

# The Night the Heads Came Short Guide

## The Night the Heads Came by William Sleator

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## Overview

In *The Night the Heads Came*, Sleator exercises his fertile imagination to conjure up visions of strange worlds, ancient ruined cities, bizarre creatures from other worlds, and an alien war being fought on Earth. The heads and the Others are locked in a cosmic contest with the people of Earth caught in the crossfire. Leo and Tim have seen wonders and learned cosmic secrets, and they are caught up in an ancient conflict with time running short to save the Earth from environmental catastrophe.



## About the Author

William Warner Sleator III says that he began writing when very young and that even then he was interested in the uncanny aspects of life.

Sleator, though raised among a family of scientists, was always interested in the arts, eventually becoming a pianist, composer, and writer. It is perhaps this blending of dual interests in art and science that prompted his avid reading of science fiction. He was born to William Warner, Jr., a college professor in physiology, and Esther Kaplan Sleator, a pediatrician, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, on February 13, 1945.

He composed music by high school that reflected his preoccupation with the macabre, and he gave these works titles such as "Guillotines in Springtime." He entered Harvard as a music major where he says that he was miserable, with his unhappiness reflected in unhappy compositions. He seems to have been very productive whatever his spirits during the Harvard years, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multivolume journal. The primary focus of his artistic interests shifted significantly while at Harvard because he changed his major to English, graduating in 1967.

Sleator moved to England to study musical composition while working for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist.

His time in England encompassed a fortuitous event which would ultimately 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 stay at the cottage was the inspiration for his first published young adult book *Blackbriar*.

After moving back to the United States, Sleator took a job as a pianist with the Boston Ballet and traveled with the company for nine years. He says he has voluminous notes in his journal about bizarre happenings with the company such as Giselle's house tipping over and knocking out a dancer, and that he hopes to turn his experiences with the ballet company into a book someday. Sleator found that writing took up increasing amounts of his time during his later years with the company so he eventually left this job to concentrate on writing books.

*Blackbriar* and *Run*, his first two novels for young adults, were based on personal experiences. He continues to be inspired by his real-life situations, as later novels attest. He lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand, and he uses what he knows about Thailand in *The Spirit House* (1991) and *Dangerous Wishes* (1995; see separate entry, Vol. 9). He also says that he bases his characters on real people, sometimes getting himself in trouble by doing so, which may account for his asking his family for forgiveness at the start of *Oddballs* (1991; see separate entry, Vol. 9).

## Setting

The events of *The Night the Heads Came* take place in a town south of New York, a location that is refreshing partly because of its very familiarity and partly because of the sensible manner in which Sleator presents his story. The novel has none of the usual clichés of the small-town-beset-byaliens plot which has often been the stuff of endless bad fiction and motion pictures. Sleator shows respect for the minds of ordinary people in presenting a town where people behave with intelligence and fortitude when confronted with new experiences. The town's adults do not all become complete idiots who ignore the warnings of teenagers, the police chief is smart and pays attention to the evidence, scientists examine an alien artifact and do not dismiss it, and there are no mob scenes of panicked fools fleeing the evil aliens that they had refused to believe existed. Instead, people behave as real people do in times of crisis with only a few lapses into stupidity. The people of the East Coast town are rational and offer none of the hackneyed frustrations that teenagers usually face in a story about alien abductions or invasions.



## Social Sensitivity

The social commentary in *The Night the Heads Came* is incidental, and the environmental issues are introduced at the end by way of explanation for preceding events and to explain the importance of Tim's pictures. There is nothing extraordinary about acknowledging the harm humans have done to Earth; the narrator Leo notes that humanity is ruining its environment and that without significant changes in how it handles its resources, humanity could render itself extinct, leaving a near-lifeless and ruined planet to the Others.

As far as other social issues go, Tim's parents are at first the parents-as-evil-monsters often found in fiction for young adults, but Leo's parents are wonderful folks who absorb the evidence of their own eyes and believe in Leo. Leo's father is courageous and backs up his son, even when it involves finding the hideout of the Others. Although Leo's mother has a couple of out-of-character lapses into abject stupidity, she is mostly portrayed sympathetically. Leo's relationships with and attitudes toward other adults are as benign as we could reasonably expect for a teenager: he is not persecuted by the police and even wins the support of the police chief; his ambivalence about Dr. Viridian is understandable given that the psychologist is a hostile alien; and his outright hostility toward Tim's parents makes good sense given that they are under the control of the Others.



