Rewind Short Guide

Rewind by William Sleator

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Overview

In Rewind, Sleator takes a seemingly simple idea—that people get second chances to save their lives after they die—and turns it into psychological examination of a young man who is under a great deal of stress as he makes the transition from childhood to adulthood. Saving his own life is not easy because he can be his own worst enemy—even when he is certain his actions will kill him again, he gives in to childish emotions and duplicates his fatal behavior. While under the pressure of his impending death, Peter also must deal with a large athlete who wants too much of his attention; his best friend, Eloise, who is unimpressed, even alienated, by his first couple of attempts to save himself; and his parents, who regard him as impractical and a "sissy." Though there is much suspense as Peter reorders his life time and again in an effort to escape his seemingly inevitable doom, Rewind is not a novel of action. Instead, it is a work of fiction that engages the mind as Peter works out important issues.

About the Author

On February 13, 1945, William Warner Sleator III was born in Havre de Grace, Maryland, to William Warner, Jr., a college professor in physiology, and Esther Kaplan Sleator, a pediatrician. Sleator says that he began writing when very young and that even then he was interested in the stranger aspects of life. Though raised among a family of scientists, the young author was interested in the arts, becoming a pianist, composer, and writer. Perhaps his combination of interests in art and science led to his interest in science fiction, which he read avidly.

By high school, he was composing music that reflected his preoccupation with the macabre, giving his works titles such as "Guillotines in Springtime." He entered Harvard as a music major, though he later admitted that he was miserable at Harvard, with his unhappiness reflected in unhappy compositions. He seems to have been very productive while in college, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multi-volume journal. While at Harvard, his artistic interests seem to have taken a significant turn, because he changed his major to English before graduating in 1967.

Rewind 351 Sleator moved to England for a time to study musical composition while working for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist. He had a fortuitous event while in England, staying 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. His stay at the cottage was the inspiration for his first published young adult book Blackbriar.

When he moved back to the United States, he took a job as a pianist with the Boston Ballet, traveling 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. Someday, Sleator once noted, he hopes to turn his experiences with the ballet company into a book. During the nine years with the ballet company, writing took up increasing amounts of his time, and he finally quit his job so that he could concentrate on writing books.

Sleator's first two novels for young adults, Blackbriar and Run, were based on his reallife experiences, and he continues to be inspired by his personal experiences. For instance, the author lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand, leading him to write about Thailand in The Spirit House (see separate entry in Volume 10) and Dangerous Wishes (see separate entry in Volume 9). He also says that he bases his characters on real people, which may explain Rewind's dedication: "this book is for Paul Rhode, who did grow up to be an artist."

Setting

There is life and there is death, In life, Peter lives in an average middle-class home, but he attends a school that has programs for eleven and twelve-year-olds that many other schools would lack, such as art classes, after-school sports, and letter jackets for athletes. Even so, the homework and tests are common ones. At home, Peter's artistic interests grate on his father, who works as a printer, and his mother, who has a practical attitude acquired from her upbringing on a farm. The parents' irritation with their whiny son and Peter's belief that they just do not understand him may be found in many families and among many children.

Death is uncomfortable for Peter: "1 missed everything. I even missed stupid ordinary things I'd never thought about, like the taste of toothpaste. I wanted my teeth back, I wanted my body back, I wanted my life back," says Peter. Bodiless, Peter is nonetheless able to hear what people say about him during his funeral, how his death was his own fault for acting without thinking. There is also a disembodied voice that tells him that he has a chance to fix his life, to change so that he does not die. Peter is not good at paying attention, and he dies twice more before actually paying attention to what the voice tells him. Yet, Peter is no quitter. Instead of giving up and journeying up the light that he is in after he dies, he struggles with himself, learning that in life he must think about the needs of others as well as about his own desires if he is to be happy.

Social Sensitivity

Rewind is a sentimental tale about a young man learning to behave like a responsible person, rather than remaining always focused on himself and his wants. The glowing light and the disembodied voice are primarily window-dressing; some might object to Peter preferring to be dead rather than to be in the light of the afterlife, but this seems unlikely. Of greater interest are the ways Peter tries to fix his life, progressing from the merely physical (sugar in the gas tank), to avoiding the problems that contributed to his death (making a flip book rather than puppets), to learning how to actually care about other people's needs and desires. The key lesson seems to be that Peter's own behavior could be more responsible for his problems than whether people understand him or not. In the process of learning this, he additionally learns how to use his artistic skills to please an audience rather than to only gratify himself. Some older teen-agers may find this cloying, but others, especially younger adolescents, may find the study of a boy learning to respect others of immediate personal interest.

