

# Teachers' Notes by Helen Sykes

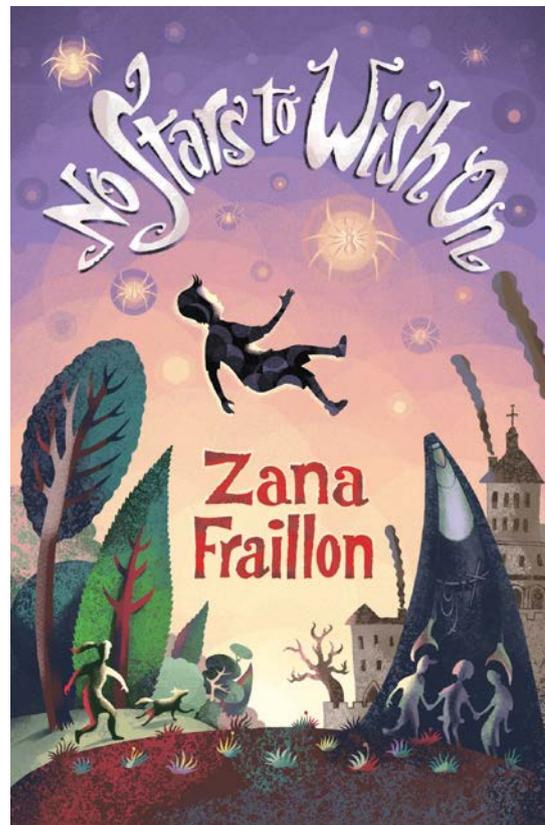
# No Stars to Wish On by Zana Fraillon

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Recommended for ages 10-12 yrs

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## INTRODUCTION

*No Stars to Wish On* is fiction based on fact. Zana Fraillon has written a novel for upper primary/lower secondary readers, based on the stories of the Forgotten Generation. The term 'Forgotten Generation' is now commonly used to refer to the many thousands of children who were placed in institutional care in Australia during the period from the 1920s to the 1970s. Many of the Forgotten Generation were child migrants from the United Kingdom, but many others were Australian-born - children from poor families, especially the children of single mothers. Fraillon's protagonist, Jack, is typical of the 'generation': he is removed from his family, along with his sister and two of his cousins, because his single mother has difficulty supporting them. The children were told that their families did not want them. As in Jack's case, most had all contact with their families cut off and the families were refused any information about their whereabouts.

The Home in which Jack is placed is, like most of the institutions at the time, run by the church. Many institutions, like Jack's 'Home for Orphans and Unwanted Children', were austere, underfunded places where children suffered physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Children were exploited as sources of cheap labour, lived in fear of harsh punishment, received inadequate schooling and were sometimes sent out into abusive foster homes. Some were even used by medical authorities as human guinea pigs to test new vaccines. Fraillon exposes the reader to all of these horrors in the novel, but she does so skilfully in a way that will anger and sadden child readers but will not traumatise them.

Fraillon tells the story through Jack's voice, the voice of an innocent narrator who does not always understand the significance of what he is telling us. Jack remembers warmly his big, loving family: Mum, who takes in children in need and loves them like her own; his strong and irrepressible older sister Janey; his cousins Amrei, Phin and Baby Sal; the elders with their folk wisdom - his grandmother, his great-grandmother and his three great-great-aunts. Mum is the only breadwinner; there are no welfare payments and jobs for women are both scarce and poorly paid, so that there is not always enough to eat, but there is no shortage of hugs. To the authorities, the children are 'in moral danger' and neglected. Their home is raided at night by men in boots who take Jack and Baby Sal away in one truck, Janey and Phin in another. Through Jack's eyes we see the church-run home for 'Orphans and Unwanted Children'. It is a cold, uncaring, brutal place where the children live in constant fear.

Fraillon has created an engaging character in Jack. Despite his fear and loneliness, Jack remains determinedly optimistic, convinced that he will find out how to escape. Jack had begun learning to tell jokes to try to cheer up his mother after the death two years previously of his younger brother, Petey. In the institution, Jack clings to his jokes for comfort. Fraillon uses Jack's jokes - the not-very-funny, rather corny jokes of a seven-year-old - to mark off episodes in Jack's narrative. No one smiles in the Home - neither the nuns nor the children - and Jack is determined to change that. In a triumphant moment towards the end of the novel, he defiantly shouts nun jokes to the room full of children and sees them laugh.

The narrative is divided into three different types of text. Jack's first-person narrative predominates, interspersed with the sections in which he remembers the jokes he learnt. There is also third-person narrative that focuses on Jack's older cousin, Amrei. Amrei was not taken by the authorities, probably because she was thought to be too old. Amrei grieves for the lost children and dreams of recovering them. The sections of narrative to do with Amrei and her eventual journey to find Jack are set off from Jack's first-person account by the use of italic font. The style is very different. Jack speaks in a very simple, colloquial voice, telling his story in a bare, understated style that reinforces the horror. The third-person narrative is almost lyrical in contrast. In a surprising but effective experiment, it also moves beyond the grim realism of Jack's narrative to a fantasy world that records Amrei's 'Visions' - visions that lead her to Jack. Jack rejects the nuns' religion and their God but he shares his family's belief in 'the Spirits', a world of spiritual possibilities beyond those of the material world. Fraillon's ability to combine so seamlessly two such different narratives is one of the strengths of the novel.

As well as exploring the conditions for the forgotten children in institutions, Fraillon has written a thriller about the fate of one child - the one Jack calls 'the real Number 49'. The nuns claim that Number 49 ran away, but slowly Jack - and the reader - piece together the clues about a terrible crime that has been committed.

The novel has been likened to Louis Sachar's *Holes*, partly because of the blending of realistic narrative and fantasy but also because of its success in exploring injustice. *No Stars to Wish On* will make young readers angry, as *Holes* does. Both books make readers question a world in which the young are powerless against the system. Comparisons have also been made with John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*. Both Boyne and Fraillon handle very confronting and painful material. Both reveal the truth while carefully negotiating the narrative so that young readers are not traumatised.

