

The Spirit House Short Guide

The Spirit House by William Sleator

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Overview

Julie's family has invited a Thai boy to come live with them for a school year. Julie is unhappy because the boy's letters and photograph make him seem to be a nerd, someone who would embarrass her at school, where she has worked hard to become popular. The boy who arrives is poised, a heavy smoker, and seemingly unimpressed by the luxuries he finds in Julie's home. Bia's good looks and composure promise to make him popular at school, and Julie the envy of her girlfriends, even if Bia does not speak English well. Then her younger brother Dominic builds a spirit house to set in the yard to make Bia feel more at home. A Thai spirit apparently comes to the new spirit house, and that spirit is turned loose in a culture that does not understand it. Then Julie's life begins to fall apart: her boyfriend drops her for one of her girlfriends, her friends want nothing to do with her, her hair becomes uncombable, her face breaks out in pimples, and her grades in school plummet.

Furthermore, something is in the spirit house and Julie feels powerfully drawn to it, but Thai spirits are very demanding and treacherous, and just what is Bia going to do with that long, sharp knife?

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 and uncanny aspects of life. Sleator was raised in a family of scientists, but he was interested in the arts and eventually became a pianist, composer, and writer. He read science fiction avidly; perhaps his dual interests in art and science led him to this kind of speculative fiction. He was born to William Warner, Jr., a college professor of physiology, and Esther Kaplan Sleator, a pediatrician, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, on February 13, 1945.

By the time Sleator 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; he says that he was miserable there, with his unhappiness reflected in somber compositions.

He seems to have been very productive while at Harvard, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multivolume journal. His artistic interests seem to have taken a significant turn during his Harvard years; he changed his major to English and graduated in 1967.

He moved to England to study musical composition and worked for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist. Sleator had a fortuitous experience during his stay in England that ultimately helped change his professional life: he stayed 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. This cottage experience was the inspiration for his first published young adult book, *Blackbriar*.

Sleator returned to the United States and worked 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 a stage backdrop house tipping over and knocking out a dancer. He has also expressed interest in someday writing a book about these quirky ballet experiences. Sleator found that his writing took up an increasing amount of time during his nine years with the company, so he finally left to concentrate on writing books.

His first two novels for young adults, *Blackbriar* and *Run*, were based on his real-life experiences, and he continues to be inspired by the happenings in his personal life. He lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand. He has used what he knows about Thailand in *The Spirit House* and *Dangerous Wishes*: He even has a spirit house brought from Thailand outside of his American home. (He reports that it does not seem as active as the one in *The Spirit House*.) He also says that because his characters are based on real people he occasionally gets into trouble when the fictional and the real are too congruent, which may account for his asking his family for forgiveness at the start of *Oddballs*.

Setting

The events of *The Spirit House* take place in the large home and yard of a well-to-do family and at the local schools of Julie and Dominic. Julie's home is big enough to have bedrooms for everyone in the family and a guest room for Bia. It has a yard spacious enough for Dominic to place the spirit house where the shadow of the home does not fall. The home represents some of the pride and snobbery of a financially comfortable family; the guest from Thailand is expected to be overawed by the lavishness and scale of the American home. The family is complacently expecting to bask in their guest's gratitude, and Bia's indifference to both the amenities and the size of his bedroom is an early indication of the disappointments ahead.

School for Julie is not so much a place to learn as it is an arena for a contest of popularity. She says she has worked hard to be popular, and having a foreign guest attend school with her is now a source of anxiety.

Bia is an asset at first; his cool poise and good looks make him a popular figure. But what happens at school also demonstrates the reach of the spirit's power: when the spirit is against Julie, her popularity is replaced by contempt and ridicule; when it is for her, her rivals suffer while she has the slavish attention of her boyfriend and earns good grades with ease. Dominic's school, by contrast, is where the last suspenseful scenes of *The Spirit House* are played out, with Julie finally making some choices that require maturity, understanding, and courage.



Social Sensitivity

The Spirit House ventures into the littleknown territory of Thai spirituality to create its suspenseful story. This quality of intellectual exploration adds greatly to the novel's fresh interest, since even avid readers of supernatural thrillers are not likely to be familiar with Thai cultural traditions.

