

# The Fall: The Seventh Tower Short Guide

## The Fall: The Seventh Tower by Garth Nix

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## Overview

As with Sabriel and Shade's Children, Nix immediately sets the stage for the primary conflict in *The Fall*: Tal's desperate need for a primary Sunstone for his family. A primary Sunstone enables a family to ascend to the shadow realm of Aenir with the rest of the inhabitants of the Castle. The ascension is an annual event during which Tal will exchange his shadowguard, a low-level spirit mimicking his original shadow, for a stronger Spiritshadow that will be his companion for the rest of his life. All children ascending to adulthood at the age of thirteen and three-quarters eagerly anticipate the Day of Ascension.

Tal's family Sunstone disappeared with his father, Rerem, while on a mission for the Empress. His mother Graile's Sunstone is weakened by her long illness, and his uncaring aunts refuse to share any of their Sunstones. Tal tries to win a Sunstone by honorable means, competing in a contest held every quarter to recognize the development of skills in the Chosen, the people of the Castle. Tal signs up for an Achievement of Body, a test of physical ability, but at the last minute he finds out his name has been listed for the Achievement of Music instead. When he sees Shadowmaster Sushin take a seat as a judge, he knows Sushin changed his name on the lists, since Sushin hates Tal's family for reasons unknown to Tal. As a result, Tal fails. His only option is to steal a Sunstone from the nets strung above the Veil.

## About the Author

Award-winning author Garth Nix is a developing power in the world of fantasy. A native of Australia, Nix was born in Melbourne in 1963 and eventually settled in Sydney. He put his bachelor's degree in professional writing from the University of Canberra to good use, working as a sales representative, publicist, and senior editor in the publishing field. In addition, Nix worked in a bookstore, served four years in the Australian Army Reserve, and established a marketing agency.

In 1997, Nix met his future wife, Anna, just as he left his day job to focus solely on his writing. They met again at a dinner where Nix was a featured speaker. In April 2000, the couple married at Bawley Point, a town on the coast of New South Wales.

Nix's background in the Australian Army Reserve adds a dose of realism to the fighting scenes in *The Fall*. His hobbies include fishing, bodysurfing, collecting books, reading, films, and writing. His knowledge of fishing is apparent in the careful development of the Icecarl society for *The Seventh Tower* series.

Nix says his ideas are drawn from an image or thought that slowly grows into something that he feels a need to express.

The *Seventh Tower* series differs slightly in that Nix, who was chosen because an editor at Scholastic enjoyed his work, received a vague description of the proposed books from the creative staff at Scholastic, publishers of *Harry Potter* and *Animorphs*, and Lucas Film, George Lucas's movie studio which produced the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* films.

In an interview with *Writer's Write*, Nix says he received a list that "included points like 'a castle where everything outside is dark,' 'a closed society similar to feudal Japan,' or 'the architecture of Gaudi.'" He took the list and created his own outline for the six books with his own ideas for the setting and background of this new world.

Once his basic ideas were approved, he wrote one book every couple months until he completed the series.

He likens the experience to the works of Charles Dickens—and, in recent years, Stephen King—authors who have written "serial novels," or novels in which each part is published as soon as it is written instead of waiting to be combined into one complete book. He writes his first draft in longhand in small notebooks that are easy to carry.

When he types his second draft on the computer, he makes revisions as he goes.

## Setting

In the Castle, an immeasurably large and complex Gothic architecture, there are seven Towers: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet. The Chosen, the inhabitants of the Castle, stick mainly to their own Towers, which are determined at birth. Tal is a member of the Orange Order, next to lowest. Only the Reds, and the servant Underfolk, are beneath Tal's order in status. For this reason, he chooses the Red Tower to climb in his attempt to steal a Sunstone.

As Tal climbs, his shadowguard mimics the red color of the Tower to disguise Tal's movements. It takes its power from the Sunstone Tal wears around his neck, not a primary Sunstone but a regular one. When Tal reaches the Veil, the black curtain separating all but the uppermost levels of the Towers from the sun, he is enveloped in a total sensory deprivation experience and barely struggles through. Unfortunately, the Tower guardian, a huge Spiritshadow, detects Tal and chases him off the roof. Tal is terrified because the Spiritshadow had pieces of previous thieves still stuck in its gaping mouth, and his terror leads to a slip, then a fall. As high up as he is, death seems his final punishment.

However, his shadowguard gamely shapes itself into a glider and uses the last of Tal's Sunstone's energy to land Tal safely. They land far from the Castle in a drift of snow and ice, where they are discovered by two female Icecarls. The eldest of the two, a Crone, traps Tal's shadowguard in a special container. The younger woman, Milla, is only a year older than Tal, but she is determined to kill Tal as an interloper to the FarRaider's territory. The Crone stops her since Tal will be of use to the Far-Raiders.