## Literary Qualities

*The Night the Heads Came* is a novel of considerable strengths, although marred by a few flaws in logic and lapses in common sense. One strength is that the story is told in the present tense but reads as though it were told in the past tense. Present-tense narration often has a heightened immediacy of action that crowds events together, but *The Night the Heads Came* has a slower narrative pace more akin to the traditional past tense. This subtle difference between expected and actual narrative speed confers a tone of originality on a story of alien invasion that has been a staple theme of science fiction ever since the publication of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1898; see separate entry, Vol. 4). Much greater originality appears in a handling of the subject mercifully free of clichés. Sleator avoids them all: his adults are neither stupid nor do they all persecute teenagers; his teenagers are not heroic saints trying to save the world from invading monsters and their own parents' idiocy; there is nothing special about invading Earth just happens to be in the way; the public does not panic when it learns about the aliens—in fact, most people react with curiosity and intelligence.

By avoiding this triteness and endowing the book with mainly credible characters reacting to logical and thoughtful events, Sleator makes most of *The Night the Heads Came* refreshing; for a veteran reader of alien invasion stories the effect may be somewhat like cold lemonade on a hot day.

The novel does, however, have some minor but slightly maddening flaws.

One flaw of logic that alert readers will spot is that Tim's parents turn out to have been weird for only six months, meaning that they were not always against Tim's art as the novel's opening passages imply. Furthermore, the marked change they underwent only half a year before should have been noticed by people, as their new behavior is nearly insane. More unsettling is Leo's mother's inconsistent characterization. For most of the novel, she is a sympathetic parent with brains who does not rush to judge her son. Yet she becomes an absolute fool when the plot seems to require it, as when she opens the door of her home to Tim's father in spite of ample evidence that he is viciously deranged and that a hoard of foul monsters have surrounded the house. Her declaration that the person at the door is Tim's father after all, does not in the least excuse her incredible lack of good judgment—especially since the Others are shape-changers. Perhaps the most glaring flaw, next to the uncharacteristic moment of outright stupidity of Leo's mother, is the end of the book. Sleator is known for the ominous endings of his novels, and they usually work well, as in *The Spirit House*, but the ending for *The Night the Heads Came* makes no sense. Leo finds his mother behaving the way Tim's mother behaved while she was under the control of the Others. This is supposed to be ominous, and would be if the adult authorities had been idiots during the rest of the novel; as it is, nearly everyone who has a television set knows about the Others and what they do. The Others are supposed to be able to only control susceptible minds, and Leo's mother has not seemed susceptible. Even if she is controlled by the Others, Leo's strongminded father would instantly recognize what has happened to her, as Leo presumably does, and police and medical experts would also recognize what has



happened. The Others have no chance of doing damage through Leo's mother since everyone around her would recognize their influence.

These flaws are irritating and stand between The Night the Heads Came and truly significant stature.





# Themes and Characters

The Night the Heads Came is a thriller that puts an emphasis on action and does not have much thematic depth or sophisticated characterization. The main character is the narrator Leo Kasden. He and his friend Tim are soon to be seniors in high school. Tim is an artist with hopes of becoming an illustrator of books; it is his ambition that gets the story moving and provides much of the impetus for events as the plot unfolds.

Leo has a few traits that prove invaluable to the narrative. He is a man of action who doesn't fall into confusion and panic when faced with new problems; he confronts them directly and quickly devises plans of action.

This intrepidity and resolve allow him to be not only an observing narrator but a fully active participant in the forefront of events where the most intriguing and crucial action takes place. Leo is capable of far more than just physical action. He has an active intelligence, and his quick and nimble mind sorts evidence to decide what he must do to thwart the plans of hostile aliens. He also has a gift for description that compares well with Tim's gift for illustration.

The startling stars of the novel are the aliens from other worlds who are fighting a skirmish in their cosmic war, and Leo's descriptions capture their strangeness, as in this passage about the workers for the heads: The creatures are tall, taller than Tim and me, with two long, pale arms that seem boneless, like tentacles. I can tell they are very thin, even though they are wearing loose, sleeveless robes that hang from their long necks to the floor. The truly horrible thing about them is their heads, simply because they are so tiny in relation to their height, about the size of tennis balls. The heads are smooth and gray and almost featureless, with one lidless eye in the front and another in the back, and underneath the eyes a mouth like a line without lips that seems to go all the way around the head.

In fact, looking at their heads and the way they move, it becomes apparent that these creatures don't have a front or a back; they are the same on both sides, gliding backward or forward without having to turn around.

