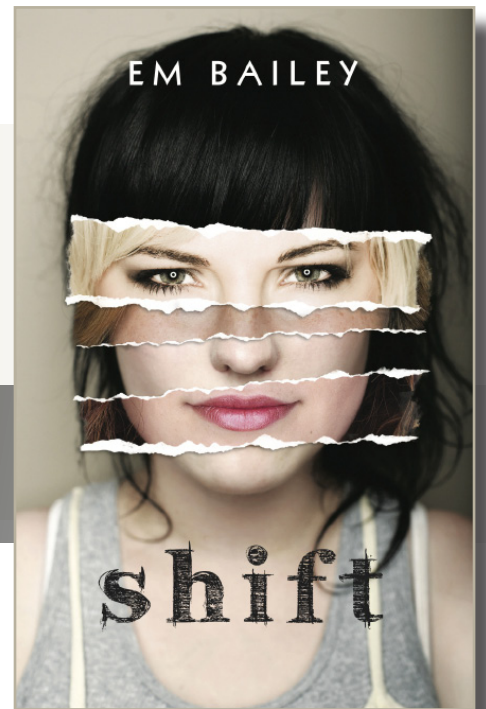


# Shift

By Em Bailey



## SHIFT

Olive Corbett has withdrawn from everything since the incident. She is no longer one of the most popular girls in the school, and her ex-best friend, the still popular Katie, who sneers and warns Olive that she is well on the way to becoming a 'road accident'. The only person who understands what Olive has been through is her best friend Ami.

But everything starts falling apart when Miranda Vaile arrives at the school. She starts amidst a flurry of rumours. The worst is that she killed her own parents. Olive can't help but watch her, at first a withdrawn, sickly creature who fades into the background. Little by little, Miranda becomes more noticeable, more popular, more beautiful, more like Olive's ex-friend Katie. Olive starts to suspect that Miranda could be something even worse than the rumours suggest.

Olive tries to watch out for Miranda, but she's pretty busy dealing with problems of her own. Her mother doesn't like Ami and is giving Olive a hard time about moving on and making more friends. Her little brother Toby isn't coping with the absence of their father, and the tension that has hung heavy over the house since the incident and Miranda isn't the only new kid causing a stir at school. Handsome, athletic Lachlan has just joined Olive's class as well and he is giving every impression that he's interested in her. Olive is so wrapped up in her paranoia about what her classmates must think of her that she is suspicious of his intentions.

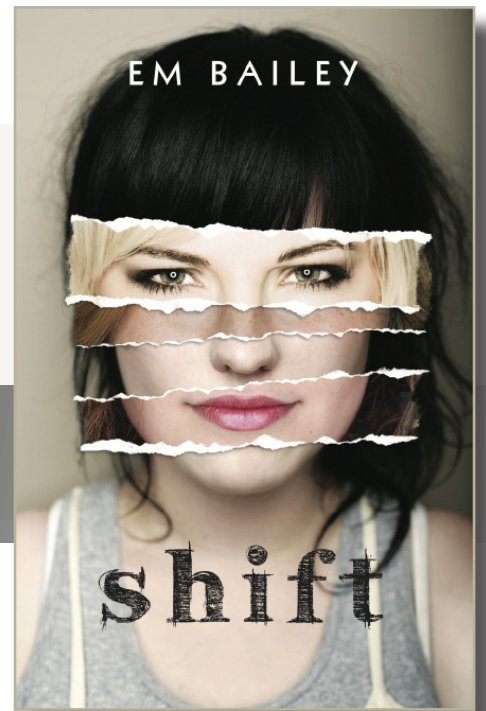
As Olive watches her one time friend turn into a shadow of her former self, fading into the background as the once sickly Miranda steps into the limelight, she becomes certain that there is something sinister about her. The tensions between the girls build up to an almost unbearable level that starts to shatter Olive's own fragile reality.

*Shift* is a sinister contemporary thriller with characters that readers will immediately relate to and a page-turning plot that makes for gripping reading.

