

The Good Thief

HANNAH
TINTI



A READER'S GUIDE

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

About ten years ago I was given a copy of Jeffrey Kacirk's *Forgotten English*, a collection of words that have fallen out of use in the English language. One of the terms was "resurrection men." I remember thinking, on first glance, that it was very beautiful. And then I read the definition:

"Body-snatchers, those who broke open the coffins of the newly buried to supply the demands of the surgical and medical schools. The first recorded instance of the practice was in 1742, and it flourished particularly until the passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832. The resurrectionist took the corpse naked, this being in law a misdemeanor, as opposed to a felony if garments were taken as well. . . . First applied to Burke and Hare in 1829, who rifled graves to sell the bodies for dissection, and sometimes even murdered people for the same purpose."
—*Ebenezer Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, excerpted by Jeffrey Kacirk in *Forgotten English*

Once I got over the horrific strangeness of it all, I became intrigued. These resurrection men were doing something terrible—desecrating graves—but with the knowledge of the medical schools and with partial acceptance from the law. The thieves did it for the money, but they also inadvertently saved others from dying by providing the test subjects that doctors needed to fur-

ther their research. I tore out the definition of “resurrection men” and pasted it into my journal with a note: *Possible novel?*

The idea of tackling a novel was daunting—up until that point, my only experience had been with short stories. I knew what I wanted to write about, but I wasn’t sure how to begin. Finally a scene began to form in my head. It was a moonlit night, and the robbers were unearthing the graves behind a large iron fence while a small boy stood lookout, holding the reins of a horse and wagon. I didn’t know anything about the boy, only that he was waiting for the resurrection men to bring the bodies and that he was terrified.

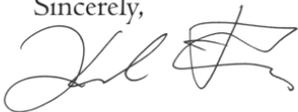
Writing for me has always been an intuitive and mysterious process. As I expanded the scene, I began to describe the boy and wrote that he was holding the reins of the horse with his right hand. But when I tried to explain what he was doing with his other hand, nothing sounded right. Then I realized—he didn’t have a left hand. And suddenly the boy came to life. I wanted to know how he’d lost that hand and why he might have fallen in with these dangerous men. The missing hand unlocked his character, and I knew that I had found my hero: Ren. This was the first chapter I wrote of *The Good Thief*, and it became the center of the book.

Now that I had an idea where I was headed, I went back and worked on the beginning, starting at Saint Anthony’s Orphanage. Ren had to be alone and unprotected if he was going to end up in that graveyard, but he also needed someone to lead him there. I opened the gate to possibility and in walked Benjamin Nab. He was all I could have hoped for in a leading man—charming, mysterious, and a great storyteller. Once I had Ren and Benjamin traveling side by side together, I knew that their journey, and mine, had begun.

My parents pressed the classics into my hands at an early age, so it's no surprise that adventures such as *Jane Eyre* and *Great Expectations* began to influence Ren's story. I wanted to write the kind of book that made me fall in love with reading. But I also wanted to set it in New England, where I'd grown up. So I guided Ren and Benjamin through farm country, fishing and whaling villages, and finally an industrial factory town. While the settings are based on real places, I made them fictional and kept the exact year when the novel takes place deliberately vague. In this way I was able to create my own surreal alternative New England—peppered with giants, dwarfs, women who shout instead of speak, and men who come back from the dead—the kind of place where one of Benjamin Nab's wild tales just might, possibly, be true.

It took me six years to complete *The Good Thief*, from that first scene in the graveyard, through many, many drafts, all the way to the final picnic. With each rewrite it became clearer to me that this novel wasn't just about resurrection men. It was also about resurrection—rebirth of the body and the soul. Each character goes through some kind of transformation. For Benjamin, and for Ren, that change comes through storytelling. For me, it has come through the process of writing this book. The journey has been long and difficult, but I found many wishing stones along the way. More than anything, I am grateful that *The Good Thief* has found an audience to connect with. Thank you for turning the pages.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Hannah Tinti', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Hannah Tinti

A CONVERSATION WITH HANNAH TINTI

Random House Reader's Circle: Why did you decide to set your novel in New England?

Hannah Tinti: I wanted *The Good Thief* to take place in America in the 1800s, and New England felt like the perfect place. I grew up in Salem, Massachusetts—famous for the witch trials and as the birthplace of Nathaniel Hawthorne—so stepping into the time period was actually quite natural for me. Most of the houses in my neighborhood were built in the 1700s and 1800s, and it was not unusual to have a back staircase, fireplaces in nearly every room, low ceilings, or small latched pantry doors. Whenever my family worked outside in our small garden, we were constantly digging up things from the past—fragments of blue and white china plates, broken clay pipes, or crushed shells that used to line the path to a neighboring carriage house. Once my grandmother found a Spanish *real* from the 1700s. This unearthing of tangible history, and being conscious every day of the people who have lived in places before you, is common in Europe and other parts of the world, but in America it is more unusual. In any event, it made a lasting impression on me and has certainly wound its way throughout *The Good Thief*.

