PLOT SUMMARY

During a Melbourne heatwave, Hannah's family life begins to distort beyond her deepest fears. It's going to take more than a cool change to fix it, but how can a girl who lives in the shadows take on the task alone?

Feeling powerless and invisible, Hannah seeks refuge in the two anarchists of her life: her wild best friend, Chloe, and her eccentric grandmother, Essie, who look like they know how life really works.

But Hannah's loyalty to both is tested, first by her attraction to Chloe's older brother, and then by Essie's devastating secret that sheds new light on how the family has lost its way.

Even if Hannah doesn't know what to believe in, she'd better start believing in herself.

Combined with Hannah's story, at the heart of Steal My Sunshine is the revelation of a shameful aspect of Australia's history and how it affected thousands of women – the forced adoptions that saw 'wayward girls' and single mothers forced to give up their babies by churches and hospitals. The practice endured for decades, and only now are the numbers and the heart-wrenching stories coming to light.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily Gale was born in London and worked as a children’s book editor for several years before going freelance. She is the author of several pre-school books and YA novel *Girl Aloud*, which has been published in the UK, Germany and the US, where it is called *Girl Out Loud*. It was shortlisted for a regional UK award and described by Jaclyn Moriarty as ‘powerful, funny, wise and true’.

In 2008 Emily and her Australian-born partner moved to Melbourne with their two children. She has since worked on the Authors For Queensland charity auction, which raised over $20,000 for flood victims, and discovered new voices in children’s and YA for a literary agent. She is now a children’s book buyer and bookseller at Readings. *Steal My Sunshine* is Emily’s first book set in Australia.

AUTHOR’S INSPIRATION

Emily says:

**On the book’s beginnings**

In 2006 I wrote the first draft of *Steal My Sunshine*. Back then it was set in the UK, particularly in the Brighton area, East Sussex. I wanted it to be a story largely about relationships between women, but also relationships between society, the Church, and the family, because these tensions have always fascinated me.

After the death of my maternal grandmother, who was a very strong influence, I examined the intense connections and strains that had existed between our three generations of women. I was really interested in the impact that a certain tragic event had had on my grandmother’s life and character. She’d lost a child, like Essie in *Steal My Sunshine*, but in a very different way. The impact of this loss, and the ripple effect of it, is part of what I wanted to explore. However, I wanted the basic facts to be very much removed from the personal experiences of my family. So the initial germ of an idea was simply: maternal ancestry and loss.

My interest in convent life also goes back to my childhood. Although I had a fairly uneventful education in convents run by Roman Catholic nuns (though probably strict by today’s standards), I was always fascinated by the stories my mother and grandmother – who attended the same convent – would tell me about the rules and harsh punishments in their day. These ranged from physical to humiliating. I should note that they spoke about these days with little resentment; they accepted it, it was just the way things were. When I researched the ‘White Stolen Generation’ I found that this attitude that ‘it was just the way things were’ came up frequently.

During my teenage years I became fascinated by what I saw as a dichotomy between theory and practice in the Church – between the kindness and selflessness that we were shown through stories about Jesus, and the anger and punitive measures delivered to those who were out of line by those in charge. Some of the women who had chosen a very testing life as a nun – a devotion that seemed so unselfish and so difficult – had over the years become capable of what I could only describe as cruelty, in the course of exerting a moral code over those they considered to be lacking one.

This moral code has had its various battles with a changing society, particularly since the 1960s. One of the biggest and, until quite recently, mostly ignored aspects of this battle was the removal of babies and children from their mothers – women across race, religion and class. The Church (not just the Catholic Church, I should note) played its part but it did not act alone by any means, and I was keen to show in the novel that convents were one link in the chain. Governments, hospitals, families, and indeed society as a whole, either actively contributed to this practice or turned a blind eye to the terrible consequences of it. In *Steal My Sunshine* I wanted to explore the impact of the practice, not only for the generations who lived under that moral code but for those in subsequent generations, like Hannah, who is caught up in the middle of the ramifications for her family.

