

Singularity Short Guide

Singularity by William Sleator

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Overview

Sleator's science fiction novels are noted for their unusual plots, which usually involve conflicts between young adults. *Singularity* is a tale of sibling rivalry which explores the value of individuality, the fear of the future, and the nature of time. It is an adventure-accomplishment romance, in which the protagonist develops and overcomes his own fears and bitterness; a suspenseful science fiction novel; and a "Robinsonade," a survival tale in which a character learns to live in isolation, much like Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Despite its somewhat shallow characters, *Singularity* goes beyond mere formula and, as a result, makes interesting and satisfying reading.

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

Setting

Most of Singularity takes place in the rural town of Sushan, Illinois in and around the former home of Ambrose Kittery, as well as in "the playhouse" built in the meadow behind it. The main house is typically Gothic, jammed with antiques, old furniture, books, an Illustration by Michael Hays for Singularity by William Sleator. Dutton: New York (1985).

old-fashioned and decaying bathroom and kitchen, and carefully mounted skeletons of some unusual creatures (like a "cat" with six legs). To Harry and Barry Kresner, twin brothers who watch the house after their parents inherit it, staying there is an adventure. The house is very remote and there is no one around to tell the boys what to do.

Soon after their arrival, Harry and Barry find a meadow behind the house with a sundial and a playhouse, "a nondescript rectangular building with a sloping roof, about twelve feet long by six feet wide." The playhouse is actually in better condition than the real house. It is freshly painted with a shiny roof, and has a metal door which requires two keys to open it. The interior is like a bomb shelter, filled with piles of books and U.S. Army Survival Biscuits.

The twins soon discover that the playhouse was built to fence in a "singularity," a sort of black hole with one side on Earth and the other in another universe. Inside the playhouse, time is distorted. One hour of playhouse time is equal to one second in the outside world. The playhouse also has a faucet and sink which, when filled, allows Harry and Barry to see objects which are approaching Earth from another universe.

During the course of the novel, the playhouse is used as a metaphor for the way in which Harry tries to lock up his problems and fears. Like "The Approaching One," the creature that must be freed from the playhouse to keep it from destroying everything, Harry must let out his own pent up fears, confronting both Barry and the creature. Shortly after Harry breaks free from Barry's control by making himself a year older, the rock that the playhouse is built on breaks in two, destroying the singularity.

Social Sensitivity

For the most part, there is little that is potentially offensive in Singularity.

The one major female character, however, is stereotypically nervous and frightened and, unlike Harry and Barry, speaks with improper grammar, ostensibly because she is from rural Illinois. The novel does raise the issue of what makes people unique individuals, questioning the notion that "identical" twins are really identical.

Literary Qualities

Like most of Sleator's books, *Singularity* seems more interested in sustaining an exciting plot than in creating well-developed characters. Many of the chapters in the book end with "hooks" or cliffhangers, prompting the reader to continue with the novel: Barry emerges from the playhouse with stubble on his chin after a few seconds; Harry realizes that the dog, Fred, may be locked in the playhouse and die; the twins discover a new creature with many teeth approaching Earth.

As several reviewers have noted, the book manages to keep the reader in suspense, largely through Harry's firstperson narrative and through careful foreshadowing. For instance, when the twins first arrive at Uncle Ambrose's house, they encounter unusual skeletons which they do not understand until much later in the book. Harry's year in the playhouse, a section potentially boring to the reader, is rendered more exciting by the progress of "The Approaching One," whose true character is unclear. This section of the novel is also strengthened by Harry's diary entries which make his adventures seem more immediate.

The novel does draw on a long literary tradition of rival twins, one ostensibly good, the other more devious, as in the biblical story of Jacob and Esau and numerous myths and legends. The book also contains a number of literary allusions in the form of Harry's reading.

Despite its fast-paced action, *Singularity* is enriched by several symbolic names and objects. As Ann A. Flowers has noted, the title has two meanings, the literal one usually associated with black holes, and a secondary allusion to Harry and Barry's desire to be "single," not twins. The sundial near the playhouse also symbolizes time, which Harry tries to manipulate, and the monster reflected in the playhouse sink parallels Harry's changing fears, as well as his attitude towards his brother.



