Oddballs Short Guide

Oddballs by William Sleator

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Overview

Oddballs is first an entertainment and second an account of Sleator's youth. From his parents to his siblings, Sleator grew up among a group of eccentrics whose views of the world differed markedly from what would be considered normal. His experiences— from living with a brother with no name (his parents took years to decide on one) who refused to use the toilet until he became five years old, to the game in which he would be dropped off in the city with no clear idea of where he was and then have the adventure of finding his way home—are funny, sometimes poignant, and always entertaining. Oddballs is a treat for fans of Sleator, offering insights into the sources of his sense of humor and the highly imaginative topics of his novels. Readers unfamiliar with Sleator's work will be merrily entertained.

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 aspects of life.

Sleator was raised among a family of scientists but was always interested in the arts, eventually becoming a pianist, composer, and writer. He read science fiction avidly in his early years, possibly spurred in that direction by his dual interests in art and science. 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.

By the time he 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 where he says that he was miserable; his unhappiness manifested itself in unhappy compositions.

He seems to have been very productive while at Harvard despite his unhappiness, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multivolume journal. Sometime during these Harvard years his artistic focus shifted significantly; he graduated in 1967 with a major in English.

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 had a major impact on his future professional career: he stayed in a cottage in the woods that had been used as a pest house for people with smallpox. The walls of this cottage even had graffiti on them from the 1700s, and this memorable stay inspired his first published young adult book Blackbriar.

After moving back to the United States, Sleator traveled for nine years as a pianist with the Boston Ballet, all the while accumulating copious notes in his journal about bizarre happenings with the company such as Giselle's house tipping over and knocking out a dancer. He says that someday he hopes to write a book based on his experiences with the Boston Ballet.

Sleator found that writing took up increasing amounts of his time, and he finally left the company after nine years to concentrate completely on writing books.

Blackbriar (1972) and Run (1973), his first two novels for young adults, were based on his real-life experiences, and he continues to write books inspired by personal happenings. He lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand, and he used his knowledge of Thailand in The Spirit House (1991) and Dangerous Wishes (1993; see separate entry, Vol. 9). He also says that he bases his characters on real people, which may account for his asking his family for forgiveness at the start of Oddballs.

Setting

Most of the events in Oddballs take place in a large house in an East Coast suburb and in a city nearby. The house seems to have been at least two stories high, have had a veranda overlooking a large backyard, and probably have had a big garden, if the fertilizer on the kitchen table is any guide. The children of the Sleator family seem to have had the full trust of their parents and, consequently, free run of the house. This freedom was tempered by responsibility such as having to change a little brother's diapers, and this fortunate conjunction liberated the children to be creative and to interact with each other with great independence. The children all seem to have learned considerable insight about how to treat people well from their experiences with each other.

The suburb and its schools were the cookie cutter variety prevalent in the 1950s, with mothers who have too much makeup and parents determined to be conformist to the point of being cruel overdisciplinarians. Nonconformists such as the Sleators are tolerated, but even Frank and Nicole's mother—the next door neighbors who are not strict conformists themselves— and certainly most of the other parents prefer that they be avoided. The Sleator children become the center of a clique of nonconformists at their schools. One can detect some of the underlying structure of Oddballs in this development, with stories beginning with the immediate family, expanding to nearby friends, and eventually expanding again to include a small community of schoolmates who provide some of the richest humor and most profound sadness of the book.

This community originates psychodramas called "pituh-plays" that are performed in public, and their dramatic execution reveals how creative ideas may influence public behavior; it also shows how even a group of nonconformists can engender their own kind of overbearing conformity, ruining the "only one good thing in high school" for lonely Leah, the book's truest nonconformist. Even Sleator fails to recognize her stories for what they are—tall tales— and thinks of them as lies.

The nearby city is not a menacing place for children, but instead a large playground. When Sleator's father takes his children into the city, drops them off, and drives away (perhaps his way of getting some peace and quiet— the children seem to have been relentlessly creative, active, and noisy), the children do not panic. They feel that they are about to have a fun day figuring out where they are and how to get home. This is an unusual way for a father to behave, and Sleator takes pains to contrast it to the way the parents of two of their friends panicked when they learn that their children were dropped off in the warehouse district.

