



# TEACHERS' RESOURCES

## RECOMMENDED FOR

Upper secondary: years 10 to 12  
(contains mature content)

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## KEY CURRICULUM AREAS

- **Learning areas:** English
- **General capabilities:** Language; Literature; Literacy; Critical and Creative Thinking; Personal and Social Capability; Ethical Understanding.

## REASONS FOR STUDYING THIS BOOK

- A powerful and moving story that examines tough issues through the safety of literature, encouraging deep personal reflection on social problems.

## THEMES

- belonging
- identity
- death and bereavement
- friendship
- heartbreak
- family
- homelessness and poverty
- family: orphans and foster homes
- drugs and addiction
- survival
- coming of age
- resilience
- empowerment
- education

## PREPARED BY

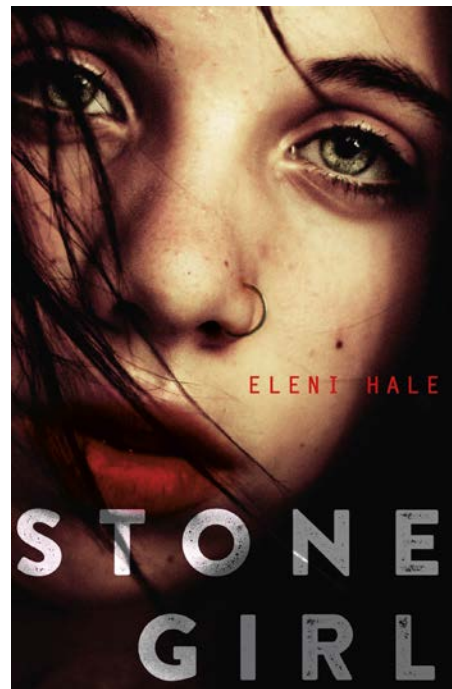
Penguin Random House Australia and Eleni Hale

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## Stone Girl

Eleni Hale

## PLOT SUMMARY

A heartbreaking novel of raw survival and hope, *Stone Girl* is the powerful and moving story of Sophie, who becomes a ward of the state at the age of twelve and navigates the dangerous world of group homes and foster care, becoming one of the children society forgets.

*I'm at the police station. There's blood splattered across my face and clothes. In this tiny room with walls the colour of winter sky I hug a black backpack full of treasures. Only one thing is certain . . . no one can ever forgive me for what I've done.*

An unspeakable event changes everything for twelve-year-old Sophie. Soon it's no more Mum, school or bed of her own. She's made a ward of the state and grows up in a volatile world where kids make their own rules, adults don't count and the only constant is change.

Then one day she meets Gwen, Matty and Spiral. Her friendship with them is her salvation, but her deepening connection to Spiral is both a source of happiness and of peril. He is the most furious, beautiful boy Sophie has ever known, and as their bond tightens and she begins to confront what happened in her past she falls deeper and deeper into a gritty world.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eleni Hale says:

I grew up in Greece on the island of Crete but moved to Australia with my mother and sister, aged eight. At 13, for many complex reasons, my family broke down and I found myself in state care. I was made a ward of the state and remained in the group home system until I was 17.

Like Sophie, I had few options by the time I left the system. The difficulty of studying while a ward meant I had no education past year 8 and my choices were few. There was little available support and a vacuum on the horizon where my prospects should have been. With so little going for me, I wondered, what would I do with the rest of my life?

A stint as a legal clerk at a law firm revealed a different world, one where education led to career and opportunities and empowerment. So I went back to school. This was a saving grace for me. I completed Year 11 and 12 at Tafe, then went on to gain a place in Professional Writing at Deakin.

Following university I worked at a number of media outlets and ended up as a reporter at the *Herald Sun*. This was an eye-opening experience that tamed the wild poet in me. I learnt minimalist language and structure while surrounded by some very talented and straight-talking professionals.

Next I moved on to media and communication advice and strategy for the union movement where I was responsible for writing media material, speeches and ghosted opinion pieces. This tightened my writing even further because I always needed to project the organisation's 'voice'.

I travelled far from the place of my youth but it never left me. Every time I sat down to write in my own time that was the story that demanded to be told. After a while I fully committed to the task of writing a book.