In 2009 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made an official apology to the children of the Forgotten Generation, many of whom were separated permanently from their families. The transcript of Prime Minister Rudd's very moving speech can be found on the Forgotten Australians: Our History website at <http://forgottenaustralianshistory.gov.au/apology.html>.

You might like to remind yourself of Rudd's words before beginning to teach the novel. Fraillon has clearly drawn upon them for inspiration.

Fraillon's 'Author's Note' at the back of the book is a good, quick overview of the Forgotten Generation.

#### **RELEVANCE TO THE CURRICULUM**

This is a perfect novel for whole-class study in upper primary and lower secondary classes. The novel offers:

- the opportunity for students to explore ethical questions, as required by the Australian curriculum;
- strong student engagement;
- accessibility to readers with a wide range of reading abilities;
- an excellent example of the use of the innocent narrator;
- insight into relatively recent times, when values were very different from those of today;
- a challenge to stereotypes about the disabled;
- themes that are relevant to the lives of young people: themes like family, friendship, grief and loss, courage and resilience;
- challenging ideas that are important to young people: What makes a good family? To what extent should society intervene in family life? How can society support families so that they can best protect the children in their care?
- a well-constructed mystery plot;
- a triumphant and unexpected resolution, although tinged with the sadness of what has been lost.

The novel is a valuable resource for all areas of the English curriculum. It is quality literature that offers opportunities for students to increase their understanding of how novels work, and it is an innovative text that successfully combines realism and fantasy.

#### **A NOTE ON THE TIME PERIOD**

In the author's note at the end of the novel, Zana Fraillon tells us that it was government policy for children from poor homes to be placed in care from the 1920s to the 1970s. It is not obvious when exactly in that period the novel is set. It is long enough ago for a job with a blacksmith to be a likely

choice when children are sent out from the Home to work (p.18). It is later than 1934, because that was when the first *Mary Poppins* book was published, and Jack thinks with joy of Mr Wigg who had too much laughing gas in him (p.78). Several references suggest the late 1950s: Amrei has left school as soon as she turned fourteen, as most students did at that period (p.22); Jack's reference to sword-fighting like Zorro with his Mum (p.91) fits with the huge popularity of the Zorro television series not long after the introduction of television to Australia in 1956, although Jack and his mother would have seen television only in a shop window; and the modern hula hoop, like the ones the children were given to play with when the Governors visited (p.104), was introduced in 1958. However, it seems that Fraillon has deliberately left the exact time unspecified. What is important is that the situation she describes existed for more than fifty years and children who were institutionalised are still alive today.

The location is also unspecified. In Jack's story, we never see outside the barbed-wire fence of the institution. Amrei, on her journey to find Jack, curls up between the roots of 'an overgrown boob tree' (p.56), which suggests northern Australia, but as with time, exact location is unimportant.

### A WORD OF CAUTION

While it is rare for children to be in institutional care these days, many children are in foster care. In some schools children are or have been in immigration detention. Make sure that you know the circumstances of your students, as Jack's story can be quite confronting for some of them.

Jack's experiences with the nuns have made him very bitter about religion. His forthright statements about God may distress students who have a strong religious faith. Again, if you know your students well, you will be able to deal with this issue sensitively. The strongest expression of Jack's lack of belief is on page 122: 'I don't care about God's will. Who cares what God wants if we all want to be together? Who told God he could just decide everything for everyone? And if it is all God's will, then why bother with people at all? Why have people who can think and do and BE, if nothing we think or do matters anyway?'

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## PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

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### HOME

Have students complete the sentence:

- *Home is ...*

Encourage students to write a number of sentences, ending them in different ways.

Have students share their sentences with a partner, and then with the whole class. Collect a sample of students' sentences in a document that everyone can access (an electronic whiteboard works well here, because everyone can easily have a final copy of the document). Ask students to discuss what the word 'home' means in the different sentences. Discuss with students the idea that words carry emotional meanings. Are there any sentences in the collection where 'home' has negative emotional overtones?

Ask students to consider the use of the word 'home' in 'A Home for Orphans and Unwanted Children'. Why do they think such places were called 'homes' and not 'institutions'?

### PREDICTIONS

1. Read the title of the novel to students. Ask them what it means to 'wish on a star'. Students will probably know the lyrics of the Disney song 'When you wish upon a star'. Is it important to be able to wish for things, to dream? What would life be like if you couldn't dream? What does the title 'No stars to wish on' suggest?

2. Ask students to examine in detail the cover image, especially the human figures. What might these figures represent? Are there any clues as to what this novel might be about? Ask them to

name genres they are familiar with, such as science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy and realistic fiction. Does the cover give any clues as to the genre of this novel?

3. Have students turn over to the back cover and read the back cover blurb. Does this give any clues as to the kind of novel they are about to read?

4. The back cover blurb refers to the 'Forgotten generation'. Ask students if they have heard that term before. It is probably a good idea to explain the term at this stage and to tell students that former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd made an important speech in parliament in 2009 apologising to the Forgotten Generation. There is a *YouTube* video available showing a couple of minutes of Rudd's speech, superimposed with documentary footage of children in care, including the many supposedly 'unwanted' children who were sent here from Britain. That clip can be found at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3znXsldzMRo>

and you might like to show it at this stage, but it is probably preferable to leave more detailed research until after *No Stars to Wish On* has been read.

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

Ask students to flick through the pages of the novel. Do they see anything interesting or unusual about the way in which it is organised? Ask them to look closely at pages 10 and 11. Is there anything unusual about the way these pages are printed? They will probably immediately notice the use of italic font, but there are in fact three different fonts used here: the jokes section is in a different font from Jack's narrative. Explain to students that the different fonts are used for different types of text. Have them look at pages 26-27, to see the three different types of text repeated. Ask them to turn over to page 30: what do they notice here? Lead them to notice that there are chapters in italic font separating chapters in normal font, and within the chapters in normal font there are sections marked off with a different typeface and some marks. Ask them to keep an eye on those marks as they read the novel, to see if they can work out what they mean.

