

# The Boxes Short Guide

## The Boxes by William Sleator

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## Overview

The Boxes is one of Sleator's best novels.

Taking the ancient Greek myth of Pandora and her box and turning it on its head, The Boxes has many plot twists, menacing events, tense scenes, and amazing settings, and it sparkles with intelligence. In it, Annie is asked by her beloved but mysterious Uncle Marco to guard two boxes, one made of wood, the other metal. Uncle Marco forbids Annie to open either one, and tells her to never let them be together. But Annie peeks into them, the first time she has ever defied a grownup's orders. By doing so, she is taking the first step toward being an independent-minded person; she begins her journey from passivity to intelligent action.

## About the Author

William Warner Sleator III says that he began writing when very young and that even then he was interested in the weird and uncanny aspects of life. Sleator was raised in a family of scientists, but he was interested in the arts and eventually became a pianist, composer, and writer. He read science fiction avidly; perhaps his dual interests in art and science led him to this kind of speculative fiction. He was born to William Warner, Jr., a college professor of physiology, and Esther Kaplan Sleator, a pediatrician, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, on February 13, 1945.

By the time Sleator reached high school, he was composing music with titles such as "Guillotines in Springtime" that reflected his preoccupation with the macabre. He entered Harvard as a music major; he says that he was miserable there, with his unhappiness reflected in somber compositions.

He seems to have been very productive while at Harvard, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multi-volume journal. His artistic interests seem to have taken a significant turn during his Harvard years; he changed his major to English and graduated in 1967.

He moved to England to study musical composition and worked for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist. Sleator had a fortuitous event during his stay in England that ultimately helped change his professional life: he stayed in a cottage in the woods that had been used as a pest house for people with smallpox. The cottage's walls even had graffiti on them from the 1700s.

This cottage experience was the inspiration for his first published young adult book, *Blackbriar*.

Sleator returned to the United States and worked as a pianist with the Boston Ballet, traveling with the company for nine years.

He says he has voluminous notes in his journal about bizarre happenings with the company such as a stage backdrop house tipping over and knocking out a dancer. He has also expressed interest in someday writing a book about these quirky ballet experiences. Sleator found that his writing took up an increasing amount of time during his nine years with the company, so he finally left to concentrate on writing books.

His first two novels for young adults, *Blackbriar* and *Run*, were based on his real-life experiences, and he continues to be inspired by the happenings in his personal life. He lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand. He also says that he bases his characters on real people.

# Setting

Amazing events can occur in ordinary places in *The Boxes*. The most important events take place in a not particularly unusual basement and in a bedroom closet.

Other important events take place in a typical downtown office building. Henry's old house has its interesting aspects, especially the old, unused room and its sticking door, but Sleator shows off his skill at making something extraordinary out of routine settings: A tall structure now rose up around the box, a three-dimensional grid made from strands of some dark fiber that reflected bright flashes from the ceiling lightbulb.

There were little ladders and platforms all over it, and dozens of creatures were scurrying up and down them. The structure shuddered precariously with their movement. It went all the way up to the ceiling and back to the wall.

This is part of the transformation a basement undergoes—a basement whose scariest feature had been an old furnace. Upstairs, in Annie's bedroom closet is a box with a ticking device in it—maybe it is a clock, but its symbols are indecipherable.

Further, it has a vine growing in or around it, a vine that can slap people. Part of the fun of *The Boxes* is seeing how mystery can be found right where one lives.



## Social Sensitivity

Sleator has a history of including environmental themes in his works. For instance, in *The Night the Heads Came* (see separate entry), the villains are alien beings who love pollution and environmental degradation. Dirty air and filthy water are beautiful to them. In *The Beasties* (see separate entry), the environmental theme focuses on the destruction of an ancient American forest by rapacious logging companies. *The Boxes* represents a slight departure in how the environmental theme is handled, because it focuses not on a natural environment but on an old, historical neighborhood.

As is often the case in fiction about the destruction of homes, developers are cast in the role of villain. Annie's beautiful, somewhat rundown neighborhood is slated to be demolished and replaced by a mall. The traditional sticking point in such a fictional situation is that someone will not sell his or her home to the developers, and the developers then put unethical kinds of pressure on the homeowner to sell. This can sometimes happen in real life, but nevertheless it seems to be old stuff, and the developers are too easy villains. On the other hand, *The Boxes* is primarily about how a teen-aged girl learns to stand up for herself and make good choices for not only herself but for those who trust her. The social issues involved in the loss of charming, historical neighborhoods to rich, exploitive developers are mostly a source of conflict to keep the plot moving. The central conflict of the novel is actually in how Annie's shyness conflicts with her need to take action to help others.