Peter's parents seem to be stereotypes for much of the novel, but this may be a result of Peter not taking the time to understand them. His father works with his hands and muscles; he understands physical labor but has trouble understanding the value of art. His mother prefers only practical behavior; Peter attributes this to her having been raised on a farm in which one had to be contributing to the welfare of the farm every day. Once Peter realizes that his own sulky demeanor may be putting off his father, he begins to look at himself through the eyes of others. He moves his stage building to his home from school, and to his surprise his father eventually joins in, hammering nails alongside his son. This is a striking moment, even though it is brief.

Peter realizes that his father can appreciate how he works with his hands if given a chance. His father even shares with him knowledge about how to use tools properly; they actually talk to each other like regular human beings. This might make Dad seem too easily manipulated, but the conclusion indicates that he has the interest and intelligence to understand his son once his son stopped sulking and opened up to him. Peter's mother, too, understands the puppet show and realizes that it reflects how Peter sees himself as part of their family.

Literary Qualities

If someone wanted to learn how to write a novel, Rewind would offer some valuable lessons. The task Sleator faces in Rewind is a difficult one. He is not writing a breathlessly paced adventure; he is writing a character study, not the sort of book readers will generally pick up for a casual read. On the other hand, the premise is interesting enough to tempt readers—time rewound over and over again as Peter tries to rework himself so that he survives the night he presents his puppet show to his parents. This idea catches the reader's attention, particularly the line that begins the novel: "At my funeral, everybody said it was a shame I had to die that way." First sentences such as this rarely pop into a writer's head; novelists often spend hours, even days trying to create a first sentence that will attract interest and cut to the essence of the action. The sentence Sleator creates captures interest and entices the reader to go beyond the first page. Why is the narrator at his own funeral? How did he die that was such a shame?

The rest of the novel builds on this opening. The disembodied voice is introduced, and it sets limits on Peter. Can he devise a way to live before his time is up? His first failure arrives early in the narrative, making it plain that saving himself will be a very difficult task for Peter. Sleator structures Peter's efforts in three movements, with the first two ending in Peter's death. It seems as if the universe is out to get Peter.

He prevents one automobile from working only to be run over by another; he avoids running into the street, staying instead on the sidewalk, and is run over by a truck that veers at him. These events heighten the tension in the novel; Sleator's themes may be about coming of age, but the tension is what generally holds a reader's interest.

During the first two movements, Sleator even explains what he is doing, using Eloise as his mouthpiece. "Realistic details are what make people believe things they find hard to believe," she tells Peter. An alert reader will note that Rewind itself is grounded in realistic details, from the emotional life of Peter to his schoolwork. These mundane details anchor the "magic" in action that most people would recognize.

Rewind is a coming-of-age story, which means it focuses on one particular event that marks a person's transition from childhood to adulthood. Typically, such events are terrible storms or other violent events; in Rewind, Sleator takes a less sensational approach and makes a puppet show the event that illustrates Peter's transition from spoiled sulker to understanding helper. For his show to be a success, Peter must understand his audience. Indulging his own fantasies serves no purpose if his audience understands nothing about what he is doing.

The third movement focuses on his learning to understand other people, not only his parents but youngsters like Meyer, with whom he assumed he had nothing in common. It turns out that Meyer can take an interest in art if he is given help and direction. Similarly, Peter discovers that Mom and Dad can understand him if he expresses his ideas in terms to which Mom and Dad can relate. His parents are not dullards; they

figure out all that Peter says with his show once he takes the time to create a show that respects his parent's ability to think. Peter can no longer claim that his parents do not understand him; by understanding Mom and Dad, Peter helps them to understand him. They even pick up on the idea that Peter will no longer have "feelings" about the future.

All this makes Rewinda sentimental novel. It may not be all lovey-dovey, but through his determination and intelligence, a boy learns how to communicate with his parents. Incidentally, Sleator leaves out one common aspect of sentimental novels: that everyone has amnesia and forgets their encounters with the divine. At novel's end, everyone still remembers everything, which many readers may find gratifying. Sleator also explicitly rejects the it-was-only-adream cliche; Peter wonders whether he has been dreaming but soon has plenty of concrete evidence that his experiences are real.

Themes and Characters

Nobody understands Peter, nor does he feel appreciated. He has just learned that he is adopted and that a baby is on the way. "I knew they would love the baby more than me," he asserts. Also, as the novel begins, Peter is dead, and he finds his funeral not particularly satisfying. His parents point out that he was impulsive, acting without thinking, and that there was nothing Mrs. Hazelton could have done to avoid running him over. Even in death, it seems, he is insulted by those closest to him.

