book, *Dear Grandpa*, was published by Allen & Unwin in 2019.

Kate loves books about girls who march to the beat of their own drum and about women who change the world. She is the great-granddaughter of Alice Ross-King.

<https://www.katesimpsonbooks.com/>



About the illustrator



Jess Racklyeft is the acclaimed creator of cards, picture books, original paintings, prints and all types of different illustrated projects. She worked in publishing sales for many years, but now works full-time as an artist and illustrator. Recent awards include being selected as a CBCA Notable Picture Book two years running.

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