At this point all my research was based on UK and Irish history. Particular influences included the feature film *The Magdalene Sisters*, set in Ireland in 1964, which first informed me of Magdalene Laundries, also known as Magdalene Asylums. These were named after Mary Magdalene, the alleged ‘fallen woman’ in the Bible who is forgiven and befriended by Jesus. The first was opened in Ireland in 1765.

To be considered ‘fallen’ in the time that Essie’s story in *Steal My Sunshine* is set was completely different to what we consider acceptable now. In the film *The Magdalene Sisters*, one girl is sent to the laundries after her cousin rapes her (her father believes she tempted him) while another is accused only of flirting and being pretty. In Ireland, in those days, that was enough. The laundries were a preventative measure as well as a punishment.

Magdalene Laundries spread around Europe and into Canada and the United States. The American singer Joni Mitchell has a song on her album *Turbulent Indigo* (1994) called ‘The Magdalene Laundries’ – you can find a performance or the lyrics online.

Many babies were born inside convents that had laundries attached to them, and the babies were then adopted out to mothers deemed more suitable. The detail of this process changed over the years. One of
the things I found so fascinating was that many of the people directly involved in this process had never and would never give birth themselves. This to me was another example of the tension between the Church and society, and a further tension between society and how it has historically treated girls and women.

On changing the setting
When I moved to Australia in 2008, still with my ‘British’ draft of Steal My Sunshine, I didn’t imagine that the practices endured by women in Ireland, the UK and the States had also taken place here. I had an impression that Australia was ‘new’ and liberal. It was when I saw the 2010 feature film Oranges and Sunshine – about the forcible relocation of British children to Australia, and the hard labour and abuse that ensued in many cases – that I saw the possibilities of transporting my story. In 2011 I undertook completely new research and set to the task of a major rewrite.

I didn’t have to look far to find evidence that the Magdalene Laundries, alongside government and hospital practices, had impacted as much on Australian families as elsewhere. In Australia, alongside the Stolen Generation was the White Stolen Generation, which is said to number approximately 250,000 adoptions.

I chose St Kilda as my main setting because I’ve always thought of it as a twin town of Brighton (UK). It has the same mix of bohemia, grunge and grandeur, and that wide expanse of water. However, because the story had originated in the UK, and because the Magdalene Laundries existed even before the First Fleet, I wanted to keep Essie’s origins in London. Since moving from London to Melbourne I’ve been fascinated by the multitude of journeys that have brought people here, so this was a great opportunity for a different kind of research – the journey from the UK to Australia in the 1950s by ship. I wanted to show in very real, physical terms how a girl in those days could be rejected not just by society but by her own family: how alone and far away from her old life she would feel.

On the characters and structure
Like Essie in Steal My Sunshine, my own grandmother was eccentric, bold, funny and extremely difficult. She was a complex person and I knew I wanted Essie to be the same – for people to love her but also see that she wasn’t a homogenous victim. Everyone’s story is different, and the context of this particular aspect of history is multifarious.

I needed to show the reader what Essie had been through so that it would seem ‘first-hand’, so I chose to split the narrative between Essie as a young girl and her grand-daughter Hannah at the same age sixty years later.

When I began to read first-person accounts of women whose babies had been taken from them, or who’d spent years in a religious institution against their will, I could hear the battle between furious rage and brokenness within them. The years hadn’t healed their pain. What they’d always been denied, as well as their freedom, and their children in some cases, was a voice. Essie had to have an individual voice that spoke only of her own experience.

It was really important to me that Steal My Sunshine be seen as a Young Adult novel. Young women are judged as much today as they were in Essie’s day, even if standards have shifted. Hannah, as a fifteen-year-old living in present-day Australia, fears judgement acutely – by her peers as much as anyone else. She’s crippled by this tension between who she feels she could be, and the way she actually behaves or the things she says (or doesn’t say). I wanted the story to be Hannah’s as much as it is Essie’s. For that reason they both have first-person narratives.