Social Sensitivity

The Sleator family was very creative, and freethinking, and their ways of handling the commonplaces of growing up may not be what many parents would like to have their own children imitate. Certainly, no adult would wish to suggest that it would be amusing or beneficial to refuse to be potty-trained until five years old. By the same token, children might prefer to have names of their own sometime before the age of two or three—being called "that other kid" by his father and "Newby" (short for "the new baby") only to eventually be given an altogether different name seems to have so traumatized Tycho that he became a physicist.

The pituh-plays are somewhat bothersome because they were jokes played on an unsuspecting public. The stupid telephone calls begging for money are as cruel as they are funny, and the children could actually be prosecuted for harassment for making such calls. What if the unsuspecting audience failed to realize the baby thrown into the fountain was a watermelon and attacked its supposed murderer? In one story, a young woman friend is supposedly harassed by males friends, creating quite a fuss on a streetcar. What if during one of these latter performances a strong but not quick-witted young gentleman decided to punch the boys who seemed to be very cruel to the young woman?

Making fun of people without letting them in on the joke can be dangerous and can make enemies.

Literary Qualities

Oddballs is not a straightforward autobigraphical narrative of the events of one's life while growing up, but rather a sequence of episodes strung together like beads on a necklace. Sleator constructs the book out of sharply drawn vignettes that epitomize different stages of his youth from around ten through high school. It is very much aimed at the same young adult audience for which his novels are intended, focusing as it does on the essentials of growing up and on those aspects of his youth that made Sleator the author he has become.

Sleator's novels are often funny, and in Oddballs his sense of humor ranges widely, showing how the weird inventions of his imagination in such novels as The Night the Heads Came may have their analogues in everyday life. In fact, part of the effect of reading Oddballs is to encourage one to look at one's life in new ways, to see the latent magic in what appear ordinary moments, whether they be picnics, sleepovers, or school days.

Although Oddballs may be enjoyed as light reading, it has depth to it and repays thoughtful reading as much as it pleases quick reading. Sleator includes important aspects of maturation, and he does not shy away from the difficult aspects of living. His delightful crew of nonconformists have their bad qualities as well as their good, and while Leah's experiences are plainly and almost completely sad, there is also a sad under4816 Oddballs tone to Frank who is doomed to enforced conformity. This underlying sadness extends even to young women who must put on outrageous performances in public in order to get some adult attention. The overall effect is one of an honest book that does not play only for laughs, but offers an honest, unglorified account of one child's's growth to the verge of young adulthood.

Themes and Characters

A disclaimer at the start of Oddballs says that although the family members are real the other characters are fictional. If this is so, then Oddballs is a masterpiece of vivid, realistic characterization; even if the characters are based on real people, the portraits are remarkable. Best drawn of all is probably Leah, focus of the poignant "Leah's Stories." She is a plain girl, apparently from a poor family, but she tells outrageous stories about her relationships to nobility and of her fantastic adventures in exotic places among singular people. A thoroughgoing nonconformist whose sad efforts to be accepted by her classmates only make her more of an outsider, she is kept at a distance even by Sleator's proud and self-admiring coterie of nonconformists.

They consider her a liar and have little concern for why she tells the stories she does. They do not realize that her tall tales belong to a category of literature with a long and honored tradition in America. Her stories of being admired and loved by admirable people are highly entertaining; more importantly, they offer great insight into the soul of someone who is an outsider because she cannot help it.

When Sleator and his friends discover that at least one of her stories is true—she really is picked up by a husband and wife in a Rolls Royce and taken to a studio where they and others practice folk dances—they join in the fun with such zest that Leah is squeezed out. Instead of the revelation that she was telling the truth being a triumph that would prompt Sleator and his friends to admire her, she still remains the eternal outsider, pushed out of the one place where she had been an insider. The story is funny — the tall tales and the revelation that the Rolls Royce was real bringing moments of hilarity—but it is deeply sad because it is primarily a story about character, and in this case the character is a tragic figure who loses even when she does well. Nicole writes Sleator, "She had only one good thing in high school—and she lost it."

Leah, just one of many finely depicted characters, seems very true to life in her quirks and her sadness.

The reality of the characterization is notable throughout Oddballs. The Sleator's neighbors, Frank and Nicole, do not seem to be like the kids next door— they seem too individualistic for that, and yet they, too, eventually become conformists. Whether it is Frank's urinating off the veranda or Nicole's flair for dramatics, each seems to behave in ways that are both uniquely individual and typically familial.

