

# The Thief Who Couldn't Sleep Short Guide

## The Thief Who Couldn't Sleep by Lawrence Block

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# Characters

van Tanner is another of Block's E individualists. He is a quasi-unofficial spy who works when he feels like it on his own terms for a government agency so secret that the CIA does not know what the unnamed agency does.

Tanner's belonging to lost causes gives him allies and potential friends in places all over the world, friends who need to hear just the password or the names of other members to accept him instantly. Block has written that Tanner is the archetypal outsider; his joining fringe groups is the other side of his opposition to the establishment. Tanner's inability to sleep gives him time to read and to gather unusual information and to learn many arcane languages, knowledge that allows him access to people in far-away places and strange cultures. His knowledge of languages also lets him hear and understand secret information that others do not think he can interpret.

One group of characters in the series consists of Tanner's romantic interests, and a function of his charm is the number of attractive young women who go to bed with him with no trouble, no explanations, no time to get to know him, and no complications or recriminations afterwards. The women kiss him hello and kiss him goodbye, providing available sex with no strings attached. This easy sex is part of the mystique of the super spy like James Bond. One love interest, Annalya Prolov, whom Tanner revisits in Tanner's *Twelve Swingers* (1967), is not jealous when Tanner tells her that he makes love to other women when he reassures her that he has babies with only her.

Villains in the series are not usually very formidable. Often the men working against him are motivated by understandable self-interest and greed, and Tanner can outwit and foil them with his greater forethought, perspicuity or luck. There are no arch-villains like Bond's Goldfinger or Dr. No. Tanner becomes violent only as the series goes along, finally killing a despicable old Nazi and a British supplier of girls for white slavery. Block resists crudely categorizing everyone who is against Tanner's objectives as fiendishly evil.



## Social Concerns/Themes

A major theme is that of the wanderer, of the hero with the ability to travel through the world and be at home. Allied with this wandering is the idea of freedom. The Irish girl Nora tells Tanner that she has only dreamed of taking the bus to Dublin from the village outside Limerick where she keeps house for her father and brother.

Tanner's mobility attests to his freedom, as does his lack of ties to a humdrum, workaday world. He can go and do as he pleases with few hostages to fortune.

Later, themes of friendship and family seem to emerge with Tanner going on his travels to rescue friends: a virgin sold into white slavery and a woman musician who disappeared on a Far East tour. Tanner's trip to Latvia is originally to bring out his American friend's fiancée, a journey for friendship and romance. One method of creating family ties for Tanner is his fathering children on Annalya in Macedonia, a good place to which he can return, a sanctuary from modern tensions and complexities. Tanner partly establishes a family for himself by rescuing and unofficially adopting a little girl, the rightful princess of Lithuania. The girl, Minna, is precocious and, like Tanner, gifted at languages, a child in his own image.



# Techniques

The Thief Who Couldn't Sleep begins in medias res, in the middle of the action with Tanner shut up in a Turkish jail, a technique Block recommends in his column on fiction. The main line of action is a treasure hunt, a hunt for the American gold in Smyrna. Complicating the treasure hunt are Tanner's allegiances to lost causes, his reputation as an oddball, and the presumption of many that he must be a CIA operative or some other kind of spy.

Like earlier classic spy novels, when the amateur becomes enmeshed in spying, he has to see the adventure through.

At the end of the treasure hunt, Tanner gives himself up to the U.S.

Embassy and the CIA in order to go home. The result involves the serendipity that is also part of the Tanner adventures. When Tanner falls into good fortune, he knows enough to accept it.

Tanner invokes a secret service without even a proper name, and the nameless Chief sends two men to rescue Tanner.

Without the Chief, the novel would go in a circle from Turkey to America, jail to jail. If there are secret agents (like the CIA) who are team-oriented, there could also be agents so secret that they work as individuals. The world has proved to be so absurd that the exaggerations of Tanner's world could also exist with only a little suspension of disbelief, or so the reader is asked to believe.

## Literary Precedents

Perhaps the ultimate model for the Tanner Series is *The Odyssey* (c.1050-850 B.C.) with the hero traveling through the world, meeting adventures, some of which threaten to keep him from getting home. In Tanner's *Twelve Swingers*, Tanner keeps picking up impedimenta, people who want him to rescue them, making each new stage of the journey more difficult.

The first Tanner adventure refers repeatedly to James Bond, distinguishing Tanner from the glamorous super spy. Tanner can be seen as an antiBond. Tanner has no license to kill and he often chooses guile rather than brutality in the series. He does not have the sophisticated technology of Bond's tricky concealed weapons. Technology requires the backing of the system, and Tanner is on his own. In the Tanner books the world is not divided into two camps with the angels on the side of the superspy and with the devils all who oppose him. Tanner starts out at least as an alternative to Bond, the violent professional who divides the world into "them" and "us."

## Related Titles

Other Evan Tanner adventure novels include *The Canceled Czech*, 1967; *Tanner's Twelve Swingers*, 1967; *Two for Tanner*, 1967; *Tanner's Tiger*, 1968; *Here Comes a Hero*, 1968; *Me Tanner, You Jane*, 1970.



# Copyright Information

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