With the structure and content of Steal My Sunshine I hoped to show how important it is for young women to look back and examine how things have changed and how they’ve stayed the same. This is relatively recent history. There are stories in Australia of babies being forcibly removed from their unmarried mothers in the 1970s. It’s possible that had I been born twenty years earlier, my children could have been removed because of my decision not to marry. Perhaps more startling to teenagers is the fact that the last Magdalene Laundry closed in Ireland in 1996. Steal My Sunshine is one tiny part of a very complicated history; I hoped to make it interesting and relevant for today’s teenage generation.

THEMES

Forced adoptions
The issue of forced adoption in Australia continues to be a topic of attention in the media, with continuing investigations, and Australian political leaders offering formal apologies to those women and families affected by the practice. (See the list of further resources below for films, investigative reports and articles about forced adoption in Australia and internationally.)

Question: What other examples can you find of practices that have taken children away from their parents? For instance, the stolen Indigenous population of Australia, the ‘Children of the Highway’ program in Switzerland that lasted until the 1970s, or the migration of British children to Fairbridge Farm School in New South Wales to populate the colony.

Activity: Undertake a research project to explore the facts and stories related to one of these past forced adoption practices.
Attitudes to women

Compare attitudes to women, particularly young women, then and now. Examine the various media of the day. How have things changed? How have they stayed the same?

For instance, in the magazine New Idea from 7 February 1962 there is an advert for a book which has some sex education content, and the advert states that you have to be over 21 to purchase the book. What do magazines like this tell us about how young women were supposed to behave and what they were meant to aspire to?

Activity: Choose a decade from the previous century (1900–2000). Using images, magazine articles, quotes and other sources, make a collage showing how women and girls were treated during that decade. What did they wear? What were they allowed to do – and not do? What roles or jobs did they take on? How were attitudes to women changing in that decade?

The subjectivity of history

The Magdalene Asylums, which were homes for so-called ‘fallen women’, were named after Mary Magdalene, who had then been regarded for several hundred years as a prostitute or ‘fallen woman’ who had been repentant and therefore admitted into the Kingdom of Heaven. However, the Catholic Church admitted in the late 1960s that this was a fallacy (based on a sermon given by a Pope centuries earlier), and not at all supported by the Gospels. She was not the prostitute referred to in other parts of the Gospels.

Questions/Activity: Imagine that something we have been led to believe is the absolute truth about a historical figure turns out to be false. What would the consequences be? How would our perspectives change?

Use your discussion as a basis for a creative exercise. For example, students could rewrite the biography of a historical figure, which can lead to a discussion on the subjectivity of history – history as a series of narratives, not plain fact. The myths surrounding a figure like Ned Kelly could be used as an example of how we reimagine the facts to fit a story that suits our purposes, and how difficult it is to then accept a new truth.

The migrant experience

Essie arrives in Australia by ship. What further details can you find about what life onboard a post-WWII migrant ship would have been like? How might a young girl feel about travelling such a vast distance alone?

Activity: Write a creative piece about the experience of migrating to another country, eg. a poem.

The power of the media to affect our perceptions

Hannah feels deeply affected by the news reports about Sophie, a teenage girl who goes missing. Talk about the ways that society can hone in on one missing person and become deeply involved in their story, while there are hundreds of thousands of ‘missing people’ whose stories will never be told (including some of the children who were taken from their mothers under forced adoption practices).

Key quotes:

‘I'm just saying that one person goes missing every fifteen minutes in this country . . . That's why we don’t think about it – we can’t. So every so often we focus on one case.’ (p. 97, and read the following scene for more discussion of this phenomenon.)

Questions: Look at today’s newspaper. What stories are featured? Whose perspectives are shown or given a voice? Whose voices are left out? How do the stories shape your perceptions of the issues?

CHARACTERS

Essie as a ‘Miss Haversham’ character

Essie is briefly referred to as a ‘Miss Haversham’ character (p. 139). Miss Haversham is one of the main characters in Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations. While she is portrayed as a very manipulative character, Miss Haversham’s backstory makes us feel great sympathy for her: her mother died when she was young, and then she was jilted on her wedding day. By the time readers meet her, Miss Haversham is a heartbroken recluse who has turned into a terrifying witch-like woman.