I have divided these notes into three areas of understanding, however these should be used in conjunction with each other in order to fully understand the text.

# Shift

By Em Bailey



## UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

### Narrative

*Shift* has an interesting narrative style because it uses an unreliable narrator to tell the story. That is not to say that Olive is not telling the truth about events, but there are plenty of moments during our reading of the story that we have cause to doubt her word.

### Examples in the text:

*Pp 141 Olive visits Katie at the hospital to discourage her from seeing Miranda again. Katie angrily confronts Olive about cutting her off as a friend after the incident and Olive discovers that Katie has not been spreading vicious rumours about her as she initially believed.*

*P 151 In a dramatic confrontation between Miranda and Olive over Katie's well-being we discover that Ami, Olive's best friend, is in fact imaginary.*

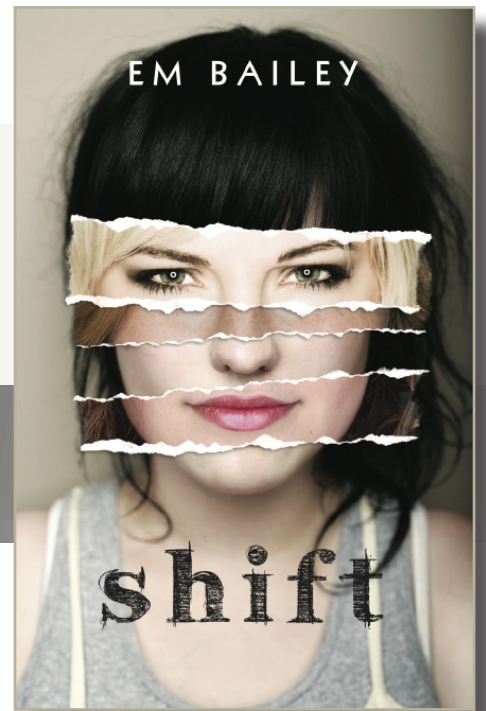
*Pp 155 Dr Richter talks to Olive in her session about her false accusations of Miranda being a shape-shifter. The doctor explains that the paranoia Olive was feeling was down to the fact that her medication was incorrect, and that things will be ok now that it has been fixed.*

### Questions/ Activities

- Using the example above find other examples in the text that could be used as evidence that Olive is an unreliable narrator.
- How do these affect our reading of the text? (For example, are they used to heighten suspense in certain areas, increase tension, make us feel a particular way towards a character.
- Discuss the journey the author has managed to take us on by manipulating our faith in the narrative. How has she used this writing technique to make the story more surprising?
- As you are reading the book make a note of the points where you believe Olive and the points that you do not (With examples or page numbers). Do you believe that she is telling the truth *before* her final showdown with Miranda? Why?

# Shift

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## Extension

Use either *Fury* or *Liar* as a companion book. Discuss and compare the use of the unreliable narrator between the book that you have chosen and *Shift*.

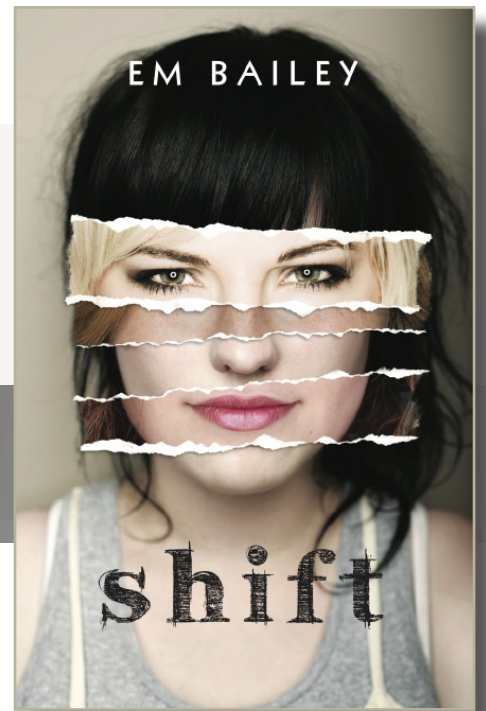
- o How is it used in a similar way and how is it used differently?
- o Did reading *Shift* first change the way you read the companion text?
- o Were you less inclined to trust the narrator?
- o How does this technique make you feel towards the book? The author? The character?