These efficient beings are the first aliens seen by Leo and Tim, but they are merely the functional bodies of even weirder beings, the heads: They are shorter than the ones that brought us here and a whole lot uglier, because they are not even remotely humanoid. They basically consist of big, squashy heads, about three feet in diameter. Where the ears would be there are instead appendages like hands with three fat, blunt fingers. I don't even know if they have feet because the soft flesh of the heads lies in folds on the floor. They move by kind of oozing along, like slugs.

These are the beings who try to manipulate Leo and Tim in their effort to influence the behavior of the human race. Although they seem to discard Leo while taking Tim away on a journey across the galaxy, they have actually concocted a scheme in which Leo's penchant for taking action plays an important role.



Tim is the stereotypical self-absorbed artist who is so rapt in his art that he fails to even think about the events surrounding him. So far as he is concerned, the heads kidnaped him in order to train him to be a great artist: "The heads. They loved my drawings.

That's why they kept me. They decided they wanted to make me into a really great artist." When he reappears, having lived two years with the heads even though only days have passed on Earth (the result of the time dilation effect predicted by Einstein), he is enthusiastic about the new kinds of illustrating that he has learned, but it is Leo who realizes that Tim is being used for a purpose other than creating great art. Tim's illustrations do depict scenes of beauty, but they also show horrible scenes that the heads told him to study and then illustrate. Tim has learned to create a compelling threedimensional effect for his drawings, images that if people look at just right become vividly lifelike. As Leo explains: But I keep looking. And as I do, the pictures begin to emerge—pictures that are all the more realistic and three-dimensional because they do consist of so many complex lines and cross-hatchings. I see several views of a rough-hewn city; all the buildings are carved out of translucent gems of various colors. It is a mountainous, vertical city designed for creatures who can fly: There are entrances to the buildings at all levels and no stairways or ramps or elevators. The bodies of the birdlike creatures flocking among the buildings are very small in relation to their wings, but their bald heads are quite large.

Their faces are streaked with blood. They are all eating what look like living humanoid creatures and dropping gobs of flesh to the ground. The countryside around the city is barren and arid, and the air is filled with smoke.

There are a variety of drawings of places where the environment has been polluted beyond repair: lands of desolate emptiness, worlds of poisoned life, and cities decayed and populated by horrible, degenerate beings. These pictures are meant to show humanity what has happened to other worlds that abused their environments beyond repair. The heads do not do this out of concern for humans; in fact, they do not much care for them because "humans are dangerous, ruled by greed and emotion." They do what they do to thwart the Others, foul beings who thrive on the destruction of the environment. When Leo attempts to rescue Tim from the Others, he gets a close look at them: The things squat around Tim like toads as big as large dogs, but with no skin on their bodies, so that the yellow muscle tissue and the purple veins are exposed; their webbed hands and feet are splayed on the floor. The toadlike, skinless aspect of their appearance in itself wouldn't be so bad after all, I got used to the heads, who aren't exactly pretty—but the really disgusting, unspeakable part is the faces, the human faces, that stare directly up from the backs of their hunched-over bodies. The faces are about twice the size of human ones and horribly stretched out and deformed; the eyes stare blankly and pointlessly up at the ceiling.

These are the enemies of the heads, and they have come to our planet to push it beyond the brink of environmental catastrophe; if they succeed all Earthly life will be devastated. According to the heads, "The Others are beings that hunger for planets approaching environmental collapse." The Others turn out to be responsible for the



numerous weird stories of abduction by aliens from outer space. They have done so by replacing the truth about alien abductions with false memories, as Dr.

Viridian does with Leo. As Leo explains, "What I am saying is that I think the doctors took away our real memories and gave us these other stories. They did it so that no one would believe us and so that no one—including us—would know what really did happen to us." The Others are shape-changers who masquerade as humans in order to deceive us.

The Others did to the world of the heads what they are trying to do to Earth, and the heads take revenge by warning other planets of the evil the Others intend. The heads see in Tim and Leo the potential for alerting humanity to the threat they face from the Others. Once warned, the Earthlings can save their planet and deny another world to the marauding Others. The heads at first underestimate Leo, who proves too independent-minded to be moved by their initial attempts to manipulate him. Leo quickly realizes that the heads have ulterior motives in their dealings with Tim, suspecting that "He [Tim] really must be brainwashed." Leo's resistance to the efforts of the heads to get him to act on their behalf gives him an unusual depth and thoughtfulness for the protagonist of a thriller. His insistence on thinking matters through and not accepting simple answers and solutions shows him to be uncommonly tough-minded.

