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## Cleopatra: The Girl Who Would Be King

**Jackie French**

### Book Summary

Forget what you know about Cleopatra, the Egyptian queen with a fantastic hairstyle. That's only part of the story. Before she was a ruler, Cleopatra was a girl with a fierce ambition: to become pharaoh.

When twelve-year-old Cleopatra and her father, Pharaoh Ptolemy XII, flee to ancient Rome in 59 BCE after Cleopatra's sister seizes the throne, they are in serious trouble. It's up to Cleopatra to raise enough gold to hire an army, gain the support of powerful allies, and take back her country's land.

Three years later she was the most famous pharaoh in history.

This is the story of how that year in ancient Rome might have changed Cleopatra's life, with daring escapes, crocodiles, pirates, shipwreck and encountering the intrepid Captain Fileas and Myra, the slave determined to be free.

**Recommended Reading Age:** 9+

**Resources Created For:** Upper Primary



## Themes

- **Determination:** From a young age, Cleopatra has been determined to learn as much as she can and to become the best ruler of Egypt that has ever reigned. Despite the machinations of various ruthless family relatives, she has outwitted any plots to dispose of her and continues her path.
- **Resilience:** Cleopatra does not allow setbacks to impede her progress towards her goals. She regards them merely as problems to be solved. If one plan fails, then she thinks of another. Cleopatra's resilience is aided by her self-confidence and the knowledge that she is smart and capable.
- **Loyalty:** Most leaders, even today, often fail to inspire loyalty in their followers or supporters. Cleopatra comes from a tradition where even slaves are treated kindly (although they are still slaves) and now, when she needs the help of others most, she is magnanimous in her unwavering loyalty and appreciation of those who are helping her.

## Vocabulary

- **Affronted:** to be insulted or hurt by something.
- **Dubiously:** to do/say something suspiciously or uncertainly.
- **Dynasty:** a series of rulers, often from the same family.
- **Heir:** someone who has the right to inherit someone's money, property or title when they die.
- **Litter:** a portable bed or couch, carried on the shoulders of slaves.
- **Papyrus:** type of paper made from the stems of the papyrus plant, a type of water reed/grass.
- **Parchment:** writing surface (paper) created from the skin of a sheep or goat.
- **Pleated:** permanent folds in a piece of fabric, usually an item of clothing.
- **Plebeians:** free (not slaves) Roman people, not of the ruling class.
- **Tentatively:** do/say something uncertainly or cautiously.
- **Trudge:** walk with slow, heavy steps due to tiredness or as an expression of unhappiness.
- **Vellum:** high quality parchment (paper) created from the skin of a calf.
- **Virtuous:** to behave correctly, according to the beliefs and customs of the time and place.
- **Vizier:** term for a senior government official, particularly in Middle Eastern countries.





## Questions & Activities

- Most students will have already heard of Cleopatra. What have they heard about her?
  - Where has most of their information come from?
    - Based on this, how accurate do they think their “knowledge” is?
  - Have any students heard about Cleopatra’s childhood?
- If possible, find a map of the ancient world and plot the locations and journeys included in the novel.
- In Chapter 2, Julia talks to Cleopatra about beauty; and all the things that she does to look beautiful (pp. 33–41).
  - What makes someone ‘beautiful’ is not consistent; different times and places have considered different aspects of a person’s appearance make them beautiful. Make a list of all the things that Julia and Cleopatra mention they do to conform to the beauty standards of the time. You may find it helpful to consult the vocabulary list above and the glossary at the back of the book to understand some of the words that Julia uses.
  - Are the things Julia and Cleopatra do to look ‘beautiful’ similar or different to the kinds of things people might do in Australia today?
    - Sort your list into a table with two columns – similar and different – to help you answer the question.
    - Why do you think some things have changed, but others have stayed the same (or very similar)?
  - While Cleopatra is sceptical about the importance of beauty for its own sake, she does come to understand that it can be useful. How does Cleopatra use her appearance to help her to achieve her goal of being pharaoh?
  - Much of what we are now told about Cleopatra is about her ‘beauty’. But was she actually considered beautiful in her own time?
- It becomes apparent to Cleopatra that in Roman society women have no status or even voice and that men have it all: “Banquets are mostly important men talking to other important men about how important they are, and the important things they have done, and the important things they will do...” (pp. 154–55). While Egypt was a place where men and women had different, generally unequal, places in society, it was a place where women could, and did, hold power.
  - Women in Rome had no ‘official’ rights or power, but Cleopatra notices that women exercise power and influence in other ways. What do they do women do to that demonstrates power and influence?