Choose a news article either in groups or individually. Based on the techniques that you have discovered in *Shift* rewrite the piece of text so that the reader doubts the narrator. Present these pieces to the class in an oral presentation

- o Does your audience believe your 'altered' version of the news piece? Why/why not?
- o This technique isn't used in a lot of books. Discuss the implications of our reading if we automatically mistrusted the narrator. Why can this technique not be used in something like the news?
- o Are there other areas of writing where an unreliable narrator would or would not work? Why?

# Shift

By Em Bailey



## THEMES

There are some pretty hefty themes in *Shift* and although it is on the border of being a speculative thriller, the serious themes that are raised ground the story and gives classrooms scope to discuss a much broader range of concepts.

Below is a list of key themes with examples. In your workbook create a list titled 'pages of note'. On the list, write down the page numbers and any relevant or useful quotes wherever these examples are mentioned in the text. Make a note of how they relate to the theme and if there is anything unusual surrounding their mention in the text.

### Mental health

Mental health is often used in the text as a weapon to make a character seem weak or unstable. Discuss how it is used against characters in the examples below.

- o Olive's 'incident'
- o Olive's stay in the hospital
- o Katie's 'eating disorder'
- o Miss Falippi's drug abuse

### Toxic Friendships

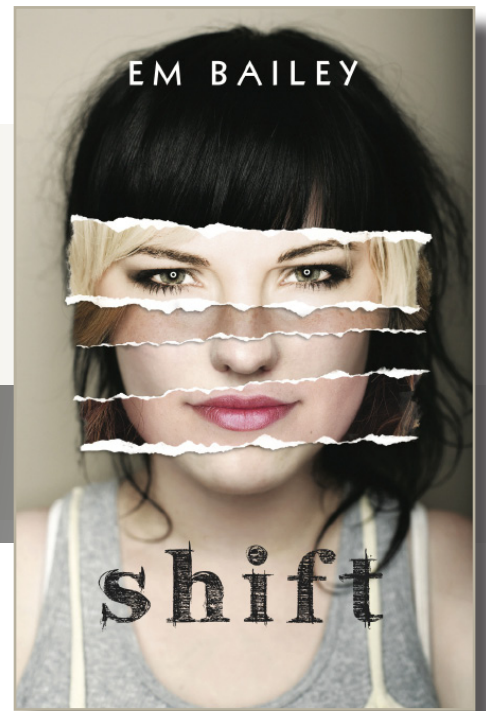
The friendships in this book are constantly changing. Make note of and discuss at least one point where each of the following pairs have a negative impact on each other.

- o Ami and Olive
- o Katie and Olive
- o Katie and Miranda
- o Miranda and Dallas
- o Lachlan and Olive

There are obviously many more interactions and other pairs throughout the text so come up with at least three more examples of your own.

# Shift

By Em Bailey



## Identity

Identity is perhaps one of the strongest themes in the book. There are several ways that the issue of identity is raised. Find moments in the text where identity is raised in the following ways.

- o Stolen identity
- o New identity
- o Identity crisis
- o Overbearing/false identity (this is not the same as stolen identity, think more of characters putting on a persona for school or other groups)

## Trust

The idea that the reader may not be able to trust the characters has already been raised, but there are many examples where the characters cannot trust each other. Find the following examples in the text and discuss how the various trust issues are resolved/ dealt with and why they existed in the first place.

Also think about the different kinds of trust that is mentioned (eg trusting your emotions, your memory, your friends).

- o Katie doesn't want to listen to Olive's warning about Miranda because she doesn't feel that she can trust her.
- o Olive's mother doesn't trust that Olive will do the right thing.
- o Olive doesn't trust her feelings for Lachlan.

