

Fingers Short Guide

Fingers by William Sleator

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Overview

Fingers appeals to both the music lover and the fantasy lover, for Sleator has aptly combined the two elements to create a fascinating story about family, the supernatural, and basic human nature. On one level, Fingers is a spooky tale of deception, intrigue and the supernatural; on another level, it is a sensitive story about two stepbrothers in a dysfunctional family.

Humphrey is the younger son in the family. He was once a child prodigy who was able to play classical piano pieces at age five. Now he is an awkward teen-ager whose career is quickly dwindling. Bridget is Humphrey's mother. She is a maneuvering stage mother who has booked darling little Humphrey around the world and has made a lucrative success of it. Luc, Humphrey's father, and Bridget concoct a scheme to reclaim Humphrey's popularity and the money that will support the entire family. However, to do this, they need the talents of the older son, Sam.

Sam is Humphrey's half brother and the narrator of the story. He harbors resentment of Humphrey's popularity, career—and more: Sam, whose father was African American while the rest of the characters are white, is something of an outcast in this dysfunctional family. Nonetheless, Sam is persuaded to write the musical compositions that are the key to Bridget's scheme.

Sam narrates and explains his mother's plan to drug Humphrey, who then thinks he has been a medium for the dead composer Laszlo Magyar. The deception works until an old man begins to show up after each performance and tells Sam things that only the family would know about the music.

About the Author

William Warner Sleator III was born February 13, 1945 in Harve de Grace, Maryland. His father, William Warner Sleator, Jr., was a professor and his mother was a physician. Three elements of his childhood have had a profound effect on his writing: science, reading, and music. Sleator says of his upbringing and his writing: "Everybody in my family is a scientist except me. I always liked science but was never good enough to be a real scientist. I was the dumbest person in the advanced class. Still, I learned a lot. I prefer science fiction that has some basis in reality: psychological stories, time-travel stories, but especially stories about people. My best books have a physical reality." Today Sleator is known as a critically acclaimed writer of science fiction.

His early interest in playing the piano has also influenced his writing. He began piano lessons at eight and has always wavered between a musical career and a writing career. He began at Harvard as a music major but eventually decided on English as a major.

From Harvard he went to London to study musical composition. He also began working in ballet schools as a pianist. It was in the countryside of London that he got his idea for his first book. The elderly lady from whom he was renting a room had this quaint old cottage that inspired him to write *Blackbriar*: ". . . the place was interesting, way out in the middle of the woods, and eerie with graffiti from 1756 on the walls. There were burial mounds nearby where druids were buried and festivals were held. The whole thing was like a Gothic novel. So there was my first book, *Blackbriar*, handed right to me."

After his return from England, Sleator continued to work for a while as a pianist—this time for the Boston Ballet.

However, he found that he wanted to devote more time to writing. Since that time Sleator has written over fourteen books for children and young adults.

He says of his writing, "My goal is to entertain my audience and to get them to read. I want kids to find out that reading is the best entertainment there is. If, at the same time, I'm also imparting some scientific knowledge, then that's good, too. I'd like kids to see that science is not just boring formulas.

Some of the facts to be learned about the universe are very weird."

Setting

The story begins in a tiny rundown hotel room in Venice, Italy. The majority of the action takes place in either the family's hotel rooms or the various concert halls that Humphrey plays in.

The majority of the scenes depicted are seedy hotels, restaurants, rehearsal halls, and a train. The story takes place in post World War II Europe with flashbacks to the 1800s as Sam reads about the life of Laszlo Magyar. The climax of the book takes place in an old spooky warehouse along the riverbanks in Geneva.

Social Sensitivity

The two boys are exploited by their mother, and at times, Bridget can be nasty and cruel toward her sons and even toward her husband. In this depiction, Sleator develops a contemporary issue in our society: that some parents push their children to accomplishments that are not for the child's benefit but for the parents'. The boys come to realize what their mother has done to them and try to take control of their lives by making their own choices about their lives.

Literary Qualities

Sleator weaves his love of music into a suspenseful fantasy tale. His use of musical terms and the creation of Magyar lend a sense of realism to the story, while his subtle use of the historical book about Magyar's life reveals information to the reader as well as to Sam.

The first-person point of view enhances the reading experience as Sam's fears, hatreds, and jealousies are developed.

Sleator gives Sam a wry sense of humor that tends to lighten the mood at times.



Themes and Characters

Sam is the main character and the narrator of the story. It is through his eyes the reader views the world of Humphrey, Bridget, and Luc. Sam is eighteen years old and often feels prisoner to his mother and his half-brother.

He feels resentment toward his halfbrother because Humphrey receives all the attention, and Sam feels that he is shunned by his mother because he is a reminder of her ex-husband. Half of Sam's blood is African American, and his physical features will never let him fit in with the rest of his family. Humphrey, along with being the child star and family "meal ticket," is Bridget's son by Luc. Bridget, Luc, and Humphrey constantly let Sam know that he does not fit in with the rest of the family.

Sam has musical talent as a composer but not as a player like Humphrey. His talent is not one that is encouraged by his mother or step-father.

Later, when his talent is exploited by his mother in her scheme to regain Humphrey's fame, Sam's resentment grows more bitter.