Frank's tragedy is thus truly poignant; there are many young people who are molded into sterile conformity by their conformist parents, and Frank may be seen as representative of them.

His individuality makes his deadeningly dull life meaningful, but when Sleator looks to the future and sees what his friends will become, Frank is lost to conformism; and Nicole's brilliant, creative spirit has been subjugated to the rituals of the Church as she has become a nun.

The core of the book is composed of Sleator's immediate family. William Sleator himself is somewhat wacky from the start. He explains that his mother and father, both very successful professionals in the sciences, made their home a fertile field for imagination and experimentation, and that he and his siblings enjoyed an unusual degree of liberty because of their parents' affectionate but relaxed attitudes. This is worthy of note because of the variety of parental figures found in his fiction. Parents are dolts and nonentities in many modern novels for young adults, as they are in Sleator's The Beasties (1997; see separate entry, Vol. 9). On the other hand, parents who defy the modern stereotype for young adult books occasionally appear, as in The Night the Heads Came (1996; see separate entry, Vol. 9), in which the parents are not only intelligent but are trusting of their son; the father seems notably like Sleator's father in Oddballs—unruffled by extraordinary, strong-minded, independent, smart children.

Sleator's coconspirator is his sister Vicky, younger than he but equally gifted in making mischief. She and Sleator find ways to torment or tease their little brothers—from the Babaloo Bum game, in which Danny rocks on suitcases during a car trip until the inevitable happens, to teaching Danny and Tycho all the dirty words that most parents are horrified to hear (although their parents hear the words without concern). Vicky makes her own special contributions: it is she who develops the song of how the children's parents never come back after leaving for an evening out in response to Danny and Tycho's endless questions about when their parents will return from a night excursion. The song has a curious effect in that the children cry when Sleator's voice becomes tremulous, but they demand to hear the song again and again. Vicky also is somewhat less inhibited in public than Sleator. Given Sleator's own imaginative games, this would be hard to do, but Vicky will do in public what Sleator shies away from. In "The Pitiful Encounter," she and her friends Avis and Eleanor spontaneously put on a psychodrama: "Go away!" Vicky said, loudly enough for the other passengers to hear. "You can't sit with us!"

"But I jist want t'be yer friend," Avis faltered. The woman Avis had asked to move was looking back and forth between them. The other passengers had fallen silent, listening. I was a little embarrassed, but not Vicky.

"Well, you can't be our friend!

You talk funny. We don't like you!" Vicky savagely retorted.

We see here not only a little of Vicky's aggressive imagination, but possibly a hint of why Sleator became a writer.

Although he is often the inventor of schemes in Oddballs, he becomes more of an acute observer as the book advances. A little too shy for Vicky's high school schemes, he watches all and sees the essence of what is going on.

The relationship between Sleator and Vicky is a very close one, and they are also close to Danny and Tycho, their sometimes victims. In Oddballs, the younger brothers do not get to spread their wings as fully as do Sleator and Vicky, but their presence is

persistently felt. Five years of changing Tycho's diapers is bound to create some kind of intimacy, but why it takes five years for Tycho to shed his diapers tells much about the person who will evolve. For over two years he was "that other kid" or "Newby" (as in "the new baby") before he was given a real name, and then it was a compromise among several choices: Tycho Barney George Clement Newby Sleator.

Having an abusive older brother [Danny], and the fact that everybody started calling him by a completely different name when he was two, were probably the seeds that resulted in Tycho's first great act of independence: He refused to be toilet trained.

Psychologists may have their own views of the traumas caused by toilet training, but Sleator takes a fiction writer's approach to using Tycho's resistance to expose personality traits.

Tycho's declaration that he will use the toilet when five years old and his doing so on his fifth birthday reveal a child who is very intelligent—he can set deadlines, knows what they mean, and meets them—and very stubborn.

This is the Tycho of Oddballs, brilliant and determined.