## Ethics

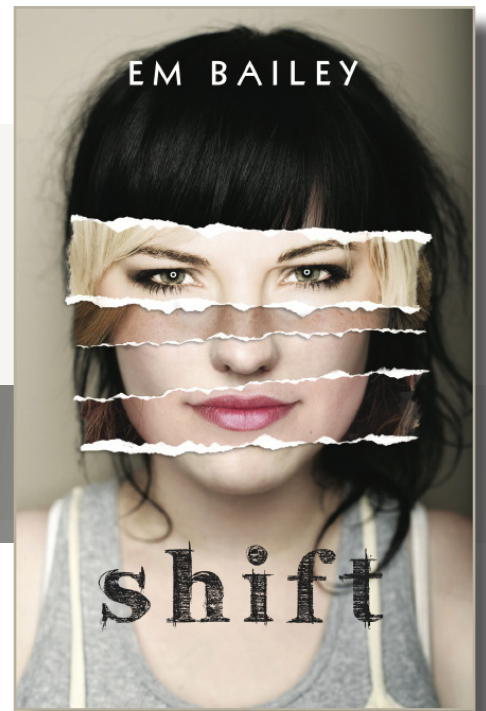
The issue of ethics is raised with a lot of Miranda's behaviour. Why does Oona warn Olive of Miranda? What does that tell you about her character? Discuss the difference between morals and ethics. Which of the following examples are morally wrong, and which are ethically wrong?

- o Putting drugs into Miss Falippi's tea
- o Kissing Katie's boyfriend
- o Lying to other characters
- o Using faked mental illness as a weapon
- o Stealing a dress in the city
- o Stealing Katie's identity



# Shift

By Em Bailey



## UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTERS

*Shift* is a very character driven novel. The tension comes from our constantly changing perceptions of the characters, as their motivations are twisted.

### Primary Characters:

#### Olive

Olive is the narrator of the story and the common thread between the other characters. She is shy and withdrawn since her 'incident' but there are constant implications that she once used to hang out with the 'cool crowd'. She is referred to by Katie early on in the book as a "road accident".

- o Look at Olive's journey as a character.
- o Why did her incident occur?
- o Why is she so mistrustful of her feelings to Lachlan?
- o Do you think she's happy?

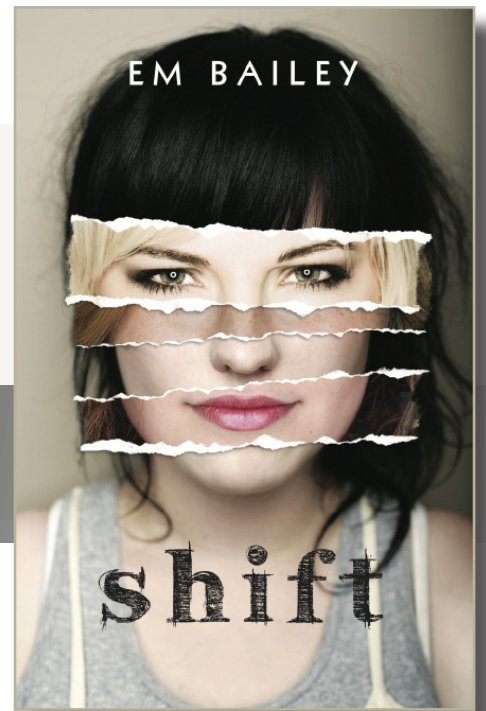
#### Miranda

Miranda is introduced into the narrative before she arrives in the story physically through gossip and rumours. When she first arrives at the school she is shy, weak and withdrawn. However bit by bit she starts taking elements of Katie's personality and is soon one of the popular girls.

- o What is the first gesture of Katie's that Miranda mimics?
- o How does Olive describe Miranda?
- o Miranda shows a wide variation of personality traits. How would you describe her?
- o How does Miranda act when Katie dies? How does this conflict with her actions?
- o Why isn't Miranda able to gain full control of Olive?
- o How does Ami describe Miranda?