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## GUIDED READING

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*No Stars to Wish On* is a great text for reading aloud. Having the teacher read aloud, at least until page 45, is highly recommended, so that students can engage emotionally with the text. A good reading aloud will also highlight the difference in style between the italicised chapters about Amrei and Jack's colloquial first-person narrative.

Each class and each teacher will have different strategies for reading the novel as a whole. In most cases there will be some time given in class for silent reading and perhaps some more reading aloud, supported by a requirement for certain sections to be read for homework. If students participate in the reading aloud, it is a good idea to give them notice beforehand of the sections that they will be asked to read, with an opportunity for them to rehearse their reading. Students who might normally be reluctant to read aloud in class may be persuaded to take on Jack's jokes; they would understand that the telling of a good joke needs some rehearsal. Amrei's sections need to be read by a very fluent reader and may be best left to the teacher.

*Blackline master 1: Jack's family* and *Blackline master 2: The Home* can be given to students to guide their reading. They can fill these tables in progressively as they read. You may want to check on their progress from time to time.

*Blackline master 1: Jack's family* allows students to explore questions about values. As students discuss what they have listed here, refer them to their earlier work with the sentences beginning: 'Home is ...' See if they can arrive at a consensus as to what matters most about family and home.

*Blackline master 2: The Home* is also about values. Students are asked to work in pairs to rank the horrors the children experienced. Have them share their findings with the class. How do such things as the absence of love and the constant fear of punishment rank alongside hunger and cold and hard, boring work?

*Blackline master 3: A quick quiz* allows students to test their memories, but also draws attention to some important details, such as how young Amrei is when she leaves home on that terrible quest to find Jack. Students are asked to attempt the questions from memory first, and then they can check their answers by following up the appropriate page references.

#### Answers to BLM 3

Q. 1 4x9 rows = 36 boys. Q. 2 Six, almost seven. Q. 3 Thirteen or fourteen. Page 1 tells us that she had her first Vision not long after she was six; page 24 tells us that it was exactly seven years later that the children were taken. She was probably just fourteen, as she had just taken up her first job. Q. 4 Aunty Nell. Q. 5 Dog. Q. 6 The stray cat that they take in. Q. 7 Salt. Q. 8 By sign language. Q. 9 He refused to eat his roast capsicums because he was allergic to them. Q. 10 Crickets. Q. 11 Jack. Q. 12 He was too small to carry the boiling water, so he scalded himself. Final question: The marks show Jack's attempt to keep track of the days.

## THE NARRATOR

### FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE - THE INNOCENT NARRATOR

One of the first and most important choices a writer makes is the choice of narrative voice. Revise with students the term 'first-person narrator' and discuss what other choices there are for writers. Ask students if they can give examples of different kinds of narrative voice from books they have read recently.

Have students turn to page 3 and read the first two paragraphs. How can they tell that this is first-person narration?

Ask students why they think Zana Fraillon chose to tell the greater part of this story through Jack's voice. What kind of voice does Jack have? What kind of person is he? You can introduce, if you think it is appropriate, the term 'innocent narrator'.

Which other characters' voices could Zana Fraillon have chosen to tell the story? One of the other boys - perhaps Samson? Jack's sister Janey? How would the story be different if told by Jack's Mum? How different would it be if told by one of the nuns - whether the terrifying Mother Superior or 'the nice nun', Sister Augusta? Do students agree that, if a different voice had been chosen, it would be a very different book? Have students discuss whether the author's choice of Jack's voice was the best decision.

### THIRD-PERSON NARRATIVE

Have students turn to page 1 and read the first two paragraphs. How is this different from Jack's first-person narration? Make sure that they know the term 'third-person narrator'. Have students look at those first two paragraphs while you read to them how it would be different if it were written in the first person, in Amrei's voice:

*Before Jack was born, when I was six, a spider appeared on my shoulder. I wished it had been a bird or a butterfly, but the mark was definitely a spider. I shivered, just looking at it.*

Students will notice that that doesn't make very much difference. We get much the same information, whether the extract is first person or third person. But in other cases the first-person would not work as well for the sections of the text that focus on Amrei. Look, for example, at pages 158-9. Read this section through with students and help them to see how this allows us to know what Amrei was doing and feeling (as would first-person narration in Amrei's voice), but it also tells us about Jack, and - most importantly - it tells us things that neither Amrei or Jack know and that could not have been told if a first-person voice had been used: 'they didn't even notice the swarm of mice heading toward the Home.' Introduce the term 'omniscient or all-knowing narrator' if you think it is appropriate. (If students have read recently a piece of fiction using limited third-person narrative - third-person narrative that takes the perspective of just one character, it could be useful to explain the difference.)

## **MULTIPLE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES**

It is probable that students are quite familiar with both first-person and third-person narration, but they may not have previously come across a novel that uses both. Would the novel have been as interesting if we had only had Jack's voice? Can students articulate the effect of the passages in italics?

## **STUDENTS' OWN WRITING**

Have students re-write an episode from the novel in Janey's voice. A good choice would be Jack and Janey's reunion, when Janey is brought to the same Home as Jack, beginning from the paragraph in the middle of page 65...

*I said two good things happened today.*

...to where the joke section begins on page 66.

Give students time to work on their writing, and then to share it with a partner, who may recommend changes.

Have students share their writing as widely as possible - whether you make a wall display in the classroom or post their work online.

## **THE CHARACTERS**

Jack's extended family is fairly complex. Have students draw up a family tree, showing Jack's relationship to his Mum (Nell), his sister Janey, his dead brother Petey, and his three cousins Amrei, Phin and Baby Sal. Jack shares with his cousins a grandmother, a great-grandmother (Great-gram) and three great-great-aunts (Jesse, Bette and Annie).

Ask students to brainstorm words and phrases to describe each of the following characters, beginning with quite simple descriptions such as 'Jack's sister':

- Janey
- Amrei
- Phin

Have students do the same for Jack's friends in the Home:

- Samson
- Charlie

Ask students to brainstorm words and phrases to describe Jack. This is a good opportunity for vocabulary development. Words that could be introduced include 'optimistic/optimist/optimism'; 'pessimistic/pessimist/pessimism'; 'resilience/resilient'; 'empathetic/empathy/empathise'; 'courageous/courage'.