RHRC: How did you come up with the title *The Good Thief*?

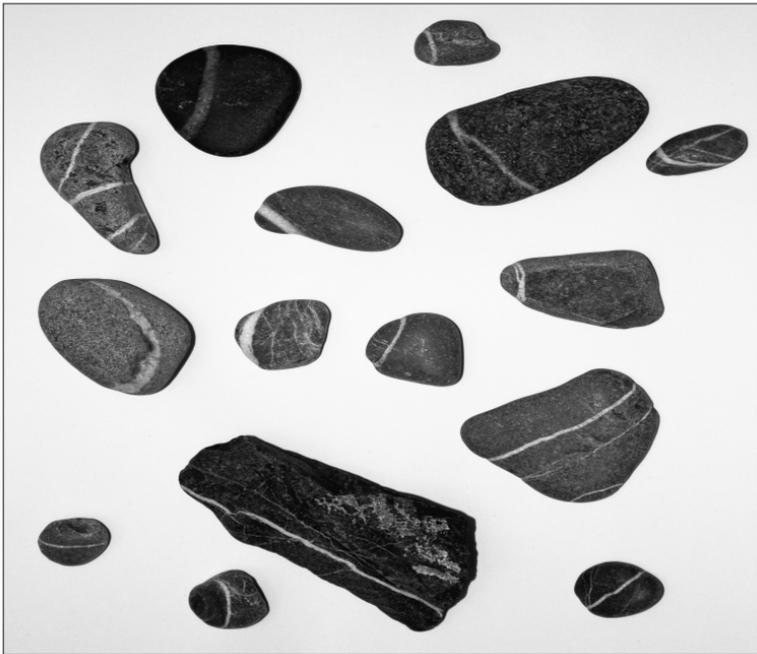
HT: Originally I had planned to call the book *Resurrection Men*. Then, for a number of reasons, I had to change it. I was at a loss for a long time, and nothing seemed appropriate. Finally I gave an early draft of the novel to my mother, who worked for many years as a librarian and has read more books than anyone I know. She came up with *The Good Thief*, and as soon as she said it I knew it was the right title. There is a lot of stealing going on throughout the book, with mixed intentions and results. I also liked the biblical reference to the Good Thief (also known as Saint Dismas), who was one of the men crucified with Jesus Christ on Golgotha. His story is one of redemption at the very last minute, and that suits this novel perfectly.

RHRC: *The Good Thief* has been compared to the work of Robert Louis Stevenson and Charles Dickens. Did you set out to write an adventure tale?

HT: It's humbling to be compared to these master storytellers. Stevenson and Dickens were my heroes growing up, along with James Fenimore Cooper. I'm not sure I set out purposely to write an adventure story, but once I had the first scene, I knew that was where I was headed, and I was certainly influenced by these writers along the way. Who could forget the scene in *Kidnapped* where David Balfour climbs the empty staircase and nearly falls? Or when Magwitch appears on the moor in *Great Expectations*? Whenever I felt daunted by the task before me, I went back to this important lesson—*write something that you would like to read yourself*—and tried to put it in motion on the page. Once I started, it was hard to stop. I like to fall into books, to read about strange places and about characters who make me care deeply. I also like to be surprised at what's going to happen next.

RHRC: What is a wishing stone?

HT: A wishing stone is a rock, usually found near water, with an unbroken white line circling it completely. It is good for making one wish come true. When I was a child I would collect them. Later I was reintroduced to them at an important time in my life. At the beginning of *The Good Thief*, Ren comes into possession of



one. It is his golden ticket, and this wish reverberates throughout the rest of the book, as do the stones themselves. Several people have asked me what a wishing stone looks like. Here are a few that I've held on to. Since *The Good Thief* was published, I've given one away at every reading, to pass on some of the good luck that has come my way.

RHRC: How much did your religion influence *The Good Thief*?

HT: I was raised Catholic and went to Catholic school, so my religion was certainly helpful, especially when it came to describing Ren's spirituality. My relationship with God was very close when I was young and grew more complicated as I got older. Children think of right and wrong in very literal terms—and they also respond viscerally to parables and storytelling in religious texts. For me, tales of the martyrs and saints always held great weight, and I tried to draw on them as I wrote Ren's character. Saint Anthony, in particular, caught my imagination. In 2000, I visited his basilica in Padua and read a history of his life. Not only was he a famous storyteller, like Benjamin, but he was the saint prayed to for lost things, which fit with Ren's missing hand. He was also involved in resurrection: One of his miracles was raising a boy from the dead. In the last days of his life, Saint Anthony lived in a tree house, wanting to be closer to heaven. It's a poignant image—this desire to be rid of earthly life. As I wrote *The Good Thief*, Saint Anthony became my touchstone, and I consider him the patron saint of this book.

