

House of Stairs Short Guide

House of Stairs by William Sleator

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Overview

House of Stairs addresses the conflict between the rewards society provides for conformity and the personal satisfaction derived from asserting one's individuality. The book also vividly illustrates a common theme of science-fiction novels: the potentially dangerous consequences of an exploitative government. Sleator depicts the exploitation of five sixteenyear-olds—Peter, Lola, Blossom, Abigail, and Oliver—as they seek out the frightening and shocking truth about the house of stairs. The results of manipulating human behavior are not pretty, and the pain that people are capable of inflicting upon one another in order to survive is ghastly. But Sleator also shows that strong individuals can care and learn to survive in nonviolent ways.

About the Author

William Warner Sleator III was born on February 13, 1945, in Havre de Grace, Maryland. His father was engaged in ballistics research at Aberdeen Proving Ground, and his mother was a surgeon for the health service there. Before he was three years old, Sleator and his family moved to a suburb of St. Louis, where he grew up in a house filled with books. Music, especially the piano, was an important part of his life.

After attending grade and high school in St. Louis, Sleator went on to earn a bachelor's degree from Harvard University. Even though he did not like Harvard and generally thought of it as a waste of money, he engaged in many activities that were useful preparation for his later life: writing music for student films and plays, writing reviews for the Harvard Lampoon, and keeping a journal that ended up containing over one thousand typed pages. After graduating from Harvard he spent a year in England, where he studied musical composition at the Rambert School.

Starting in 1974 he worked for nine years as a rehearsal pianist for the Boston Ballet.

Sleator has been a major writer of young adult fiction since *House of Stairs* appeared in 1974. In many ways that book set a new standard for science fiction for adolescents. His earlier, nonscience-fiction works, *Blackbriar* and *Run*, were also well received. He is the author of eight other novels for young adults, all science fiction except for *Fingers*; three children's books; and a nonfiction behavior modification guide.

His first children's book, *The Angry Moon* (1970), illustrated by Blair Lent, was a 1971 Caldecott Honor Book, an American Library Association Notable Book, and a nominee for the American Book Award.

Sleator devotes much of his time to traveling and speaking at conferences and workshops for young writers and teachers. An articulate speaker and writer, he strives to make the complex and intricate seem clear. He writes about believable characters who are usually intelligent, sensitive, and wellread. By portraying fictional events that could possibly occur in the future, his unique brand of science fiction aims to make the reader better able to understand the potential consequences of his or her actions and attitudes. Sleator's ideas are grounded in science but allow for the full range of imagination.

Sleator writes one book at a time and collaborates very closely with his editor, usually Ann Durell at E. P. Dutton. He says his next book will move away from science fiction and will concern personal relationships. He plans to incorporate materials from his travels in Thailand.

Setting

The idea for the novel's setting and title comes from M. C. Escher's print, "House of Stairs," which shows small, segmented, wormlike creatures crawling up and down endless stairways. Sleator takes this image and turns it into a surrealistic nightmare place where five sixteen-year-old orphans find themselves trapped, unaware that the house is actually a testing laboratory and that they are the subjects of an experiment in behavior modification.

In their wanderings the five discover a machine that will feed them, but only if they perform certain gestures and acts.

They make many efforts to please the machine, and they find that the machine will reward them with food if they dance.

But then the machine stops providing them with food, and they seek other methods of pleasing it. Gradually, by trial and error, they discover that acts of cruelty to one another get them food.

Peter and Lola make a very difficult decision to refrain from cruelty, even if they must starve. The others torment them, but finally Peter and Lola win the battle with the machine and are released from the house of stairs. Instead of becoming conditioned puppets, as the others do, they develop individuality and a deep respect for each other.

Social Sensitivity

Perhaps the aspect of this novel that may be of greatest concern to some readers or parents is its portrayal of a dehumanizing and exploitative government. The violent scenes that *House of Stairs* illustrates reflect the consequences of actual totalitarian governments, such as those of Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Sleator obviously believes that only by understanding the potential for such evil can people hope to combat it.

Literary Qualities

The plot of the novel contains a few brief flashbacks, but it is largely linear, moving forward in time. The climax occurs at the end of the book. Readers join the well-developed adolescent characters in unraveling the mystery of the house of stairs. The characters continually face what seem to be hopeless situations, creating a strong element of suspense. The adversity that the characters face brings out every aspect of their personalities—strengths and vulnerabilities.

