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opening extract from

Thief in the House of Memory

written by

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PROLOGUE

PICTURE A BOY'S ROOM. There is a bed shaped like an enormous red running shoe. The comforter is a golden map of the world. The curtains match the comforter but have faded. Time does that; fades things. The windows are deep, with cushions. A place to curl up with a comic book or a thought you need to think.

This boy is a builder. Models hang from invisible threads, ready to dive-bomb his dreams. A Lego skyscraper

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sits on a low table. Action figures patrol a nearby shelf – transformers in various states of transformation.

He is a dreamer. Above the bed is a framed picture of a house the boy drew when he was not even nine. A dream house. There is a book open on the bedside table. He might have just stepped out to get a glass of water.

Where is he? What's keeping him?

The curtains flutter. It's an April night. One window is open just a crack.

Listen. Someone is outside, someone walking too close to the shrubbery, checking a window latch, checking a door handle. There is silence again and then, suddenly, the splintering of wood. The sound is muffled, over in a second. Above the bed a Super Star Destroyer clicks against the Millennium Falcon.

Reach up and still the starships. Look at your fingers. They are black with dust. Run your finger over the jacket of the book. See the picture brighten under your touch? The boy hasn't slept in this room for four years.

No one has slept in this house for four years. There is no one at home. No one to hear a stranger break in, a thief with this whole, vast house to himself. Listen at the bedroom door. Open it. Quietly. The lights are out but there is a thin, wavering beam of light in the grand entrance hallway below.

Something has caught his interest. It is not easy to reach,

by the sound of it. He seems to be struggling. He goes, returns. Now it sounds as if he is climbing. And then there is a rumbling sound, a furious shout, a thundering crash. A tremor runs through the old place. You can feel it buzzing in the bones in your feet.

Maybe this is how it all started – what stirred up the memory. For memories are like dust, in a way. They settle over time, almost invisible, but still there. Waiting.

SLEEPLESS IN CAMELOT

THIS IS WHAT APPEARS to Declan Steeple out of the darkness of sleep: a river of molten glass. It seeps from the cracks and crevices of his imagination. Eerily glowing, gathering speed, the river surges towards a clifftop where it spills like rainbow-coloured syrup, plunging to the sea below. Then, suddenly, it freezes in mid-air. It hangs there, shimmering before his mind's eye like ice, but not ice, because ice doesn't have a pulse, does it?

Something is throbbing at the heart of all that glass. It starts to expand, inflate, as though an invisible glassblower – Dec himself – is filling that glittering mass with air, shaping it, making rooms inside it.

It is a glass house by an ocean, glowing in the setting sun. But even as he admires his handiwork, he senses trouble, knows that such beauty cannot last. And he is right. In the space of a heartbeat, it explodes.

Dec awoke, sweating, breathing hard. It was difficult work filling a house with air. He rubbed his eyes and propped himself up. Three a.m. He struggled out from under his duvet and sat groggy and light-headed on the edge of his bed.

What had happened?

There had been a noise. He looked towards the window. It was open a crack. Even though it was April and chilly, he loved to hear the peepers down in the swamp, the sound of spring coming.

He looked across the lawn. The lights were on in his father's workshop. His eyes strayed to the looming hill beyond the shop, to the woods made alive with wind, high up on the hill. There was just a fingernail of moon snagged in the skeletal branches of a maple.

He found his sketchbook and pencil case on the floor

beside the bed and cleared a space on his desk. The dream image of the glass house had shattered, but the idea of it was still alive inside him. Could he draw it? He squinted at the dazzling emptiness of the page until his eyes hurt. Nothing. He tried to summon back the dream. The cliff was all he got. It was still there, solid, imperturbable. He had seen it before and now he remembered where.

There was a night light on in the hallway. Noiselessly, he made his way to the stairs. With an act of will he carried the splintered remnants of the wonderful glass house through this most ordinary of houses.

Camelot: a split-level done up to look like a Tudor manor. An English country house plunked south-west of nowhere in the rough-and-tumble countryside of eastern Ontario.

Camelot. That was the name of the model in the *House & Garden* magazine, which was where Birdie found it. She had seen it there and pointed at it and said, "This one, honey." And so his father built it for her. She wasn't going to live up on the hill, she said. She wasn't going to live in a draughty museum filled with memories that were not her own. She wanted a House & Garden Camelot. And Bernard Steeple wanted his Birdie to have her nest.

Dec made his way to the bookcase in the living room. He turned on a lamp and pulled out an issue of *National Geographic*. He knew most of them by heart. There had

been an article about Highway One, the legendary coastal road that wound its way like a serpent along the whole length of California. Here it was. And here was the very cliff he was looking for, the one in his dream.

He stared at the picture – the sweep of mountain, the swathe of orange poppies, the dun-coloured cliff, the pounding surf. Beautiful and empty. The perfect setting for a dream house.