Oddballs is primarily a study of character—Sleator's and others—and its theme, the uncomplicated one of how a person grows, is therefore subordinate. The theme engenders obvious questions such as how did he grow, what made him grow, did he grow in every way? This theme subtly keeps the focus of the book on Sleator himself, even when a vignette may emphasize the actions of others. In "Pituh-plays," for instance, the bizarre recital in Mr. Minkoff's studio is not really Sleator's idea, and the emphasis is on the strangeness of the overall performance, not on Sleator's own playing of a Brahms intermezzo to the accompaniment of grinding noises near the piano. Vicky then gives the grand finale and produces the first performance of Vanya, the Insane Pianist (Sleator says that she can still be persuaded to perform the piece, to the delight of her children). Yet, the abiding image is Sleator giving a recital in a studio clamorous with noise and increasing chaos, a scene that almost perfectly prefigures his adult role as the rehearsal pianist for the Boston Ballet.

Topics for Discussion

1. Oddballs begins with a disclaimer: "All of the characters in this book—except for my own family—are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons is coincidental." Do the characters other than family members seem fictitious to you, or do they seem real?

2. Does Oddballs help you to better understand any of Sleator's other books?

3. Why is Sleator the only one of his parents' children not to become a scientist?

4. Does Sleator regard his youth favorably, unfavorably, or as a mixture? What were the best aspects of his growing up? What were the worst?

5. What do you admire about Sleator's family?

6. Which of the stories in Oddballs is the funniest? What makes it funny?

7. Would you like to have William Sleator as your brother? What would make him a good brother? What would make him a difficult brother?

8. Were Sleator's parents neglectful of their children?

9. Do you play games during long trips in an automobile? Are any of them like those played by Sleator and his sister during their long rides?

10. Why do children enjoy saying curse words to grownups?

11. Sleator and Vicky seem have carried much responsibility for the care of their younger brothers. Was it too much responsibility? Is such responsibility a good idea? How much responsibility for baby brothers and sisters should older brothers and sisters have?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Sleator's brother Danny has vast web sites; look them up (you might start with a search engine such as Yahoo—http://www.yahoo.com), then search for "Danny Sleator" and see what you can learn about the real-life Danny and his interests. Does he seem like he could have been the boy portrayed in Oddballs?

2. Where do Sleator's family members appear in Sleator's novels? Does Sleator incorporate them extensively into his fiction?

3. In what ways has Sleator's family life while growing up influenced his fiction? Is it a source for any of his ideas?

4. Write a pituh-play incorporating the essential elements described in Oddballs.

5. What were "happenings"? Why does Sleator compare pituh-plays to them?

6. What is hypnotism? What is a posthypnotic suggestion? Could it work on Tycho the way Sleator describes it?

7. What are the legal rights of a teenager like Vicky who is arrested for passing bad checks? Is what happened to her common?

8. Sleator did not like being compared to the Greenberg kids. What do psychologists say is the effect on someone who is negatively compared with another on a persistent and continual basis, especially by his parents?

9. What is the origin of disclaimers such as the one on the copyright page of Oddballs: "All of the characters in this book—except for my own family—are fictitious, andanyresemblance to actual persons is coincidental"? Why do books have such disclaimers? What could happen if they did not?

10. Research various kinds of folk dancing in the U.S. What are their origins? Where are they now performed?

For Further Reference

Daggett, Margaret L. "Recommended: William Sleator." English Journal 76 (March 1987): 93-94. Explains Sleator's appeal for high school students.

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.

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——. Oddballs. New York: Dutton Children's Books (Penguin Books USA), 1993. In several stories, Sleator tells about his family life when he was a youngster. He portrays his family as people with unique views of life whose eccentricities made for a very creative, sometimes very funny, growing up.

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Web page: http://www.penguinputnam.com/catalog/yadult/authors/2082_biography.html. Sleator provides a short account of his life and interests.

——."William Sleator." In Speaking for Ourselves: Autobiographical Sketches by Notable Authors of Books for Young Adults. Edited by Donald R. Gallo. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990, pp.

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-thoughtout 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

Oddballs, in a way, is related to all of Sleator's books because family members pop up as characters in various novels. For instance, Tycho (also Newby in Oddballs) has his name appear in the title The Green. Future of Tycho, and Danny is likely the original for Dominic in The Spirit House and Dangerous Wishes. Furthermore, it was Tycho who told Sleator about mole rats, thus inspiring The Beasties. Because his family is a strong influence on Sleator's fiction, Oddballs offers insight into where Sleator has found some of his ideas for plots and characters and strongly suggests that the offbeat characters that populate most of his work have their origins in an eccentric family life.

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