# Shift

By Em Bailey



## Katie

Katie is the most popular girl in the school at the outset of the book and was once Olive's best friend. When she befriends Miranda she quickly becomes a shell of her former self.

- o Does it come as a surprise to find out that Katie and Olive were once so close? Why?
- o What does Katie give to Miranda in a scene that is almost the opposite of an earlier scene?
- o Why is Katie upset that she and Olive are no longer friends?
- o Do you think that deep down Katie is a nice person, or is she truly shallow and mean?

## Lachlan

Lachlan is a pretty stable character, but often misunderstood. Olive assumes that he is arrogant and making fun of her when he first shows her any attention, however he keeps surprising her until eventually she realises that she likes him.

- o What are some of Lachlan's secrets?
- o Why do you think he keeps them a secret?
- o Why doesn't Olive trust him at first?
- o What is she afraid to tell him?
- o What makes her trust him?
- o List three examples where Lachlan's steps into the role of 'hero' and saves another character.

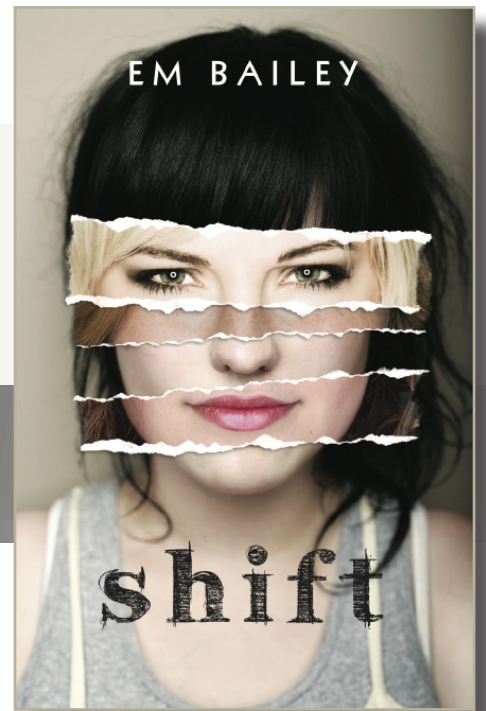
## Ami

Ami is Olive's best friend. She understands what Olive is going through because she also had a difficult time after her parents split up. She seems totally supportive of Olive at all times, and yet Olive's mum doesn't trust her.

- o Why doesn't Olive's mum trust Ami?
- o What is the surprise about Ami?
- o When do you find out Ami's secret and how does that impact your reading?
- o Is Ami a 'toxic friend' or a supportive one?
- o Find examples in the text to suggest the way that other characters feel towards Ami?
- o Why is Olive ok when Ami is gone?

# Shift

By Em Bailey



## Extension activity:

As an extension project, divide the class into teams and get them to put on a debate over one of the following topics.

Things that should be noted when deciding the winner are:

Correct use of textual references, understanding of characters and their motivations, imaginative predictions outside of the text, use of quotes or direct examples.

- o Olive is a liar.
- o Katie is shallow and mean-spirited.
- o What Miranda does is wrong.
- o Olive is crazy

## Secondary Characters:

### Activity:

Choose one of the following characters and write a detailed character study. Things you might like to think about are:

- o Who are they? (age; relatives; name; looks)
- o What do they like?
- o How are they related to the other characters?
- o What is their personality like?
- o How do other characters see them?
- o How do they see other characters?
- o Why are they important to the story?
- o Why are they a secondary character rather than a primary character?

