

Others See Us Short Guide

Others See Us by William Sleator

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Overview

Others See Us, like many of Sleator's books, explores an interesting premise based on scientific conjecture, which is used to explore the conflicts sometimes present in seemingly ordinary families.

In this case, the novel's protagonist, Jared, develops the ability to read others' minds and, as a result, discovers his relatives' innermost thoughts and secrets. Ultimately, he realizes that most people are not what they appear to be on the surface.

As is frequently the case with Sleator's work, the novel is suspenseful, largely plot-driven, and yet provides interesting insights into its protagonist and a few other major characters.

Through Annelise, Jared's cousin, Sleator paints a portrait of a sociopath who ultimately defeats herself. Jared's grandmother is a complex, ambiguous character.

In the course of the novel, Sleator explores the nature of the human mind and the lengths to which individuals will go to protect their secrets. In typical Sleator-fashion, the novel's ending is both ambiguous and thought-provoking. Reviewers such as M. P. Dunleavy are correct in suggesting that this is one of Sleator's best books.

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 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, Others See Us 3795 including making the American Library Association Best Books for Young Adults list for *House of Stairs*, *Interstellar Pig*, *Singularity*, and *The Boy Who Reversed Himself*; making the School Library Association Best Books of the Year list for *The Green Future of Tycho*, *Fingers*, and *Interstellar Pig*; and he received the Children's Choice, International Reading Association, and Children's Book Council awards for *Into the Dream*.

Setting

Others See Us takes place at the summer estate of Jared's grandmother, which she and her late husband had bought years before. Scattered across the property are four cottages, which Jared suggests are really more like comfortable houses, one for his mother and her brother and two sisters. The main building is a gothic, three-story, gabled house overlooking the sea. The estate's exact geographic location is unclear, although it is in an area where most of the summer residents, including Jared's own family who recently toured Europe, have money.

Near the main house is a swamp filled with toxic waste formed by dumping from a nearby mill. The waste inside, Jared discovers, gives anyone who comes in contact with it the ability to see into others' minds. For the most part, the estate and the swamp are merely background for the battles waged within the minds of Jared, Annelise, Lindie, and their grandmother.

Social Sensitivity

Sleator's novels frequently draw on interesting social issues to create a suspenseful story. In this case, the novel's premise is that toxic chemicals could alter humans in potentially dangerous ways, although Jared, his grandmother, Annelise, and Lindie fortunately feel few negative effects.

Of greater concern is Sleator's suggestion that humans are frequently petty and selfish. While Annelise is a real sociopath, most of her other relatives also have few real redeeming qualities. Even the novel's hero and heroine, Jared and Lindie, are ruled by their passions. Jared has nothing on his mind but being alone with Annelise, a possibly controversial plot element since she is his cousin; Lindie has cheated in order to achieve recognition by being admitted to an Ivy League school. Their grandmother is, evidently, also a thief, blackmailer, and self-imposed judge of others.

Literary Qualities

In some respects, *Others See Us* is a more "literary" work than Sleator's other novels. The book begins with an epigram by Scottish poet Robert Burns, "Oh wad some power the giftie gie us/To see ourselves as others see us!"

This quote sums up the novel's notion, reiterated in its title, that humans often wish to see themselves as others see us.

Sleator soon makes it clear, however, that people's real thoughts about one another are generally not what they say.

In developing this idea, Sleator creates several characters, in particular Jared, Annelise, Lindie, and their grandmother, who are more developed and complex than some of those in his other books. Sleator also gives the novel both credibility and immediacy through its use of a generally likeable first person narrator and through Annelise's diary entries, which effectively reveal her true character.

More importantly, the novel excels in its descriptions of Jared's probes into others' minds, especially those of Annelise and his grandmother. These descriptions make the main plot more plausible and give it substance.



Themes and Characters

Others See Us focuses mostly on three generations of a single family who have come together for an annual reunion. While the family appears relatively normal on the surface, it is filled with quirky, problem-filled individuals. The most normal is the protagonist, Jared, a sixteen-year-old boy who wants to be a writer and who is infatuated with his cousin, Annelise. One of Jared's most well-known characteristics is that he cannot lie, a virtue which gets him in trouble when he subsequently develops the ability to see into the minds of those around him. While he is obsessed with Annelise, he has no 3796 Others See Us other secrets. Even when his grandmother steals his journal, he is concerned only with hiding his comments about his cousin; he has written little that would really be offensive to anyone else because he is generally open with others. Jared is also introspective and shows compassion for his cousin, Lindie, ultimately trying to protect her both from their grandmother and Annelise.

Most of the other characters seem normal, almost stereotypical cartoons, until Jared learns what they are like beneath their facades. Through his new power, Jared discovers that his father has a drinking problem, Lindie cheated on her SAT's in order to get into Harvard, and, most importantly, Annelise is a self-centered, manipulative monster obsessed with obtaining others' admiration. She has already caused one death and is willing to risk the life of her young cousin, Amy, in order to rescue her and appear a heroine. Annelise is not above manipulating her cousin Eric into getting a bad sunburn so that he will not monopolize her or "fixing" Jared's bicycle so that it will crash. In the course of the novel, Annelise's need to have everyone love her causes her to overreact to her family's anger and, in the end, to psychologically self-destruct.

