My Brilliant Career: Netflix's caricature of a classic Australian novel

Kaye Tucker, Richard Phillips
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This year marks the 125th anniversary of *My Brilliant Career*, Miles Franklin's landmark first novel and one of the enduring classics of Australian literature.

Written when Franklin was just 19, the novel is a semi-autobiographical account of a young woman coming of age amid poverty, social inequality and the unforgiving conditions of rural Australia. Its central character, Sybylla Melvyn, is fiercely determined to preserve her independence in a society where a woman's economic security is largely dependent upon marriage.

That tension—between individual freedom and material circumstance—is at the heart of Franklin's novel. It is also what makes the new Netflix adaptation so disappointing.

Rather than bringing Franklin's social realism to a contemporary audience, the series applies the "Bridgerton treatment," a reference to Netflix versions of Julia Quinn's *Bridgerton* historical novels. This generally involves modernising the characters, dialogue and relationships, often adding a contemporary pop music soundtrack, while stripping away much of the historical context that gives the original its force.

My Brilliant Career by executive producer, writer and showrunner Liz Doran (*Please Like Me* [2013] and *Ready for This* [2022]) is a fast-paced coming-of-age romance that bears only a limited resemblance to Franklin's class-conscious novel. The Australian bush remains as a backdrop, but the economic crisis, drought, poverty and social relations that shape Sybylla's world are largely pushed into the background.

Franklin's novel deserves better, not because it should be treated as untouchable, but because its central concerns are far more interesting than the preoccupations of the Netflix series.

To understand what is lost in this adaptation, it is worth returning briefly to Franklin's original story.

Sybylla is an imaginative and fiercely independent teenager whose sheep-farming family has fallen on hard times following a series of poor business investments by her father. Forced to relocate to a subsistence dairy farm in Possum Gully, New South Wales, her father becomes an alcoholic and the family sinks into crushing poverty.

A reprieve arrives when Sybylla is sent to Caddagat, the comfortable estate of her wealthy maternal grandmother, Mrs. Bossier. Surrounded by books and a more cultured existence, she flourishes and soon attracts the attention of Harold "Harry" Beecham, a wealthy and handsome neighbouring landowner.

Sybylla is drawn to Harry but struggles with low self-esteem, believing herself too plain to be truly loved. More importantly, she fears that marriage will suffocate her artistic ambitions and her passion for literature, music and writing. She accepts his proposal only on the condition that they wait, intending to test his devotion.

Sybylla, however, is forced to leave Caddagat and try to pay her father's debts by becoming a governess to the wealthy but uncouth M'Swat family. The gruelling work and bleak surroundings drive her into a physical and mental breakdown, forcing her back to Possum Gully.

When Harry returns to claim her as his bride, offering a life of luxury and emotional security, Sybylla rejects him. Convinced that her independent spirit would make them both miserable, she chooses freedom over financial security. The novel ends on a bittersweet note: Sybylla remains trapped in rural Australia but is determined to pursue her own path as a writer rather than submit to marriage and the domestic expectations of her era.

The Netflix series loosely follows this narrative but introduces or radically alters a succession of characters, most of whom are never fully developed. Harry Beecham (Christopher Chung), for example, is reimagined as a wealthy biracial Chinese-Australian farmer—an unlikely development given the virulent anti-Chinese attitudes prevailing among colonial political elites at the time.

The series also introduces two Aboriginal sisters, Nell (Sherry-Lee Watson) and Betty (Miah Madden), who work at Mrs. Bossier's estate. Charlie (Jarron Andy), an Aboriginal stockman, falls for Nell, who aspires to become the station's first female foreman. Betty begins a secret relationship with a white policeman.

The presence of these Aboriginal workers at least acknowledges the historical reality of Aboriginal labour on large farming properties. But their stories remain largely tokenistic and reveal little about the extreme poverty, dispossession and exploitation experienced by Aboriginal people.

