

# *Thunderbolt's Lady*

an outlaw love story

## **project synopsis:**

*Thunderbolt's Lady* is inspired by a true story. It's a character-based adventure about two people fighting for their lives and their love. The film is set mostly in the high granite country of New England, New South Wales, during the 1860s.

The main character is a young woman named Mary Ann. Before Mary Ann's birth, her Aboriginal mother saved her Irish hunchback father, a shepherd, from being speared by the local tribe. Their daughter grows up beautiful and intelligent. She's sent away to be educated, at great expense, although the colour of her skin means her options are severely limited.

When Mary Ann returns to find her mother dead, and her father re-married, her life is thrown into limbo. Where does she belong?

Working on a station near Mudgee, Mary Ann meets Fred Ward, a ticket-of-leave convict, horse thief and Verdi fanatic. Fred is white. Braving the opposition of their families and society at large, the pair fall in love, elope, and marry. The nightmare begins when Fred is returned to barbarous Cockatoo Island, in Sydney, on a false charge of horse stealing.

After the birth of their first child, Mary Ann resolves to break Fred out of prison and return to the mountains. After a miraculous escape, their options narrow, until crime seems the only way to survive. Fred evolves into the notorious bushranger Thunderbolt, with Mary Ann as his right hand 'man'. He teaches her to ride, and she teaches him to read; not just in English.

As an outlaw, Mary Ann is always the pragmatist, but she doesn't live in an ordinary physical world. The ghost of her mother, Darkinyung, is often by Mary Ann's side, helping and chiding her. As life becomes harder, and more children arrive, a dream emerges; to escape to Queensland and leave the criminal life. But the dream is tempered by the ties that bind Mary Ann and Fred to the New England high country.

Where Mary Ann is the brains of the gang, Fred is the frontman. He sings arias as he approaches his victims and wears colourful clothing. He's addicted to the showmanship aspect of the outlaw life. Fred's philosophy is to always ride the fastest racehorses, and to run away rather than risk violence. He relies on Mary Ann's organisational ability and sixth sense to stay out of trouble.

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There are four other key characters in the story. Coates, an opera-loving English prison commandant, is demoted to being a frontier policeman after Mary Ann breaks Fred out of Cockatoo Island. He spends the rest of the film in pursuit of the people who destroyed his life. Britten, a Scottish convict and mate of Ward's, becomes a thorn in their side after breaking out of Cockatoo with them. Will Monckton is a teenage boy who joins the gang and falls in love with Mary Ann after they rescue him from his vicious stepfather. Eventually Monckton becomes a more insidious threat than the guns of the police.

There is also Catchwarry, Mary Ann's teenage sweetheart and now a blacktracker working for Coates. Catchwarry is a man tormented by internal divisions. Eventually he has to risk his life, and self-respect, in a choice between the old world and the new.

Not all the antagonists in the film are human. The weather in the mountains is extreme and the country often dangerous. There's also tuberculosis. The disease attacks Mary Ann, after she's imprisoned in squalid conditions, and then Fred as well. Towards the end, he's so sick that he starts hallucinating. This enables him to enter the magical, spiritual world of Mary Ann, allowing her to continue as an active character after her death.

*Thunderbolt's Lady* is not so much a black story or a white story, as a love story. It raises eternal questions, like how do you reconcile children and career, love and marriage, law and survival? Mary Ann's journey takes her from invisibility to national notoriety, from forbidden love to a kind of spiritual immortality.

Potential cast members might include Everlyn Sampi (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*) or Lisa Flanagan (*Australian Rules, Look Both Ways*) as Mary Ann, Orlando Bloom or Hugh Jackman as Fred Ward, and Edward Woodward or Gary Lewis as Coates.

*Thunderbolt's Lady* is a story about strong collaborative bonds across gender and race lines, and this should extend to soundtrack and crew choices in the production of the film. Locations will be throughout the spectacular, and largely unfilmed New England granite country.