RHRC: What kind of research did you do for *The Good Thief*?

HT: Because I grew up in Salem, Massachusetts, I knew how everything should look and what the feel of North Umbrage should be. But I also read many books on resurrection men, grave robbing, and the history of medical schools. Two that were particularly helpful were *The Italian Boy* by Sarah Wise, a nonfiction account of the trial of two resurrection men in London, and *The Knife Man* by Wendy Moore, a biography of John Hunter, who was a famous surgeon and resurrectionist. I also went to the New York Public Library and read old newspapers from the 1800s, which

gave me a real feel for the language and everyday lives of people. Museums were a great resource, especially the Mütter Museum at The College of Physicians of Philadelphia and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. On the bulletin board over my desk I kept sketches of graveyards, shots of buildings from the 1800s, prayer cards, photographs of Native Americans by Edward S. Curtis, artwork by Lee Bontecou and Edward Gorey, pictures of ancient dentures and designs of early mousetraps, so that every time I looked up, I would stay in the world I had created.

RHRC: Why did you choose Ralph Waldo Emerson's quote to open *The Good Thief*?

HT: I remembered Emerson's words after writing about the mousetrap factory. I wanted to find the complete wording and add it to my folder of notes for the book, so I looked it up. When I reread the entire quote I realized that it was more complex than I had thought: "If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, though he build his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door." Emerson covered not only mousetraps, but religion as well as storytelling, the very thing I was struggling to accomplish. I put the quote on my wall as a challenge to myself—to write a better book.

RHRC: What is your writing process like?

HT: I try to follow my intuition—sitting quietly and letting things come. It's a bit like using a divining rod. Often I don't realize what I'm doing until after the words are on the page. Later I go back and try to make sense of it. The editing process is where most of the work is done, but I discovered long ago that I

need to be open and trust my subconscious. When I was a little girl, I went net casting on a fishing boat. The men threw a net overboard, then dragged it a hundred yards, then pulled up what they caught into a big tank onboard. Then they tossed things over that they didn't want and kept the fish they did. I remember that the water seemed so clear and empty, but when the fishermen pulled the net onboard, it was full of the weirdest things I'd ever seen. Bizarre creatures from the bottom of the sea. Novels seem to be like this—casting a net through a writer's mind and pulling the unexpected into the light.

READING GROUP QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do the time period and the locale shape the novel? How did the needy and the sly fare in rural America before the twentieth century? What historical aspects of *The Good Thief* surprised you the most?
2. What were your impressions of Saint Anthony's? What were the motivations of Father John and the brothers who cared for Ren there? Were they cruel or simply realistic?
3. Did you believe the story Benjamin told when he took Ren from Saint Anthony's? Would you have fallen for the scams they ran? What vulnerabilities did they prey on? What is the key to being a successful scoundrel?
4. What did *The Lives of the Saints* mean to Ren before and after he left Saint Anthony's? How did his feelings about religion change throughout the novel? How did his early lessons in sin, penance, and ritual serve him in the real world?
5. What enabled Benjamin and Tom to engage in grave robbing without feeling repulsed? Can their practical logic be justified? What is the emotional value of the possessions of the dead?
6. In chapter fourteen, Doctor Milton lets Ren see his scarred skin under a microscope. What changes for Ren in that en-

counter? How did his injury affect his life in different ways throughout the novel? How did you react when you discovered how his hand had been severed?

7. The Harelip, Mrs. Sands, and Sister Agnes all seem powerful and skilled in different ways but don't fit traditional female archetypes of wives or mothers. How are women represented in *The Good Thief*? How do these women affect Ren's story?
8. In what ways is Ren wiser than Brom or Ichy? What makes him better prepared for life on the lam?
9. What does Dolly teach Ren about himself and about the nature of death and darkness in the world? What effect does Ren have on Dolly?
10. Discuss the images Ren had created of an ideal mother as someone beautiful who could provide comfort, a warm bed, and good cooking. How does Sister Agnes help him cope with the reality of his mother? Should he have been sheltered from knowing the truth? How does Mrs. Sands fulfill or not fulfill the role of mother for Ren?
11. What is the source of McGinty's sadism and bitterness? What did it take to defeat him?
12. Early in the novel, Benjamin and Tom discover Ren's ease with trickery and declare that he is already one of them. Did he possess these skills innately or were they the result of having to survive at Saint Anthony's? How much control over his destiny did Ren have? Did nature or nurture have the greater role in his approach to the world?

13. Discuss the title. What makes a good thief—either in terms of being a noble thief or a skillful one? Can this be applied to the epigraph from Emerson, describing the rewards available to a good “trapper”? And how does this relate to the biblical story of the Good Thief, who was crucified with Jesus Christ on Golgotha?

14. What innovative approaches to storytelling appear in *The Good Thief*?