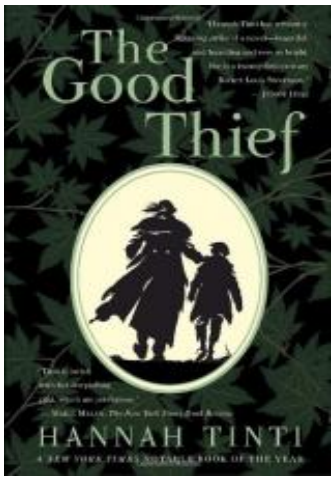
The Good Thief

by Hannah Tinti



About the Book

A tantalizing blend of brilliant ingenuity and spooky, gothic twists, **The Good Thief** tells the mesmerizing story of a child named Ren, whose past is a mystery and whose future lies in the hands of a skilled con artist. Abandoned as an infant at St. Anthony?s Orphanage, Ren was steeped in Catholic ritual and admonitions against sin. By the time he is twelve years old, several of the other boys have been adopted, but prospects are slim for Ren; he is missing his left hand, an injury experienced early on, even before he arrived at St. Anthony?s. When Benjamin Nab arrives, claiming to be Ren?s long-lost brother, he transforms this mark of misfortune into a lucrative scam, whisking Ren into the world of scenic New England farmland and towns populated by trusting villagers: a prime location for a gritty underbelly of grave robbing and other dark trades. But as their hardscrabble adventures unfold, Ren begins to suspect that this fast-talking charlatan holds the key to one important truth: who Ren really is, and whether he can be reunited with the loving mother he has always dreamed of.

The questions and discussion topics that follow are intended to enhance your reading of Hannah Tinti?s **The Good Thief.** We hope they will enrich your experience of this extraordinary novel.

Discussion Guide

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 St. 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 St. 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 **Lives of the Saints** mean to Ren before and after he left St. 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 encounter? 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 and 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 St. 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 both **The Good Thief** and Hannah Tinti?s short-fiction collection, **Animal Crackers**?

Author Bio

Hannah Tinti grew up in Salem, Massachusetts. Her short story collection ANIMAL CRACKERS was a runner-up for

the PEN/Hemingway Award. Her bestselling novel THE GOOD THIEF won the Center for Fiction First Novel Prize and an American Library Association Alex Award, and was a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Tinti is the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the award-winning literary magazine *One Story*.

Critical Praise

"**The Good Thief** is a dark, Dickensian fable filled with enough surprises to keep a reader turning pages long past midnight. Irresistibly strange, and just plain irresistible."

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