## **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

Characters in stories change and develop as a result of their experiences. Ask students to consider how Jack changes during the story.

One interesting aspect of the novel is the revelation that the experience of institutionalisation changes people in destructive ways. Some of the examples are chilling. 'Most of the babies don't even cry much any more. They just stare around them.' (p.32)

Of the boy Anthony who ran away, was caught by the police and then brought before the Director, Jack says: 'I don't want to know what makes that kind of Still' (p.19). Particularly disturbing is Samson's observation about the girl who was once like everyone else until she was forced to spend a

week locked up in isolation in the Hole: 'That's the Girl-Who-Spent-a-Week-in-the-Hole - won't look at anyone, stuck in her own head.' (p.75)

Even the strong, irrepressible Janey changes. When Janey is returned by the foster family that took her away, she is accused of theft, something Jack knows she would never do. Jack comments on the reports he hears of Janey's behaviour: 'it sounded like a kind of wild animal, a crazy person, not someone staying strong, the way Janey would.' (p.118)

While the children are scarred and changed by their experiences in the Home, so are the nuns. Jack comments that the nuns are not like the ones in the church near home, who are 'smiley and kind and make you feel warm to be near' (pp.13-14). Here, in the Home: 'None of the Nuns come close to being real people.' (p.41) 'That's an important part of being Nunish. Not caring. They try to make you not care. About family and friends and how you feel and everything.' (p.60)

Jack is aware of the destructive effect of life in the Home and worries that it is even changing him: 'Sometimes I wonder if the Nuns are right, if being evil is inside us. How else can I feel glad at someone else getting into trouble instead of me?' (p.63)

Jack changes but he does not become less human, as do so many of the others. Ask students why they think Jack comes through the experience as a better, not a lesser, person.

#### **WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO JANEY, PHIN AND BABY SAL?**

While Fraillon allows us a happy ending in allowing Jack to triumph for a moment over Mother Superior and to escape with Amrei, she does not give us such easy comfort in relation to his sister and cousins. We know that Phin has been sent to a boys' home for difficult boys - in effect a prison - because he refuses to co-operate with the authorities. We know that Baby Sal was suffering from a serious fever when she was taken from her home and that she does not seem to be in the dormitory where the babies are kept. Fraillon leaves us to draw our own conclusions about what might have happened to them. You might like to discuss with students how they feel about the author being unspecific here. Young readers often expect the author to tell them 'what really happened'. The concept that the book is fiction and there is no 'reality' is hard for them to grasp, because, if the book is successful, the reader has begun to think of the characters as real people.

Fraillon has left us to assume the worst - boys like Phin spent their entire childhood in such homes and babies like Sal died - or to accept a more optimistic view as Jack would do. This is even more the case with Janey. The adult reader suspects from the clues that Janey, when fostered, was abused - partly because we know that, historically, that was the fate of many such girls. There is no need to raise this possibility if you feel that your students are not ready for it.

#### **JACK'S RESILIENCE**

Jack has an almost unflinching ability to see the bright side of almost any situation. Have students read the paragraph on page 16 beginning: 'One of the other boys called me stupid ...' as an example of this ability. Ask them if they can think of other examples. There are dozens: Jack's reaction to being locked in the boiler room (pp.8-9); his view that his deafness is an advantage because he can't hear the nuns yelling (p.59) and he can use sign language to communicate with Janey (p.65); the fact that he likes the unpleasant rubbish-pile smell, because it reminds him of home, where there is a tip at the end of the street (p.90).

Have students re-read the section on pages 74-5 with the repeated use of 'At least ...'. What does this show about Jack?

#### **JACK'S COURAGE**

Ask students to find evidence that Jack is very frightened in the Home.

How does he become strong and brave? What 'Brave Ideas' does he have, and how successful are they? Ask students to look at pages 83-5 (the decision to bring some happiness to the person in the

Hole), pages 88-9 (the idea about the mousetraps) and pages 115-8 (his realisation that he must get help for sick Samson).

### **THE STEREOTYPING OF JACK**

Revise with students the meaning of 'stereotype'. How do the nuns stereotype Jack because he is deaf? How different is the real Jack from the person the nuns see?

### **HUMOUR IN *NO STARS TO WISH ON***

The most obvious example of humour in the novel is Jack's jokes. Ask students what they think of Jack's jokes. Are they really clever, or rather corny? How many of the jokes have students heard before? Why do they think Jack tells himself these jokes?

Check that students remember why Jack first began learning jokes (to cheer his mother up after baby Petey's death).

To begin with, Jack tries remembering the jokes to keep his spirits up, but the jokes become more important than that. Ask students to consider how Jack's jokes become part of Jack's 'war' against the system.

Many of Jack's jokes are about the ridiculous. Jack soon realises that he has landed in a ridiculous world. He keeps pointing out the terrible 'joke' that has been played on him:

'Here's the real joke: I'm not who they think I am.' (p.3)

'Here's another joke: being put in the boiler room didn't make me feel sorry, or sad, or scared - it made me happy!' (p.8)

The funniest joke of all is the joke about the kids taking their shoes off so that they don't wear them out (p.71). This is a pivotal scene in the book. Re-read it with students (from the paragraph beginning 'Samson looks at me ...' on page 71 to the bottom of the page). Ask students what this scene tells us about Jack and about the world in which he finds himself.

Ask students to identify other very funny scenes from the novel. One that they will choose is the scene of Jack's last confrontation with Mother Superior where he comments with glee: 'One little mouse can make a difference after all.' (p.156) It could be interesting to ask students to consider what this scene would be like if it was turned into a scene from a film.

Introduce students if appropriate to terms like 'black humour' and 'farce'.