## Literary Qualities

Sleator's ability to create amazing scenes is itself amazing. With words alone, he can transport his audience into wondrous situations: The grid of yesterday must have merely been scaffolding. The building now revealed was far more complex. It was entirely glittering black—the creatures could not perceive color, after all. But clearly their sonar made them aware of the shape of things. Sharp conical spires spiked around the steeply sloped roof, and beneath these were colonnaded hallways, small and simple at the top—for the lower classes, I imagined—and growing more spacious and ornate as rampways, first narrow, then wider, descended toward the bottom. The two lower stories were elaborately carved with statues of monstrous creatures, not like anything on earth—many-limbed, with fangs and claws. The statues looked nothing like the creatures who had built this palace in my basement. In the middle of the structure a large arched opening rose from the floor to the third level, which seemed to go all the way through the wall behind it.

Note how this description speaks not only of the beauty of the structure but of the beings who made it. At first, the crablike, blind creatures seem menacing and ugly, but their palace speaks of a genius for construction and of a powerful sense of beauty.

This passage also suggests at the end of the novel that the building provides a gateway to something that is also wonderful, but what that may be is not explained. The ending of *The Boxes* is vague, leaving open what the true conclusion to Annie's adventures may be, and crying out for a sequel that shows what happens when she slides down after the Lord and the others. There is satisfaction in seeing Annie making a life-changing decision for herself, but where is she going? The plot, too, is not entirely satisfying. The evil-developer-wants-to-drive-people-out-of-their-homes-to-build-a-mall routine is very old hat, although the period of the slowdown in the guarded offices of Crutchley Development does manage to get one's blood racing. Fortunately, the somewhat too convenient plot is not really the central interest of the novel. At the novel's heart are Annie and her creatures; they are the ones who determine where the action goes and who is involved. For example, Henry is only involved in the novel's events because Annie chooses to involve him. In fact, there is no novel without Annie taking action by opening the boxes left in her care by Uncle Marco. It is in the portrait of Annie, a remarkable figure, and her involvement in a situation full of amazing wonders that *The Boxes* satisfies and becomes a superior novel.



## Themes and Characters

The Boxes is the story of Annie Levi, a shy, obedient fifteen-year-old girl whose life is ruled by others. Her parents are dead, and she lives in a large old house with her Aunt Ruth, a nasty, chain-smoking, fat banker who verbally abuses Annie. "You always were an ungrateful brat" is one of Aunt Ruth's typical remarks to Annie. If there is a failing in the characterization in The Boxes, it is with Aunt Ruth, who is given no positive qualities to offset her meanness. Annie even fears that Aunt Ruth would kill her if she saw profit in it. Perhaps the portrait of Aunt Ruth is a product of Annie's biases, for Annie is the novel's narrator.

On the other hand, Annie adores her Uncle Marco, who has "thick black hair": "He had a narrow face with a strong nose and cleft chin, and pale blue eyes. He was very good looking." Annie notes that "Uncle Marco looked uncannily young," which is an early clue about what Uncle Marco does on his mysterious trips. He is not around the house much, even though he is allowed to live there, and this means that most of the time he is not available to help Annie and to protect her from Aunt Ruth.

Although Annie completely admires Uncle Marco, this seems selfish of him, particularly when what he usually does on his trips is revealed. Annie very much needs a strong, fatherly figure in her life, and Uncle Marco cops out.

At the start of the novel, he chooses an odd way of helping her gain some power in her life: He gives her two boxes to guard, one that they hide in the root cellar in the basement and another that they hide in her bedroom closet, and he tells her not to touch either one and not to ever let them get near each other. Then he leaves. Annie has always obeyed Uncle Marco; indeed, as her narrative advances, she makes it plain that she has always done what grownups have told her to do. She is even a doormat for her friends such as Jeff and Linda, who use her as a messenger girl to transmit messages between them so that their parents, who do not want them seeing each other, do not find out that they are in fact dating. She is even supposed to sit with them at lunch to make it look like the three of them are hanging out, so that people do not report to their parents that Linda and Jeff are carrying on their romance at school. Linda and Jeff just talk to each other and rarely pay attention to Annie. Thus we see that Annie is a shy girl who lets other people push her around and use her without taking into account her feelings.