Themes and Characters

Singularity focuses on the relationship of sixteen-year-old brothers, Harry and Barry Kresner, both of whom wish they were not twins. Harry, the novel's narrator, is better at math and science than his brother, but is also more nervous and cautious; he allows himself to be bullied by Barry.

Barry, Harry feels, is sometimes devious and resents having him around.

When the two boys meet anyone new, it is Barry who controls the conversation, while Harry is usually silent. Barry, the handsomer twin, is the one who instantly attracts Lucy Coolidge when they meet her by the river. Nevertheless, it is Harry who figures out what is happening in the playhouse and actually takes advantage of its unusual nature.

Both Harry and Barry are emotionally immature, something that Harry does not realize until late in the novel.

Harry's year-long stay in the playhouse, which takes less than an evening for Barry, allows him to become a year older than his brother. During this year, Harry matures through a combination of exercise, reading, and meditation. Harry emerges from the playhouse well-educated and physically fit, having read great works of literature like *Anna Karenina*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Way of All Flesh*, and having developed a muscular physique. When he is about to leave the playhouse, Harry finally realizes that he needs to take control of his own life and that Barry is not his greatest stumbling block. Barry has not changed, however, and is still bitter, although he seems to like the new Harry.

Most of the other characters are flat and undeveloped. Lucy Coolidge, a not very likeable farm girl, shares in the brothers' discovery of the "singularity." She is present mainly to provide the twins with important background information on Uncle Ambrose and the mysterious events which have taken place in the meadow over the years.

The twins' dog, Fred, a mere plot device, is trapped in the playhouse and ages rapidly, soon dying, thus substantiating Harry's theories about the singularity.

The other significant character in the novel is "The Approaching One," a creature from another galaxy whose approach to Earth frightens both twins.

It turns out, however, that it is really a harmless machine which eats itself up.

The creature suggests that human fears are often based on mistaken perceptions, in this case a distorted reflection in a pool of water in the playhouse.

Among the novel's many themes is the notion that sometimes individual people are imprisoned by their own unjustifiable fears and the idea that people can create and solve their own problems. During Harry's stay in the playhouse he learns not to take nature and everyday life for granted, maturing and learning that he is master of his own destiny. A tale of survival, *Singularity* shows how Harry survives his time in isolation,



following a routine, developing his own holidays, feeding his intellect, reading and strengthening his body through exercise. In the end, he is in control of his emotions and is willing to face his problems.



Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the ways in which Harry changes both physically and mentally because of his "year" in the playhouse.
2. Lucy Coolidge is not crucial to the plot of Singularity. What is her role in the novel and in what way does she help define the differences in the twins' personalities?
3. Discuss the literal and figurative meaning of the novel's title.
4. How are Harry and Barry different? Discuss how being a twin affects each of them.
5. How does Harry's attitude toward "The Approaching One" change during his stay in the playhouse?
6. What is significant about the way "The Approaching One" behaves when it arrives on Earth? Do you think that it was sent intentionally or merely entered the "Singularity" by accident?

Support your answer.

7. The paperback edition of the book shows the twins and Lucy staring into the pool of water in the playhouse sink. Try to decide which of the twins is supposed to be Harry and which is Barry. Explain why.
8. Harry blames Barry for many of his troubles. To what extent does Harry help create the rivalry that exists between him and his brother?
9. Discuss Harry's changing feelings about reading, as well as the way the books he reads in the playhouse affect him.
10. Discuss why Harry decides to spend the year in the playhouse. How valid are these reasons?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In Chapter 9, Harry reads aloud a letter sent to Uncle Ambrose by the chair of a university physics department which mentions black holes and the "singularity" at their core. After doing additional research in the library, write a research paper explaining what contemporary scientists theorize about black holes and their effect on time.

2. In Chapter 17, Harry describes his first "Great Walk" (a fifteen-minute walk outside of the playhouse). Write an essay in which you discuss what you would have done during that fifteen minutes, comparing your holiday with that of Harry.