### **THE MYSTERY OF NUMBER 49**

Jack thinks at first that the real Number 49 has run away and that he has left clues that will help Jack also escape. But the clues are to a very different type of mystery. Ask students to make a list of clues that eventually lead to our understanding of what has happened to the real Number 49. They include the following:

- Samson won't talk about the real Number 49: 'His face goes all funny and scrunched up' (p.54)
- Jack finds the shoe in the rubbish and realises that 'it means the real Number 49 isn't coming back'. (p.93)
- Sister Mary goes white when she sees the shoe. (p.93)
- Charlie tells Jack about the real Number 49. The nuns claim that Number 49 ran away, but Charlie knows that he was very sick and that he was one of the kids who were given injections by the doctors. (pp.127-8)
- Charlie said she found Number 49's shoe. (p.128)

- Charlie took Number 49 to the hospital wing, to the moustached doctor - 'the one who gets cross when kids are sick'. 'In the morning he was gone, and no one ever saw him again. The real Number 49 never came back.' (p.132)
- The shoe dropped out of the sack the Director was carrying. (p.133)
- Charlie uses the word that Jack has been dreading: 'Dead.' (p.134)
- The Director put the sack in a hole in the dirt. The next day the rubbish tip was moved. (p.135)

## THE STYLE OF THE NOVEL

*No Stars to Wish On* offers excellent opportunities for enhancing students' understanding of different forms of language. Zana Fraillon has chosen to use very simple, colloquial language for Jack's narrative. Understanding the differences between spoken and written language is very important. *Blackline master 4: Sentences* is designed to help students revise what they know about sentences and to understand why, when they are always being told that they must write proper sentences, some authors break the rules.

### COLLOQUIAL LANGUAGE

As well as using *Blackline master 4: Sentences* to increase students' understanding of the sentence, you might want to look at other language features in the extract from page 35 that are characteristic of speech but usually unacceptable in formal writing, such as the sentence beginning with 'and' and the use of 'though' at the end of a sentence. Use this as the basis for further exploration of the author's use of colloquial language. Here are some of the many examples of the use of colloquial words. Ask students if they can find a more formal alternative (perhaps by consulting a thesaurus).

- 'The Nun just started *laying into* her. She got even more *whacks* than the birthday girl.' (p.18)
- 'We had a great old *chinwag*.' (p.65)
- 'the *wonky* one in the kitchen'. (p.69)
- 'Letting them believe I couldn't talk really came back to *bite me on the bum*.' (p.79)
- 'mouse *poo*'. (p.108)

Ask students to collect more colloquial words from the novel. There are also examples of grammar that is colloquial and inappropriate in writing, such as:

- 'He was always a good fighter, *our Phin*.' (p.35)
- 'Gotta walk to school in bare feet.' (p.71)
- 'I better stay here.' (p.80)
- 'I sort of feel I know the real Number 49.' (p.82)
- 'Me and the mice against Mother Superior.' (p.83)
- 'They [the doctors] sort of look through you.' (p.101)

Answers to BLM 4

Extract 2

Q. What is your name?

A. Jack.

Q. How old are you?

A. Seven.

Q. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

A. A sister, Janey.

Q. Is she older or younger than you?

A. Older.

Extract from pages 14-15:

Great-great-aunt Annie knows about potatoes. Potatoes and babies. Perhaps there's something in babies that's the same as in potatoes. Great-great-aunt Annie can just look at a baby and tell what's wrong, or right. Mostly, anyway.

Extract from page 35.

He was always a good fighter, our Phin. Even when kids were bigger and tougher than him. And he always smiled when he was fighting, as if he enjoyed the challenge. The bigger the kids, the bigger Phiny's smile. That used to make the big kids really angry when he was fighting, though. Or scared. He was too clever for that.

## THE DIFFERENCE IN STYLE BETWEEN THE FIRST- AND THIRD-PERSON NARRATIVES

### Sentence structure

After students have looked closely at Jack's sentences, see if they can see the difference in style in sections of the novel that are written in the third person. Complex sentences (those that include a subordinate clause) are common, whereas they are rare in Jack's narrative:

*When Jack was still small, his father disappeared, leaving Jack's mother to look after the family on her own.* (p.10)

- The main clause - 'his father disappeared' is extended both by the subordinate clause 'When Jack was still small' and by the participial phrase 'leaving Jack's mother to look after the family on her own'.

*Amrei felt her tears splash onto the ground, mingling with the rain, which was now falling in earnest.* (p.97)

- This is the same structure as the previous example: a subordinate clause 'which was now falling in earnest' and a participial phrase 'mingling with the rain'.

While complex sentences do occur in Jack's narrative, the majority of sentences have only a principal clause, or else they have the loose structure of speech, as in this example:

*But the best thing about being deaf is when your sister suddenly arrives one day in the back of a police car, and even though the Nuns say you can't go see her, you sister who you haven't seen for two whole months, you can sign to each other across the Eating Hall and have a whole conversation with no one ever knowing.* (p.59)

- Grammatically, that is enormously complex, but it is undoubtedly the language of speech, not of writing.

Note: It is important not to let the examination of the grammar of the text eclipse the exploration of the characters and the issues. However, using real texts to teach the grammar required by the curriculum is more effective than using isolated exercises.

### Vocabulary

The word choice in the third-person narrative is also much more sophisticated. Jack would not use words like 'mingling' (p.97), 'awe' (p.119), 'landscape' (p.136) or 'hallucinations' (p.137). Ask students to find other examples of the use of more sophisticated words in the third-person narrative.

### Multiple narrative perspectives

It could be worth re-visiting with students the question first raised when looking at Jack's narrative: Would the novel have been as interesting if we had only had Jack's voice?

