

# TEACHERS' NOTES

## THE SOUND OF MY HEART

by Ella West

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Recommended for ages 12-16+ years

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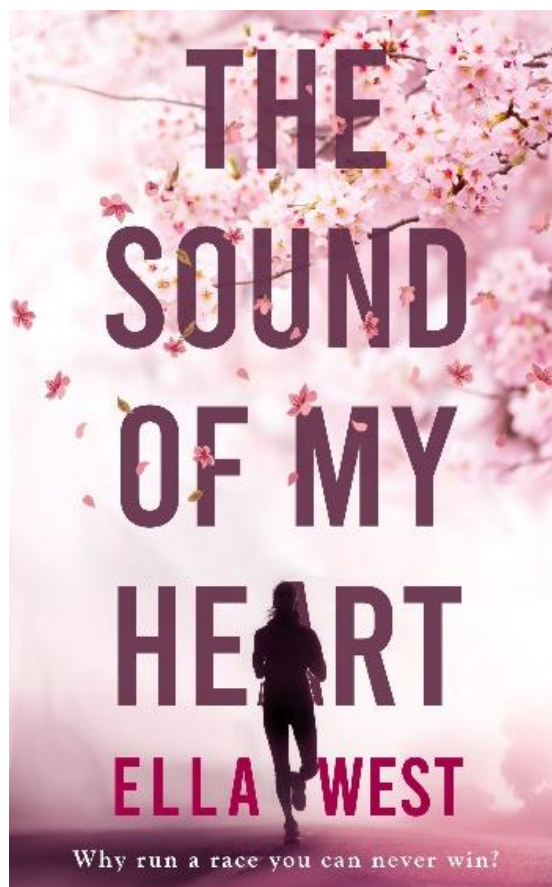
### INTRODUCTION

#### PLOT SUMMARY

Emily runs half marathons but because she's only sixteen, and because she's a girl, she can't excel at her chosen sport. Every time she lines up at the start of a race she knows she won't win. As she trains in and around her hometown of Cromwell in Central Otago, New Zealand, listening to the sound of her breath, of her heart beating, she sees dog walkers, the man who does Tai Chi, the Asian woman who spits on the ANZAC war memorial and one day she sees an old man trying to throw a rope up into a tree and she offers to help. On her way back she finds he has hung himself.

An elderly neighbour suffers a stroke and after returning home from hospital he sits in the darkened living room watching war documentaries. His wife seems not to be worried as he sinks deeper and deeper into depression. Emily, still guilt ridden about the man who hung himself, gets him outside and so starts their daily walks together in the sun. As he slowly opens up to her she begins to understand the importance of living a life well – that it's not about winning or losing, but about how you run the race.

Amongst the cherry blossoms of spring in Central Otago, this is a story about the choices the elderly face and how they have to come to terms with dying. As the world publicly debates changes to the laws related to euthanasia and suicide, THE SOUND OF MY HEART will help teenagers explore some of these issues and hopefully think further about the elderly living in their communities.



## THEMES

### RUNNING

This is a book about running. Emily is obsessed with her sport and it invades every part of her life:

*“I’ve heard people say, when they see a runner on the side of the road, doing the hard yards, out in the middle of nowhere, what are they running from? I’m not running from anything or anyone. And I know exactly where I’m running to.”*

She talks about race tactics, training, even the food she has to eat to get the best time she can in a race. The chapters are also interspersed with facts about running – the fastest times, how women’s times differ from men and however well Emily does, Athletics New Zealand does not record times for men or women under the age of twenty in the half marathon distance.

We always focus on the winners, but sports people train and compete for many reasons.

### ELDERLY

The book begins with an elderly man hanging himself in a tree and, as Emily tries to understand what happened and why, and whether she did the right thing, a neighbour suffers a stroke. As the neighbour learns to walk again as part of his recovery, Emily’s baby sister is also taking her first steps. The book examines a teenager’s place in her community that is larger than her own age group. Her interaction with her parents, her sister and her elderly neighbour all help her understand why she does what she does, who she is and what matters to her the most.

### SUICIDE

Many YA books examine suicide as a youth problem but adults of all ages commit suicide. Because of the law in New Zealand, individual suicides are not reported in the media, even in the death notices. They are hidden. This book questions whether this is right. The incident at the start of the book happened to the author while she was running one morning. It was a walnut tree (she checked the next day) but because it wasn’t a there-and-back run, as Emily’s is, she has no idea whether the elderly man was telling the truth. The suicide of a family friend also prompted the writing of this book. He walked up and down a popular walking track for an hour before jumping from a cliff. Many people saw him. If just one person had known this was a place used for suicides and realised that was what he was thinking, and asked him if he was okay, he still might be alive today.