# Classroom Resources

- b) In the Author's Notes at the end of the book, Jackie French outlines some of Cleopatra's achievements during her reign as pharaoh. Which of these relate to improving the rights of women in Ancient Egypt?
- (i) Choose one of these improvements and research what Cleopatra did and how it continues to impact the lives of women and girls today.
5. Slavery was common throughout ancient times, but the enslaved were treated differently across cultures as demonstrated by the differences in how Cleopatra and Egyptian society treats slaves and how the Romans do so.
- a) What are some of these differences? Can readers find other differences in various cultures?
- b) Societies of all kinds were hierarchical, even within the slave ranks. Read and research how the Roman slave hierarchy operated. What differences were observable, for example clothing, and which were not so easily seen?
6. "Thankfully I speak Latin perfectly" (p. 16). There are many examples of Latin words throughout the narrative, e.g. *domus*, *mammillare*.
- a) Why is Latin referred to as a 'dead' language?
- b) How has Latin impacted on our own English language?
- c) Choose examples from the text and create modern word families based on the root of each, e.g., *domus*: domestic, domesticated, domicile, domain.
4. *Cleopatra: The Girl Who Would Be King* is written in first person. How does this affect your engagement with the story?
- a) Rewrite the section of the novel when the storm hits the pirate ship that Cleopatra and Myra are imprisoned on (pp. 178-79) in third person.
- b) Compare what you have written with the original text. Which version is more engaging and gives you a greater sense of what it was like to live through this event?
5. In her Author's Notes, Jackie French calls *Cleopatra: The Girl Who Would Be King* a "might have been" story, rather than a true one as there are very few records about Cleopatra's childhood. French has based her story on the few facts that are known about Cleopatra's childhood, along with records that exist that tell us about her adult life, and things we know about the places Cleopatra visited.
- a) After reading the novel, glossary and Author's Notes, which event of Cleopatra's "might have been" story do you think is most likely to have actually happened (or you hope it did!)? For example, do you think it's likely she was kidnapped by pirates, or do you suppose she *was* taught by Julia, daughter of Julius Caesar, how to dress "properly" and use her appearance as a source of power?

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# Classroom Resources

- (i) Do some research into the time, place and/or situation to try and find evidence that could support your belief. For example, if you think it's likely that Cleopatra was kidnapped by pirates, do some research into piracy in 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.
  - b) Write a short paragraph explaining why you believe this event happened, including evidence from your research.
6. Insult like a Roman: "Out of the way, you traumus putidas!..." (p. 84). Have some fun devising some (school appropriate) Roman insults by looking up the Latin for your choice of descriptive language.
7. Worst Jobs Ever: "Slaves are lined up outside covered in old milk and honey to attract the flies and mosquitos to keep them from the diners." (p. 153). Slaves, of course, had no choice but even those who were free, but poor, had little choice of work.
  - a) What other awful jobs were there in this era? Research to find out some others.
  - b) Which would be the worst? Which would you hope to do?
8. Ancient Roman Feast: There are numerous references to foods eaten, e.g. hard-boiled quail eggs, goat's cheese and honey cakes (p. 19). Using clues from the text as well as research, select a range of food for a Roman feast.
  - a) Create a menu, with descriptions of dishes and illustrations, to share with the class.

## About the Author

Jackie French AM is an award-winning writer, wombat negotiator, the 2014–2015 Australian Children's Laureate and the 2015 Senior Australian of the Year. In 2016, Jackie became a Member of the Order of Australia for her contribution to children's literature and her advocacy for youth literacy. She is regarded as one of Australia's most popular children's authors and writes across all genres – from picture books, history, fantasy, ecology and sci-fi, to her much-loved historical fiction for a variety of age groups. 'A book can change a child's life. A book can change the world' was the primary philosophy behind Jackie's two-year term as Laureate.

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