## JACK'S USE OF IMAGERY

Despite the simplicity of Jack's language, Fraillon gives him some startlingly fresh and vivid images. Having students examine some of these is a good way of revising figurative language, especially the difference between simile and metaphor. Many of the similes and metaphors Fraillon uses are extended images, running over several lines of text to create a memorable picture. Here are some of the best examples of the images, but see if students can find others:

- GurrGurr, the cat, 'stuck to Gran's leg like a furry tick.' (p.23)
- 'Their tears will flood through the hallway and out into the street, and a whole new river will whoosh right throughout the town.' (p.29)
- 'I think of the toys up there, like Rapunzel trapped in her tower waiting for her Prince Charming to carry her away.' (p.30)
- 'Being at school is like peeking through a window at all the stuff that's out there.' (p.50)
- 'School is like one massive spiderweb ...' (p.50)
- The nuns' voices 'send claws running through his blood.' (p.59)

The following is an excellent example of Fraillon's use of an extended image. Jack imagines the families coming to find the children:

'... like a whole wave of people. They'll wash right up over the barbed-wire fences and flood the whole building. And as the families find each other again, every brick in this place will split in two. The whole place will crumble away, as if it had never existed. We'll be swept along in the wave of families, every one of us. Swept all the way back home.' (pp.42-3)

Some of the best of the images are used to express feelings, in a fresh and original way that is one of the strengths of the novel. Here are some examples:

'... it's hard to work fast when your heart feels like an elephant has stomped all over it'. (p.34)

'If I'd heard that [Baby Sal crying for him], my heart might have split down the middle, like the firewood when Mum chops it. Little chips of heart all over the floor. And I don't reckon a splintered heart can ever be glued back up the way it was before.' (pp.36-7)

'Seeing the babies laugh lifted the rock that had settled in the bottom of my stomach.' (p.42)

'You get the feeling you'd get if a bucket of icy water had been thrown over you.' (p.51)

'Today my heart is singing. I can feel it flying about my chest, thumping into my ribs and rolling around my stomach.' (p.60)

'I want to float up high high high into the sky - so high that all there is is white, and nothing else. So high that I don't have to think about things any more.' (p.108)

'Thinking about it makes me angry, and when I'm angry I get all shrivelled up inside, as if I've just eaten a lemon ...' (p.112)

'My feet touch the ground. My legs feel like jelly, wibbly-wobbling all over the place. I have to force my legs to move, to take steps. Janey wouldn't have jelly legs and shaky feet. Janey would be strong. I will be strong too.' (p.112)

## THE USE OF MOTIFS

Students may be unfamiliar with the use of motifs in literature, but they are important in the novel and worth looking at. Ask students to collect all the different references to:

- mice
- spiders
- shoes
- jokes, smiles and laughter

Explain that motifs are ideas repeated throughout a novel like this to give unity or cohesiveness to the work. It is not necessary to explain them precisely: 'the spiders mean ...'. The repeated motif of the spiders connects Jack's story with that of Amrei and lifts the narrative out of the grim realism of Jack's everyday life to the spiritual world of home. Number 49's shoe is a vital clue in what happened to him, but the shoe motif also connects Jack and the real Number 49: Jack has the unusual privilege of new shoes because Number 49's shoes have been thrown in the rubbish.

## FORESHADOWING

On a number of occasions, Jack wonders if someone will realise that locking kids up in an institution like the one he is in is a mistake.

He wonders 'if this whole thing is some huge misunderstanding, and someone will come along one day and say: "Oh no, I didn't mean *that*. Whoops. Oh well. No harm done."' (p.16) He imagines that police will come along and take them to a new Home, admitting that they had got it wrong (pp.52-3).

- Ask students to imagine that Jack as an old man listened to Prime Minister Rudd's apology. What did he think as he heard that speech?

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## AFTER READING ACTIVITIES

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### SOME ETHICAL QUESTIONS

One of the great strengths of *No Stars to Wish On* is that it provides opportunities for young readers to explore some important ethical issues. A good way of encouraging them to do this is to provide some provocative questions for group discussions. You might like to give a different question to each group and then have them report on their discussion to the class. Here are some examples:

1. 'It would have been better for Janey and Jack if Jack's Mum had refused to take in other people's children. She should have devoted all her energies to her own children. Then they might not have been taken away.' Do you agree with this view?
2. 'It is obvious that Jack's Mum can't look after him properly. It's right that he should be taken away, although it would have been better if the Home had been a kinder place.' Do you agree?
3. 'The nuns should not be blamed for how the children were treated. They thought they were doing what was best. People's ideas about what children needed were different in those days.' Do you agree?
4. 'I don't think the Australian Prime Minister should have apologised to the Forgotten Generation. That all happened many years ago. We are not responsible for what happened then.' Do you agree?

### EVALUATING THE NOVEL

*Blackline master 5: What I thought of No Stars to Wish On* can be used as a starting-point for a class discussion on students' opinions of the novel. It provides some sentence beginnings that can be

given to students, to allow them to crystallise their judgment about *No Stars to Wish On*. It works well for students to complete these sentences working in pairs. When they have finished, they can share their work with another pair of students before a full class discussion takes place.

### THE COVER OF THE NOVEL

Before reading the novel, students examined the cover to see what it suggested about the book they were about to read. Ask students to look again, closely, at the cover.

- Do any of the images make more sense now than they did before?
- Were any of their predictions correct?
- Do they think this is a good cover for the novel they have read?

### FURTHER RESEARCH

Fraillon has taken care to tell the story of the Forgotten Generation in a way that is not too traumatic for young readers. It may not be appropriate for students to do their own original research in this area, as many of the stories are quite confronting, but if you want to do some research yourself, in order to give them more background information, places to start are:

- Forgotten Australians: Our History - <http://forgottenaustralianshistory.gov.au/apology.html>
- The Care Leavers Australia Network - <http://www.clan.org.au>
- The Alliance for Forgotten Australians - <http://www.forgottenaustralians.org.au>.

The transcript of Prime Minister Rudd's apology can be found on the Forgotten Australians: Our History website. Rudd's speech is very moving, especially for those who have read *No Stars to Wish On*. You might like to explore with your students some of the following extracts from the speech and ask them how they relate to *No Stars to Wish On*. While some of the words Rudd uses - such as 'austere', 'authoritarian' and 'drudgery' - may be unfamiliar to students, they may well be worth introducing at this stage.

- Prime Minister Rudd apologised for 'the cold absence of love'.
- He said that he was sorry for 'childhoods spent ... in austere and authoritarian places, where names were replaced by numbers, spontaneous play by regimented routine, the joy of learning by the repetitive drudgery of menial work.'
- The Prime Minister said that 'we look back with shame that many of you were left cold, hungry and alone and with nowhere to hide and nobody to whom to turn.'

A complete record of the occasion of the Prime Minister's speech, running for approximately an hour and a half, can be found at <http://parlview.aph.gov.au/mediaPlayer.php?videoID=6216>.