3. Read Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (another adventure-survival book, 1987).

Compare Brian Robeson's return to civilization, as described in *Hatchet's* "Epilogue," with that of Harry. What is similar about the way they react to the normal world?

4. While Harry is in the playhouse, he spends a great deal of time reading.

Among the specific titles he mentions are *The Diary and Letters of Madame D'Arblay*, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, *Moby Dick*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Way of All Flesh*. Go to the library and try to determine which of these are real books, then read one and discuss what Harry might have learned from it that would be relevant to his own situation.

5. Compare and contrast the rivalry between the siblings in Sleator's *The Green Futures* of Tycho or Fingers with the twins in *Singularity*. What is the basis for these rivalries? Which rivalry is most effectively developed and why?

6. Write an additional chapter of the novel describing what happens when the "new" Harry meets his parents after they return from their trip.

7. Towards the end of the novel, the reader is allowed to see several of Harry's diary entries. Write four or five entries describing the first "days" Harry spends in the playhouse. How are these entries likely to differ from those Harry writes later?

8. Write an essay describing what you would take into the playhouse if you were going to stay there for a "year."

For Further Reference

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

Flowers, Ann A. Review. *Horn Book* 61 (1985): 320-321. A positive review of the book which notes the double entendre of its title.

Gale, David. Review. *School Library Journal* 31,10 (August 1985): 82. This review praises the quick pace of the novel, its "surprise" ending, and its unusual plot, while suggesting that Harry and Barry are one-dimensional characters.

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: 43-52. A discussion of some of Sleator's books and the value of science fiction for teen-agers.

———. "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: 193-194. A short autobiographical piece touching on Sleator's development as a writer.

———. "William Sleator on Creating Readers." In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. 3d ed. Edited by Kenneth L. Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen. Glenview, IL: 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

Singularity is an adventure-accomplishment romance, a study of sibling rivalry, and a fantastic story dealing with the altering time, all common topics of other books by young adult writers. It is an adventure-accomplishment romance in which the protagonist learns to overcome his feelings of selfdoubt, Singularity has elements in common with the comic novel *One Fat Summer* (1977) by Robert Lipsyte, whose protagonist, Bobby Marks, emerges more physically fit at the end of his struggle, adding to his new confidence.

Sleator's Harry Kresner also resembles Brian Robeson of Gary Paulsen's *Hatchet* (1987), whose fifty-four days alone in the wilderness make him more aware of the world around him. Like that of Miyax of Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves* (1972), Harry's time spent in isolation provides him with a new perspective of his life, allowing him to return to civilization with confidence.

A number of novels for young adults feature twins who are jealous of each other, much like Harry and Barry of *Singularity*, and who eventually work through their problems. For example, in Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* (1980), Sarah Louis Bradshaw is extremely jealous of her talented sister and works to get out from under her sibling's shadow. In science fiction for young adults, twins often use fantastic means to solve their problems.

Through traveling back to the time of Noah, twin brothers, Sandy and Dennys Murray of Madeleine L'Engle's *Many Waters* (1986) ultimately grow closer together. One of the twins in Robert Heinlein's *Time for the Stars* (1956) travels through outer space and, like Sleator's Barry, finds himself aging more slowly than his brother who stays on Earth.

Many of Sleator's other books involve confrontations with alien creatures who seemingly threaten the world, like the being that Harry sees in the pool of water. In *Interstellar Pig*, sixteen-year-old Barney must defeat three different aliens bent on destroying the Earth. The ability to alter time, a major plot device in *Singularity*, is also the subject of Sleator's *Strange Attractors*, in which a teen-age scientist discovers two parallel universes, and *The Green Futures of Tycho*, in which a boy alters the past and must fight an evil adult version of himself from the future.

Intense sibling rivalry which leads to a supernatural confrontation is an important theme in Sleator's *Fingers*, in which eighteen-year-old Sam suffers from a lifelong jealousy of his brother Humphrey, a musical prodigy. Confronting one's double is also the subject of Sleator's *The Duplicate*, in which a boy named David must fight a duplicate which he creates of himself.



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