Key quotes:

‘She was the sort of person who’d leave a massive hole in your life no matter how you felt about her.’ (p. 13)

Questions: What other literary characters have this interesting balance between being malevolent and sympathetic? Is Essie more sympathetic than she is blameworthy? Is it easy to forgive her for what she’s done because of what she has been through, or is she just as guilty?

Essie as an unreliable narrator

As the novel progresses, Hannah (and therefore the reader) begin to learn that what Essie says and does can’t be trusted as truth and that Essie can be very manipulative. Some examples include:

- She pretends to be dead in the first chapter.
• She tells Hannah that her male neighbours have been harassing her, but it later seems that this is not the case.

• She reveals one secret to Hannah (about her first child) but conceals from Hannah the truth about Hannah’s mother.

Questions: It seems that we can’t trust what Essie tells Hannah in the present day – does this throw any doubt on Essie’s stories about what happened to her in the past? Is she an unreliable narrator of her own story, or is she only unreliable from other characters’ perspectives? Does Essie really want to hold the neighbour’s baby, or is she just manipulating Hannah? Which of Essie’s lies were for good purposes (e.g. to keep her baby) and which were harmful?

Hannah

Hannah feels lost in her world and is finding it difficult to cope with the changes in her life. She wants to be fearless, like she perceives Essie to be.

Key quotes:
‘I wished I could have faith in the things I’d said and done.’ (p. 56)

‘I wanted to know young Essie – someone that complex and strong had to have really lived. I needed to know her secrets, to find out how to be fearless like she was.’ (p. 60)

‘Two separate worlds were going to collide, and that meant the different versions of myself – the different ways Chloe and Essie saw me – would collide too.’ (p. 152)

‘There it was again, a bold feeling that was trying to have its own voice, but I was scared to let go.’ (p. 207)

Questions: Why does Hannah idolise Essie, even knowing how difficult Essie is? Why does Hannah become obsessed with learning Essie’s secret? How does it affect her when she does learn what happened to Essie?

SYMBOLISM

Constellations

Evan tells Hannah his theory about the stars and how we create stories about them in order to make sense of life as we know it.

Key quotes:
‘I don’t know why but it actually makes me feel better to think of myself as a minuscule dot in the universe. Makes the little things seem less important for a moment.’ (p. 212)

‘Maybe you and your mum and Essie are like those three stars across [Orion’s] belt. You look like you should be close from here but you’re nowhere near each other.’ (p. 213)

For other key constellation quotes see pp. 289 and 323.

Question: How does Evan’s theory and knowledge about the constellations help Hannah to understand her family better?

Activity: Choose a particular group of stars and find out all the different stories, from different cultures, about that constellation. Choose one of those constellations and create your own myth.

Map-making

Hannah’s father, a cartographer, makes special maps for her because she has no sense of direction. Maps play a symbolic role in the story as Hannah navigates her way through family problems.

Key quotes:
‘I hadn’t looked at that map for a long time; the journey was as much a part of me now as any cell in my body.’ (p. 201)

‘It was the first step in a plan I hadn’t even mapped out properly. Maybe it was time to wing it.’ (p. 288)

‘This had been the real destination all along, it just wasn’t marked on the map.’ (p. 294)

For other map quotes see pp. 51, 60, 130 and 133.

Questions: What role does Hannah’s lack of direction play in the story? What does it tell you about her character? What things help Hannah to ‘find her way’ through the problems she is experiencing?

Melbourne summer

The stifling heat of a Melbourne summer, and the relief of the storms and rain when they finally arrive, play a strong role in shaping the story, particularly at the beginning of the book.