The inventions extend throughout the supporting cast. Sybylla's Uncle Julius (Alexander England) is given a secret homosexual romance with Everard Grey, while Harry's Aunt Augusta (Kate Mulvany) hosts parties at which she and Sybylla's Aunt Helen (Genevieve O'Reilly) consume hashish-infused Turkish delight as others take part in relay drinking games.

In Franklin's novel, Sybylla's placement as a governess with the uncultured M'Swat family is a tragic and soul-crushing experience. In the Netflix version, the ordeal is trivialised, with Sybylla's experiences and attitudes recast as a prototype of modern female empowerment. The vast and intimidating expanse of the Australian bush is similarly diminished as is the impact of the economic crisis and drought.

This is precisely what makes the adaptation so frustrating. Franklin's novel is not simply a story about an unconventional young woman searching for herself. It is a story about how economic conditions, class relations and narrow social conventions dictate the possibilities available to individuals.

Liz Doran is, of course, free to do whatever she wants with the material. Hopefully, those who watch the series will read Franklin's novel. They could also watch Gillian Armstrong's excellent 1979 film, starring Judy Davis, Sam Neill and Wendy Hughes—a far more convincing and artistically satisfying version of the story.

Franklin's own complex career

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Franklin completed her handwritten manuscript in 1899 and sent it to Henry Lawson, the foremost Australian short-story writer and bush poet of the era. Struck by its raw authenticity, he took it to London and helped secure its publication in Edinburgh in 1901.

The novel's title is bitterly ironic. Franklin wanted it titled "My Brilliant? Career", but the question mark was removed by the publisher. For a woman of Sybylla's social position, a "brilliant career" effectively meant marriage—and if marriage was to provide an escape from poverty, it needed to be to a man of property.

Women of Sybylla's class had few avenues. They could become teachers, governesses, domestic servants or wives. Her artistic and intellectual ambitions, and her fierce desire for independence, collide constantly with the material realities of her existence.

Against idyllic conceptions of the Australian bush that would later become central to national mythology, the novel unfolds in the aftermath of the collapse of the land boom of the 1880s. When the bubble burst, banks failed, property values collapsed and the price of wool—the country's principal export—fell catastrophically.

Thousands of small farming properties were foreclosed while the "squattocracy", the richest landholders, consolidated their wealth and political power.

The financial collapse was followed by the Federation Drought (1895–1901) which destroyed livestock and crops on an enormous scale. Franklin conveys its effects through vivid descriptions of the landscape and the suffering of people and animals alike.

"The scorching furnace-breath winds," she wrote, "shrivelled every blade of grass; dust and the moan of starving stock filled the air; vegetables became a thing of the past. The calves I had reared died one by one, and the cows followed in their footsteps."

The 1890s also witnessed some of the most intense class struggles in Australian history: the two-month maritime strike by more than 50,000 workers in 1890, followed by the shearers' strikes of 1891 and 1894. These momentous struggles were ultimately crushed by troops deployed as strikebreakers.

Franklin does not directly refer to these battles but provides moving descriptions of the resultant poverty. When Sybylla moves to Caddagat, she is put in charge of providing food for poverty-stricken itinerant workers—the victims of the economic devastation—interviewing on average, "fifty tramps a week, and seldom saw the same man twice."

She continues: "Hopeless, homeless, aimless, shameless souls, tramping on from north to south, and east to west, never relinquishing their heart-sickening, futile quest for work—some of them so long on the tramp that the ambitions of manhood had been ground out of them, and they wished for nothing more than this.

"In a wide young country of boundless resources, why is this thing? This question worried me. Our legislators are unable or unwilling to cope with it. They trouble not to be patriots and statesmen. Australia can bring forth writers, orators, financiers, singers, musicians, actors, and athletes which are second to none of any nation under the sun. Why can she not bear sons, men of soul, mind, truth, godliness, and patriotism sufficient to rise and cast off the grim shackles which widen round us day by day?"