You are unlikely to want to ask students to watch the whole video, but a few minutes of the opening are well worth showing, as the camera moves among the faces in the crowd. Those who belong to the Forgotten Generation are immediately obvious from their expressions of grief as they listen to the Prime Minister's words.

Make sure that students know as well about The National Apology to the Stolen Generation (Prime Minister Rudd, February 2008) and The National Apology for Forced Adoptions (Prime Minister Gillard, March, 2013).

It could be argued that conditions for asylum seeker children in our current detention centres are even worse than those endured by the Stolen and Forgotten Generations. It is possible that a future prime minister may feel obliged to apologise for actions that our government is taking now. It is obvious, however, that this is a politically sensitive issue that is very divisive in our society, so that it may not be an appropriate question for discussion in the classroom.

## FURTHER READING

*Holes* by Louis Sachar. Allen & Unwin, 1998.

Stanley is in the wrong place at the wrong time. As a result, he gets picked up by the justice system and sent to an institution for naughty children called Camp Green Lake - where the lake has dried up and there is nothing green, just desert. The children are made to dig holes, an activity that seems totally pointless but that is supposed to make bad children good. Warden Walker is as scary as Mother Superior in *No Stars to Wish On*.

*The Book of Everything* by Guus Kuijer. Allen & Unwin, 2004.

There are a lot of similarities between Jack's voice in *No Stars to Wish On* and Thomas's voice in *The Book of Everything*. Thomas says: 'When I grow up, I'm going to be happy.' Like Jack, Thomas sees the world differently from other people. Unlike Jack, Thomas is still with his family, but families aren't always happy.

*Once* by Morris Gleitzman. Puffin, 2005.

Like Jack, Felix does not always understand the significance of things he tells us about. It is World War II and - in an attempt to save his life - Felix, a Jewish boy, has been left by his parents in a Catholic orphanage in Poland. When he runs away to try to find his parents, Felix finds himself in a very dangerous world.

*A Small Free Kiss in the Dark* by Glenda Millard. Allen & Unwin, 2009.

This is another novel told in the first person by a boy who is alone and unprotected. Skip has run away from an unhappy foster home, but, at a time of great danger - when war breaks out in Melbourne, he finds a new and unusual family.

*The Burnt Stick* by Anthony Hill. Puffin, 1996.

Like Jack, John is taken away by men in boots who come while his family are sleeping. Knowing that the authorities were taking away Aboriginal children with light skin, John's mother had tried to protect him, by darkening his skin with charcoal. John is one of the Stolen Generation. As in Jack's case, the authorities of the day thought that they were doing the right thing for the children, but their actions had terrible consequences.

*No Safe Place* by Deborah Ellis. Allen & Unwin, 2011.

The children in this story are older than Jack but, like him, they are running away. The story follows the lives of three very different children: Abdul from Baghdad, Rosalia from the Roma people of Romania and Cheslav who, as an orphan, has been educated in a military institution in Russia. They are thrown together by circumstances as they try to reach refuge in England.

*The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* by John Boyne. Definitions, 2006.

Bruno, who tells this very moving story, is just a couple of years older than Jack. The world he lives in is even more puzzling and unreasonable, and Bruno does not understand quite a lot that he tells us about his father's job as commandant of a camp called 'Out-with'. While the ending of Jack's story is sad, because we do not know what has happened to Janey, Phin and Baby Sal, the end of Bruno's story is terrible.

*Wonder* by R. J. Palacio. Corgi Book, 2012.

Like Jack, August mostly tells his own story. August is a little older than Jack, but like Jack he needs a huge amount of resilience to survive in a difficult world. August was born with severe physical deformities and has never been to school. Now, in Year 4, he is finally going to face a school full of kids most of whom, he knows from experience, will look at him with horror.

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## ABOUT THE WRITERS

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### ZANA FRAILLON

Zana Fraillon was born in Melbourne, but spent her early childhood in San Francisco. 'I grew up in a house that had a whole room full of books and comfy chairs and this was my favourite place to be.'

As a teenager, a lot of her time was given to practising magic tricks. When she was 16, she won the Close Up Magic Competition at the Australian Society of Magicians (up against professional adult magicians!). 'I didn't hear my name being called out at first because I hadn't contemplated even placing. I worked at Bernard's Magic Shop in Elizabeth St for five years, and worked my way through most of the Close Up magic books and tricks on the shelves.'

Inspired by her love of magic and books, Zana wrote a book for her nine-year-old sister about a young female magician who solves crimes using her understanding of magic. 'The book was never published, but it was read and enjoyed by my sister and gave me my first insight into the possibilities of becoming a writer.'

When she was twenty, Zana spent a year in China teaching English in a very remote, rural area. It was there that she decided to study education and become a teacher. When she returned to Australia she became an Integration Aide at a local primary school for four years whilst completing a Bachelor of Arts and subsequently a Diploma of Education. However, she has still not got her own class to teach, as her own children came along about this time. About writing, Zana says:

With three sons, now aged 3, 5, and 7, I do not get the opportunity to write during the day. Instead, I write at night time, usually when the boys are going to sleep. I do not have an office, and while there is a desk in the living room, I usually sit with my laptop on the floor somewhere to work until my back cramps and I move up to the desk.

Unfortunately, some of my best ideas come to me just as I am drifting off to sleep. On the few occasions I have decided that I will remember them in the morning, I wake to remember nothing. I now have a pad and a pen by the bed for when this happens.

I have also discovered that some books take a long time to come out, while others seem to throw themselves onto the page. I wrote my first draft of *No Stars to Wish On* in two and a half months. Other books of a similar length have taken me almost a year to write. I can't work out why some come quickly and others need more time to make their way onto the page. I guess every story is different.

*No Stars to Wish On* is a story which had been floating around in my head for quite some time. I first started thinking about it when my friend was asked to transcribe an oral history of a woman. The woman was part of the Forgotten Generation, and like many people who suffered through those events, her story was horrific.

