

A FORTUNATE LIFE

A.B. FACEY

ABOUT THE BOOK

In this classic Australia story, A.B. Facey offers a unique window into Australian life in the twentieth century – this is the extraordinary journey of an ordinary man.

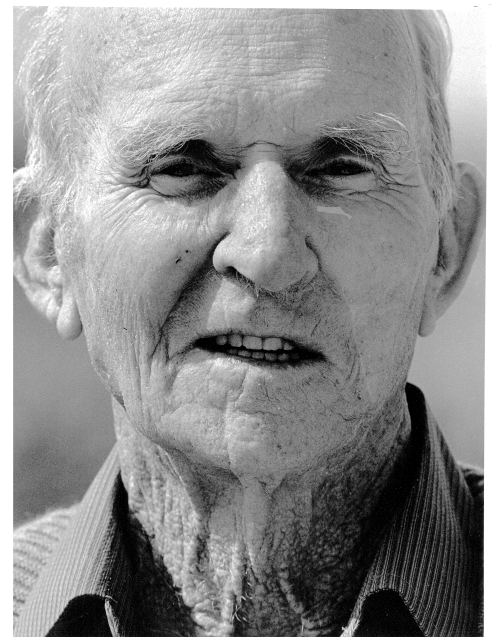
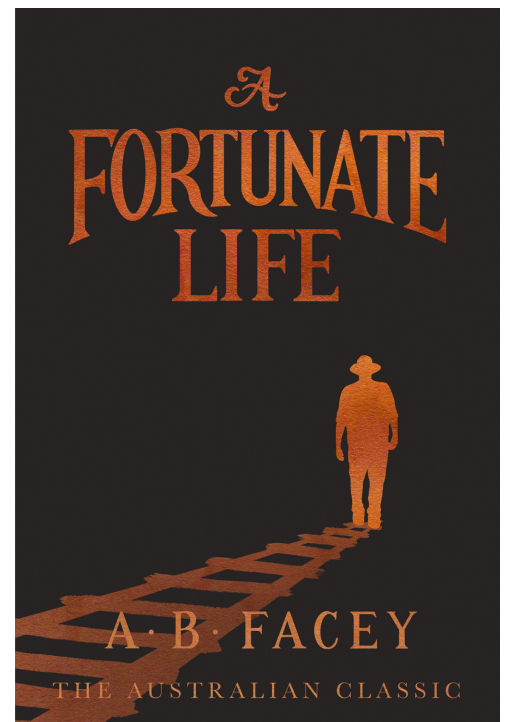
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Albert (Bert) Barnett Facey was born in 1894 and grew up on the Kalgoorlie goldfields and in the wheatbelt of Western Australia. His father died before he was two years old and he was deserted by his mother soon afterwards. He was looked after by his grandmother until he was eight years old, when he went out to work. His many jobs included droving, hammering spikes on the railway line from Merredin to Wickiepin and boxing in a travelling troupe. He was in the Eleventh Battalion at the Gallipoli landing; after the war, he became a farmer under the Soldier Settlement Scheme but was forced off the land during the Depression. He joined the tramways and was active in the Tramways Union.

A.B. Facey, who had no formal education, taught himself to read and write. He made the first notes on his life soon after the First World War, and filled notebooks with his accounts of his experiences. Finally, on his children's urging, he submitted the handwritten manuscript to Fremantle Press. He died in 1982, nine months after *A Fortunate Life* was published to wide acclaim.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is this autobiography called *A Fortunate Life*?
2. Why do you think Facey's story has endured for such a long time?
3. Is this the story of a 'typical' Australian? Or is this the kind of story that upholds the narrative about what it means to be Australian? Can it be both of those things?
4. How would you describe Facey's character and what experiences do you think helped forge it?
5. What kind of a childhood did Facey have?
6. When do you think this childhood ceased (at least as we understand the concept of childhood today)?
7. Albert is only nine years old when he heads off with Bob to his farm on a 'pretty little pony'. How does Facey relate to animals through his life?
8. After a chance encounter, Facey agrees to go to Mullewa with Bill Oliver. What is the basis on which Facey decides whether to trust people?
9. What are some examples of cruelty he experiences at the hands of people who should be responsible for his care?
10. What evidence does young Facey give not only of his vulnerability in these situations, but of resilience and adaptability?
11. Who are the advocates he encounters along the way?
12. What are the circumstances under which the Mr and Mrs Phillips offer to adopt twelve-year-old Facey, and what difference does his mother's refusal make? Why does he call these 'the actions of an unworthy mother' (p.97). What alternative perspectives might there be?
13. What other interactions between mother and son point to the nature of their relationship? What do you make of their parting on p.151 – and how does their relationship change over time?



14. He is not yet fifteen when he heads north 'free to go and do as I pleased' (p.155). How do you think that our expectations of what a teenager is and does have changed over time?
15. How does Facey write about his encounters with First Nations people? (See the chapter titled 'Journey 1908–9')
16. How old is Facey when he learns to read and write? How do the parameters of his education affect his life?
17. Facey's memories are vivid. To what extent do you think this is the result of an amazing recall, and what details might be called upon in the name of fashioning a story for himself and others?
18. You may be interested in reading the account of one of his editors, Wendy Jenkins, about the arrival of the work at Fremantle Press, in which she says, '*The mark of many good books is that they are disarmingly "simple". In the case of memoir, it can seem as if a life has been transferred to the page by an act of perfect dictation. All the writer had to do was get down the relevant facts in the right order. Anyone could do it. This, of course, is utter mirage – as anyone who has battled to distil complexity into simple lucid prose could tell you. Simplicity is not easy.*' What do you think Jenkins means when she observes that 'Simplicity is not easy'? See fremantlepress.com.au/2011/04/13/tales-from-the-backlist-a-fortunate-life-turns-30
19. How would you describe his narrative voice and mode of delivery? Is Facey writing for the reader / an audience? And if so, what are the ways in which he might be tailoring his narrative accordingly?
20. Are there any points at which Facey's story starts to feel a little 'tall'? And if so, does it matter?
21. What iterations of Facey do we see across time? What do you think these say about memories and the stories we choose to tell ourselves, and the stories we choose to share about ourselves?
22. In what ways does Facey's story conform to our national narrative about mateship and the Australian spirit? What are its points of departure?
23. What does the foreword say about the virtues of manliness and masculinity, which are on display in 'Solidarity' (ch.45) and 'Prize Fighter' (ch.46)?
24. Ffion Murphy and Richard Nile also discuss Facey's 'permanent debility' from his war service. What is the connection they make between his PTSD and the writing of his autobiography?
25. Why do you think Facey might have fudged details of his participation in the Gallipoli campaign (ch.52)?
26. Why do you think that so much time is devoted to Facey's early life (especially until the end of the First World War) and so much thereafter is of a much more summary nature (see the chapter 'Another Life 1915–76)?
27. What difference does Facey's wife Eleanor make to his life, his sense of wellbeing and his identity?
28. On p.401, Facey concludes the chapter with a line beginning 'People do terrible things in wars'. How are the two final paragraphs a tonal departure from the rest of the book? Why do you think he has included them? What difference would it have made if these were left out?



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