Key quotes:
‘You couldn’t fight heat like this and the only consolation was the knowledge that it couldn’t last. There’d be a storm, the heat would dissipate and everyone would be able to breathe again soon.’ (p. 58)

Questions: How does the summer heat affect Hannah’s experience? What does Australian heat mean to Essie, who has come from colder Britain? What other stories have you read or watched where weather plays a role? What other emotions or symbolic meanings can weather evoke? (See Worksheet.)
STRUCTURE AND LANGUAGE

Different voices, different modes
The book is narrated alternately by Hannah and Essie in first-person, but there are other modes of narration included too:
- A voicemail message from Evan, narrated in the form of an abstract poem (p. 59)
- Letters from Essie’s friend (p. 23, pp. 223–4)
- A casual note from Hannah’s mum (pp. 315–16)

Activity: Write a short creative piece from one of the other characters’ point of view – for instance, a dramatic monologue from Hannah’s mother about how she felt when she learned the truth about what Essie had done; a series of text messages from Chloe to Hannah to apologise (or not!) for her behaviour; what Mr Inglewood might write on Hannah’s report card for Drama; a song Evan might write about what the constellations mean to him.

Figurative language
Apart from the recurring motifs noted above, Emily Gale also uses some evocative analogies and metaphors in Steal My Sunshine. Some key examples are given below.

Key quotes:
‘I was a kid with a balloon and I’d handed it to the wrong person to hold on to. Now it was floating up to the sky and out of sight.’ (p. 73)

‘It was as if the end of school was creeping steadily towards me, like a tide coming in. I was just watching it creep closer to my toes.’ (p. 65)

‘I stayed put, nervous about seeing my own dad, but more than that, feeling like my thoughts were a broken spiderweb – all the pieces of history that had been carefully strung out, swept away with one revelation.’ (pp. 283–4)

‘Without him, I’d sunk to the bottom of every day like a stone.’ (p. 285)

‘Both of them seemed to be spinning their way deeper inside themselves, winding up into neat little spools that no one could touch. Spinning and spinning.’ (p. 148 regarding both Hannah’s mother’s pottery wheel and Sam’s DJ record set-up)

Activity: Even the title of the book, Steal My Sunshine, is an analogy for how the characters feel about each other. Complete the Worksheet on what the phrase ‘steal my sunshine’ means to Hannah and to other key characters.

RESEARCH AND RESOURCES

There are plenty of resources available on the issues and subjects considered in Steal My Sunshine – including forced adoptions, forced and voluntary migration from Britain to Australia and tensions between church and state – from fictionalised feature films and series to Four Corners investigations.

These resources will help to enrich students’ knowledge and experience of these aspects of Australia’s history.

A multi-modal study of different portrayals of the issues presented in the book, using the resources below, would be a rewarding exercise.

Activity: Watch or read some of the films, shows or articles below. Compare and contrast Steal My Sunshine against these in terms of:
- Narrative structure and mode: How is the story told? Who narrates it? Is it first-person or third-person? What other narrative techniques are used (e.g. flashbacks, multiple narrators)?
- Effect on the reader/viewer: did you experience a stronger emotional reaction to stories of forced adoption or migration when reading/viewing personal true stories (e.g. women interviewed for the Four Corners investigation), or fictional/dramatised accounts (e.g. Steal My Sunshine or The Magdalene Sisters)?

To watch
- Sinners. BBC N. Ireland. 2002. A TV movie about how women were treated in Ireland in the 1950s.
- In the Shadow of Eden. Docurama Films. 2003. Artist Rachel Romero, who was sent to a Magdalene Laundry in South Australia during the 1960s, uses film and art to document her experiences. http://rachaelromero.com
- Brides of Christ. ABC. 1991. A miniseries set in Sydney that shows the tensions between society and the Church in the 1960s.
- Oranges and Sunshine. Dir. Jim Loach. Icon Film Distribution, 2010. A film based on a book by Margaret Humphreys about children who were forcibly relocated from the UK to Australia and Canada.
- ‘Given or Taken?’ Four Corners. ABC, 27 February 2012. Television. This link also includes a number of very interesting videos, such as a 1970 episode of Four Corners called ‘Child of the Single Mother’, and
‘The Unmarried Mother’ from 1965 (highly recommended).  
http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/stories/2012/02/23/3438175.htm

- Although the convent in *Steal My Sunshine* is a made-up version based on research, there are real examples for further study. For example, follow the link below to a set of videos taken at Abbotsford Convent in Melbourne, Victoria. It was made by the son of a former inmate, and though the quality is quite poor, it contains some interesting facts.  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vjbWjQv62k

**To read:** articles

- Welch, Dylan. ‘Mums relive trauma of forced adoptions.’ *The Age* 29 September 2011.