As I built my career *Stone Girl* was the project in the background, the writing job I did for love. Fiction is such a release. You skip out of reality and go to a place where you make all the rules, explore characters you find interesting and, most importantly for me, write what feels honest and true.

## AUTHOR'S INSPIRATION

**Eleni Hale** says:

During my teens I was a ward of the state and moved around the Victorian group home system. This experience inspired me to write *Stone Girl*. I wanted to show what can happen to kids when they live a life with minimal adult guidance and have to navigate their own life trajectory in difficult circumstances. What choices do you make in order to survive? What is the process when a child transforms from innocent to the kind of

teenager you need to be to get by in Australia's group home system?

Living in the homes is an altering experience. I remember changing very quickly to 'fit in'. Those I spent time with in residential facilities rarely showed a vulnerable side and many were watchful and defensive, always on the lookout for what they already knew was wrong with society. The longer I lived in the homes, moving every other week or month, the more separate I felt from society. The difference was palpable.

I remember homes kids wearing mismatched and old clothing. Most had home-done haircuts and, if still attending school, weren't doing well. They could come across as anti-social. This misfit type identity served to make the average person wary of them. The general dislike of 'troubled' kids is exacerbated by the fact that we often only hear about wards of states in the media if they have done something wrong or a tragedy befalls one. People seem to either fear or pity them. They are voiceless.

I wanted the reader to look inside the head of a character like Sophie who they might not like in real life, someone they might even fear or despise and locate not just their empathy but to *will* this character to succeed.

*Stone Girl* aims to demonstrate how and why things can go wrong for some teenagers and that we shouldn't give up or judge them harshly. People often become a product of their environment. Sophie's transformation is a breath-by-breath demonstration of this.

I also wanted to reach out to teens through literature that doesn't shy away from their reality. Books allow deep personal reflection on social issues and it's something that's more important today than it ever was before. Their lives are flooded with information. Most kids know someone or have heard of a story about what happens when you don't have parents, or you try drugs or things spiral out of control. Many are living it right now.

When I was young I read *Go Ask Alice* and the knowledge I gained from that book helped me many times as I navigated a world where drugs were as available as cigarettes. For this reason the issue of drugs was something I felt needed to be dealt with head on. By removing the mystery we allow teens to learn about addictive and deadly drugs like meth through the safety of literature.

Sophie is exposed to a specific set of circumstances but her need to find where she belongs, avoid danger and seek out truth in the chaos is a universal struggle.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### 'Stone Girl'

Sophie becomes resilient. This is an important aspect of her personality, she toughens up quickly, she becomes Stone Girl, and this is both positive and negative.

Hardening herself, especially against adults, serves to protect her and isolate her. In a sense, she parents herself. But stony self-preservation can cut both ways. She doesn't trust anyone. Doesn't ask for help even though she often desperately needs it. Doesn't even know she needs guidance until she meets Phil the social worker.

Her Stone Girl persona is what she uses to hide her vulnerability. When she lifts her chin against the world then she can shut out the things that have happened to her. She uses her anger to protect her.

The scene when she confronts Scotty about what happened to her mum is the first crack in the Stone Girl facade. She hated and blamed Scott but she suddenly understands that blame is not so simple. Even though she won't admit it, Sophie begins to grasp the bigger picture outside of her own feelings of hurt. The despair this incites in her no doubt contributes to the downwards trajectory that follows with drugs and accepting Spiral's worsening behaviour towards her.

In the end, seeing her desperate mother reflected in her own actions is indicative of the complete loss of Stone Girl. She did not escape her past after all.

What Sophie does with this makes *Stone Girl* a story of redemption and hope instead of another tragic warning. She transforms once more, this time into a person who wants something better, a different 'self', one still striving to survive but under different circumstances.

#### Questions

- What does the title *Stone Girl* mean to Sophie and why does she privately refer to herself as this?
  - How do friendships in the homes differ from friendships at school?
  - Belonging is a major theme in *Stone Girl*, what does Sophie do to try to find where she belongs?
  - How does Sophie's relationship with adults change after her mother dies.
  - *Stone Girl* is written in three sections, summarise each in regards to how Sophie changes her views of the world and herself?
- What are some of the things Sophie does to fit in with other kids in the homes and why is this important her?
  - Why doesn't she go to her mum's funeral?
  - Sophie thought she could try drugs but stay safe, why does this not work out for her?
  - How does Sophie blame herself for her mum's death and why?
  - What are the factors involved in Sophie's decision to try for a better life?

