

# Dangerous Wishes Short Guide

## Dangerous Wishes by William Sleator

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## Overview

*Dangerous Wishes* is an intense, exotic, and wonderful story of adventure. It takes place in Thailand, a country Sleator knows well, and readers unfamiliar with Thailand will be absorbed by how the customs of the Thais are seamlessly woven into the narrative. In addition, the novel is one of Sleator's best tales of adventure and the supernatural, with his fifteen-year-old protagonist Dominic caught up in a race to save family and friends from a terrible curse. The novel's concluding movement, a chase in which a spirit pursues Dom and his friend Lek, is as riveting as any in literature, with Thai spiritual beliefs brilliantly rendered to create a situation of breathless terror.

## 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, eventually becoming a pianist, composer, and writer. Perhaps these dual interests in art and science led to his fascination with science fiction, which he read avidly. He was born to William Warner, Jr., a college professor, and Esther Kaplan, a physician, in Havre de Grace, Maryland, on February 13, 1945.

By high school, he was composing music that reflected his preoccupation with the macabre, giving these pieces titles such as "Guillotines in Springtime." He entered Harvard as a music major where he says that he was miserable, with his unhappiness reflected in unhappy compositions. Despite his unhappiness, he seems to have been very productive while at Harvard, writing musical scores for school dramatic productions and a multivolume journal. At some point in his college career the focus of his artistic interests subtly shifted; he changed his major to English and graduated in 1967.

Sleator moved to England to study musical composition while working for the Royal Ballet School as a pianist.

A fortuitous circumstance in England helped begin his writing career. He stayed in an old cottage in the woods that had once been a pesthouse for people with smallpox. The cottage's walls even had graffiti on them from the 1700s. This interlude at the cottage inspired his first published young adult book *Blackbriar* (1972).

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; he also hopes someday to turn his experiences with the ballet company into a book. During the 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.

*Blackbriar* and *Run* (1973), his first two novels for young adults, were based on personal experiences; these continue to inspire his work. For instance, he lives part of each year in Boston and part in Thailand, and he uses his knowledge of Thailand in *The Spirit House* (1991) and *Dangerous Wishes* (1995). He also says that he bases his characters on real people, which may account for his asking his family for forgiveness at the start of his autobiography *Oddballs* (1993; see separate entry, Vol. 9). For *Dangerous Wishes*, he credits Siang Chitsa-ard with "the nastiest stories in this book."

## Setting

There is nothing quite like reading a book that sweeps one away to faraway lands and immerses one in the daily life of a different culture. *Dangerous Wishes* achieves this with complete success due to Sleator's extensive knowledge of Thai culture and his story-telling prowess. The lives and customs of Thais do not merely serve as an exotic backdrop for a suspenseful adventure story but are instead the heart of the novel. Thai spiritual beliefs, traditions, customs, and everyday lives are essential to the events of the novel and are so well integrated into the plot that the novel would collapse without this fusion of elements. Sleator takes his characters on a journey through the streets of Bangkok, out of the city into the countryside, into a country village, and back again to the city, giving a view of Thais in their diversity.



# Social Sensitivity

Sleator uses Thai customs and traditions to generate the plot of *Dangerous Wishes*. His presentation of them is matter-of-fact, without being judgmental. The result is not just an exciting adventure but an intimate association with how Thais experience their lives. *Dangerous Wishes* is the rare novel that manages to take its readers inside a culture and experience it from the inside out; excitement leavened with education make most rewarding reading.

The novel contains implied criticism of some aspects of Thai life. For instance, pollution figures prominently in a few scenes, with a river so polluted that falling into it can bring on severe diseases, and: "They didn't seem at all concerned about the environment here. You could literally see the pollution in the air on the main streets, and a lot of the cops wore masks over their noses and mouths."

Such pollution is frightening, but it is used primarily as part of a larger picture of Thai life. Also implied is criticism of the status of the poor in Thailand; educational opportunities are available to the rich, but poor people like Lek must end their educations early in order to survive.