The frightening experiment performed on the characters, which is fully explained at the story's end, symbolizes a society that places too much emphasis on obedience to authority. People who think for themselves and trust others are labeled misfits. Sleator's work gains its power through a vivid and unrelenting portrayal of a frightening society full of ironic contradictions, as well as through strong dialogue, complex characters, and a suspenseful plot full of mystery.

Themes and Characters

When Peter and Lola first meet, they are so different that it seems they will never be able to relate to each other.

They have been bound, blindfolded, and taken from an orphanage to this maze for no apparent reason. Peter is submissive when his blindfold and ropes are taken off. To escape from the reality of the nightmarish stairs and his own fears and inadequacies, he lapses into a daydream. When Peter comes out of his dream, Lola is there. Her rough voice, tough talk, and tomboy ways lead Peter to believe at first that she is a boy. She is more aggressive than Peter is, but she shares his confusion about why they have been brought to the house of stairs.

Despite her confusion, Lola refuses to be passive about her predicament.

Blossom, the next character introduced, is fat, selfish, and spoiled. She is manipulative and hateful, especially toward Lola. Oliver is handsome, happy-go-lucky, and athletic. He wants to lead the group, but he lacks the strength of character to fill a leadership role. He takes advantage of Abigail's attraction to him, pretending that it is reciprocated and then becoming cold and aloof. This treatment only intensifies Abigail's attraction to him. She is weak and does not want competition to develop in the group.

Through the experiences of these five characters, Sleator explores how humans are affected by their environment and how they react to it in different ways. Although the circumstances the characters encounter may seem farfetched, even today behavioral scientists perform similar experiments on pigeons, rats, and dogs. People, too, have sometimes been used for tests by their governments or employers. By portraying a situation where characters' behaviors are so obviously being manipulated, Sleator alerts readers to the more subtle attempts at behavior modification that can occur in everyday life. Just as the young people in the story do not realize that they are manipulated, people in the real world are sometimes manipulated without recognizing it.

The conflict between good and evil in *House of Stairs* is straightforward. The experimenter who appears at the end is the epitome of evil; he represents the kind of evil that clouds judgment and causes people to sell themselves short of their full potential. The experimenter and the government that funds him justify their deeds by claiming to act in the name of security, order, comfort, and efficiency; but Sleator makes it clear that no excuses can justify such behavior. Only people such as Peter and Lola, who are unwilling to submit to evil for any reason, can be considered good.

Another of the novel's themes is the individual's struggle for freedom in a society that values conformity. Lola and Peter risk their lives by refusing to conform, while the other characters give up their freedom in an attempt at self-preservation. Ironically, Lola and Peter are the only characters who are truly alive at the novel's end; the others have been reduced to unthinking zombies.

Other themes addressed in House of Stairs are the individual's potential for redemption through being needed by someone else; weakness versus strength; and the effects of peer pressure.



Topics for Discussion

1. What is meant by the statement that the machine is a capricious provider?
2. What are the changes that take place in Blossom, Peter, Abigail, Oliver, and Lola during the course of the novel?

What causes these changes?

3. What do you think will become of Blossom, Abigail, and Oliver? Do you think their conditioning will ever go away?
4. What psychological conflicts does Peter face and how does he deal with them?
5. Why are the scientists experimenting on the young people?
6. What kind of feelings do Peter and Lola develop towards each other?
7. How does Sleator address the theme of mistrust in the story?
8. House of Stairs focuses on the conditioning of human behavior. What does it tell you about human behavior?
9. Discuss the terms "stimuli," "variable ratio reinforcement," "reward," and "punishment" in relation to the novel.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does Sleator use various forms of light and voices throughout the novel?

What is the significance of Sleator's use of these devices?

2. How do the "good" characters in the novel differ from the "bad" ones?

3. Some people complain that the novel is too intense because of the violence that the characters inflict on one another. Do you agree? Explain your answer.

4. Write an essay comparing Peter to Oliver or Lola to Abigail.

5. Peter, Oliver, Lola, Abigail, and Blossom have many unusual experiences in the story. How do you think that their experiences will affect their lives after they return to the real world?

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