Through its use of five contrasting characters, Stolen shows that the experience of being ‘stolen’ can take different forms and have widely varying effects on individuals. However, the five characters are also brought together in several scenes to show how their different situations share common features and problems. Each character is a complex individual; additionally, the characters represent a number of important themes and issues.

**Jimmy**

Jimmy’s personality changes dramatically as he grows older, and this change is highlighted by the temporal shifts that occur throughout Stolen. The best example is ‘It rained the day’ (pp.4-5), in which Jimmy acts out a childhood incident in the family’s chook yard. Then he shifts, for a moment, into his adult character, before waking as a child. The brief scene juxtaposes Jimmy’s adult and child personalities, fusing dream and memory, present and past. The disparity between Jimmy’s childhood and adult personalities – the one lively and laughing, the other morose and silent – is clearly shown.

The young Jimmy is bold and full of humour; he challenges authority, but without being destructive or malicious. As he grows older, the oppressiveness of white authority and, in particular, the disappointment of being denied contact with his mother, the one thing he continues to hope for while in the children’s home, cause Jimmy’s personality to alter. A key transition scene is ‘Jimmy’s being naughty again’, in which his laughter is now ‘more an angry laugh’ (p.20). He becomes angry and hostile after his mother’s death, and the consequences are dramatised in the scene ‘Racist insults’ (discussed above).

**Ruby**

Ruby’s character is the least developed of any of the characters. Ruby and Jimmy are the two characters whose lives end up being completely destroyed as a result of their institutionalised childhoods. Ruby’s desire for a nurturing environment is evident in her interaction with her doll, ‘Ruby comforting her baby’ (pp. 9-10). She calls the doll ‘Ruby’ and speaks as a mother, projecting onto the doll the care and love she herself longs for. Then she returns to her own identity, crying out ‘Where are you?’ in clear awareness of her own mother’s absence.
Compounding the lack of a loving home life is the abuse Ruby repeatedly receives on visits to the home of a white couple. After these visits the children eagerly greet her and they play the ‘patty cake game’, chanting a series of questions. It is a playful way of broaching the question of a secret, but the secret takes on a sinister quality when its unspeakable nature becomes evident. The children stop their chanting and clapping, but Ruby admits she has ‘promised not to tell’ (p.8, p.15; later Jimmy responds similarly, p.23). Ruby’s inability to speak about what has happened causes her to withdraw into herself, making it increasingly impossible for her to interact with others.

By the time Ruby’s real family re-establishes contact with her, she has retreated entirely into her own, internal world. Even her sister’s comforting words, ‘we’ve come to take you home’, take on threatening connotations to Ruby, so she draws back, saying ‘Don’t need no trouble’ (p.31). This highlights the importance of home, but also suggests that it can sometimes be too late for even a loving home to make a difference.

**Shirley**

Shirley represents the importance of family, and especially of motherhood, to identity and happiness. Shirley’s experiences reflect the historical fact that the removal of children took place over more than one generation: what happens to Shirley as a child happens, in turn, to her own children.

Shirley’s memories are triggered by the sound of rain. The repetition of the scene title ‘It rained the day’ and of key phrases – such as ‘that big black car’ (p.9), echoing ‘The car’s big and black’ (p.4) – reflects how entrapped the lives of Aboriginal people became as a result of government policies. Like Ruby’s experience of abuse, Shirley’s feelings ‘cannot be expressed in words’ (p.9). Despite her traumatic experiences, and how much of her life has been stolen from her, Shirley has the most unambiguously happy ending of all the characters in Stolen.

**Sandy**

As Sandy’s name suggests, he is the character closest to a traditional understanding of Aboriginal identity. His name aligns him with a natural element – sand. Sandy’s life is relatively nomadic. In his childhood he is always trying to evade the Welfare. In the early scene, ‘Hiding Sandy’ (pp.3-4), Sandy’s repeated phrase ‘Always on the run’ is like a chant, emphasising his inability to escape from a life based on evasion and flight. His circumstances, like those of the other characters, keep repeating themselves.

The Welfare finally catches up with Sandy, as he relates in ‘A can of peas’ (pp.19-20). This scene makes an ironic comment about the Welfare’s efforts to assist Aboriginal families. The can of peas, the Welfare’s ‘gift’, was found at the back of a cupboard, past its use-by date. It thus turns out to be the decisive weapon used by the Welfare to destroy Sandy’s family.
Sandy’s character in Stolen represents the possibility of a future for traditional Aboriginal culture, in which storytelling and place have central roles to play. Sandy leads both storytelling episodes, which draw the other children into playing the roles of mythical or spirit beings. He also seeks to return to the desert sands at the end of the play, representing the possibility of a return to one’s place of origin.

Anne

Anne represents most clearly the effects of the assimilation policy (discussed in the Themes & Values section, below). She is adopted into a comfortable home, although her relationship with her white parents is not a particularly close one. In ‘The Chosen’ (p.7), Anne and her parents take turns to speak but do not directly address each other. This sense of speaking at cross-purposes is reinforced in ‘Anne’s told she’s Aboriginal’ (pp.13-14). Anne is shocked – ‘This is a nightmare!’ (p.14) – not by her birth mother’s Aboriginality but by her white parents’ deception and ‘shame’.

The scenes in which Anne lives with her white parents alternate with scenes in which Anne is still in the Cranby Children’s Home. This is another example of Harrison’s flexibility with time. Anne does not simply progress smoothly from one environment to the next, but each life stage and experience informs the others in some way.

Anne’s desire to know her Aboriginal family causes her to be caught in-between the two cultures. In the scene ‘Am I black or white?’ (pp.28-9) she is initially claimed by both her families, then rejected by both. Anne turns this sense of confusion and alienation back onto the audience, directly addressing its ‘blackfellas’ and ‘whitefellas’ near the play’s end (‘Anne’s scene’, p.34).