The most complicated character in the novel is Jared's grandmother, who initially appears as nothing more than an elderly, opinionated eccentric who likes to shock her relatives. It soon emerges that she is as manipulative as Annelise. Although she uses her ability to read minds to steal from teller machines and blackmail her neighbors into selling their house, she has not endangered anyone's life. Or has she?

This is the question that Jared raises at the end of the novel as he articulates his own fears that power might have corrupted her and, perhaps, could do the same to him and to Lindie. After all, he helps expose Annelise by telling his first ever outright lie.

Besides the novel's concern with the corrupting nature of power, it also clearly exposes the superficial nature of many relationships and the disjunction between what people often think and what they say. The novel also posits an interesting view of what the human mind looks like and the barriers which we sometimes create to protect our thoughts from others.



Topics for Discussion

1. Before Jared reads Annelise's mind and discovers the content of her diary entries, are there any clues about her true character?
2. Why do you suppose that Jared's grandmother really gives him and Lindie the swamp water to drink?
3. How does Jared differ from the other members of his family? Is he a sympathetic narrator? Why or why not?
4. Jared and Lindie are left with a number of questions at the end of the novel? Why does Sleator not provide more concrete answers about their future and their grandmother's true character?
5. How does Sleator manage to create suspense throughout the novel?

What questions, for example, does he raise in the reader's mind early in the novel?

6. Compare and contrast the way that Jared, Annelise, and Lindie react to and use their new powers.
7. What is the significance of the novel's title and the epigram by Robert Burns?
8. As Jared soon learns, his cousin Lindie cheated to get into Harvard.

Why does he find her a more sympathetic character than Annelise? Is there a difference between her act of deception and those of Annelise?

9. Discuss the character of Jared's grandmother. How can she rationalize stealing and blackmailing and, at the same time, pass judgment on Annelise?

Why do you suppose that Sleator leaves her motives so ambiguous?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write an essay in which you describe what the interiors of your mind might look like to Jared if he stumbled inside it. For instance, what buildings might it contain? How would they be decorated?
2. Since the novel ends ambiguously, write a continuation suggesting the future relationship between Jared, his grandmother, and Annelise.
3. Research the topic of "telepathy" and write a newspaper article presenting current scientific views about whether or not it could be possible.
4. Read another young adult novel, such as *Harriet the Spy* (Louise Fitzhugh, 1964), which deals with the public disclosure of an individual's secret, private feelings. Compare its treatment of this idea with that of *Others See Us*.
5. Compare and contrast Sleator's treatment of the corrupting nature of power in *Others See Us* with that of one of the following: Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies*, Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, and Sleator's own *The Green Future of Tycho*.



For Further Reference

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Daggett, Margaret L. "Recommended: William Sleator." *English Journal* (March 1987): 93-94. In a highly laudatory essay, Daggett explores the reasons that Sleator's books appeal to her high school students. She focuses on books written before 1987.

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

Dunleavy, M. P. Review. *New York Times Book Review* (April 24, 1994): 24. Dunleavy writes that *Others See Us* is one of Sleator's most riveting novels to date, providing readers with a vivid sense of what telepathy might be like. No one who has ever battled with relatives, according to Dunleavy, will be able to put down this book.

Knoth, Maeve Visser. Review. *Horn Book* 70 (1994): 75. In this starred review, Knoth notes the novel's concern with the seductive nature of power and praises the novel as intriguing, fascinating, and exemplary storytelling.

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Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1990: 193-194. A short autobiographical piece touching on Sleator's development as a writer.

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

Related Titles

Like many of Sleator's novels, *Others See Us* features a protagonist who is forced into conflict with other members of his family and whose own parents are overly-concerned with appearances.

For instance, Barney's parents in *Interstellar Pig*, like those of Jared, are classconscious snobs who care too much about what others think of them. In *The Green Future of Tycho*, the protagonist's siblings evidence some of Annelise's vindictiveness. Both of these books, much like *Others See Us*, are also concerned with the deceptive nature of appearances. Rivalry between relatives is the focus of *Sleator's Fingers*, in which eighteen-year-old Sam suffers from a lifelong jealousy of his brother Humphrey, a musical prodigy.

Telepathy, of course, is a common plot-device in science fiction novels and films. For example, the twins in Robert Heinlein's *Time for the Stars* (1956) develop the ability to read each others' minds. The television series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* features a major character, Counselor Troi, who can read the emotions of others.

Many important works, for both adults and young adults, have also explored how individual people are affected by learning how others really see them. In Moliere's play, *The Misanthrope* (1666), Alceste, the title character, proceeds to offend everyone else by sharing his honest thoughts with them. In Louise Fitzhugh's groundbreaking children's novel, *Harriet the Spy* (1964), Harriet Welsh becomes a temporary outcast when her friends learn her secret thoughts by reading her journal.

Similarly, the corrupting nature of power is an important issue in many literary works, such as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), William Golding's *The Lord of the Flies* (1955), Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), and William Sleator's *The Green Future of Tycho* (1981).



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