My mother had already written a book herself (*Delinquent Angel*, published by Random House) about a poet, Shelton Lea, whose mother had been forced to give him up for adoption when he was born. I had known Shelton for many years, but had viewed his circumstances more as a one-off rather than as a result of actual policy. I had not realised the extent to which such policies were introduced in Australia, nor connected these policies with those that forcibly removed children from often caring, stable families and put them in children's homes.

It amazed me that this was a part of recent Australian history which is seldom discussed, let alone taught in schools. While I had been taught bits and pieces about the Stolen Generation throughout my education both at school and university level, I had never even heard of the Forgotten Generation.

I hoped that a book written for kids coming up to teenagehood would help, in some way, to rectify this injustice, and help educate the future of Australia as to its past.

While the events and characters in my story are all fictitious, they are based on the many transcripts I read of people who form The Forgotten Generation. It took me a while to find Jack, the main character in the story, but once I did, it felt as though I had known him for years. I was actually quite sad to finish writing the book. I felt in a way I was saying goodbye to an old friend.

Sometimes when I feel that I am losing the voice of a character, I write them a letter. We have a kind of written conversation on the page. I make sure that I completely clear my mind and don't even think about what I am writing. I know no one will ever read these conversations so I am not editing as I go along which I do when I normally write stories. The next day, I go back and read the conversations. Often I have very little memory of what I have written, and the character voice is clear and strong. Jack and I had many such conversations.

If I had to name the themes of *No Stars to Wish On*, I'd say they were:

- The rights of children to be listened to and respected.
- Courage and determination in the face of overwhelming odds.
- The inherent value of all people.

## **HELEN SYKES**

Helen Sykes has been involved in children's and young adult literature for many years as a manuscript assessor, teacher, editor, writer and presenter. She has written more than 20 books for teachers and students of secondary English and produced many units of work on fiction texts for school textbooks. She presents regularly on new titles at conferences of English teachers and librarians, including presenting on young adult literature at the NSW English Teachers' Association Conference every year for more than thirty years. The notes she prepares for participants at such conferences are highly valued. Helen also conducts a course in young adult literature for the English classroom as part of the Masters of Education at the University of Western Sydney.





## Blackline Master 3: A Quick Quiz

How good is your memory? Try answering these questions from *No Stars to Wish On* off the top of your head. When you have finished, you can use the page references at the bottom of this page to see if you were right.

1. How many boys are there in Jack's dormitory?

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2. How old is Jack when he is taken into the Home?

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3. How old was Amrei when Jack and the other children were taken?

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4. What does Amrei call Jack's Mum?

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5. What is the name of the dog that joins Amrei on her journey?

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6. Who is GurrGurr?

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7. What do the children in the Home use to clean their teeth?

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8. How do Jack and Janey communicate when she arrives at the Home?

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9. Why was Samson sent back by the family who fostered him?

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10. What does Cook put in the stew to make sure that the children get more protein in their diet?

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11. What was the real Number 49's name?

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12. Why was Jack not allowed to keep working in the kitchen?

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### A final question

Each section of Jack's story begins with some marks on the page - vertical lines crossed with a horizontal line, in groups of five. What do these marks mean?

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0.1 pp.5-6; 0.2 p.7; 0.3 p.1 and p.24; 0.4 p.9; 0.5 p.73; 0.6 p.23; 0.7 p.40; 0.8 p.65; 0.9 p.39; 0.10 p.109; 0.11 p.163; 0.12 p.108; Final question: see pages 33, 58 and 103 for examples.

## Blackline Master 4: Sentences

As you know, it is very important when you are writing to use proper sentences. Proper sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop, a question mark or an exclamation point. Proper sentences have a subject and a verb, so that they can express a complete idea.

Speech is different. We do not always use complete sentences when we are speaking, partly because we are often responding to what someone else has said.

1. Look at these two different extracts and decide which one is normal speech.

### Extract 1

Q. What is your name?

A. My name is Jack.

Q. How old are you?

A. I am seven years old.

Q. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

A. I have a sister, Janey.

Q. Is she older or younger than you?

A. Janey is older than me.

### Extract 2

Q. What is your name?

A. Jack.

Q. How old are you?

A. Seven.

Q. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

A. A sister, Janey.

Q. Is she older or younger than you?

A. Older.

2. Do you agree that Extract 2 is more like the way we usually speak?

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3. Underline any incomplete sentences that are used in Extract 2.

4. Sometimes in novels and plays, writers use incomplete sentences because they want their characters to sound as if they are speaking naturally. This is what Zana Fraillon does in *No Stars to Wish On*, when she has Jack telling his story. As we read, we feel as if we are hearing Jack talk to us. His language is colloquial, which means that it is speech-like. One way of making your writing sound like the spoken word is to use incomplete sentences.

Underline the incomplete sentences in this extract from pages 14-15 of *No Stars to Wish On*:

Great-great-aunt Annie knows about potatoes. Potatoes and babies. Perhaps there's something in babies that's the same as in potatoes. Great-great-aunt Annie can just look at a baby and tell what's wrong, or right. Mostly, anyway.

5. Here is another extract, from page 35. Underline the incomplete sentences. (This is harder than Q. 4.)

He was always a good fighter, our Phin. Even when kids were bigger and tougher than him. And he always smiled when he was fighting, as if he enjoyed the challenge. The bigger the kids, the bigger Phiny's smile. That used to make the big kids really angry when he was fighting, though. Or scared. He was too clever for that.

6. Have a look at the writing you did, when you told part of the story in Janey's voice. Did you use any incomplete sentences? Was it all right to use incomplete sentences there, because you wanted it to sound as if Janey was talking?

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7. Find a report that you have written recently, perhaps for science or history. Incomplete sentences don't belong in written reports. Go through your work with a partner and see if you can find any incomplete sentences. Talk about what you need to do to improve them.

## **Blackline Master 5: What I thought of *No Stars to Wish On***

Working with a partner, complete these sentences:

1. This novel makes me feel sad because

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---

2. This novel makes me feel angry because

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3. The most interesting thing I learned from reading this novel was

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4. What puzzled me was

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5. I was surprised when

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6. The character I liked most was ..... because

---

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7. I first guessed what had happened to the real Number 49 when

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8. When I finished the book, I

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