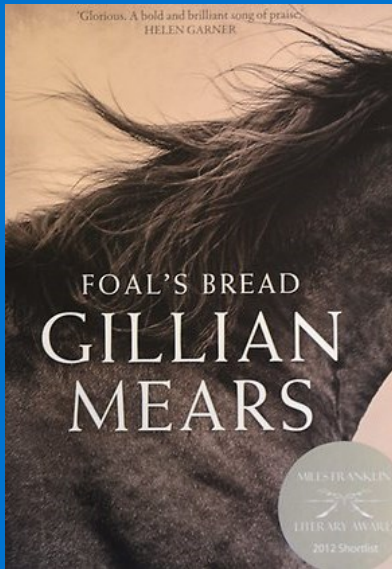


# Foal's Bread

## Gillian Mears



### Author Background

- Birth—1964
- Raised—Grafton, New South Wales
- Education—Archaeology at University of Sydney, BA at University of Technology, Sydney
- Currently—lives in Grafton

Gillian Mears grew up in north coast towns of New South Wales. She began the study of Archaeology at the University of Sydney but did not finish her degree. She took a position as a laboratory assistant in the university and, in 1982, began to write fiction. Her writing benefited from writing classes at the University of Technology, Sydney, in which she had the assistance of writers such as Susan Hampton, Drusilla Modjeska and Stephen Muecke. Mears completed a Bachelor of Arts in Communication at that University in 1985 and returned to Grafton to her close-knit family. She travelled to Africa on a grant to research a novel on her father's English grandmother and mother. The work was abandoned. Mears spent six months in Paris at the Keesing Writers' Studio in 1991. She has suffered from a form of locomotor ataxia which deepened as she turned thirty-five. Mears continued to live quietly on a farm outside Grafton, New South Wales.

Writing since she was twenty, Mears has received many prizes and awards including the Australian/Vogel Literary Award in 1990 for her novel *The Mint Lawn*. Writing with a joy and a passion, Mears draws heavily on her own experiences, bringing alive the Northern rivers region of New South Wales. Mears has always had a strong connection with landscape and place, expressed through her fiction and her involvement in Green politics. Her collection *Fineflour* (1990) attracted notoriety as it was removed from the Higher School Certificate syllabus in New South Wales on the grounds that the stories failed to meet the Higher School Certificate Board's criteria of 'literary merit, broad community, ethical and moral standards'. She was awarded the 2012 Australian Literary Society (ASL) Gold Medal on Wednesday 4 July.

(from AUSTLIT)

# Foal's Bread

## Gillian Mears

### Book Summary

#### *Foal's Bread*

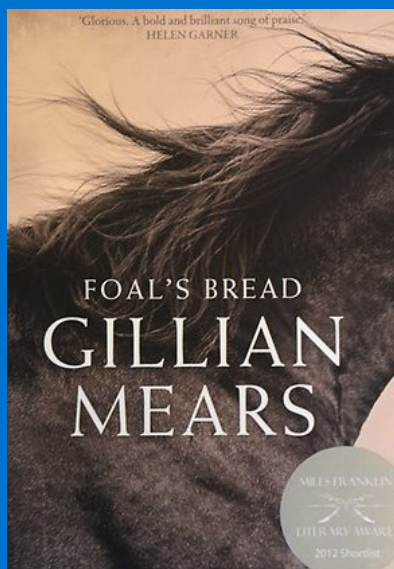
Gillian Mears, 2011

Allen & Unwin

376 pp.

ISBN-13: 9781742376295

Book Groups @ Blue Mountains Library



*The sound of horses' hooves turns hollow on the farms west of Wirri. If a man can still ride, if he hasn't totally lost the use of his legs, if he hasn't died to the part of his heart that understands such things, then he should go for a gallop. At the very least he should stand at the road by the river imagining that he's pushing a horse up the steep hill that leads to the house on the farm once known as One Tree.*

Set in hardscrabble farming country and around the country show high-jumping circuit that prevailed in rural New South Wales prior to the Second World War, *Foal's Bread* tells the story of two generations of the Nancarrow family and their fortunes as dictated by the vicissitudes of the land.

It is a love story of impossible beauty and sadness, a chronicle of dreams 'turned inside out', and miracles that never last, framed against a world both tender and unspeakably hard. Written in luminous prose and with an aching affinity for the landscape the book describes, *Foal's Bread* is the work of a born writer at the height of her considerable powers. It is a stunning work of remarkable originality and power, one that confirms Gillian Mears' reputation as one of our most exciting and acclaimed writers.