Icecarl society follows the migration path of the Selski, huge creatures with flippers that move in a continuous undulating motion, stopping only to die. Like the Eskimo, Icecarls utilize every part of the Selski for food or to create ships, housing, clothing, and weapons. In looks, they resemble the Vikings more so than the Eskimo; Milla has white-blond hair and blue eyes. The Icecarls also consider Shadowspirits "demons" and Tal as not much better.

## Social Sensitivity

In much the same way Nix's character Sabriel never gives up in her search for her father, Tal also continues to search and hope he will find his father alive. The need for a strong male role model in families separated by divorce is an everyday occurrence. In some ways, Tal's decisions represent the trouble a younger teen can get into without parental guidance, since in Tal's case his mother is as good as absent.

Tal's attempt at thievery opens the door to a discussion of right and wrong and extenuating circumstances. With many states enforcing a "three strikes" law, Tal's attempt, had he been caught, could be considered strike one. And since his Great-Uncle Ebbitt mentioned the possibility to him, readers need to consider the power and influence even distant family members can have on a teen.

## Literary Qualities

Jennifer Hubert calls *The Fall* "an epic fantasy not to be missed," but her opinion is not consistently shared. Reviewers either love or hate this series, and detractors cite the fast pace and lack of attention to detail in parts of the world-building as faults. The symbolism of the colors is never explained in one place or even completely in this first book. Readers have to piece together bits of information and details from all six books to gain a more complete understanding of this fantasy world and the motivations of the characters. While the novelty of *The Seventh Tower* as a "serial novel" is not to be overlooked, the fast-paced writing and editorial schedule for the series may have contributed in part to the inconsistencies. The title *The Fall* is appropriate in reflecting Tal's physical fall from the Red Tower, his fall from grace under Shadowmaster Sushin's hatred, and his fall from morality when he decides to steal, even though circumstances arguably support his decision.



## Themes and Characters

Tal and Milla are the main characters throughout the series. In *The Fall*, readers learn minute, scattered bits of information about the Chosen and the Castle and are left to infer most details on their own. Tal's family belongs to the upper levels of the Orange Order; each Order has seven levels to match the seven Towers. On the brink of adulthood, Tal is basically a good person at heart; he decides to steal only as a last resort and only since his family desperately needs him to fill the place of his missing father.

Unfortunately, his ego and self-centeredness make a poor first impression on Milla and lead him to make mistakes when his temper gets the best of him. Tal's family is his primary concern, lending a focus for his self-centeredness since he has to improve himself to help them. He is also a snob, ranking himself higher and better than any Red, the level below Orange, and, of course, above any Underfolk who have no colors or rank except eternal servitude.

Milla is just as bad as Tal when it comes to snobbery. For her, the Icecarls, especially her clan, the Far-Raiders, are the ultimate society and any Castle-dweller is Selskifodder. Within the Icecarl clans, there exists a group of female warriors called Shield Maidens, and Milla's fondest dream is to join them. The Shield Maidens resemble the Valkyries of Norse mythology, adapted to an icy climate, and dispensing justice among the clans. If it means helping her worst enemy to obtain the possibility of joining the Shield Maidens, then Milla will give her life to see that Tal's quest succeeds.

Shadowmaster Sushin is an obese, power-hungry man with no care for anyone else. He hates Tal since Tal's father Rerem continuously defeated him in various Achievements. Instead of focusing on his success in consistently beating the other contestants, he focused only on his defeat by one man and let his ambition warp him into a creature of pure evil. He will stop at nothing to destroy Tal's family.

Tal's Great-Uncle Ebbitt is crazy like a fox. Once a wielder of Violet light, the most powerful in the Towers, he was supposedly reduced to the Red level after falling into the bad graces of the highest levels of power in the Castle. He kept his powerful Shadowspirit since only death can separate the two, and Tal witnesses him using Violet light even when he should no longer have the ability. Ebbitt hides his skill to remain beneath the notice of the powerful in the Castle since he cannot fight them alone, but he sees his time coming with Tal's troubles.

The rest of Tal's family—his father Rerem, his mother Graile, his younger brother Gref, and baby sister Kusi—barely affect the plot in this first book except as a reason for Tal's desperation to secure a primary Sunstone.

Like his current Sunstone, they are too weak to aid him in his quest.





Achieving adulthood is a primary theme for The Seventh Tower series. Tal is physically becoming an adult as he nears his Day of Ascension, but he still has the reactions and impulses of a child. Milla already has the responsibilities of an adult in her quest to join the Shield Maidens and aid her clan, but she too still reacts in many ways as a child when she acts without thinking. Tal and Milla also want to do everything as individuals, not realizing their combined efforts will make them stronger and more effective.

