This is the author's radio script of this article.


Miss McAllister’s Ghost is a book for the 10 plus age group by Elizabeth Fensham. Based on her own family stories, it is an old-fashioned morality tale about friendship across generations.

14-year-old Cass and her younger brothers Mick and Wilf are thoroughly modern kids, with a mother too busy with her career to spend much time with them, and a short-tempered father who is a bit too fond of a beer. They’re independent and allowed to roam around their suburban streets alone, and when Wilf, the youngest, reports having seen a ghost at an old house in a cul de sac, the three of them, Enid Blyton style, decide to go and investigate without telling their parents.

Of course he hasn’t seen a ghost at all, just a 97-year-old woman who has lived in isolation in her family home since the 1920s. At first she drives them away as trespassers, but they’re intrigued and they go back and offer to do odd jobs for her to make up for their intrusion. Miss McAllister hasn’t modernised: there’s no electricity, so the jobs include wood-chopping, washing, starching and ironing in the old labour-intensive way, and looking after the chooks. It’s a rude shock for these kids, and this part of the novel is reminiscent of reality shows like 1900 House.

Miss McAllister is strict and rather dour, but the children come to appreciate her and she becomes more of a parent to them than their own parents. She teaches them, even the cynical Mick, that ‘real fun wasn’t videos and takeaway pizzas. … it was about doing and being together.’

Miss McAllister’s Ghost has charm and wit despite the occasional corny moment, and though it confronts some of the big questions it doesn’t sensationalise. Also, it’s a
good long read – at 277 pages in normal type, it doesn’t pander to reluctant readers. I’m sure I would have loved it when I was eleven.