

Strange Attractors Short Guide

Strange Attractors by William Sleator

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Overview

Strange Attractors is a thriller, a monstrous roller coaster ride through time and worlds of imagination rarely equaled. In it, a teenager is trapped by desires he barely comprehends, a desire to hold fast onto a "phaser," a desire to be close to a young woman who might kill him, as well as by a scientist who may be truly insane—or perhaps both of them are. From 33,019 B.C. to a future in which time is in chaos, rushing, slowing, spinning, Max visits places that are ordinary, other ones that defy logic, and lands that are exotic. Which way is up, where is the future, and why can bifurcations kill? The answers may lie in "strange attractors."

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 aspects of life. He was raised among a family of scientists, but he 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. He was born to William Warner Sleator, Jr., a college professor in physiology, and Esther Kaplan Sleator, a pediatrician, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, on February 13, 1945.

By high school, Sleator 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, but he says that he was miserable at Harvard and his unhappiness was reflected in unhappy compositions. Still, he seems to have been productive while at Harvard, 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, graduating in 1967.

He moved to England for a time to study musical composition while working for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist. He had a fortuitous experience there: 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. 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, and that he hopes to turn his experiences with the ballet company into a book someday.

During his nine years with the company, writing took up increasing amounts of his time, and he finally quit his job so that he could 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 his personal experiences. For instance, he lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand, and he used what he knows about Thailand in *The Spirit House* and *Dangerous Wishes*.

Setting

Sleator captures a fine sense of place in *Strange Attractors*. Especially remarkable is his portrait of a place where time is in chaos, speeding up, slowing down, and rippling, even storming through the earth.

The novel begins in a fairly ordinary home, in the suburbs of an American city, where Max awakens thinking today is yesterday, with no idea how he has lost a day of his life—especially a day that he had been looking forward to. He visits a home that is almost empty, meeting a scientist named Sylvan and the scientist's daughter Eve, and he visits an apartment full of clutter, meeting—surprise!—scientist named Sylvan and the scientist's daughter Eve. Pay attention; each place holds clues as to who is who.

From his mundane life, Max is spirited to North America in 33,019 B.C., a great empty grassland spotted with trees. What is a mobile home doing there? And why does he have to fly through space and time to twenty-first century Bangkok, then dash to Bangkok in 1910? Sleator, who spends much of his time in Thailand, paints an evocative picture of the people and homes of Bangkok as Max and Eve drift downriver in an abandoned boat. However, all is not as it seems and every action seems to have triple meanings; even a tranquil ride downriver while watching women wash clothes and children splash in play may pose a threat that could destroy the future not only for humanity but also for the entire universe.

That threat to the future is made evident by a visit to a universe that is the result of a bifurcation, a branching off from time to a new timeline. People are afraid there because nothing works as it should, and one moment people crowd together and the next they stagger apart. One of Sleator's greatest feats of imagination is bringing his vision of time in chaos to life in the apartment of the second Sylvan and Eve. It is a world gone mad.

Social Sensitivity

The casual use of drugs in *Strange Attractors* is a distraction in the novel. Max mentions that Sylvan I smokes marijuana and this drug shows up elsewhere. Furthermore, Max was secretly drugged by Sylvan II but seems to think such an outrageous assault on his person to be insignificant compared to the scientist's seemingly good behavior.

In the case of Sylvan I and Eve I, the recreational smoking of marijuana is intended to reveal how dissolute they are. They also smoke cigarettes and seem fond of alcohol.

In addition, Sylvan I reveals that he is a glutton who uses liposuction as well as exercise to maintain a trim figure. Each of these vices is meant to associate Sylvan I and Eve I with evil, exposing them as people with more appetite than good sense.

Still, the drugging of Max by Sylvan II presents an ethical dilemma. Perhaps Sleator means this incident to keep his audience suspicious of Sylvan II and Eve II until near the end of the novel, thus heightening suspense as Max tries to figure out who is in the right and who is in the wrong. Even so, Max's declaration that Sylvan II is worthy of trust because he and Eve II "were basically decent" seems absurd. Sylvan II's claim that Max was safer when he did not know what was happening is belied by Max's experience: He is never safer than when he understands what is happening. Sylvan II's conviction that he was doing Max good by drugging him means that he is a dangerous, self-absorbed man who remains a threat to Max, as well as anyone he thinks knows too much. There is nothing "decent" about what Sylvan II does to Max.



Literary Qualities

The concept of bifurcating (splitting) timelines is complicated in *Strange Attractors*.