Sleator allows his narrator Julie to present with nonjudgmental forthrightness the Thai traditional concepts of spirit houses and the spirits that live in them. The fascinated reader learns that land has spirits, and those who build on the land must provide a small house for the spirit of the land to live in. The spirit domicile must be separate from the main house and the shadow of the main house must never fall on it. The spirit has a female head from which dangle entrails; it is demanding and can do people either good or harm. It likes gifts enough that it will do good for those who give it offerings, but those who displease it or who are enemies of someone who has pleased it are likely to suffer. Julie's changing fortunes are in direct proportion to how the spirit regards her. She first suffers because she is friendly with Bia, who has antagonized the Kamen spirit by failing to keep a spiritpromise back in Thailand, and then suddenly she can do no wrong after she gives the spirit the jade Buddha. When Bia gives the spirit a gift of boiled pig's brains, Julie's life goes badly again. Figuring out how to deal with the spirit and how to deal with Bia's apparent treachery involves Julie's learning about another culture, broadening her intellectual horizons from the tiny world of high school popularity contests.

The Spirit House also touches on a common American problem of condescension or arrogance toward people from other cultures. Julie and her family are disappointed by Bia's casual acceptance of their home and lives. According to Julie, they are disappointed that he does not rave about the luxuries he never had at home and does not cry out in delight at how his bedroom is much better than any room he lived in before. The family's attitude toward Bia is treated with contempt by Julie, who attributes most of the condescension to her mother, someone she dislikes. Bia's difficulty with English only makes the problem worse; he is disappointing for those who expected a grateful nerd. Bia is instead attractive and composed enough to make himself accepted at school.

Julie finds her mother, a professor of women's studies at a nearby college, to be predictably annoying; she seems to have a knee-jerk response to anything involving gender politics. Even when Bia explains a little about the roles of men and women in Thai society, she breaks in with off-the-wall assertions about what the women could do, declarations that have nothing to do with the reality faced by Thai women. Julie tries to avoid subjects that will start her mother off, which suggests that some very important topics about women's hopes and aspirations are never discussed by Julie and her mother. Indeed, her mother seems so imprisoned in her ideology that she never actually discusses matters of gender; she can only make elitist, on-high pronouncements that make her seem a closed-minded fool. This is not a big part of the novel, but it touches on the important issue of a generation gap between grownup women and young adult

women who seem to have different goals and interests from their feminist mothers. It may also be an implied criticism of women's studies as an academic specialization so narrowly focused as to exclude any aspect of any culture that does not fit the preconceptions of its practitioners.



Literary Qualities

The Spirit House is narrated by Julie, a sophomore in high school, who is very judgmental and overly concerned with being popular. She seems selfish, immature, and mean-spirited—if her dismayed anticipation that her family's Thai guest will be a nerdish bookworm who will cause her embarrassment and loss of popularity at school is any indication. Her delight that the teenager who shows up is handsome and worldly, a boy who could inspire envy in her girlfriends and those that she wants to impress, makes her seem to be only a statusseeking airhead. Her narration, under the circumstances, is one that demands that readers try to read between the lines. The selfish Julie may well be overstating the closed-mindedness of her mother, whose disciplining angers her. In the case of Bia, Julie's thoughts are so confused that one must question everything she says about him. Once suspicions that Bia is a fraud begin to take shape in her mind, the doubt and confusion sown in the reader's judgment helps to build suspense. Is Bia a murderer, or is Julie misconstruing the facts?

Does he use the spirit against Julie, or is he helping Julie by only pretending to be her enemy? What is Bia doing with that knife?

Is he using it for the pig's brains, or does he have something deadly in mind for Julie?

The Spirit House is a thriller that builds its suspense in steps, using small details to build a large mosaic of menace. The suspense depends in part on Julie's character.

She is smart enough to earn good grades but is so self-centered that her version of events cannot be entirely trusted. She may be failing to observe important evidence.

