

The Duplicate Short Guide

The Duplicate by William Sleator

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Contents

The Duplicate Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

William Sleator is noted for his popular and suspenseful science fiction and fantasy for young adults. And like many of his other books, *The Duplicate* is fast paced and exciting. Although it is somewhat formulaic, the book raises interesting issues about the importance of and the need to maintain one's individual identity. This theme is played out by the book's main character, David, through his reactions to two duplicates of himself, and the increasing tension for the last few chapters helps to raise the book above mere formula fiction. With this novel, Sleator also adds to a large body of fantasy fiction that deals with doppelgangers, or evil doubles.

About the Author

William Warner Sleator III was born February 13, 1945, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, to William Warner Sleator, Jr., a university professor, and Esther Kaplan, a physician. He grew up in University City, Missouri, near St.

Louis. As a child, Sleator was interested in music, studying the piano and cello for a number of years and writing musical compositions with macabre titles, such as "Guillotines in Springtime" and "The Haunted Easter Egg."

According to Sleator, he was surrounded by scientists as a youth and enjoyed reading science fiction.

In 1967, Sleator received a bachelor's degree from Harvard University and spent the next year in England, where he studied musical composition and worked as a pianist at the Royal Ballet School. He returned to the United States in 1968 and spent the next nine years as a rehearsal pianist for the Boston Ballet. Following that, Sleator took a job as assistant to children's book illustrator Blair Lent and soon began writing for children and young adults.

Sleator's first book, *The Angry Moon*, was illustrated by Lent and was named as a Caldecott Honor Book in 1971. Sleator has continued his collaboration with Lent and has composed the score for Lent's animated film *Why the Sun and Moon Live in the Sky*. Most of Sleator's recent books, aimed at young adults, fall into the science fiction genre and have proven to be extremely popular. His books have won a number of awards, including the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults for *House of Stairs*, *Interstellar Pig*, *Singularity*, and *The Boy Who Reversed Himself*; the School Library Association Best Book of the Year Award for *The Green Futures of Tycho*, *Fingers*, and *Interstellar Pig*; and the Children's Choice, International Reading Association, and Children's Book Council awards for *Into the Dream*.



Setting

The Duplicate takes place in an unnamed town near a beach, where the protagonist, sixteen-year-old David, has always enjoyed walking when he needs to think. Such is the case at the beginning of the novel—David is walking the dunes, his head filled with romantic thoughts of Angela. As he walks, David notices that a recent storm has washed up from the ocean "satisfyingly disgusting things," such as seaweed, jellyfish, seagulls with broken necks, and dead fish. He also finds that the storm has washed up a box that looks like a cross between a postal meter scale and a video camera—the Spee-Dee-Dupe.

Much of the first part of the novel is set at David's home and at his school, both of which are described only briefly. The second half of the novel takes place in a much more exotic location, a deserted World War II watchtower on a remote part of the beach. The tower, a "four-story-high square structure, bleak and unadorned," was used by the army as a lookout for enemy boats and planes, and its interior is dark, shadowy, and menacingly prison-like. Its amenities consist of only a couple of rusted metal beds and a door with a rusted padlock, and it appears prominently in local folklore as the site of a boy's murder. This gothic structure serves as an appropriate setting for David's and Angela's battles with his duplicates.

Social Sensitivity

There is little that is potentially offensive in *The Duplicate*, with the possible exception of the depiction of Angela, who serves as little more than a stereotypical beautiful maiden in distress. David's initial attraction to Angela because of her looks and Angela's lack of any real personality contributes to the stereotype. The novel also briefly raises questions about the ethics of cloning and other genetic experimentation, stressing the importance of maintaining an individual identity.

Literary Qualities

Like many suspenseful, plot-oriented novels, *The Duplicate* is short on characterization and setting development. But Sleator himself admits that his primary concern is the creation of a riveting story. He has certainly accomplished this goal in this tightly constructed novel. He manages to keep the reader with him to the end by using short chapters that often end in cliffhangers (as when the brick nearly hits David on the head). The novel does not waste time complicating David's life; by page ten he has already created a duplicate, and he almost immediately begins facing the consequences of his actions.