The novel ends with Sybylla proudly declaring that she earns her bread "by the sweat of my brow, as man was meant to do. I rejoice I was not born a parasite, one of the bloodsuckers who loll on velvet and satin, crushed from the proceeds of human sweat and blood and souls."

Her final lines return to the drought-stricken landscape, with the "great sun sinking in the west, grinning and winking knowingly as he goes, upon the starving stock and drought-smitten wastes of land."

Franklin's landscape retains this contradiction: The stark but striking beauty of the bush exists alongside starvation and devastation. The natural world can be magnificent, but its beauty offers no escape from the social and material conditions confronting those who inhabit it.

When *My Brilliant Career* was first published, it received widespread critical acclaim for its fresh and direct depiction of Australian bush life. Reviewers in Australia and Britain welcomed Franklin's energetic voice and predicted a golden literary future for her. Yet Franklin earned very little from the book: Colonial editions of books published in Britain attracted greatly reduced royalties, while its critical success did not immediately lead to further publications.

The reaction to *My Brilliant Career* in Franklin's own rural community was more troubled. Local readers and neighbours interpreted the novel as fact rather than fiction, believing its characters to be thinly disguised portraits of real people. The resulting gossip and intrusion into Franklin's personal life deeply distressed the young author. In 1910, she withdrew the novel and refused to allow it to be republished during her lifetime.

Franklin subsequently turned to journalism, publishing articles under various names. She spent a year working undercover as a domestic servant in wealthy households and boarding houses in Sydney and Melbourne, intending to use her experiences to expose the harsh exploitation of young women in the industry. Her manuscript on the subject, with the working title *When I Was Mary-Anne, a Slavey*, was rejected because potential publishers feared they would be sued.

Franklin moved to Chicago in 1906 and, from 1908 to 1915, worked for the National Women's Trade Union League, assisting exploited immigrants and working with a group of talented women. She became the League's press officer during the historic 22-week garment workers' strike of 1910–11, which involved 40,000 textile workers fighting starvation wages and unsafe factory conditions.

Franklin co-edited the League's journal, *Life and Labor*, writing extensive reports on industrial struggles, union organisation and working-class conditions across North America. At the League's 1911 conference in Boston, she was elected national secretary.

Following the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Franklin relocated to London. A staunch anti-militarist, she viewed the war not as a heroic national defence but as a catastrophic slaughter engineered by imperial powers.

In March 1917, Franklin worked with the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service. She then served as a cook in a 200-bed tent hospital attached to the Serbian army in Macedonia, Greece, from July 1917 to February 1918.

Following the war, she worked as secretary at the National Housing and Town Planning Association and organised a women's international housing convention in 1924. She returned to Australia in 1932 and resumed her literary career.

Franklin continued writing, producing several historical novels, including the prize-winning *All That Swagger* (1936) and *My Career Goes Bung* (1946), and a series of pioneering bush chronicles under the pseudonym "Brent of Bin Bin."

Although Franklin retained a left-wing social-democratic outlook throughout her life she never joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA). She maintained warm, lifelong friendships, however, with prominent communist writers such as Katharine Susannah Prichard, Jean Devanny and others.

When the Menzies Liberal Party-Country Party coalition government attempted to ban the CPA in 1950, Franklin opposed it, publicly warning that the outlawing of political parties and suppression of freedom of association posed a grave danger to the democratic rights of all workers.

Some of Franklin's most powerful writings clearly express her anti-war convictions. In April 1952, she wrote to Jean Devanny: "I still am an independent in politics and am against war—all wars. I should be against even a war to emancipate women, because war never can be won. To contemplate war is to be defeated."

Franklin's literary legacy survives today in the prestigious annual Miles Franklin Literary Award, established through a bequest in her 1954 will,

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and in 2011 the Stella Prize for Australian women writers.

Franklin’s novel remains a powerful testament to the resilience of working people in the face of economic ruin. A century and a quarter on, the book’s unvarnished account of class relations, poverty and human dignity in rural farming communities retains its power to speak directly to the social contradictions of our own time.

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