Humphrey is a fifteen-year-old who is easily manipulated and used by his parents. At the age of five he could play any piece of music, no matter how difficult. He was a child prodigy who was praised for his cuteness and talent; now he is an awkward teen-ager with a fading career. He is easily fooled by Bridget's plot and buys the nonsensical story completely.

Bridget is both Sam and Humphrey's mother. She is obsessed with keeping Humphrey's popularity alive and the cash flowing in. She is callous and manipulative; in fact, her characterization is sometimes too exaggerated to be credible. Her husband Luc is a background player in the novel. He is Bridget's second husband and Humphrey's father. He is overweight, sloppy, and lazy. He is easily manipulated by Bridget and seems to care more about fame than his son. It is also apparent that Luc has no musical skills; this is evident when he demands changes in the Laszlo music that Sam is composing.

Laszlo Magyar becomes a final character in Sleator's science fiction thriller.

The reader learns of Magyar through the book about his life that Sam finds on the train to Milan and through his only living descendent, his son.

Through the book, it is discovered that Laszlo was a gypsy and that he supposedly sold his soul to the devil to keep his fame and youth. Magyar was a perfect choice for Bridget's scheme because he had not written many pieces, and it was easy for Sam to imitate him using old American tunes.

Laszlo Magyar's son also plays a key role in the final chapters of this story.

His appearances and comments convince Sam that the ghost of Magyar or Magyar himself has come after the family for using his name in their deceptive scheme.



Family relationships is a major theme of *Fingers*. Sleator writes of a dysfunctional family and the abuse the children take from the mother and father. Sam's dysfunctional relationship with his mother is the first aspect of the theme to be explored. Sam is the narrator, and it is through his eyes that Sleator has chosen to show us this abusive relationship. Both boys suffer mental and emotional abuse, for both are seen by their mother as mere pawns to be used as she wills.

Sibling rivalry is another aspect of the family relationship depicted in this novel. Both Humphrey and Sam have feelings of jealousy and resentment for one another. They constantly have battles throughout the book, usually with Sam as the antagonist. Sam resents Humphrey's attention as the musical star, and he perhaps even more strongly resents his own biracial heritage.

Another theme of the novel is the supernatural. What starts as a scheme, the "writing" of Magyar's music, music that never existed, seems to become real as the old man appears and as Humphrey's behavior becomes strange and ghoulish. Sam begins to feel that the real Magyar will harm the family for using his name. And in the book that Sam finds about Magyar, a Hungarian composer who died in 1903, he discovers that Magyar's entire life was filled with the supernatural.

Music is another important theme in this story. Sam refers to common sounds in musical terms, such as the bedsprings having a B flat sound, and the telephone ringing in F sharp. Humphrey's playing and Sam's composing are also obvious elements of a musical theme. In the end, perhaps Sam and Humphrey have developed some semblance of love for each other in this otherwise dysfunctional family.



Topics for Discussion

1. Do you think that Bridget really loves her two sons? Why or why not?

Cite evidence from the novel to support your opinion.

2. Humphrey was led to believe that he had written Magyar's music while he was in a trance or dreaming. Do you think that dreams influence us? Have you ever had a dream that influenced some event in your life?

3. How is the sibling rivalry between Sam and Humphrey both typical and atypical of rivalry in all families?

4. Do you think that the use of the gypsy tales added to the authenticity of the tale about Magyar? Why or why not?

5. How do you think the story would change if told from another character's point of view?

6. How do ghosts contribute to the novel?

7. Why does Sam go along with his family despite his feelings that what they are doing is wrong? Later, what changes?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Make a map of Humphrey and his family's travels throughout the novel.
2. Research a famous pianist or a famous musical composer. Look for unusual facts about the person's life.

Write a biographical sketch of this person and present your findings to the class. Try to use the musician or composer's music in your report.

3. Rewrite a chapter from another character's point of view.
4. Make a diorama of a favorite scene from the book.
5. Write another chapter to the novel.

Expand the setting to five years later from the original ending. How would each of the character's lives be changed?

For Further Reference

Garrett, Agnes, and Helga P. McCue.

Authors and Artists for Young Adults.

Vol. 5. Detroit: Gale Research, 1990: 207-215. This article gives biographical information and discusses Sleator's major works.

Olendorf, Donna. "Sleator, William." In *Something about the Author*. Vol. 68.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1992: 215-218.

This article gives a biographical sketch of Sleator's life and offers personal quotations from Sleator. A list of Sleator's books and awards is also given.

Review. *Booklist* 80 (October 1, 1983): 234. The reviewer gives a brief synopsis of the novel and makes favorable comments about the plot and suspense.

Review. *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books* 37 (December 1983): 7879. A positive review of the novel emphasizing its pace, characterizations, style, and humor.

Review. *School Library Journal* 30 (October 1983): 173. The reviewer summarizes the plot and makes favorable comments about the humor and suspense of the novel.

Related Titles

Sleator has written four other novels that also deal with supernatural phenomenon: *Blackbriar* (1972), *The Green Futures of Tycho* (1981), *Interstellar Pig* (1984), and *The Boy Who Reversed Himself* (1986). These novels are similar to *Fingers* in that each is a science fiction or supernatural thriller.



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