

# **It could actually happen.**

An exploration of William Sleator

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“Everybody thought I was a genius. I did nothing to correct this impression.”

**William Sleator**

William Sleator wrote his first story when he was six-years-old. He even typed it out. It was a brief novella of exactly four sentences: “Once there was a fat cat. Boy was she fat. Well, not that fat. But pretty fat.” The title? Why, *Fat Cat* of course (PenguinPutnam, 2001).

Sleator went on from his glory days of writing *Fat Cat* stories to composing scores of music. He was quite the popular composer in his Maryland high school, where he was known for writing scores for school plays and the orchestra. These musical triumphs continued into his college years at Harvard where he says he was miserable. He entered Harvard with full intentions to pursue a music degree, but several tragic novellas later, he found himself with a BA in English (The Scoop, 2001).

Despite his newly acquired degree in English, Sleator spent many years after graduation from Harvard playing in ballet schools in England. Eventually, he made his way back to the US where he wrote his first published novel, *Blackbriar*.

*Blackbriar* was born out of a real-life experience Sleator had when he was helping a co-worker restore an old cottage. “The place was interesting... the whole thing was like a gothic novel. So there was my first novel, *Blackbriar*, handed right to me” (Central Lake, 2001). Sleator continued writing from real-life experiences until he ran out of them in the early eighties. Even then, he continued to write his real-life friends into his novels -- that was until he ran out of friends. “That has gotten me into trouble at times,” Sleator said. “Fortunately, most of my friends have started speaking to me again” (The Scoop, 2001).

Sleator was forced to write with only his imagination now, and this was the true birth of his science fiction. Sleator says the best thing about writing science fiction is that it could actually happen (The Scoop, 2001). “The challenge is to try to make the parts you invent as

believable as the scientific laws you are using. If you succeed, then you are giving the reader something that is magical and fantastic but at the same time might actually be possible” (The Scoop, 2001).

Sleator’s science fiction is unique in that he carefully blends reality into his stories. For example in his 1995 book *Singularity*, Sleator creates a scenario where there are two twin boys who come upon a utility room. Reality #1: A young adult reader most likely has come across a utility room such as the one Sleator describes. The crux is that this utility room is in the presence of a gravitational field and the teens don’t know it at first, but time actually slows down in the room. Reality #2: Many young adults have the desire to be older, if not in age, at least in the amount of respect they get. So one twin figures out the time difference and spends an entire year in the utility room (this is only overnight in earth time). When he comes out of the room after the year, he is older, more muscular (because he used the time to work out), more intelligent (because he used the time to read) and wiser. Reality #3: This change is appealing to teens, whether they would want to tough out the year in solitude or not, the idea is very appealing. He is now distinguished from his brother who was the villain all along. The scenery is familiar, the situation is plausible and as Sleator says, “Time slows down in the presence of a gravitational field. It really does, you know. That’s not science fiction. It’s a fact” (The Scoop, 2001). Even the “fiction” in the science fiction is believable in *Singularity*.

Of course, Sleator has gone to extremes in his novels, but he always seems to make the reader think twice about the possibility of the science fiction actually happening. For example, in *Interstellar Pig*, a solid three quarters of the novel could resemble any other mystery or fiction novel. There are clues and hidden meanings, and things that make more sense on a second read, but the reader has no idea that he or she is dealing with aliens as Barney’s next-door neighbors

until the truth is revealed. And because the reader has invested so much thought and time into the novel at that point, it seems the only possible direction to go in next. It isn't outrageous that the novel is about aliens, because by the point, it's not. It's about a boy and his elusive next-door neighbors. The reader just found out why those particular ones were so elusive. Maybe they'll think twice about the people in the next cabin over on their summer trip to the beach.

Sleator has also turned his readers worlds upside down in true science fiction grandeur. In books like *The Boy Who Reversed Himself*, *The Duplicate*, and *Strange Attractors*, Sleator vividly paints pictures of worlds that exist only in his own head, and those of his readers. However the plot lines of these stories are so grounded in real-life, everyday problems, they become easy to relate to with most readers. In *The Boy Who Reversed Himself*, Sleator creates a story focusing on the fourth dimension. A boy, who can project himself into the 4D world and if he doesn't do it correctly, when he comes back everything about him is reversed. It makes the reader look twice at the part in someone's hair, the placement of their freckles and which hand they're wearing their watch on. The "it could actually happen" phenomena of Sleator's stories are what make them so appealing to all readers. He even manages to work in romance in several of his novels, which traditionally make them more open to girls, but also and perhaps more importantly, make romance okay for boys to read as well.

*The Duplicate* is a good example of this, a boy who makes clones of himself so that he can enjoy his time with his girlfriend Angela and still do all of the less desirable things of his daily life. The only thing he forgets to consider is that clones have a mind of their own as well. And they don't want to be stuck with "work duty" all the time. Again, a young adult sometimes wishes they could have a clone of themselves to do the things they don't want to do, but they may not think through exactly how harsh the consequences would be of that wish being granted.

Sleator also has a gift for writing opening lines. In young adult novels, the first line can be the difference in the checkout at the library, or more importantly the sale in the bookstore. Often his opening sentences capture the entire meaning of the book in one perfectly poignant sentence. They can give just the right amount of foreshadowing, that the reader has to go back and see what the sentence was alluding to in the beginning. For example, the opener to *Interstellar Pig* is: “‘I’m telling you, there’s more history to this house than any other place on Indian Neck, and that’s the truth,’ Ted Martin said, and took a long swallow of beer.” Or in *Singularity*: “It was my twin brother, Barry, who wanted to go to the house – and Barry knew how to get what he wanted.” The poignancy in *Singularity*’s first sentence is that “the house” Sleator is writing about in the sentence is not the utility house that the two discover as the book progresses. The first sentence also gives us the fact that the two characters are twins, and that there’s a power struggle occurring. The foreshadowing and irony comes in the fact that Barry doesn’t always get what he wants, because the narrator is actually the twin that ages a year in the house.

William Sleator is a unique and gifted author who appeals to both male and female readers despite the science fiction hat he wears. He has produced over 25 books in his career as a young adult writer. From his *Fat Cat* days to present day where he is revered in many circles of sci-fi fans as almost god-like, Sleator continues to entertain his audience through writing. Sleator himself said it best, “I want kids to find out that reading is the best entertainment there is” (Central Lake, 2001). And if they’re reading Sleator—it is.

## **Works Cited**

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\*Please visit "It could actually happen." Online...  
<http://www.ibiblio.org/tench/sleator/>