One of Sleator's tasks is to explain this idea in quantum mechanics so that his audience understands how the bifurcations complicate the plot. In doing so, he has choices to make. First, he needs to decide who his intended audience is. If his audience consists only of high school science geniuses, he can probably get away with using many technical words; this would help him avoid his narrative getting bogged down by longwinded explanations. But Sleator seems to have chosen a broader audience, one that could be attracted to the great adventure in *Strange Attractors* without knowing much about physics. This leaves him to decide what needs to be explained and what does not. Everything that has to do with his characters' motivations and with the perilous situations in which they are found needs explanation. Sleator risks the danger of his story stopping dead in its tracks by devoting two paragraphs all at once to explaining the basic concepts behind "bifurcations."

He begins: Changing the past is the big problem with time travel. Let's say you went into the past and accidentally killed your father when he was a boy. Then you never would have been born. But if you had never been born, how could you go into the past and accidentally kill your father? It's an impossible paradox.

This paragraph accomplishes two important goals for Sleator. First, it is the timetravel paradox his readers are most likely to be familiar with, as well as the best-known argument against time travel being possible. Second, it sets up how bifurcations can get around the paradoxes that time traveling suggests ("quantum mechanics, and the theory of multiple universes, or timelines"). Having drawn the problem in plain English in the previous paragraph, Sleator begins the next by telling his audience that there may be a solution to the paradox, and he offers reassurance that his explanation will make things clear. According to this way of thinking, when individuals change the past, the timeline splits, or bifurcates.

The term bifurcates will be important to the rest of the narrative of *Strange Attractors*.

First, it is a handy shorthand for "time splitting into two branches," thus it helps the narrative move along faster than if Sleator had to repeat a long, clumsy phrase every time he wanted to mention the idea of different branches of time. Moreover, it provides a distinctive word to describe the essence of the terror Max will experience in a region where time is in chaos. It is also suitably scientific sounding—it sounds authentic, adding to the suspension of disbelief Sleator's audience may experience while enjoying his tale.

Later, when Max is thoroughly hooked on time travel and "strange attractors," Sleator has Sylvan II explain the danger in metaphorical terms: The past is exquisitely fragile because it's frozen. You could say it's like a forest of delicate glass ornaments, all



connected to one another, and you have to creep through it without brushing against a single thing.

Or it's like . . . like an arrangement of millions of dominoes, balanced close beside one another. Knocking against just one of them will bring all the others crashing down.

This passage, with its striking images, helps to flesh out the characterization of Sylvan II, who shows that he has a fertile imagination that comes up with poetic images for the abstractions of science.

The object that will become almost a part of Max, so much so that he says it feels like he is losing an arm when it is taken from him, is his phaser. The phaser is a figment of Sleator's imagination, and he can make it look like almost anything he wants. But this is what he chooses: The object looked sort of like a clunky, old-fashioned calculator, about five inches long and an inch thick, with a display screen and a small array of keys. What was unusual about it was that it seemed homemade, not mass-produced. The surface was rough and unpolished. I could see the little screws holding the metal plates together, and in a couple of places the edges were not joined perfectly, leaving narrow gaps through which the mess of wires and chips on the inside was partly visible. There was a piece of electrical tape covering a bump at the bottom of the key panel.

This passage becomes a bit wearisome because it is mundane, unremarkable. Yet, that may be what Sleator wants. Modern young adults are often equipped with a pocket calculator when in school. They are so ordinary that people take them for granted when they appear among a teenager's belongings. Indeed, for some youngsters (and some grownups, too) a calculator may seem as much a part of them as legs or arms.

Thus, Sleator has made his miraculous phaser into something familiar and comfortable for his audience. It is easy to imagine how Max would hold it and how he would press the keys. It is also easy to imagine that he would be familiar enough with calculators to be able to reassemble a phaser.

Another notable aspect of Sleator's achievement in *Strange Attractors* is his use of foreshadowing. Details are carefully provided which give cues about future events in the narrative and build suspense. Throughout *Strange Attractors*, Sleator uses foreshadowing to tease his audience, to complicate Max's efforts to uncover the truth about the two Sylvans and two Eves, to misdirect his audience, and to heighten suspense. Take, for example, the following seemingly innocent passage: But I was surprised to see a whole collection of stuffed furry animals on the shelves, bed, and floor. They seemed out of character for such a competent and down-to-earth person.