## WRITING STYLE

The author uses first-person present tense, interspersed with flashbacks in italics (which are also first-person present tense) describing the traumatic events that led to Sophie's fate at the start of the novel: being interviewed at a police station after her mother's death, having been found at the age of twelve with her mother's decomposing body in their flat.

The author also has divided Sophie's story into three parts so we see the events that build to each dramatic turning point at the end of each section. This serves to draw our attention in heartbreaking detail to the massive changes her character must experience in order to survive parentless in the homes and foster-care system in Australia.

The author's writing style reflects the interior state of Sophie and her trauma cleverly, and her choice of language to render Sophie's voice and the voices of those around her, especially in dialogue, is unerring in its accuracy and authenticity, inspired by the author's own experiences living in the homes system as a teenager and the real-life language and interactions she experienced in all of their ugliness but also their poignancy.

#### Questions

1. How would you describe the writing style in this novel?
2. What is the narrative perspective throughout? How does the point of view in which the story is told affect how and when information is revealed to the reader?
3. How might the story have been different if it was written from another character's point of view?
4. How is the story structured? How does the structure give dramatic weight to key moments in Sophie's life?
5. How does the author create tension in the story?



6. What is Sophie's character arc in the novel? What does she learn about herself and others? How does she change as the story progresses? How does her vulnerability make her more at risk of finding herself in dangerous situations? Why does she make the choices she does?
7. What role does 'voice' play in this novel? What do people mean when they say an author and a narrator has an authentic voice?
8. How does the author treat the most dramatic moments in the novel? How does her writing style reflect the urgency and danger of particular moments in Sophie's life? How does the structure and chapter length reflect this?
9. YA author of *One True Thing* and *A Shadow's Breath*, Nicole Hayes, says: 'Gripping, eloquent, and realer than real, *Stone Girl* will break your heart into a million tiny pieces, then quietly put it back together again.' How does *Stone Girl* break our hearts and put them back together?
10. YA author of *Risk, Black and Wreck*, Fleur Ferris, says *Stone Girl* is 'a heartbreaking, authentic and exceptionally written story'. What role does authenticity play in *Stone Girl*? How accurate do you think the dialogue and interactions are? How does a writer achieve authenticity?

#### Activities

1. Choose an incident from the story and write it from another character's point of view.
2. Imagine you are in Sophie's situation. How would you react? What would you do? Write a chapter imagining that you are experiencing what Sophie is experiencing? How do you feel? How would you behave?

#### PRE-READING QUESTIONS

1. Research what happens to children who are unable to live with their parents, either because their parents have died or because they are incapable of looking after them. Discuss.
2. Find some recent news articles about children living in care. Examine the stories with positive outcomes and those with negative ones and discuss. What makes all the difference to these children?
3. Which organisations and charities help vulnerable children like Sophie?

#### KEY STUDY TOPICS

##### Belonging and friendship

###### Questions

1. Why does Sophie feel like she doesn't belong anywhere?
2. What would it take to help her feel as though she belongs?
3. What is the role friendship plays in helping Sophie feel like she belongs?
4. How important is friendship to Sophie?
5. What do you see as the most important characteristics of friends in this novel?
6. What happens when Sophie is separated from her friends?

##### Family, identity and home

7. What is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs? Research this and list the elements it includes.
8. Which of these did Sophie miss out on?
9. Why do you think these are important to Sophie's identity and self-esteem? Why do you think she behaves the way she behaves when they are absent?
10. Why is family so important to our physical and mental wellbeing? Can friendship replace family in Sophie's case?
11. How does Sophie get past these hurdles and empower herself?

##### Loneliness, homelessness and mental health

- What role does loneliness play in this story? When is Sophie at her most loneliest?
- How is Sophie's mental health affected by her circumstances? By not having a home or real-life or present parents? When does this reach crisis point for her?
- Where can teenagers experiencing similar psychological trauma and pain seek help? Research organisations that help, including those listed at the end of the book.

##### Drug addiction

- How is drug addiction represented in this novel? What avenues exist for the characters to recover from drug addiction? What is it about their circumstances that makes them more at risk?
- How does Sophie find a way out?