The Thai justice system is also touched on: It turns out that Bia (from the earlier novel *The Spirit House*) was arrested for a crime he did not commit and unfairly imprisoned after his boss lied about a theft committed by a favorite hotel maid; no one, not even Bia's family, was informed of his arrest, conviction, or imprisonment—"It was no surprise to him [Lek] that money and influence were more important, when it came to justice, than guilt or innocence." These observations of some negative aspects of Thai society are made by an author who lives much of his life in Thailand, but they may irritate readers who would prefer that Thailand only be praised.

On the other hand, these negative aspects of Thai life contribute to the honesty of the overall depiction of Thailand and help the narrative's tone avoid any hint of condescension, which could well occur if the narrative focused only on the happy rich living in a fictional paradise. As it is, *Dangerous Wishes* serves the Thais well by showing them as complex human beings whose culture, values, thoughts, and aspirations are to be taken seriously.

# Literary Qualities

*Dangerous Wishes* is written in three movements (sections in which action rises, peaks, and then declines). The first movement is one of discovery as Dom arrives in Thailand, explores his new home, meets new people, experiences the streets of Bangkok, and visits Lek's room. The action rises from hints that the house is haunted until Lek's cart is destroyed, then it declines until Dom and Lek agree to go to Lek's village to look for the jade Buddha.

The next movement is a journey of a stranger-in-a-strange-land, in which Dom starts as the stranger surrounded by customs he neither knows nor understands. The action of this movement peaks when the jade Buddha is removed from the corpse of Duan, declines rapidly with Duan's thank you in Thai on an English computer, and then rises sharply into the third movement, the flight. Each movement has its own characters, locations, and atmosphere. Sleator, in the first movement, sets the stage for exotic adventure by placing Dom in scenes of Bangkok filled with commonplace automobiles, buses, and policemen.

He then slides from the familiar into the unfamiliar by putting Dom among slow moving people in narrow and alien streets. This shift not only helps ease Dom (and the reader) into the intricacies of Thai culture, but it helps to establish an atmosphere of expectant anxiety and tension. The second movement introduces the train, which becomes important in the third movement, and it brings Dom to a Thai village in which little is familiar to him. Completely surrounded by Thai culture he must now learn to behave according to new and different social rules, including how to properly wai, a gesture of respect that is essential to avoid making enemies.

The third movement is a perfectly paced masterpiece of tension and excitement. In it, the Thai spiritual world has become palpable, completing Dom's total immersion into another culture's way of viewing the world; a khwan capable of driving him insane dogs his footsteps, acting by rules utterly new to Dom. The third movement is sustained by frenetic invention; Sleator has some new surprise every few pages, each adding to the danger, with Dom and Lek becoming ever more frantic to evade their *Dangerous Wishes* 4539 pursuer until Dom is overcome by madness. The action peaks as he is pinned to the ground with his head exposed on the street where automobiles can run over it, then declines as he recovers his senses, runs back to the shrine and rescues the jade Buddha from Lek, who has himself been overcome by the khwan's influence.

This structure is harmonious and proportioned, with nothing out of place, and it helps to gradually draw the novel's audience into the setting for the action so that the terrifying events of the third movement make sense.



# Themes and Characters

"She say bad spirit in your house," said the boy in the skeleton T-shirt.

Dom shivered in spite of himself. At home, a remark about spirits wouldn't have bothered him. But here in Thailand, in this strange, shadowy house, what the boy said made him very uneasy.

In this passage the novel's unifying theme of the stranger is announced.

Dom is an American who has already learned a little about Thailand and who can even speak some simple Thai phrases, but he is largely ignorant of the subtleties of Thai life, thinking that "Anything seemed possible here."

When Dom finds himself in a strange house crowded with customs which include profound spiritual beliefs alien to him, his character is severely tried. His first impulse is to retreat into his computer, and this tells us a little about him—that he tends to try to escape his problems; but Sleator cuts off this retreat by having the hard disk crash, perhaps under the malevolent influence of a spirit. Dom is thus at the mercy of not only Thai spirits but Thai culture, finding that he has little choice but to try to remove the curse on his family.