This is part of what Max sees in Eve II's bedroom. Which Eve is good and which is bad is still in doubt at this point in *Strange Attractors*, but the stuffed animals suggests an innocence for Eve II. Could Sleator be foreshadowing Eve II's being good? When Max registers Eve II and her favorite teddy bear simultaneously, he is having a moment of compassion for her, in spite of his crying need for the other Eve and for more time travel. However, Sleator has used a deft bit of misdirection, much like a stage magician



will direct his audience's view away from what he is really doing. It is not Eve II's love for stuffed animals that is important, it is not Max's compassion that is important; it is not even the hint that Eve II may be an innocent person that is important. It is that teddy bear and Max's always being drawn to strange attractors such as phasers that is important, as will be revealed in the chaotic timeline created by bifurcations. Thus, with a brief passage, Sleator manages to hint at what is to come while leaving his audience still wrapped in the mystery of events.



Themes and Characters

Max is the main character and narrator of *Strange Attractors*. The first Eve and Max meet, and she tells him, "You're so blatantly honest." This contrasts notably with the second Eve's remark, "We can't trust you unless you tell us." This untrustworthy remark casts suspicion on Eve. After all, she has been less than forthcoming to Max about herself, and her father. Though he is a thoughtful fellow, Max watches his life become crazy within a day, mostly because of "strange attractors," people and objects that are almost magnetic because they have traveled through time. "And it [Max's phaser] was like part of my body now. Giving it up would be the same as cutting off a limb," Max declares. Through his experience with his phaser, it is easy to see how the first Sylvan he meets has become almost deranged in his desire for his own phaser.

There are two Eves and two Sylvans in *Strange Attractors*. The first Eve and Sylvan whom Max meets (called here Eve I and Sylvan I) live in a house that is almost bare.

Sylvan I is trim and fit, with a mercurial temperament. His daughter has a powerful attraction for Max: They were gray eyes, carefully outlined with dark makeup, which made them seem very large. She had prominent cheekbones and a small nose; her skin glowed with health. But it was her mouth that gave the arresting quality to her face. Her lower lip was full, her upper lip thin and sculptured, the shape emphasized by red lipstick. Short, streaked blond hair crinkled around her head in an unruly halo.

This is meant to contrast with the second Eve Max meets (called here Eve II): The girl was just a little shorter than I because of the relaxed way she carried her body. She wore a loose, sleeveless blue dress. Her pale face was devoid of makeup; her long, dark-blondish hair was pulled back into a thick braid that hung down to the middle of her back. But she was the same girl I had met this morning.

Through his description, Sleator helps his audience tell the difference between the Eves. One is trim, fashionable, and has short hair until she tries to look like Eve II, who is modestly plump and more relaxed than Eve I. In these descriptions are also hints about how Sleator hopes his audience will feel about each. Eve I is meant to appear somewhat decadent, smoking, drinking, and even abusing drugs, while the other is meant to look wholesome, eating health foods and liking stuffed animal toys.

Sylvan II is himself a notable contrast to Sylvan I: "A man in a wrinkled whitish shirt and gray polyester pants entered the room. His hair was long and unkempt, he had a protruding belly and a slightly dazed expression. But in every other respect he was the twin of the man [Sylvan I] on the trampoline." He tells Max that Eve I and Sylvan I are "functioning as strange attractors now, obviously." His concern about the phasers contrasts with Sylvan I's attitude: "His blandness about the destructive power in his hands was unsettling, almost irrational. The other Sylvan's cringing apprehensiveness was a lot easier to understand."



These observations are part of Max's efforts to sort out who is who and which Eve and Sylvan belong in his timeline and which do not. He notes, "It was amazing how much [Eve II] looked like the other Eve, but was still so different—so plain and nondescript." But does this mean Eve II is the innocent she seems, or is she putting on an act? As part of his sorting out information, he asks Sylvan II, "You said the others were strange attractors. Does that mean that they have some kind of . . . unusual influence on people?" He wonders whether his passion for Eve I is natural; he even remarks that he had never felt about a girl what he feels about Eve I. It is interesting that he does not feel passion for Eve II, perhaps a sign that strange attractors are working on Max's mind.

As close an observer as Max is, his opinions about people cannot be entirely trusted.

His remark, "These two [Eve II and Sylvan II] were no match for the others," seems true enough, but his statement "I also knew that they [Eve II and Sylvan II] were basically decent. I trusted them" is unreliable, given that Sylvan II had drugged him in order to erase his memory, a dangerous action that might have cost him all his memory. Sylvan II, in his own way, is as ruthless and dangerous as Sylvan I. Adding to the confusion are the attitudes of the characters toward Max. Eve II does not like him, but Eve I seems to. It is not until the end of the novel that Eve I's suspicious warming up to Max turns out to be as genuine as her father's show of concern was not. This adds fire to the ending in which Max begins making his own phaser.