Beyond Julie's questionable assertions, the suspense is built on two levels. One level is supernatural. Dominic begins building a spirit house, worrying Bia, who warns that nothing should be begun on Saturday because it would be bad luck. Sleator plays with this suspense for a bit, implying that a spirit house could be menacing, then he elevates the tension by showing the spirit house finished, set up, and beginning to have a baleful effect on Julie's life. Her personal affairs start to spin out of control as previously adoring friends reject her, and even her once well-groomed body betrays its hygiene and habits. When she gives the spirit in the spirit house a gift, something seems to respond! The other level of suspense is a more earth-bound one. The person who says he is Thamrongsak Tanngarmtrong may be an imposter, and if he is, he must have gotten the real Thamrongsak Tan-ngarmtrong out of the way somehow, perhaps by killing him. Bia's secretiveness and his assertion, "Just remember—I not your friend now, Julie," add to his menace, as does his worldly attitude. A fraud who may have killed before may kill again to protect his secrets.

The suspenseful elements are tied together by the novel's climax, with Julie finally figuring out how complex Bia really is, as well as with Bia explaining how he angered the spirits back home by forgetting to give a gift that he had promised to a shrine. The concluding chase and Julie's gaining a new understanding of herself by overcoming her



fears are typical of Sleator's books and make for a satisfying resolution of events. On the other hand, the novel's anticlimax is problematical, also typical of most of Sleator's novels. When Julie makes her trip to Thailand, she loses the jade Buddha that needs to be given to the shrine (it seems to have been stolen by a man on the plane with her), and her hosts seem troubled: They're not smiling, as they were in the photos. Even when I wave at them and they recognize me, their smiles are halfhearted, forced. Clearly something is wrong. Bia isn't with them.

This is a formulaic way to finish a novel, sometimes called "the Blob ending" after a 1958 motion picture that closes with "The End?"—the question mark implying that there may be more to the story. Sleator often uses the implied more-to-the-story ending, not always well (as in *The Night the Heads Came*; see separate entry), but it works for *The Spirit House*. The mercurial temperament of the Thai spirits is such that a fully happy ending for anyone involved with them is unlikely.



Themes and Characters

Thai spiritualism is the major theme of *The Spirit House*, with most of the novel illustrating Thailand's cultural perspectives by contrasting them with typical American views. The contrast begins with the American family's expectations for the young man coming from Thailand to live with them while attending a local high school. The novel's narrator and main character, Julie Kamen, fears that Thamrongsak Tanngarmtrong will be a nerd who will embarrass her at school. She expects a young man who will be a very studious and very unpopular bookworm. Her parents seem to hope for a young man who will be overwhelmingly grateful to them and amazed by the wonderful prosperity of America.

The young man they meet at the airport defies their preconceptions: He is handsome, relaxed, and at ease with his surroundings. He smokes cigarettes heavily and seems worldly. When he sees his new home for the first time the guest appears indifferent to its size and amenities. The bedroom he is given evokes no response from him save indifference. This seems strange to the Kamen family since the room, though small by their standards, must surely be large to a Thai student. Thus begins an American family's education about Thais.

As their guest shows, Thais are not bookish, unworldly people inexperienced in the wonders of the modern world. Indeed, the Kamens' guest seems more experienced than they are.

There are aspects of American life that their guest, who asks to be called Bia, covets. He wants the opportunities an education and good knowledge of English will open for him in his homeland. A major driving force behind the action in the novel is Bia's almost desperate desire to pursue an education that would be denied him back home: He hopes that his studies in America will give him a chance to better his life. This is a worthwhile lesson for Julie to learn, who at first is all wrapped up in herself and her personal popularity. Bia is living evidence of what the education she takes for granted means to people who must leave school early in order to earn livings and help support their families. Julie has the good sense and the good heart to recognize the importance to Bia of a high school education, and her understanding of Bia's urgent desire to learn influences the plot by making her hesitate to point out that he is not the Thamrongsak Tan-ngarmtrong her family had corresponded with but rather an imposter.

Julie's eleven-year-old brother Dominic spurs the plot when he builds a spirit house, in spite of Bia's hints that doing so would be bad, and sets it up in the family's yard.