#### Awards

Short-listed, Adelaide Festival Award for Literature, Fiction, 2014

Winner, Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction, 2012

Winner, ALS Gold Medal, 2012

Winner, 60th Annual Book Design Awards, Best Designed Literary Fiction, 2012

Winner, The Age Book of the Year Award Fiction, 2012

Winner, Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Fiction, 2012

Winner, Colin Roderick Award, 2012

Short-listed, NSW Premier's Literary Awards, Christina Stead Prize for Fiction, 2013

Short-listed, Indie Awards, Fiction prize, 2012

Short-listed, Barbara Jefferis Award, 2012

Short-listed, Miles Franklin Literary Award, 2012

Short-listed, Nita B. Kibble Award, 2012

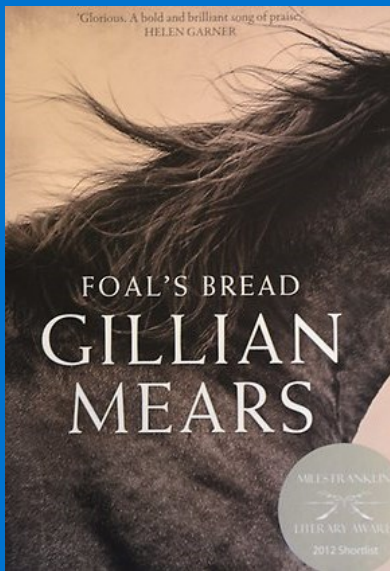
Short-listed, Australian Book Industry Awards Book of the Year, 2012

Short-listed, West Australian Premier's Book Award, 2012

# Foal's Bread

## Gillian Mears

### Reviews



Having grown up in rural New South Wales, Gillian Mears was practically schooled in the saddle. Yet her riding career was curtailed by the onset of multiple sclerosis at the age of 31, and it seemed for some time as if her literary career might follow. Now 47, Mears has not published a novel for 16 years. Yet *Foal's Bread* is a truly heroic effort; not only a great book about horses, but an exceptional one about paralysis.

Mears's subject is the golden era of show-jumping, for which we must immediately banish images of scarlet-coated gentry prancing round paddocks.

Aussie-rules show-jumping between the wars was a tough, backwoods sport, in which riders and horses risked their necks clearing obstacles up to eight feet high.

Roley Nancarrow is the 1926 high jump record holder for New South Wales, famed for flying over hurdles with his arms outstretched "as if at the apex of the leap, in the sheer balance and faith of it all, he was being welcomed into the Almighty's arms". He seems to have developed his extraordinary, cat-like equilibrium after being struck by lightning as a child: "It was like some of that lightning must've stayed in me," he says. "I could run along an old fence line as narrow as a nail."

At a country show he is struck by the sight of Noah Childs, a 14 year-old drover's daughter who is capable of coaxing a temperamental old mare over 6ft obstacles. He invites her to join him in the dual competition, which they win with ease, their mounts landing with identical stride. The union is sealed when their triumphant image is reproduced on a biscuit tin, and by Roley's gift of foal's bread – a lump of tissue found in the mouth of some new-born horses and believed to deliver good fortune.

It becomes questionable, however, whether this curious equestrian mojo has any effect. Riding out in a storm, Roley is hit once again by lightning; though this time it appears to have the opposite effect. A creeping, intermittent numbness appears in his legs which, significantly, the horses are quick to sense: "The pair of workhorses noticed it first – that the feeling had begun to leave his feet. They put their ears back at his unusual clumsiness and in small, cunning ways that only he could detect stopped working as hard for him."

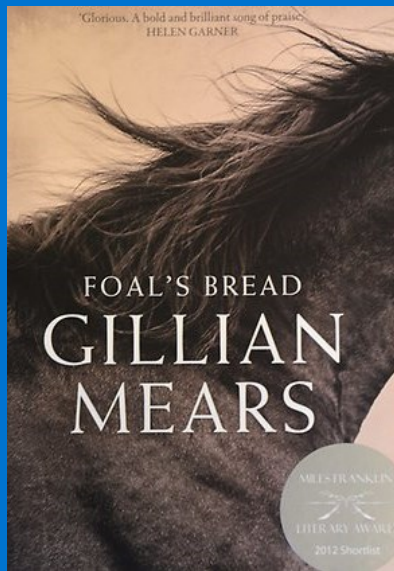
There is no diagnosis: only bewilderment, frustration and despair expressed in horseman's vocabulary. "Be it the beginning of bony spurs, bog spavins or windgall, Noah would see the first slight knobble or puff." But though Noah prides herself on her ability to detect animal defects, she is powerless to explain the progressive paralysis afflicting her husband. Having suffered the humiliation of being turned down for military service, Roley takes on the aspect of a lame animal who senses he may not recover: "A horse hurt in the hindquarters will often curve its head around to take a good long look. If Roley thought no one was watching he might bend down to his legs as if to work out what invisible harness, hobble or dingo snare might have trapped his nerves." The decline becomes horribly swift. On his deathbed, it feels to his daughter, Lainey, "as if she had hold of a horse waiting patiently for the day to be over".