Authors frequently place major characters under great stress in order to reveal their most important personal traits. In the case of Dom, this testing stress reveals his ability to make friends—Lek—and his fortitude—venturing by himself among the crowds of Bangkok. Dom's pressure-laden situation also allows Sleator to introduce another theme, the dangers of ignorance. From getting lost on Bangkok's streets to failing to show proper respect to people, Dom spends the novel putting himself in deadly danger because he does not know what he is doing. His ignorance could get him killed. This theme sets up its mirror image, the theme of the value of learning. As Dom acquires knowledge of his environment, he puts it to good use, pleasing Thais with his willingness to speak their language and using it to help himself navigate among the many spirits that are everyday parts of Thai life.

This multiplicity of themes may make *Dangerous Wishes* seem like a complex novel and, in fact, it is. But Sleator is a master storyteller at the height of his powers, and the narrative moves so smoothly that the themes do not call attention to themselves—instead, they are intimately bound to the action, requiring no pauses for exposition because the action expresses everything that needs to be said about them. The principal characters Dom and Lek may seem simple compared to these interwoven themes but they also have their subtleties.

Lek at first seems like a mere function of the plot, helping to set up the perilous situation for Dom. He tells the Kamen family that their maid is afraid of a bad spirit in their house, noting "More like-like bad spirit come with you," which hints at a malevolence directed specifically at the Kamens rather than just anyone who might occupy the house. Lek





also helps advance the stranger theme by pointing out that Dom and family are "falangs," a not necessarily complimentary term for outsiders. He also helps build suspense with "'But I didn't wish for anything,' Lek was thinking. 'All I did was tell them where the house was.'"

What wish would he be thinking about?

It turns out that his wishes are dangerous and that he is troubled by them. He has "a battered old pocket computer" that was given to him by Duan, a good woman who had helped Lek learn English but who was murdered by Cambodian guerrillas. When he wishes upon the pocket computer something good happens for him, but at the cost of something bad happening to someone else. For instance, he was able to purchase a good food cart cheaply because the cart had rolled over and killed its previous owner and therefore no one else would buy it.

Some of Lek's good heart is revealed because he chooses to stop wishing on the pocket computer; some of the pain of his existence is revealed because he hangs on to the dangerous object because it was a gift from someone who had been kind to him. As his character develops, he becomes more than a dangerous wisher whose presence pushes Dom into the plot, he becomes an individualized human being. Although the focus is on Dom as the stranger, Lek becomes equally bound to the themes of *Dangerous Wishes*. He becomes not just the facilitator of Dom's education in Thai ways, but he also becomes a learner himself; his adventure with Dom is a journey of self-discovery in which he uncovers the capacity to be a good friend, to appreciate the qualities of someone unlike himself, and to realize that he has the capacity to help himself without dangerous wishes.

Dom is a many-faceted figure who defies stereotyping. He appears to be a computer nerd, but he has a venturesome temperament and physical courage not associated with the stereotypical computer geek. He is a young man of action taking chances in a harrowing quest, yet he is thoughtful and sensitive to the feelings of others, qualities not associated with the conventional action hero. Instead of being a character type, he is all fifteen-year-old with the slips of mind, changes in mood, and unfettered impulsiveness often found at that age, but with these common traits modified by his interest in learning, his ability to accept Lek as an equal (much to Lek's surprise), and his good heart. That he occasionally does something stupid such as placing Lek's pocket computer in the wrong pocket after secretly wishing on it is not annoying because it adds another defining quality which makes him seem even more a real person with a unique combination of faults and virtues.

What the themes and characters add up to is an especially satisfying story of action, suspense, and growth of personality. Dom and Lek are pleasing individuals who grow in their capacities to care about other people and to take action on their own or others' behalf. As they experience an intense adventure, with danger at every turn, not just from living people but from spirits that can be anywhere, they invite readers to share their experiences. In the case of Dom, the sharing includes learning about a complex, deeply interesting culture. For instance, his learning Thai words such as *jairawn* and *jaiyen*

not only serve to show something of the language Dom tries to learn, but tells us about Thai cultural views. Jairawn is hothead, and jaiyen is cool heart, meaning, Lek says, "Think first, then do." Dom is impulsive by nature but he can learn to behave better by absorbing some of Thailand's cultural wisdom, and in the process readers also can learn a little about a fascinating and faraway people.