Then Julie's life falls apart almost immediately. One of her best friends meets Julie's boyfriend at the airport when he returns from summer vacation, and they become a couple, dropping Julie from their social lives. Her hair becomes greasy and unruly, her face breaks out in pimples, her grades drop, and she is more than usually clumsy in gym class. She notes despondently, "Nothing was going right anymore. And just a few



days ago I had been fine!" A high school sophomore devoted to being popular, she now becomes utterly unpopular.

She becomes suspicious of Bia as her life worsens, wondering, "Had he substituted himself for the other boy?" She thinks, "It was obvious that Bia had been taking advantage of me...." Her suspicions and her misery make her vulnerable to the spirit house's appeal. Bia had feared that a spirit from Thailand might come to live in a Thai spirit house, even if it was in America, and one seems to take up residence in Julie's yard intent on making her life miserable.

"I didn't like the spirit house; I didn't want to get near it. But I felt powerfully compelled to do something," Julie says, introducing a significant secondary theme of wishing for easy—in this case supernatural—solutions to problems. Julie is about to learn that quick solutions exact unforeseen prices. She gives the jade Buddha Bia had given her to the spirit in the spirit house, asking the spirit for help in proving Bia to be a fraud. She says: The hard part wasn't removing the chain from my neck—the loose clasp fell open at a touch. And although giving it away, now that I was really doing it, was painful enough to bring tears to my eyes, it was something I could do unflinchingly, because it made a kind of sense, and I knew that my intentions were good.

What do good intentions have to do with it? She has just asked a temperamental and unpredictable spiritual being to intervene in her life and to do harm to someone else—Bia. "And I didn't think I was using Dominic or putting him in danger," she adds.

Bia is a sharp-minded fellow; figuring out what Julie has been doing, he declares, "Just remember—I not your friend now, Julie." Julie takes this only one way—that Bia suspects she is on to his fraud and will be out to get her—but Sleator has layered the narrative so that below the level that Julie understands there is a subtext that readers comprehend but Julie does not.

When Bia says that he is not her friend, he does so within hearing of the spirit house.

Could he be helping her by making a spirit that is angry with him think that she is his enemy so that the spirit will not hurt her because of him? There are signs that he continues to still trust her, as when he goes to her room for help with his schoolwork, even though he is reserved in his speech when with her.

Julie is a somewhat unreliable narrator who seems to miss clues readers are likely to spot. Her self-centered thoughts continue to focus on the social standing she deems so important: "Maybe I had a chance of being popular again." She is still far from mature in her perceptions and judgments of the quick reversals of fortune she has undergone. She gets her boyfriend Mark back, and he almost becomes her slave.

Even her mother lets up on her: "Mom thought it was cheap and demeaning for women to accept expensive presents from men," Julie observes, but her mother gushes over the bracelet Mark has given her. "I couldn't seem to do anything wrong these days. And Bia couldn't do anything right."



A narrative by a self-absorbed, immature narrator could quickly become tiresome, but Julie turns out to be an intelligent person who does mature considerably through the painful process of applying her mind to understand the events of her life.

She first applies her reason to the mystery of Bia, drawing a correct conclusion that seems to have escaped the rest of the family: "And now that I knew him better, it was clear to me that this was not a photo of Bia." This close observation and solid reasoning shows her to be bright, and the changes she makes as the story progresses prove her to be capable of significant personal growth. Personal growth is one of the hallmarks of good fictional characterization, and Julie is an excellent example of how an author can show a character growing in maturity and complexity from what she was at the beginning of the story. After exercising her mind to uncover evidence that Bia is a fraud, Julie then takes the crucial step of first wondering what happened to the real Thamrongsak Tan-ngarmtrong and then feeling compassion for him. Remember that Julie, early in the novel, was already beginning to dislike Thamrongsak Tan-ngarmtrong even though she had never met him; now midway through her narrative she discovers concern for someone she has never met—a long stride toward maturity.

Julie advances further towards maturity when she feels compassion for Bia. Even after he has unintentionally terrified her with his masquerade, even after he has confirmed that he is not Thamrongsak, she realizes that his stay in America is his greatest chance for achieving a good life. That this growth in Julie's outlook seems to evolve naturally out of events is remarkable because she is changing from someone concerned only with herself to someone who can understand and respond to the outlook of someone who could be her enemy. That Julie overdoes her reaction to the discovery that Bia was trying to shield people from the spirit is more a symptom of her energy and enthusiasm than her evolving outlook on life: "He [Bia] had done a genuinely noble thing, and yet he had tried to hide it from everybody." Perhaps not so noble— he could have told the truth to everybody.