## COMPREHENSION AND DISCUSSION

### CHAPTERS ONE TO FIVE

#### Comprehension

1. How many kilometres is Emily’s run on Monday morning?
2. What breed of dog does the dog walker have?
3. What school does Emily’s dad teach at?
4. Where does Emily’s coach live?
5. What is the porch light staying on show?

#### Discussion

1. Why do you think the Japanese woman spits on the war memorial?

2. What does Emily's dream tell us about her?
3. Why does Mrs Harris tell Emily's dad she is fine when she is not?

## CHAPTERS SIX TO TEN

### Comprehension

1. What type of muffin is waiting for Emily her first time at the Harris house?
2. What does Emily call Olivia's food?
3. What is part of Emily's race number in the Christchurch Half Marathon?
4. Who or what is living in the Christchurch Cathedral?
5. What placing does Emily get in the Christchurch Half?

### Discussion

1. Why does Emily need to run after looking after Mr Harris for the first time?
2. Why doesn't Mr Harris want to watch golf on TV?
3. Why does Emily drink coffee before she races? Do you think it would work?

## CHAPTERS ELEVEN TO FIFTEEN

### Comprehension

1. What colour is the singlet Emily wears when in a race?
2. What does Emily swap Olivia's spoon for when feeding her?
3. What is the name of Mr Harris' grandson?
4. How is Emily's house heated?
5. What is growing in Mr Harris' frozen vegetable garden?

### Discussion

1. Do you think there should be war documentaries on TV? Why or why not?
2. Why does Emily feel uncomfortable when Mr Harris' daughter and grandson visit?
3. Would you rather be a team of one like Emily or like Sophie and her team? Why?

## CHAPTERS SIXTEEN TO TWENTY-ONE

### Comprehension

1. Why does Emily take Mr Harris walking at 3pm?
2. How many teams have beaten Sophie's so far?
3. What colour is the pom-pom on Mr Harris' hat?
4. What does Emily use to pay for her half marathon entries?
5. What time does Emily do in the Southland Half Marathon?

### Discussion

1. Why does Poppy not understand how Mr Harris is really doing?
2. Does the answer Emily's mum gives her about why she runs true for why you do things?
3. Why is there no one at the finish line in the Southland Half Marathon?

## **LANGUAGE AND STYLE**

What person is *THE SOUND OF MY HEART* written in and what tense? How does this affect the telling of the story? Is it successful or should the author have chosen another person and tense?

Does *THE SOUND OF MY HEART* fit into a genre? What are examples of genres? Does a book need to belong to a genre?

The weather and the changing seasons are constantly mentioned throughout the book—how has the author used them to tell the story? Has this worked successfully or not? Use examples.

Think about the book's ending – does it end on a high or a low or both? Explain your answer and why you think the author has written it this way.

## **ACTIVITIES AND FURTHER DISCUSSION**

Ask to see your school's policy and procedures document which sets out what happens if there is a suicide in the school community.

- What is the aim of it?
- Do you think the actions will help you? Why? Why not?
- Have a go at rewriting them so they will help you the most.

Do you know anyone who has committed suicide? Do your parents? Compare it with the number of people you know, or your parents know, who have died in traffic accidents. Which is the higher figure? There are many measures to stop road deaths – do you think there should be more to stop suicides? What sort of things would work?

Visit an elderly care home and talk to the residents. What is their outlook on life – positive or negative? Are they in pain which causes them distress? Do they have family and friends that they have daily contact with? Weekly? Monthly? Never? Do they ever go outside? Why not and how does this affect them?

What can you find out about 1967 Boston Marathon winner Dave McKenzie from Runanga?

Do you think the Boston Marathon will ever be won again by an amateur runner like him? Why not?

## **CREATIVE WRITING**

Write what happens when Emily's dad catches up with her at the finish line at the end of the book.

Write what happens when Emily tells Mr Harris about it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

New Zealander Ella West lives on a farm near Dunedin, having spent many years on the West Coast. Ella started writing plays for children for the New Zealand School Journal but soon crossed over to fiction and *Thieves* was published in 2006, the first in a trilogy. She enjoys writing for children and teenagers because anything can happen in a story for children. There's always magic. Ella was awarded the Louis Johnson New Writers' Bursary in 2006, and her novel *Night Vision* won the 2015 LIANZA Young Adult award and the Young Adult Children's Choice award in the New Zealand Book Awards.



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