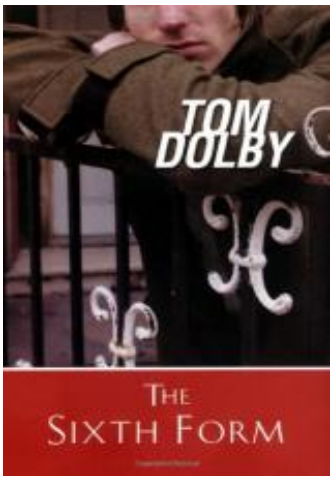
The Sixth Form

by Tom Dolby



About the Book

From Tom Dolby, the acclaimed author of **The Trouble Boy**, comes an extraordinary new novel --- a sensitive coming of age tale and a compelling work of suspense that explores the price of innocence betrayed and the complexities of personal truth.

When seventeen-year-old Ethan Whitley leaves his home in California for Berkley Academy, a prestigious Massachusetts prep school, he's a blank slate, a shy follower of rules in search of himself. Ethan is given the chance to start over when he is hand-picked by his wealthy, disaffected classmate, Todd Eldon, and a seductive, enigmatic teacher, Hannah McClellan, a free spirit for whom rules were meant to be broken.

Life with Todd and Hannah is a revelation, an invitation to a world of privilege and desire --- trips to a glittering, gritty New York City with its Fifth Avenue penthouses and artists' lofts; clandestine encounters in the graveyard near Berkley's wooded campus; and private meetings at Hannah's secluded house where they can drink wine and read Rimbaud, testing their limits and temptation in equal measure. Looming over these heady evenings is the disturbing mystery of Hannah's fragmented past, one that Ethan longs desperately to understand.

As secrets are revealed, Ethan is pulled deep into the undertow of Hannah's history and Todd's longings. He learns that every deceit has a price, every lie an ugly truth, and that those he has come to trust are people he doesn't know at all. The most dangerous stories of all, though, may be the ones he has told himself.

Discussion Guide

1. The Sixth Form has three main characters: Ethan, Todd, and Hannah. While we know the most about Ethan, in what ways is the novel Todd's story as well? Can it be considered Hannah's, too?

2. The writer Andrew Solomon has said that Ethan and Todd are "at first surprised by how different they are from each other's perceptions, and ultimately surprised by how different they are from their own self-perceptions." What do you think Solomon means by this?

3. Hannah is ultimately not a sympathetic character, and yet the boys and many others find her enchanting at points in the novel. Did you like her? Did you trust her?

4. The novelist Ayelet Waldman has said that **The Sixth Form** says "something new about... the way art can give us what we need to survive." How is this true for Ethan, Todd, and Hannah? Though Todd is not an artist or writer in any formal sense, how can his baking be considered a form of creation that helps him to survive? And if art can be used to survive, is it possible that it can also be used to manipulate?

5. There is an emphasis on food in the novel. What is its importance to the story? What does cooking represent for Hannah, for Todd, and for others?

6. At certain points in the book, the story of *Hansel and Gretel* is referenced. How does it function in the novel? Are there other ways in which fairy tale or fantastical imagery are used? How does this relate to the situation at the end of the novel, in which both boys either lose or are missing a parent?

7. History plays an important background role in the novel: through the history of the town of Wilton, the history of Berkley Academy, and in the mysterious story of Hannah's past. Near the end of the novel, the author writes: "It was possible, [Ethan] realized, to live in both the present and the past." Is this true for other characters as well? Who is living in the present and who is living in the past?

8. How does the story of Louisa Berkley function in the novel? Why do you think the author chose to insert her narrative in the book's center?

9. It could be argued that Hannah lives in a world of fantasy, while the boys and their parents --- except for, perhaps, Todd's mother --- live in the real world. Are these two worlds at odds with each other in the novel? Are there ways in which the world of fantasy is more appealing to Todd and Ethan?

10. In what ways does Hannah act like a mother to the boys? A sister? A friend? A lover? How does she alternate between these roles?

11. In the novel, there is a good deal of attention paid to the way Hannah is dressed: young or old, sexy or studious, in a skirt or jeans, in a blouse or in a man's shirt. What is the significance of her various clothing choices?

12. The novel illustrates class differences, most pointedly those between Ethan and Todd. What are some of the ways, both obvious and subtle, that the author references class?

13. How does the novel view youth and aging? Are there ways in which some characters try to act older, while others strive to be younger? Consider the dynamic between Hannah and Ethan; between the faculty and the students at Berkley; and the differences between Ethan's mother and Todd's mother.

14. Both Ethan and Todd go home during spring break to spend time with their parents under trying circumstances. What are the different modes in which the two young men relate to their parents?

15. At the end of the novel, Ethan draws some bold conclusions about human relationships. Are they accurate, or are they overly cynical? What does the novel say about growing up?

16. What is the significance of the title? How is the Sixth Form a period of growth and change for the main characters?

17. While it covers many topics and situations, **The Sixth Form** can be seen within the genre of the "boarding school novel." How does it fit into the canon of books like J.D. Salinger's **Catcher in the Rye**, John Knowles's **A Separate Peace**, and even Curtis Sittenfeld's **Prep**? How is it similar to or different from these novels?

18. In recent years, the prep school novel has experienced a resurgence. What do you think accounts for the popularity of novels set within this milieu?

Author Bio

Tom Dolby is the author of the bestselling novel **The Trouble Boy**. Born in London and raised in San Francisco, he is a graduate of The Hotchkiss School and Yale University. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times, The Village Voice,* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. He currently lives in Manhattan, where he is working on his third novel.

Critical Praise

"In the tradition of Curtis Sittenfeld's **Prep**, with just the right hint of **Tom Brown's Schooldays**, Dolby gives us a glimpse into the rarefied world of elite New England boarding schools and manages at the same time to say something new about adolescence, sexuality, and the way art can give us what we need to survive."

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Publication Date: January 1, 2008
Hardcover: 352 pages
Publisher: Kensington Publishing Corporation
ISBN-10: 0758222580
ISBN-13: 9780758222589