Why Peter would want to go back to his old life is not entirely clear. While he liked being able smell and taste while alive, everybody was mean to him. Peter says, "But after Mom found out she was going to have a baby, when I was eleven, I could never do anything right." It only occurs to him later that he did not try to do anything, right or otherwise. Once he starts helping his pregnant mother with household chores, he discovers that she can actually be pleased with him.

But his parents are tough on him: Dad asks, "How much time you spend doing this kind of stuff? Messing with sequins and sewing little costumes?" "Waste of time," says Mom about Peter's interests.

When Dad asks about what is worrying him, Peter knows, "He [Dad] was pretending to care, but I knew it really made him angry when I didn't act cheerful about everything." Fortunately, he also had a good friend: "Eloise was smart, and she was my best friend." She seems to accept him even when he is sulky and rude.

The disembodied voice that tells him he has a chance to change his life and avoid death also warns him that he must treat his own emotions as if they had substance, though Peter complains "But I couldn't just control my emotions by will power." As if to prove it, he runs into the street a second time, this time to be run over by a taxi. On his next try, he runs to the street, catches himself, stays on the sidewalk, but is run over again anyway. Whatever the disembodied voice wants out of Peter, it requires much more work than Peter realized.

Throughout the story, the length of time it takes Peter to decide what to do increases.

These periods mark how much more thinking Peter has learned to do before he acts; he changes from an impulsive character to a more thoughtful one. He realizes, "But Mom was right about how I acted without thinking, rushed into things. Maybe they were right about some other things, too."

Physically inept, Peter's first efforts to please his parents and earn their approval do not work out well. "I was trying to be the kind of person Dad wanted, and it wasn't working. It was worse than before." He switches from making puppets to making a flip book of a baseball being pitched and then hit; he finds the work "boring" but he is surprised that his parents find it boring, too. There is a lesson in that. On the other hand, towering athlete Kurt Meyer, teaches Peter something of great value: How to demand quality

work and how to get it out of someone. He even has clumsy Peter playing baseball after school in a quest to capture the motions of pitching and hitting exactly right. In a later life, Peter uses this experience to coach Meyer in how to make papier-mache puppets; Meyer even seems disappointed when Peter does not demand his best work.

Kurt Meyer, athlete and bully, turns out to have his good qualities. This surprises Peter, but it adds to Peter's growing maturity. When Peter has his last try at life, he makes his picture book assignment about a batted ball rather than a haunted house— something that amused him more than it amused others. "Realistic details are what make people believe things they find hard to believe," Eloise tells Peter. The baseball story is good: A ball is swatted so hard that it leaves earth, eventually orbiting a distant star. Life evolves on the baseball. Meyer, who is usually bored with art, actually likes the book. "Research helps you make it realistic. And the more realistic it is, the more you believe in the magic," Peter says to Meyer. Peter had researched escape velocities and other details of his tale, grounding the fantasy in a reality that his audience, including Meyer, could understand and appreciate. The research also required that Peter control his impulses, to think about what he was doing: I remembered what Mom had said at my funeral about how I always acted without thinking. Doing the opposite—thinking before acting—was one of the ways I had decided to try to change, to fix my life this time.

His lessons learned from working with Meyer are also applied to his parents.

"My problems with Dad weren't just that he didn't understand me—the way I acted was part of it, too," Peter observes, so he helps around the house, treats his mother with care, and presents a friendlier face to his parents. Instead of crying and running to his room when told that he was adopted, he takes advantage of knowing it was coming, steels himself, and behaves reasonably, emphasizing the joy of the coming infant. This surprises his parents and seems to increase their respect for him.

Peter decides to make his stage at home rather than in shop, involving his father in helping him buy wood at a lumberyard.

His father eventually joins Peter in his work on the stage, indicating that Dad can grow, too. However, the situation is not yet ideal—Dad still says to Peter, "But this puppet stuff is kinda sissy." Further, Peter's selfimage is far from perfect. When he puts on his puppet show for his parents, the boy— who obviously represents him—says that "I'm so funny-looking." This alludes to his mother complaining about his thin neck and the dark rings around his eyes.

Another person that Peter wants to appreciate him is Eloise, his "smart friend."