**Toby**

**Olive's mum**

**Oona**

**Miss Falippi**

**Noah**

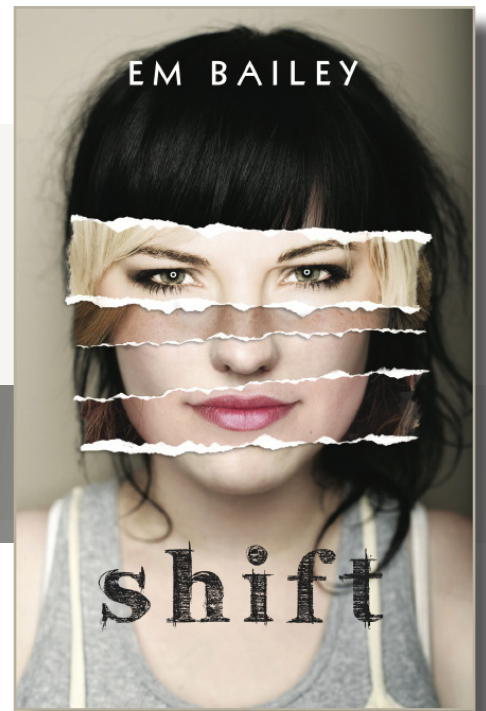
**Dallas**

**Cameron**



# Shift

By Em Bailey



## UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER

*Shift* is an excellent text to look at the way we interact with and treat each other. The themes are all very centred around identity and feeling safe and secure in our environment and being able to trust those around us.

The fact that so much of the book manipulates these ideas offers an excellent opportunity to discuss the potentially devastating impacts of bullying, mental illness, toxic friendships or broken families.

### Look at the following websites:

<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?>

<http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets-podcasts>

What typically indicates the following disorders?

Eating disorders

Anxiety

Depression

Drug abuse

Which characters have/ or are accused of suffering from the above conditions?

Why?

What action is taken?

Discuss how the characters are manipulated and what could have been done to prevent it.

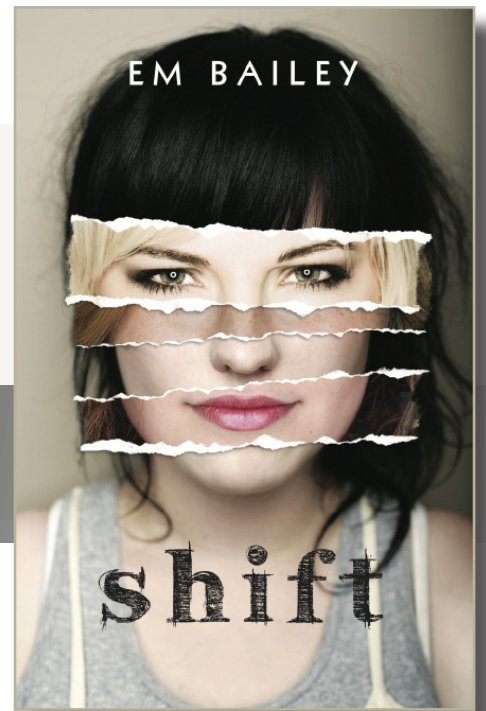
### Activity:

\*This can be done either individually or in groups

From the websites, choose one of the disorders not mentioned in the book. Give a short presentation of the symptoms and treatments of the disorder that you have chosen, and discuss what could be done if you knew someone in this situation.

# Shift

By Em Bailey



**Activity:**

Look at the friendship between Katie and Olive. Think about why it ended and how it could have ended better. Choose the position of one of the girls and write a letter to the other explaining your point of view.

\*This could be done as an oral presentation, or on a blog.

**Activity:**

If your school has a blog or a facebook look at the settings and discuss the kind of content that is put online.

Is there any protection against cyber-bullying? Discuss why this kind of bullying could be just as damaging as physical bullying,

**RELATED READING**

Liar by Justine Larbalestier (unreliable narrator/ thriller)

Fury by Shirley Marr (unreliable narrator/thriller/ toxic friendships)

Beautiful Malice by Rebecca James (thriller)

Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson (mental health/toxic friendships)

Destroying Avalon by Kate McCaffery (cyber bullying/ thriller)

Finding Freia Lockhart by Aimee Said (identity)

Mice by Gordon Reece (thriller/identity)