Roley's affliction is the defining theme of the book, yet it is Noah who becomes the dominant character. She begins the narrative as a traumatised 14-year-old, pregnant by her uncle, who remains haunted by the memory of casting the unwanted child adrift on a river: "The baby forever destined to be careening away at the back of her mind in a box built for butter." She grows into an obstreperous, unforgiving woman, toughened by tragedy and consumed with jealousy when her daughter – who has inherited the family's riding skills – supplants her own high-jump record. The gulf between mother and daughter is closed only when history threatens to repeat itself. To reveal how would be to defuse a shockingly brutal conclusion – suffice to say that Noah is remorselessly efficient with a neutering blade.

The bush country of New South Wales is a tough, unforgiving landscape and *Foal's Bread*

# Foal's Bread

## Gillian Mears



### Reviews (continued)

turns out to be a tough, unforgiving book. But to her immense credit, Mears's account of a terrible illness never becomes self-pitying or sentimental, while her galloping prose thrums to the rhythm of some perfectly constructed sentences: "The sound of horses' hooves turns hollow on the farms west of Wirri." The outlook may be pessimistic in the extreme, but you are unlikely to read a more courageous novel this year.

***The Guardian***

'The relationships between the characters in *Foal's Bread* are rich and varied, and Mears rarely takes the obvious rout as she explores emotions of love, jealousy, frustration and disappointment ... *Foal's Bread* is a book to be read slowly and savoured.'

***Australian Bookseller & Publisher***

What a beautifully complete book this is. Quintessentially Australian, the vernacular of the time and place a joy to read. Life is hard on One Tree Farm but there are no clichés here. A tragic secret revealed early and subsequent misunderstandings go unspoken with heart-breaking consequences. Gillian Mears paints a landscape so real you can step into it. This is a love story that has its beginnings on the high-jumping Show circuit of NSW just before the first world war. Joy and family pride come from the triumphs of prizewinning horses and their riders. It's a story about struggle, fate, dreams made and broken and hope through adversity, the titular *Foal's Bread* a totem of that hope. Her exquisite prose tells this story with such tenderness, humour and profound honesty it catches your breath.

***ABC Adelaide***

'It's a dyin art, mate, which is why I should teach you soon,' says Uncle Owen towards the end of *Foal's Bread*. By this stage in the book we know that the show-jumping life that has been the focus of Noah Nancarrow's life is dying but we also know that the whole rural culture and way of life Mears is writing about is undergoing radical change.

The story begins in 1926 when Noah Childs is a 14-year-old girl making a quick urgent decision that haunts her throughout the rest of her life. She and her father are droving a herd of pigs to slaughter and the country of inland New South Wales is harsh and the life constantly demanding. But Noah has a dream of jumping horses and finds beauty and grace in the sport. She also finds her husband, a young Rowley Nancarrow, Australia's top show jumper, and their love blossoms, making some people expansive and others spiteful and jealous.

Detailing the inner workings and bitter, petty feuds of Noah's in-laws, Mears lyrically and heartbreakingly draws the demise of love when people are too fearful to express emotion. The landscape, from Grafton down through the inland strip of grazing country and on to the coast, is evocatively depicted and the Nancarrows' land, One Tree Flat, forms a tilted, precarious canvas for three generations of the family to stumble on, or know, or fail.

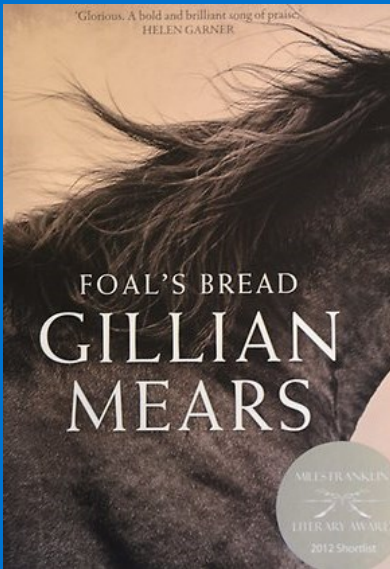
*Foal's Bread* is Gillian Mears's first novel in sixteen years and for those of us who loved *The Grass Sister*, it is well worth the wait. The desire and the emotions that lie just beneath the sun-worn skin of the characters is so present and electric that at times it feels as though lightning will strike the reader, just as it does Rowley Nancarrow.