The contest in *Architectural Record* magazine was for “students only”. It didn’t specify architecture students. It didn’t specify an age. “The Shape of Things to Come” – that was the title of the challenge.

His thoughts drifted. He laid aside the magazine and reached for another, Vol. 191, No. 6. Heiata was on the cover – the most beautiful woman in the world, with tropical flowers woven into her raven hair and a strand of black pearls around her neck. Someday he would build a house for Heiata. Being from Tahiti, she would want to live by the sea.

He yawned. Birdie would be getting him up for the school bus in less than three hours. Birdie – her morning voice like Chewbacca – at his bedroom door. “Hit the deck, Dec.” The same tired joke, day in and day out. He hugged the open magazine to his chest and closed his eyes.

Then Sunny started to cry.

He heard footsteps and turned. It was the Wookiee

herself, Birdie, clumping down the stairs in her quilted nightgown, her arms wrapped around herself under her substantial bosom.

She saw him and frowned.

“What is going on in this madhouse?” she said.

“I heard something,” said Dec.

She looked at the volume in his lap. “You heard a magazine?”

“I got to thinking,” he said.

She made a face, as if thinking was something that should be confined to reasonable hours if indulged in at all.

“Don’t go asking for the day off,” she said, then ran her hands through her great mane of hair and headed into the kitchen.

He closed the book on his dreams. As if he’d ever missed a day of school. School was how you got out of here.

He turned off the light and followed Birdie into the kitchen. She was standing in the dark, outlined by the light from the hall. Her head drooped as she leaned against the counter. In the lighted window of the microwave, a Minnie Mouse cup went around and around.

“Ear bothering her again?” asked Dec.

She nodded. “Lemon and honey for Little Miss Sunshine,” she said.

The timer dinged.

Dec looked out the window. "Dad left the lights on."

Birdie shook her head, yawning as she stirred a pouch of cold remedy into the heated water. "He's still out there," she said.

Dec remembered thinking that a noise had woken him. He looked again towards the shop, wondering if something had happened to his father. Then he saw him walk past a window. He was all right. Of course. Nothing much ever happened to his father.

"Had to get the war started," said Birdie.

"What war is it this time?"

She held up two fingers.

"The Second World War?"

She nodded.

"All of it?"

Birdie glanced at him wearily. "Just D-Day." She tasted Sunny's drink. Too hot. She poured some into the sink and topped up Minnie with cold water.

"My ear hurts." It was Sunny's voice, all wobbly, drifting down from her room.

"As if D-Day weren't enough," said Birdie. She joined Dec at the window. "It's three in the morning, and your father is out there in his shop happily building some beach in Normandy. Go figure."

She sounded kind of proud, as if only a special kind of guy stayed up late playing with model armies.

"D-Day," said Dec. "That's a long way from the Greeks taking out the Persians at Marathon."

"I thought you'd be pleased," she said.

"Why?"

"Your old man finally joins the twentieth century. You're always grouching about him being stuck in the past."

Dec was just about to remind her it was now the twenty-first century when Sunny called out again. "Mommy?"

"Coming," said Birdie.

And Dec bit his lip the way he always did when he heard his sister call Birdie Mommy. Even after so long.

Alone in the dark of the kitchen he looked towards his father's workshop.

"Bernard Steeple arrives in the twentieth century," he murmured. "Alert the press."

Just then, as if his father had heard him, the lights in the shed went off. And in the new darkness Dec thought he saw, far up on the very top of the hill, another light. He stared. Must have been a shard of moonlight shining on a window in the big house. Where they used to live when his real mother was still around.

AN INTERVIEW WITH TIM WYNNE-JONES

WHAT WAS THE INITIAL INSPIRATION FOR *A THIEF IN THE HOUSE OF MEMORY*?

I was washing the dishes, actually, when I thought: wouldn't it be cool if you never had to throw anything away. When you filled up one room, you just moved to another, so that you would have every sock you ever owned, even the smelly ones.

DID YOU DRAW ON PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN WRITING THE BOOK?

Yes. I used to own a lot of smelly socks. Actually, there are lots of personal things in this book. Like Dec, I wanted to be an architect from the age of eleven and I did study architecture for three years, as it turns out. We moved a lot when I was a kid and I guess I'm kind of obsessed by the idea of home – what home means.

OTHER THAN DEC, WHO IS YOUR FAVOURITE CHARACTER IN *THIEF*?

I love Dec's mum, especially when she's in her wedding dress and cowboy hat. And I really like Ezra. I wish I'd had a genius friend when I was a teenager. Maybe I wouldn't have screwed up so much.

WHERE DO YOU FIND YOUR CHARACTERS? DO THEY EVER CHANGE AS YOU WRITE ABOUT THEM?