Family is another theme. Tal is willing to do anything to help his family, including setting aside his personal feelings about thievery, to provide a primary Sunstone for them. He wishes his mother were well and his father back home, but he knows he cannot sit and wait for his family to become whole on its own. Milla, on the other hand, does not seem to have an immediate family.

She substitutes devotion to the Far-Raider clan and a longing to belong to the Shield Maidens for this lack.

The color scheme used in the Castle— Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet—reflects the prismatic colors of the rainbow, a symbol of hope and renewal.

The colors are ironic since the Castle is rooted in the status quo, with little changing from day to day. Also, the residents of the Castle will never see a rainbow since the Veil prevents weather from affecting their lives.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Tal's society in the Towers is based on the colors of the rainbow, increasing in power and status from red to orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and, finally, violet. How are the colors in a rainbow formed, and what are the possible reasons for choosing red to be the weakest color and violet the most powerful?
2. Why is the number "7" important in Tal's society? In what ways does it occur and why? (Seven towers, seven levels in each tower, seven colors, seven deluminents.) See if you can locate ancient associations of value with the number 7.
3. Tal is resentful of authority for treating him poorly, yet he considers himself superior to the Reds, the Underfolk, and the Icecarls. Discuss Tal's snobbery and how it hurts his quest.
4. Milla is intolerant of outsiders, but she will need to learn tolerance to achieve her dream of being a Shield Maiden. Basing your argument on evidence in the book, do you think she will learn tolerance, or will she continue with her 'kill first, ask questions later' mentality? Write about a time when you were tolerant or intolerant of new people and new ideas.
5. Would you prefer to live in warmth in Tal's Towers as a lowly Red or Orange, or would you prefer to take your chances in the cold as an Icecarl? Base your opinion on what the book says about these settings.
6. How are the Towers and the Icecarls' society similar? Different? Is one better than the other? Explain why using the book to support your position.
7. Who acts more mature, Milla or Tal? In what ways could they be considered "typical" teenagers of their societies?
8. Is Tal's great-uncle Ebbitt crazy like a fox or just plain crazy? Explain.
9. Shadows play an important role in The Fall. Why would Tal's people consider them benevolent and Milla's people consider them evil? Has Tal witnessed anything that might support or disprove the Icecarls' beliefs?
10. Tal plans to steal a Sunstone to save his family. Is stealing okay when Tal's other options have been exhausted, or is it wrong all the time? Or is this a case of situational ethics where a person who normally would not steal does so in order to protect or help someone else?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare Icecarl society to the Vikings and the Eskimos.
2. Compare and contrast the Shield Maidens and the Crones to similar figures from mythology, e.g., the Valkyries, the Fates, the three aspects of the female as child/woman/crone, etc.
3. Discuss at least five cases of abuse of power. Compare and contrast the actions of the people involved and the results of each case. What connections, if any, do these five kinds of abuse have to this book?
4. Explore the history of gargoyles in Gothic architecture. Are there any legends about gargoyles? What about the perception of gargoyles in popular culture, e.g., in the animated television show created by Disney or in horror movies?
5. Compare and contrast the history and hierarchy of feudal Japan with the societies in The Seventh Tower series.
6. Are people in general more apt to act with fear or hatred of people or things they do not understand, or are they more accepting? Give examples to support your argument.
7. In the United States, teens earn certain rights as an adult at age eighteen, with full rights at age 21. Are there modern or historical societies in which children become adults at younger ages? Discuss the reasons, pro and con, for these decisions.

## For Further Reference

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"Nix, Garth." In *Something about the Author*, vol. 97. Detroit: Gale, 1998. This entry contains biographical information, a list of awards, his bibliography, and information about Sabriel.

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This article is a brief discussion of the release of *The Seventh Tower* series.

## Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers of the immensely popular Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling will find enough similarities between those titles and The Seventh Tower series for initial interest: both series feature a boy on the brink of manhood, magic from an innate ability, and continuing adventures. For similar reasons, Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy will appeal, as will Susan Cooper's The Dark Is Rising sequence.

## Related Web Sites

Garth Nix Homepage. [http://eidolon.net/garth\\_nix/](http://eidolon.net/garth_nix/). Accessed July 9, 2002. This official Web site of the author gives updates on his writing, novel excerpts, review quotes, a biography, and a look at the writing process. His original site, <http://members.ozemail.com.au/garhnix/>, is still active and supplements the information on the newer site.

The Seventh Tower. <http://www.theseventhtower.com>. Accessed July 9, 2002. The official Web site of The Seventh Tower series sponsored by Scholastic and Lucas Film includes brief character biographies, plot synopses, and more information about the series.



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