- Castleman, Shane. ‘The Royal Women’s Hospital’s apology is long over due.’ *The Drum* 27 January 2012.


- ‘Gillard to apologise for forced adoptions.’ *ABC News* 19 December 2012, ABC. The article includes a link to ABC Open’s photo gallery of ‘parents and children separated by past policies and practices of forced adoption’.


**To read:** books


- See next page for more suggestions.

**To listen**

### FURTHER READING FROM PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

**The Forgotten Children**  
*by David Hill*

**Why this story?** Compare Essie’s story with David Hill’s memoir of 1950s British child migrants.  
From 1938 to 1974, thousands of British parents were persuaded to sign over legal guardianship of their children to Fairbridge Farm School in New South Wales to solve the problem of child poverty in Britain while populating the colony. Now many of those children have decided to speak out. Abuse was not uncommon. Loneliness was rife. Food was often inedible. The standard of education was appalling. This remarkable book is both a tribute to the children who were betrayed by an ideal that went terribly awry and a compelling account of an extraordinary episode in Australian–British History.

**Confessions of a Liar, Thief and Failed Sex God**  
*by Bill Condon*

**Why this story?** This award-winning novel explores the experience of growing up male (and Catholic) in Australia in the late 1960s.  
Neil Bridges attends a Catholic boys’ school in which teachers rule with iron fists and thick leather straps. Some crumble under the pressure but Neil toughs it out, just as his Vietnam-bound older brother has done before him. He has to be a man, after all. But at sixteen, how can he be sure of himself when he’s not sure of anything else? He loses a friend and finds another, falls in love and unwittingly treads a path that leads to revenge and possibly murder . . .

**The Story of Tom Brennan**  
*by J.C. Burke*

**Why this story?** J.C. Burke’s CBCA-award-winning novel also deals with family breakdown, faith and identity – and grandmothers who have a strong influence on the protagonist.  
For Tom Brennan, life is about rugby, mates and family – until a night of celebration changes his life forever. Tom’s world explodes as his brother Daniel is sent to jail and the Brennans are forced to leave the small town Tom’s lived in his whole life. Tom is a survivor, but he needs a ticket out of the past just as much as Daniel. He will find it in many forms . . .

*Teachers’ resources available.*
WORKSHEET: WILD WEATHER

In *Steal My Sunshine* the stifling heat of summer in Melbourne plays a role in shaping Hannah’s experiences. Below is a list of types of weather or weather events. Beside each one, write down the possible ways that weather could affect a story and its characters, or the possible symbolic meanings it could have. In the third column, note any books, poems, plays, films or songs that use this type of weather as a plot device or symbol.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of weather</th>
<th>What different emotions could it evoke? What symbolic meaning could it have?</th>
<th>Examples from literature and other media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Light rain</td>
<td><em>Could symbolise softness or spring or a fresh start or being stuck inside. Emotions could include boredom, misery, wistfulness.</em></td>
<td><em>Eponine singing ‘A Little Fall of Rain’, Les Misérables</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Thunderstorm</td>
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<td>Fog</td>
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<td>Bushfire</td>
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<td>Humid summer heat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dry summer heat or desert heat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gale-force winds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Light flakes of snow</td>
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<td>A crisp spring day with blue skies</td>
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<td>Mist in the forest</td>
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<td>Hail and sleet</td>
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<td>A fierce snowstorm</td>
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WORKSHEET: ‘STEAL MY SUNSHINE’

Imagine that each character has been asked to say what the phrase ‘steal my sunshine’ means to them. What would they say? Consider their history, and their relationships with other characters. Try to answer in that character’s voice.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>What ‘steal my sunshine’ means to me . . .</th>
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<tr>
<td>1 Hannah</td>
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<td>2 Essie</td>
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<td>3 Chloe</td>
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<td>4 Hannah’s mum, Sara</td>
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