Peter admits that his affection for Eloise is somewhat selfish: "Eloise was pretty in an odd way, with very pale red hair, and she was a better student than I was. She loved art, too, but she just couldn't draw. She thought I was kind of a genius at it, which is why we became friends." Peter is an artist who likes to have an appreciative audience, but it is hard to say exactly what Eloise gets out of the friendship. One thing she receives is Peter's trust; telling someone that he has died repeatedly because of his immaturity and

his inability to control his emotions cannot be easy. Eloise also finds herself involved in Peter's schemes to avoid a fourth and final death, and she contributes much to Peter's efforts to understand and appreciate his parents.

Thus, Peter's efforts are not in a vacuum.

Eloise, once she understands what has happened, gives excellent advice, and her support helps to steady Peter's emotions. The voice Peter hears in death, offers good, although cryptic, advice, pointing out the value of taking time to plan carefully and not just rushing off with the first idea that comes to mind. The voice also likes to remind Peter that his lack of emotional control is his downfall. Meyer unwittingly helps Peter to learn to take control of a situation and to take care to do precise, well thoughtout work. His insistence on getting pitching and hitting motions right becomes a valuable lesson as Peter learns to apply these same standards to his art.

Topics for Discussion

1. Is life going to be smooth sailing for Peter after the ending of Rewind?

2. Who might the voice be that Peter hears each time he dies?

3. How does Peter grow during the novel? How is he significantly different at the end as opposed to the beginning of Rewind?

4. Is Kurt Meyer a good person?

5. Why does Peter choose to make his last puppet show one about himself and his family? Is it a good choice?

6. What does the last puppet show reveal about how Peter thinks of himself and of his parents?

7. "I knew they would love the baby more than me," declares Peter early in Rewind. How much of this remark reflects selfishness on his part? How much of it is grounded in reality?

8. When does Peter realize that he himself may be responsible for creating some of his problems? How does he change his behavior after this?

9. What about Peter's behavior annoys his parents? Is Peter right to try to modify that behavior?

10. "But I couldn't just control my emotions by will power," says Peter. How does he learn to control himself?

11. "Peter's always so clever and enthusiastic," Miss Lilly says, comparing Peter to Meyer. This makes Peter seem like the teacher's pet, but more important may be how it affects Meyer. What is Meyer supposed to think about himself?

12. Is Peter too whiny to be a good protagonist?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. When is a good time to tell children that they have been adopted? What do specialists in child psychology recommend?

2. British author Wilkie Collins said that it was the novelist's job to find the romance in everyday life. To what extent does Rewind manage to do this?

3. What are the similarities between Peter's trying to learn to play baseball and Meyer's trying to learn to make a puppet? What do these experiences tell us about each character?

4. "Realistic details are what make people believe things they find hard to believe," Eloise tells Peter. How does Peter put this idea into action? What does he learn about entertaining an audience when he tries to do what Eloise suggests?

5. "Research helps you make it realistic. And the more realistic it is, the more you believe in the magic," Peter says to Meyer. How does Sleator put this principal to work in Rewind?

6. In one of his lives, Peter creates a flipthe- pages animation of a pitcher throwing a ball, a batter hitting it, and then the ball flying out of the ballpark. Create your own animation of the events in Rewind.

7. The premise of Rewind leaves many possibilities for stories of people who get second chances at life. Write one of your own, sticking to the rules set out Rewind 357 in Rewind but featuring characters and situations out of your imagination.

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.

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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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, way of growing up.

——. "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. 193-94. 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 Aileen Pace Nilsen.

Glenview, IL: Harper, 1989, p. 348. According to Sleator, telling a well thoughtout story is important for keeping the attention of young readers.

Related Titles

Much of Sleator's work has focused on remarkable events occurring in mundane places such as home and school. For instance, in The Spirit House, a Thai spirit invades a suburban American home that is similar to Peter's. Part of the appeal of the book is the premise that strange and mysterious adventures may occur at home, right in the middle of a familiar world. In The Boxes (see separate entry in Volume 10) Annie's big house is a bit unusual, but the amazing events she experiences occur mostly in her bedroom closet and the basement, ordinary places. Sometimes, Sleator takes his characters out of the mundane world and places them in isolation, making them outsiders in a world they do not understand. His 1974 novel House of Stairs (see separate entry in Volume 4) takes this to extremes by placing the characters in a house that would be unfamiliar to anyone.

More recently, Sleator has placed his characters in places unfamiliar to them but still realistic; Dangerous Wishes is an outstanding example of this. In it, a young man from America ventures on a perilous journey into Thailand, a place whose customs are mostly unknown to him. Much of the pleasure reading the novel provides comes from learning about Thai people and their traditions.

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