It also serves to constructively complicate the plot. Part of what makes *The Night the Heads Came* entertaining is how Leo works his way through a plot that becomes ever more complex by facing the toughest questions with uncompromising mental rigor. The heads succeed in manipulating Leo by finding a way that plays to Leo's strength of character: "But you are a person of action, Leo," they note. Leo seems to agree, saying that "I've gotten accustomed to taking control of things, and I like the way it feels."

They thus give Leo cause for action, and he unwittingly aids the heads in their war against the Others by defying the heads: "I know for sure now that I can't trust the heads. They lie"; "I see now with absolute clarity that I must not do what the heads are commanding me to do. I know this because of the way the heads lie, the way they don't explain, and the way they threaten." Leo attains a deeper level of thoughtfulness to discover the manipulations of the heads and the complexity of their schemes. This long stride in maturity makes him a formidable opponent for anyone who would try to manipulate or intimidate him again.



## Topics for Discussion

1. When did you figure out that the heads wanted Leo to do the opposite of what they told him to do? What tipped you off?

2. The novel is written in the present tense, instead of the much more common past tense. How does the use of the present tense affect your experience of the novel?

3. What clichés of alien invasion stories does *The Night the Heads Came* avoid?

4. Why does Tim think the heads were training him to be a great artist?

Were they actually training him?

5. How important is environmentalism to *The Night the Heads Came*? If all mention of environmentalism were removed how would the novel change?

6. Why do the heads say that Earth is unimportant?

7. Why does Leo sneak into the warehouse where the Others are hiding? Should he have waited for the police?

8. Tim's artistic ability sets him apart from most people. Does Leo have any special qualities that set him apart?

9. Tim's art inspires people to take action to improve their environment.

How does art affect people? How much does art influence how people behave?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the history of accounts of alien abduction? Are any of them like those in *The Night the Heads Came*?
2. How do psychiatrists explain alien abduction experiences?
3. When do psychologists use hypnosis to treat patients? How effective is hypnosis as a treatment?
4. Dr. Viridian plants false memories in Leo and other people. What is false memory syndrome, when does it occur, and why is it controversial?

How are psychologists associated with it?

5. Tim is kidnapped while traveling to New York for a job interview inspired by his art. How do artists sell their work to publishers?



## For Further Reference

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Davis, James, and Hazel Davis. *Presenting William Sleator*. New York: Macmillan, 1992. A critical study that discusses Sleator's life and how it relates to his fiction.

Lempke, Susan Dove. *Booklist* 92, 14 (March 15, 1996): 1252. Lempke says of *The Night the Heads Came*, "Adding a dollop of environmentalism, Sleator builds the tension and mixes it with gruesome imagery for a thought-provoking, page-turning exploration of alien life-forms."

*Publishers Weekly* 243, 8 (February 19, 1996): 217. Notes that *The Nights the Heads Came* has cliches.

Sleator, William. "Chaos, Strange Attractors, and Other Peculiarities in the English Classroom." In *Authors' Insights: Turning Teenagers into Readers and Writers*. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1992, pp. 43-52. Sleator explains how science fiction can encourage young readers to think and to read. This essay indicates that Sleator puts much thought into the interest and needs of his audience.

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Sleator provides a short account of his life and interests.

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193-194. Sleator tells a little about how he became a writer.

———. "William Sleator on Creating Readers." In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. Third edition. Edited by Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen. 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

Given the many books Sleator has written it is surprising that none repeats the major elements of *The Night the Heads Came*. Indeed, he seems to have made an effort to rarely repeat himself. Novels such as *Dangerous Wishes* share with *The Night the Heads Came* the avoidance of clichés common to literature for young adults. Sleator's novels generally feature very imaginative backgrounds with carefully considered alternative worlds, as in the case of *The Beasties* (1997; see separate entry, Vol. 9), but works such as *Singularity* (1985; see separate entry, Vol. 8) and *The Spirit House* share with *The Night the Heads Came* an ordinary American setting in which extraordinary events take place. In these latter settings, teenaged protagonists tend to be caught up in events that become their responsibility to solve, and they are required by these testing circumstances to mature out of immature expectations for themselves into people who can take charge of their own lives. Julie, in *The Spirit House*, learns that there are far more important aspects to human character than the ability to be popular when she finally acts on another person's behalf. In *The Night the Heads Came*, Leo learns that he can take charge of situations and use well-considered action to solve problems, prime characteristics of the leader he is on his way to becoming.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996