The Boxes is an account of how Annie learns to acquire power in her life, even as she seems to fall under the control of supernatural forces. At first, when the crablike creatures she sets loose from the wooden box in the basement tell her what to do, Annie is her usual obedient self. She is already a messenger girl, because she passes on messages for Linda and Jeff. It is not a big step from that to obediently going to her closet and giving a message to the clockwork machine in the box there. She is declared the "nervous system," an ominous name, and she is told that she has the high honor of being part of the "three-in-one."





Experienced readers of science fiction will probably note this as an important clue as to what will happen to Annie.

"You don't give somebody a box if you don't want her to open it" is an odd rationalization for a girl who always behaves herself, but Uncle Marco seems to have carefully chosen a moment in Annie's life when she must learn to control her own destiny. She begins to learn by first talking back to the creatures in the basement. When they boss her around too much, she tells them to be polite. They may be grouchy about it, but they respond by being more polite to her. Thus begins her growth into someone who can think for herself. Yet, Sleator does not make the growth easy on her, and he keeps it cloudy enough that his audience is unlikely to ascertain until near the novel's end that she has not fallen under the psychic control of the creatures and the mechanism they call "the Lord." When Annie resists carrying four lower-class creatures to be sacrificed on the blades of the Lord, the four involuntarily bite her, causing her increasing pain the more she resists carrying them to their deaths. The four creatures are frightened but have no control over themselves; Annie must involuntarily carry them to where she is told to carry them.

Even so, there is a more mundane evil that outweighs the barbaric practices of the creatures and the Lord: Crutchley Development. Land developers are standard villains in popular entertainment and have been at least since Snyderly Whiplash was throwing penniless widows out of their homes in nineteenth-century American melodramas, which means Crutchley Development offers no surprises and is a somewhat disappointing villain in a novel that is vibrant with imagination. Still, Sleator is a master craftsman, and the evil of Crutchley Development is thoroughly integrated into the plot and into Annie's growth.

Just as people have been doing all Annie's life, Crutchley Development, or more particularly Adam Crutchley, tries to tell the youngster what to do. She is to make the Lord slow down time for Crutchley Development so that it can demolish the landscape and construct its buildings before anyone can see what is happening. There are millions of dollars at stake, and Annie could be rich. Adam Crutchley makes it clear that she and her friend Henry could live like royalty if they do his bidding. Yet, Crutchley Development serves for Annie as a contrast to the mysterious beings in the basement. They may be bossy, but they are innocent creatures that are devoted to the only good aspect of their lives, the Lord.

When Crutchley Development steals the Lord, the creatures put on their funny little metallic hats and dance in rituals that they believe will bring the Lord back to them.

Rather than evil, they are pitiable. Annie takes the step that crosses the line between pushover and forceful leader. The connection between her and the creatures and the Lord has become strong, but she makes her choice based on her own understanding of right and wrong. Taking away the Lord is too cruel to its worshipers.

Sleator skillfully stretches the suspense of *The Boxes* as Annie and Henry, a true friend who does not use her for his own selfish ends, struggle to defeat Crutchley



Development. Annie must think quickly and seizes upon the legal documents as a way to put an end to Crutchley's evil destruction. Once she does this, she must make a choice that will determine how far she has come in her growth. As Henry points out, the documents are enough to save their homes; as the Crutchley employees come out of their slowdown, Annie must choose between running away and saving the Lord. The creatures that worship it were bereft when it was lost, and she chooses to risk everything by trying to save the Lord while her enemies slowly catch up to her speed. For once in her life someone does as she tells him rather than the other way around, and Henry helps save the clockwork mechanism and its symbiotic vine. At this stage, Annie emerges as a fully capable person who not only can take action on her own behalf, as when she talks back to Aunt Ruth, but who can take action on behalf of others. Not only that, but she has become a leader. Significant in the final moments of *The Boxes* is her hesitation before following the others down after the Lord. The creatures beg her to come: They need her as part of the three-in-one. Yet Annie is no longer someone who does what she is told; even with her emotional and psychic connection to the creatures and the Lord, her narrative emphasizes that she can choose not to go. When she does go, it is as a strong-minded young woman who has learned to make her own choices about her life.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Annie seems to have a great deal of trouble figuring out why Uncle Marco would want her to stage a very deep slowdown for Crutchley Development.

Why would she be so slow to understand what Uncle Marco plans?

2. Are you satisfied with the ending of *The Boxes*?

3. Why does Annie do as the creatures tell her to do? What does it reveal about her personality?

4. How does Annie grow during the novel? How is she significantly different at the end from the beginning of *The Boxes*?

5. What are the similarities between Annie's relationship with Linda and Jeff and her relationship with the creatures and the Lord?