Sleator also creates a sense of immediacy by letting David tell his story in the present tense, as if it is happening to the reader at the same moment. He also manages to make a rather unbelievable story at least somewhat credible by sharing with the reader David's own confused, conflicting feelings.

Sleator manages to heighten suspense by keeping the reader in the dark about certain details, such as the existence of Duplicate B, for a good portion of the novel. A scene in which David finds dead both his fish and the duplicate fish that he made also creates suspense and suggests that David may be in great danger from his own duplicate. Along the way, Sleator also injects some humor. For example, David and Angela watch a video of *Interstellar Pig*, one of Sleator's other books and marvel at the "reality" of the alien lichen in it.

However, the novel ends on a eerie note, suggesting that the deaths of Duplicate A and Duplicate B may not be the end of the story.



Themes and Characters

The novel's main character, David, is a sixteen-year-old boy who is impulsive and has a habit of overcommitting himself. David's chief concern is his infatuation with Angela, "an extremely good-looking and a very enthusiastic type of person," who is going out with Carl, "a snotty jerk." As the novel opens, David has been thinking about Angela for some time and has finally managed to get a date with her, only to discover that he has already made plans to attend his grandmother's birthday for the same evening. His discovery of the Spee-Dee-Dupe, which makes duplicates of living things, seems to be the answer to his problems, so he decides to make a copy of himself without thinking of the consequences.

During the early chapters of the book, David is mostly concerned with himself and gives little thought to how his actions affect others. The possibility of being in two places at once by using the duplicate is appealing. On several occasions, however, other people realize that unusual things are happening.

For instance, David's mother can't believe that he made it home from school in only five minutes.

David is mistrustful of Duplicate A, and he is often confused about his feelings, alternating between jealousy of and sympathy for the duplicate. As the novel continues, however, David is forced to think things through and avoid rash behavior in order to outwit the duplicate. When Duplicate A creates Duplicate B, David must trick them both to keep them from imprisoning him and taking over his life. And in the end, David even begins to feel compassion for Duplicate A and tries to save him from Duplicate B, who wants to kill them both.

Other than David, the characters in the novel are not well developed. They generally remain on the fringes of the action, or in Angela's case, serve as catalysts for David's struggles with the duplicates, who like David are also well developed. At first, Duplicate A appears to be identical to David in every way, although David instinctively mistrusts him. Later, it becomes clear that Duplicate A is not exactly like David—he perceives the duplicate as slightly better looking, more stubborn, and more persuasive. Unlike David, Duplicate A is not afraid of the watchtower, and he also comes to claim control over David. But Duplicate A is also paranoid and creates Duplicate B because he thinks that David is plotting against him. At the end, however, Duplicate A seeks David's help as the cold-hearted Duplicate B threatens to kill them both.

The character of Duplicate B is more handsome than either David or Duplicate A. He is also much more dangerous, being amoral and bent on killing both David and Duplicate A so that he will be the only version of "David" around. Before David learns of his existence, Duplicate B tries to arrange an "accident" by positioning a brick to fall on David's head. In trying to achieve supremacy, Duplicate B pits David and Duplicate A against one another. His attitude is summed up by the words he scrawls on the wall of the tower: "Life is hard. Then you die." In the final chapter of the book, Duplicate B tries



to force himself on Angela and invokes Duplicate A's rage. Duplicate B, however, manages to push Duplicate A off the roof of the tower, killing him. But the reader finds that Duplicate B is, contrary to David's beliefs about him, not very clever. When Angela cries out that another duplicate is behind him, Duplicate B turns to face the attacker and also falls to his death.

Although Sleator seems mostly concerned with creating a suspenseful story that will keep the reader's attention, he manages to raise several important issues. At various points, David suggests that his complicated situation has come about because of his impulsive behavior and his mistrustfulness. Because he cannot trust the motives of either duplicate, there is no advantage to having near-clones of himself. More important, however, the novel stresses the uniqueness of all living things and negates the possibility, or desirability, of a duplicate.

The novel also plays on the folk theme "Don't wish for something because you might get it." As in the folk tale "The Three Wishes," David's ill-conceived desire for a double nearly brings him disaster. Sleator also makes effective use of the folk character the doppelganger, or evil double, which allows the main character to literally battle himself.