Julie continues, "I had never felt such admiration for anybody." Bia took a relative's place, lied about it, and tried to keep the opportunities for himself; thus he is perhaps not wholly admirable.

Bia, though, is not a routine villain—in fact, one of the remarkable aspects of *The Spirit House* is that villainy is hard to find.

Even Bia's taking the place of Thamrongsak Tan-ngarmtrong was partly happenstance.

He also grows throughout the story to become more balanced and insightful. If his outlook was selfish at first, he matures enough to care about the Kamens and his friends at school. He tells Julie that he and she are enemies to shield her from the spirit's displeasure. He also strives to take full advantage of his opportunity to learn in the United States, struggling with his schoolwork in order to achieve the sound education that could help him build a good life.



These traits are admirable, though they are marred by Bia's untruthfulness. Readers can thus respond to a character who is neither better nor worse than most real people. He is fully human because his numerous faults are mixed with fine qualities, thereby making his misdeeds not only understandable but even sympathetic.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why don't other characters besides Julie figure out that Bia is an imposter before the end?

2. Why would Julie be afraid of having a nerd live with her? Would the real Thamrongsak Tan-ngarmtrong be more or less embarrassing to her than Bia turned out to be?

3. Why is Julie annoyed by her mother's constant reminders of feminist views?

Does her mother ever become more than just embarrassing?

4. Are Julie's family's expectations that their Thai guest will rave about the wonders of his new home typical of Americans? Do rich Americans display a similar attitude toward impoverished Americans?

5. Does The Spirit House explain Thai traditions well enough for you to understand what the spirit house is? What more would you like to know?

6. Is Bia a good person or a bad one? Should he be trusted?

7. When Julie says that Bia "had done a genuinely noble thing," is her judgment any more reliable than it was when she decided that Bia was a murderer?

8. Why does Bia not just tell Dominic that the spirit house is a bad idea?

9. Is the anticlimax a good ending for The Spirit House?

10. Why does Julie ask that Dominic discover the truth about Bia rather than ask to discover the truth herself?

11. Julie says, "In spite of everything he had done, I just couldn't bring myself to destroy Bia's chance for a better future." What does this reveal about her character?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What are Thai spirit houses? Where are they to be found? What do they do?

2. What are the religions of Thailand?

How do spirits fit into Thai religious practices?

3. How important is the speaking of English in Thailand? What opportunities does it create? Where would it be spoken?

4. Julie is surprised that Bia is a heavy smoker. Who smokes cigarettes in Thailand? What other tobacco products are commonly used by Thais? Where does the tobacco come from?

5. Bia's ambitions for a good job seem modest. What sort of jobs could someone like him aspire to in Thailand?

What jobs are good from the Thai point of view?

6. Do many Americans open their homes to foreign students the way Julie's family does? How do they do it? Are there ways to prevent mixups such as Bia's substitution for Thamrongsak Tanngarmtrong?

7. Does the sequel *Dangerous Wishes* answer any questions you had about *The Spirit House*? How well does it develop the themes begun in *The Spirit House*?

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Related Titles

The sequel to *The Spirit House* is *Dangerous Wishes* (1995; see separate entry). The events in *Dangerous Wishes* take place four years after the end of *The Spirit House*. Julie had a horrible time in Thailand and fled for home as quickly as she could; she does not join her family when they journey to Thailand four years later. Dominic, now fifteen years old, is the main character of *Dangerous Wishes*: It falls to him to solve the mystery of the disappearance of Bia, find the jade Buddha, and give it to the spirit of the Erawan (also spelled "Erawan" in the novel) Shrine. His adventures with Lek, a Thai boy, are harrowing indeed, featuring Sleator's vivid descriptions of frightening spirits and deadly dangers, and the novel features an intense chase sequence. *Dangerous Wishes* surpasses *The Spirit House* in characterization, development of intercultural themes, and narrative structure.



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