## Topics for Discussion

1. Why does Dom not always do what Lek tells him to when he is in Lek's village?
2. Why does Sleator present the supernatural elements of his story as literally real rather than offering alternative ordinary explanations for events?
3. Which character is better developed, Dom or Lek?
4. How well does Sleator seem to understand Thai customs?
5. At the end of the novel, is Dom free of Thai spirits and their influence?
6. What do these words and phrases mean: falang, wai, khwan, phii, phii prai, jairawn, jaiyen, andsom-nam-na? What are the rules governing when these words and phrases may be spoken?

Why are they important to *Dangerous Wishes*?

7. What role do the computers play in *Dangerous Wishes*? Why would Sleator include them in the novel?
8. What motivates Lek to help Dom?

What does this reveal about Lek's character?



# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Explain Thai spiritual beliefs and identify the different kinds of Thai spirits such as khwan and phii. How accurate is Sleator's presentation of Thai spiritual beliefs?
2. How severe is pollution in Thailand? What kinds of pollution are there? Where is the pollution the worst? Where is the least pollution?
3. Lek makes his living selling food from a push cart. What kinds of street vendors are there in Bangkok? What do they sell? How do they live?
4. Dom and his family are "falangs" in Thailand. What are falangs? Is the word complimentary? What are Thai attitudes toward outsiders?
5. Women in Lek's village chew a mixture of betel nut and tobacco, staining their teeth red. What kinds of tobacco products are used in Thailand? Do only women chew the betelnut-and-tobacco mixture? Where does the tobacco come from? How expensive is it?
6. What is the system of justice in Thailand? How does it function?
7. What is life like in a rural Thai village like the one described in *Dangerous Wishes*?
8. Identify a shrine in Thailand that is like Erewan in *Dangerous Wishes*, describe it, explain how it is maintained, and explain the role it plays in the lives of the people who visit it.
9. Much of the portrait of Thailand in *Dangerous Wishes* shows a mixture of the very old and the very modern.  
  
How has modern technology influenced Thai society?
10. Compare *Dangerous Wishes* to *The Spirit House*. Why would Sleator change from a first-person narrator in the earlier book to a third-person one in *Dangerous Wishes*? Why change the focus from Julie to Dom?
11. Thai expectations for teenagers seems different from American expectations for teenagers. What do Thais expect their teenagers to do? What roles do teenagers play in Thai society?
12. What is wail What are its origins? Why is it important in Thailand?  
  
What function does it serve in Thai society?



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## Related Titles

*Dangerous Wishes* is a sequel to *The Spirit House* (1991; see separate entry, Vol. 9), but unlike most sequels it is superior to the original book, although *The Spirit House* is a good read.

The events in *The Spirit House* take place about three-and-a-half years before those in *Dangerous Wishes*; the main character is not Dom, then eleven years old, but Julie, his older sister, a sophomore in high school whose principal concern in life is being popular with other teenagers. *The Spirit House* has a first-person narrator, Julie, rather than the third-person omniscient narrator of *Dangerous Wishes*, and Julie is unreliable, missing important details and twisting her account of events so that they focus on herself.

Dominic's role in *The Spirit House* is that of a secondary character: He builds the spirit house which is a source of much of the trouble Julie endures, and he is the one to first read a letter from Thailand that shows that the family's guest Bia is not who he pretends to be.

It is the anticlimax of *The Spirit House* that sets up the events in *Dangerous Wishes*. A matured Julie travels to Thailand to visit, bringing with her the jade Buddha that Bia forgot to give to a powerful spirit at a shrine in Bangkok. She intends to give it to the spirit at its shrine and thus end the fearsome events that could destroy people's lives, but a man steals it from her. *The Spirit House* ends with her arriving at the airport and realizing that something is wrong when she sees the unhappy people who wait to greet her.



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