6. Annie finds the sacrifice of lower-class creatures to be repellent, yet she goes along with it twice. Has she forsaken her moral values for the sake of expediency?

7. Is Uncle Marco actually living more by sometimes slowing down his life, or is he just living the same amount as he would have if he never slowed himself? What does he think? Is he right?

8. Knowing how miserable Annie's life is without him, why does Uncle Marco wander off to have a slowdown most of the time, leaving Annie in the care of her vicious, cruel aunt? Does he really deserve all the affection Annie gives him if he is unwilling to be part of her life all the time or even most of the time?

9. Is Aunt Ruth a well-developed figure? 10. Why does Annie open the boxes? She has never disobeyed before.

11. How much of Annie's behavior when she saves the Lord is determined by her psychic attachment to it and the creatures in her basement? How much of it is determined by her own free choices?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What is parthenogenesis? What animals reproduce by parthenogenesis?

Do any share traits in common with Annie's creatures?

2. What is Chapter 11 bankruptcy? How could it foil Annie's plans to destroy Crutchley Development?

3. The Boxes does not finish the adventure begun by Annie's opening the boxes.

Write a story about what happens to Annie, Henry, Uncle Marco, and the creatures after they slide behind the Lord. For clues about what they may find, review the descriptions of the palace the creatures have built.

4. Compare The Boxes to the story "Sandkings" (1979) by George R. R. Martin. What do the two have in common? Where does The Boxes diverge from "Sandkings"? What does this suggest about Sleator's objectives in The Boxes?

5. The Beasties is another novel by Sleator about nonhuman beings controlling young people. What are the significant differences between the novels in portraying the relationships between the youngsters and the creatures?

6. Describe the process behind a development of a mall. What are the steps a developer must take?

7. British author Wilkie Collins said that it was the novelist's job to find the romance in everyday life. To what extent does The Boxes manage to do this?



## For Further Reference

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Glenview, IL: Harper, 1989, p. 348. Telling a well-thought-out story is important for keeping the attention of young readers.

Williams, Royce D., Web page: <http://saturn.math.uaa.alaska.edu/~royce/sleator.html>. Has photos and is a good resource for reviews of Sleator's books.

## Related Titles

Much of Sleator's work has focused on remarkable events occurring in mundane places. For instance, in *The Spirit House* (see separate entry), a Thai spirit invades a suburban American home. Part of the appeal of the book is the premise that strange and mysterious adventures may occur right at home, right in the middle of a familiar world. Annie's big house is a bit unusual, but the amazing events she experiences occur mostly in her bedroom closet and the basement, ordinary places. Sometimes, Sleator takes his characters out of the mundane world and places them in isolation, making them outsiders in a world they do not understand. The bizarre early novel, *House of Stairs* (see separate entry) takes this to extremes by placing the characters in a house that would be unfamiliar to anyone.

More recently, Sleator has placed his characters in places unfamiliar to them but still realistic; *Dangerous Wishes* (see separate entry) is an outstanding example of this. In it, a young man from America ventures on a perilous journey into Thailand, a place whose customs are mostly unknown to him.

Much of the pleasure in reading the novel comes from learning about Thai people and their traditions.

*The Beasties* places its main character in a real place that is strange to him. Doug is very much the product of urban America—the forest is another world for him, and he needs to learn some of its ways in order to survive. By placing characters in places strange to them, Sleator creates an underlying tension for his narrative; even though the setting is earthly and knowable, for Sleator's characters—and hence for Sleator's readers—danger may lash out from any direction. *The Beasties* shares with *The Boxes* protagonists who are bossed around by strange beings; *The Boxes* takes a very important step away from *The Beasties* by allowing its main character, Annie, an independence of mind not found in the youngsters in *The Beasties*. Although *The Beasties* has a superficially more serious theme, that of environmental destruction, the destruction of Annie's neighborhood is similar to the destruction of the beasties' forest, placing Annie, Henry, and Uncle Marco in the role fulfilled by the beasties—protecting their homes. Thus, in the earlier novel, the youngsters are peripheral to the novel's theme, merely aiding the beasties, whereas Annie and Henry are central to the theme of preserving their heritage against destruction. To the credit of *The Beasties*, the people who are cutting down the forest are given a great deal of humanity, and some are nice to the youngsters, whereas in *The Boxes* the people of Crutchley Development do not have redeeming qualities—they are just plain despicable. Even so, making Annie the central actor in her own drama of preservation makes the narrative of *The Boxes* more dynamic than that of *The Beasties*, and allows for richer development of both characterizations and themes.



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