***Readings.com***



# Foal's Bread

## Gillian Mears



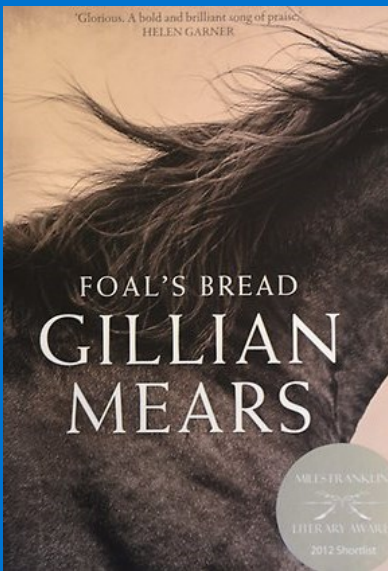
### Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Gillian Mears chose *Foal's Bread* as the title of this book? What does the foal's bread symbolise?
2. Some of the characters in the novel could have been unsympathetic, but they still evoke empathy in the reader. How does Mears achieve this?
3. Discuss the concept and function of 'luck' in *Foal's Bread*.
4. In her review for Bookseller & Publisher, Heather Dyer says, 'Mears rarely takes the obvious route as she explores emotions of love, jealousy, frustration and disappointment'. Discuss how these emotions are presented and explored in *Foal's Bread*.
5. What techniques does Mears employ to convey the sense that the novel is set in the past, in the period between the wars?
6. The horses in *Foal's Bread* are beautifully drawn. Do you feel that they are characters in themselves? Why or why not?
7. *Foal's Bread* tells the story of many 'dreams turned inside out', but could you call it a bleak book? How does the Coda contribute to your perceptions of the novel?
8. 'To look into a horse's eye is to see a reflection of yourself that you might've forgotten.' Discuss the relationship between humans and horses in the book and what it reflects of the often conflicted nature of human- animal relationships today.
9. Consider the relationship of Noah and Rowley in the novel. Could you call *Foal's Bread* a love story?

(Questions issued by publisher.)

# Foal's Bread

## Gillian Mears



### Gillian Mears on writing Foal's Bread

#### How did the idea originate?

My eldest sister Yvonne and I grew up riding and jumping horses, as well as feasting on the stories of the greater horses of the past. Our after and before school hours were consumed by riding and jumping. There could be no greater pleasure between about 1975–1980 than retrieving photos from the local chemist that allowed us to assess our style over this or that jump.

In 1995, Yvonne's novel that involved high jump horses was short listed for the 1994 Vogel. We have had a lifelong habit of sharing creative ideas and sketches. This was no exception as my interest in the high jump horses sharpened markedly when Yvonne lent me *High, Wide and Handsome*, a history of the greats of the high-jump era by Moss Vale vet Alan Chittick.

The titles of my books often blossom in my imagination long before I properly know what the book is truly going to be about. I first heard the phrase 'foal's bread' from my great old friend Merv Mulligan, an old horseman/timer of some repute in the Grafton area. Later, as I fell into a reverie flicking through the old card catalogue of the Mitchell library, I came across the phrase again and copied a few old pages describing this mystery.

All these strands gathered together as it became clear, between 1995 and 2002, that I was losing my ability to safely ride my mare Bellini, or to walk. With incredible sorrow, horses, and my mare Bellini, passed out of my daily life.

#### How long have you been at work on this book? Did the book involve any special research?

Although I've been gathering lovely images and phrases for this book since at least 1994, the true writing task didn't begin until January 2009. 2008 had been consumed with working on *The Cat with the Coloured Tail*, a wisdom cat fable that failed to find instant publication.

In some desperation, I turned to a VERY rough draft of *Foal's Bread*—just five or six chapters—and to my rich store of images and characters. Many of these images were gleaned from 2004–8—the years I spent camping in my old ambulance 'Ant and Bee'. Across the years, I'd also conducted quite a few informal interviews with some of the high-jump riders of the 1930s and 1940s.

I loved to chuck snips of paper and notes into a FB folder file, sure that the day for assembling them would one day arrive. At this time I also placed an actual foal's bread in a butter container of salt. By the time I reached Adelaide it had turned into the shape of a heart.

I also have many heart stones, found over many years.

I decided to take a leaf out of Randolph Stow's writing book and to finish a true draft very quickly. (To keep up his energy, he ate pork pie. I preferred intermittent days of high caffeine content—organic chocolate and coffee.)

By July, I was like a thirsty horse galloping for a river. I felt sure that I had written a story that would move people with feelings of longing. I made haste but in the great writing gallop, ended up in hospital in October 2009 with a major and shocking ms exacerbation. A trip to South America also meant further delays. But as soon as I was home, February 2010, with a feeling of delectation, I put the finishing touches to the final chapters.

In winter, many wonderful offers for the book began to arrive, making it a wonderful 46th birthday for me.

(From the publisher)