They change a lot. Dec was Ray for a while, until I realized it would be weird to be named Ray and have a sister named Sunny. A bit much, really. Also, Birdie wasn't even in the first two or three drafts. She just sort of barged in and made a role for herself. Thank goodness!

NOW DO YOU GET INSIDE THE HEADS OF YOUR CHARACTERS?

I walk around in their shoes. Well, not Lindy's, because I'm not so good in heels. But seriously, I try to see the world through their eyes. Even Dec's boring dad. We all have our boring side and I really got into pretending to be the most boring father in the world, who might also be... Ah, but I'm not going to give it away.

DO YOU HAVE TO DO A LOT OF RESEARCH?

Yes. In this story I needed to know a lot about model building and D-Day, for one thing. That was excellent research to do. Then there's research into police procedure with regards to a juvenile witness. I didn't want Dec going to the inquest and so I had to find a legitimate way to keep him out. Things like that.

DO YOU HAVE ANY DISTINCTIVE WRITING RITUALS?

Yes, turning on my computer. I always find I get a lot more

done when I actually turn it on. I'm not a superstitious type, but I do like to work to a pretty rigorous schedule. Up at five or six, at my desk by seven, at the latest. I also never write in the evening because I always make mistakes when I do that. But that isn't really a ritual, is it? More like a work habit.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF WRITING A BOOK AND WHAT IS THE HARDEST PART?

I love the second draft after you've got all the "junk" out there on the table, as it were, and you get to look through it and see what's worth keeping and what should be chucked out. It always feels good knowing you got through it once, already, so it's only going to get better. Then again, *Thief* took thirteen drafts to get right...

WHICH SCENE IN *THIEF* GAVE YOU THE MOST TROUBLE AND WHY?

Which scene? I'd say the whole last movement. I had a whole lot of other things happening – bad guys coming out all over. It was crazy! So it took a lot of work to really figure out what exactly did happen.

DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR READERS WHO MIGHT LIKE TO FOLLOW IN YOUR FOOTSTEPS AND BECOME A WRITER?

Yes, write a lot. Don't worry about quality, quantity is

what you want. Play at it – have a good time. Make up crazy things and when you get bored, stop and start something else. Just like an athlete, a writer has got to build up good writing muscles, so that when you get a REALLY good idea, you're ready to roll. And the best way to build up a good writing muscle is to have a whole lot of fun writing whatever crosses your mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IN HIS OWN WORDS

“Writing a bio in the first person always makes me think of those boring people who back you into a corner at a party and tell you about themselves. The worst part is that they invariably situate themselves between you and the crisps. I like crisps. I like food. I love cooking. And crossword puzzles and cross-country skiing, although I make a point of not trying to do these activities at the same time.

“I started writing when I was in my twenties. Never dreamed of becoming an author. Oh, I loved reading but I had known since I was eleven that I was going to be a world famous architect when I grew up, so I never took my writing very seriously. Besides, I failed high school English. But the university where I was training to become a world famous architect thought it might not be such a good idea for me to design buildings into which real people might actually stray by mistake. So

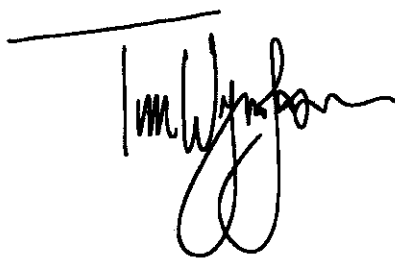
I turned to making art, which led to an MFA (Master of Fine Art), which is when I realized, if I wasn't careful, I was going to end up being offered a teaching job! So I wrote a novel very quickly.

"Winning the Seal First Novel Award in 1980 convinced me to put aside my designing, acting, singing, painting, teaching career and take writing seriously. Twenty-four books later, I'm still doing it and still loving it.

"I've won lots of awards. Oh, here – can I get you the crisps? You just munch away and I'll tell you all about them: a couple of Governor Generals; three or four Canadian Library Associations; the Arthur Ellis – that's from the Canadian Crime Writers of Canada; the Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America; the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award – are you feeling woozy, yet?

"I've written three adult novels, but I got over that. I've also written a dozen picture books. Then there's *Ned Mouse Breaks Away*, which has pictures, but chapters as well, so it's a storybook, I guess. I've written three collections of short stories, the best known of which is *Some of the Kinder Planets*. And I've written four novels for older readers, beginning with *The Survival Game*. Most recently, I wrote *A Thief in the House of Memory*. The last novel before that was *The Boy in the Burning House*. Notice the house thing? You see? I'm obsessed.

“Oh, don’t go. Please! I haven’t told you about my acreage in Perth, where I’ve lived since 1988, or about my three very talented grown-up kids and my wonderful wife and the cats. I’ve got lots of pictures. Some other time, okay? Or you could check out my website: www.timwynne-jones.com.”

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Tim Wynne-Jones". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Above the signature, there is a single horizontal line.