Topics for Discussion

1. What clues does Sleator provide the reader to indicate that someone will eventually be killed in the tower?
2. What is the basis for David's attraction to Angela? Why does Angela eventually break up with Carl?
3. In what ways is David actually different from Duplicate A and Duplicate B? Can the flaws in the duplicates be seen as extensions of David's own personality?
4. What complications arise from the creation of the first duplicate? What do David's actions, when faced with these problems, reveal about him and Duplicate A?
5. Trace how David's feelings toward Duplicate A change as you progress through the novel. What is the basis for these changes?
6. At the beginning of the novel, David suggests that he is rash and impulsive, making dates and appointments that conflict with others. Is there any evidence that this has changed at the end of the novel?
7. What early evidence is there that Duplicate B is more monstrous than Duplicate A? Why does David pretend to go along with him?
8. David is obviously infatuated with Angela, so why doesn't Sleator bring her into the novel until Chapter Six? Is she a developed character or a stereotype? Why or why not?
9. At one point, David thinks that it might be easier to tell his parents the truth about the duplicates. Why doesn't he? Are his reasons valid?
10. How important is David's fish to the novel? What does he learn from it and its duplicate that ultimately helps him save himself?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Carefully re-read the novel and keep track of how Sleator manages to create suspense and keep the reader's attention.
2. Find another novel in which the main character fights a duplicate of him or herself, such as Mildred Ames's *Is There Life on a Plastic Planet?* (1975) What motifs or plot elements does this novel have in common with *The Duplicate*? Which novel has the most fully developed characters and why?
3. The novel ends with David worrying that the Spee-Dee-Dupe might have a memory that will allow it to create more duplicates of him. The novel's final line tells us that he stops worrying about it until the phone rings.

Write a continuation of the novel in which you reveal who makes the ominous phone call.

3070 *The Duplicate* 4. Compare and contrast the rivalry between the brothers in Sleator's *Singularity or Fingers* and between David and his duplicates. What is the basis for the rivalries? Which rivalry is most effectively developed and why?

5. Discuss Sleator's attitude toward technology as presented in *The Duplicate* and in his other young adult novels. Is technology presented as a threat or a help to humanity?

For Further Reference

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Davis, James, and Hazel Davis. *Presenting William Sleator*. New York: Macmillan, 1992. A critical biography that explores Sleator's life and works.

Flowers, Ann A. Review. *Horn Book* 64 (1988): 362. In this review, Flowers praises the novel's clever plot, while recognizing its shallow characters.

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Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992: 43-52. A discussion of some of Sleator's books and the value of science fiction for teen-agers.

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———. "William Sleator on Creating Readers." In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, eds. 3d ed.

New York: Harper, 1989: 348. Sleator discusses his own interest in telling a good story and in keeping the attention of young adult readers.

Sutherland, Zena. Review. *Bulletin for Children's Books* 41 (1988): 168. Sutherland suggests that the book's plot is at times congested but praises Sleator's economy in casting and structuring the book.



Related Titles

Like *The Duplicate*, most of Sleator's works are suspenseful science fiction or fantasy that center on fairly ordinary young adults who find themselves involved in confrontations with bizarre, often hostile, beings. In Sleator's children's novel, *Among the Dolls* (1975), a young girl is miniaturized and threatened by her dolls, and in *Interstellar Pig* (1984), a young boy named Barney fights a life-and-death struggle with three aliens. In both of these works, the young characters must fight for their survival.

Rivalry between siblings, if not exact duplicates, serves as the conflict in *Fingers* (1983), which tells the story of two brothers who are jealous of each other's musical talents, and in *Singularity* (1985), in which Harry discovers how to make himself a year older than his twin brother, Barry, in order to dominate him.

The Duplicate is similar in theme to a number of works in which characters must fight their own doubles to maintain their own identity. James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824) is a good early example of the use of the doppelganger.

More recently, adult novels such as Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and children's and young adult novels such as Mildred Ames's *7s There Life on a Plastic Planet?* (1975) and Mary C. Ryan's *Me Two* (1991) have used similar plot devices to explore characters who must in some way overcome versions of themselves.



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