

My Spare Heart

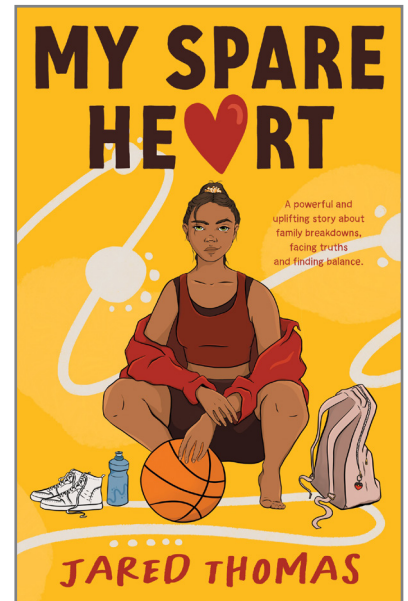
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RECOMMENDED FOR: Mid to Upper Secondary
(Drug/Alcohol References, Language)



SYNOPSIS

Phoebe's non-Indigenous mother, a busy event manager, and her father, an Aboriginal man and uni lecturer, have split up and she's moved to sleepy old Willunga with him and his new health-obsessed girlfriend. It's only a few kilometres from Phoebe's old friends and the city, but it feels like another world.

Her new school is full of hippies, but some of the kids are cool and the local basketball team is tight, and before long Phoebe's fitting in. But as her mum becomes increasingly unreliable, Phoebe's grades begin to suffer, her place on the basketball team is under threat and her worries spiral out of control.

Phoebe can't tell her friends and is worried her dad will get angry, but pretending everything is fine is breaking her heart. How can she help her mum without tearing her family apart?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Jared Thomas is a Nukunu person of the Southern Flinders Ranges, William and Margaret Geary Research Fellow, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Material Culture and Art at the South Australian Museum and the University of South Australia, and an Indigenous Literacy Foundation ambassador. He is the highly regarded author of critically acclaimed books for young adults including *Sweet Guy*, which was short-listed for both the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards and the Adelaide Festival Awards for Literature, and *Calypso Summer*, for which Jared was awarded the Kuril Dhagun Indigenous Writing Fellowship, and which was selected by the International Youth Library as a White Raven Book and short-listed for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Indigenous Writing. Jared is also the author of the YA novel *Songs that Sound Like Blood*, and the co-author of the Patty Mills series *Game Day*.

STUDY NOTES

- "Learning shouldn't be about rules, it should be about freedom. I want us to take some relaxed time to think about ways we can establish the class to maximise our freedom," Michael declared. I facepalmed and whispered to myself, 'Just give me a test already.' (p 40) Phoebe's new school's approach to learning is very different from her previous school, Wattleside High. Discuss what you believe are the three main differences between both schools. Which type of school would you prefer to learn in, and why?
- If a 'coming of age' novel is one in which the protagonist is transformed from child to adult, would you describe *My Spare Heart* as a 'coming of age' novel?

- In your response discuss Phoebe's journey in relation to her:
 - mother's alcoholism
 - encounter with Trent
 - reaction to Matilda's racist taunts
- In your opinion, are Bronwyn, Trent and Matilda also transformed in the course of the novel? What scenes best depict their change or lack of it in *My Spare Heart*?
- The strapline on the *My Spare Heart* cover is, 'A powerful and uplifting story about family breakdowns, facing truths and finding balance.' In your opinion, what truths are faced in the novel and what 'balance' does Phoebe find?
- *My Spare Heart* is unflinching in its depiction of the widespread use of alcohol in our society, regardless of age and social status, and the potential harms that arise because of it. And the book's views are backed up by research: Curtin University's National Drug Research Institute estimates that alcohol consumption cost Australia almost \$67,000,000,000 in the 2017-2018 financial year. Split the class into two groups, one for and against to debate the following topic: All Australians would benefit from the federal government announcing a one-year ban on alcohol sales, starting immediately.
- 'Our family have lived in this place for tens of thousands of years and our bodies are part of this place, organisms within it. The plants hold medicine and they slow us down, centre us and let us know we're home, hey Pheeb's?' (p 279) Why do you think Phoebe's identity as a Nukunu person is important to her? How does her identity provide her with comfort when dealing with the stress of her parents' marriage breakdown and her mother's alcoholism?
- Jared Thomas doesn't tell us what Trent's parents said to him after hearing Phoebe and Caroline's account of his treatment of them. But we do know it had a huge effect on him. Write a scene describing the three-way conversation and stage it for your class.
- Write a book review of *My Spare Heart* making sure to say what you like about the story and what, if anything, disappointed you. Remember, when writing a book review you can briefly retell the story but it is much more important to say whether you found the story interesting, believable and/or emotionally satisfying.