Eve I, beautiful and in love with Max, is plenty of motivation for Max to risk sending time into chaos just to be with her.



Topics for Discussion

1. Why would Max forget that he had registered the Jeep Cherokee?
2. Max says, "I hated her [Eve I's] long hair and what it meant, but somehow I still couldn't hate her." Why not?
3. Max remarks, "I also knew that they [Eve II and Sylvan II] were basically decent. I trusted them." These were the people who gave him amnesia by drugging him! Why would he trust them even for a moment?
4. Why would machinery have trouble functioning in the chaos of time?
5. Why do people appear and disappear, sometimes crowding in large numbers, sometimes being lonely figures, sometimes not existing at all in chaos?
6. Why do characters need to register people and objects on their phasers in order to move them through time?
7. Is *Strange Attractors* too complicated? If so, where in the story does complication prevent you from understanding?
8. Who is Sleator's intended audience for *Strange Attractors*? What cues in the story suggest a certain level of reader?
9. The name Sylvan refers to forests, and the name Eve refers to the first woman. How do these names work symbolically in *Strange Attractors*?
10. How well does Sleator manage to keep clear which Sylvan is which and which Eve is which?
11. Is Max a good person? What in the story determines his goodness or lack of it?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. What will happen when Max goes back to 33,019 B.C. to see Eve I?
2. Some paleontologists think the first wave of human migration from Asia to North America occurred over 100,000 years ago. How would this affect the hideout in 33,019 B.C.?
3. Why do Max, Eve II, and Sylvan II each experience time the same way in chaos, even though all around them are people who are shifting and changing, as well as appearing and disappearing?
4. Read Jorge Luis Borges's "The Garden of Forking Paths" and compare its ideas to those in *Strange Attractors*. What notions of bifurcation do they have in common? Where do they differ? Why would Sleator slip in a little reference to Borges's short story in his novel *Strange Attractors* with the phrase "individual forking paths?"
5. Write a story about what Max does after he builds a phaser for himself.
6. In drawings or paintings, try to capture what the scene in the apartment of Eve II and Sylvan II looks like.
7. In *Rewind*, a character, Eloise, asserts, "Realistic details are what make people believe things they find hard to believe." How successful is Sleator in putting this idea into practice in *Strange Attractors*?
8. How well researched are the quantum mechanics of *Strange Attractors*? Does quantum mechanics allow for bifurcations as described by Sleator?
9. Sylvan II mentions, "quantum mechanics and its theory of multiple universes."

Does quantum mechanics have a theory of multiple universes? If so, what are they supposed to be like?

For Further Reference

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Daggett, Margaret L. "Recommended: William Sleator." *English Journal*, vol. 76 (March 1987): 93-94. Daggett explains Sleator's appeal for high school students.

Davis, James, and Hazel Davis. *Presenting William Sleator*. New York: Macmillan, 1992. This critical study discusses Sleator's life and how it relates to his fiction.

Roback, Diane. *Publishers Weekly*, vol. 236, no. 20 (November 24, 1989): 72. Roback thinks *Strange Attractors* is ideal for its audience: "Sleator's latest high-tech thriller is compelling and thought-provoking, and offers a clever surprise ending."

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: Boynton/Cook, 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.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Sleator often creates unusual events in ordinary places. For example, in *The Spirit House*, a Thai spirit invades a suburban American home that is similar to that of Max. Part of the appeal of the book is the premise that strange and mysterious adventures may occur right at home, right in the middle of a familiar world. In *The Boxes*, 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. In *Strange Attractors*, Max has extraordinary experiences in the apartment of Sylvan II and Eve II, which is subjected to chaotic time on a branching timeline, and Sleator has some fun by placing an ordinary mobile home in the middle of the North American wilderness in 33,019 B.C.

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. The bizarre early novel, *House of Stairs* takes this to extremes by placing the characters in a house that would be unfamiliar to anyone.

Later, Sleator 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 the United States 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. In *Strange Attractors*, Max is isolated because of his inability to explain to people from his everyday life, such as his parents, what is going on with his time traveling. He is further isolated by his actual experience of time traveling, an experience shared only by people he does not trust. Even Sylvan II, who built the phaser Max uses, queries Max about his sensations during time travel, not having actually experienced them himself.

As in *Dangerous Wishes*, Sleator takes his main character to Thailand, using it as an exotic and dramatic backdrop for the show Max is intended to witness. The brief foray into a timeline in which time has gone crazy is as weird as anything in *House of Stairs*, showing off Sleator's flair for making bizarre situations come to life.



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