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The Palace Thief

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795583000897315

Introduction: A Tale of Consequence and Character

In the vast landscape of American short fiction, few stories have resonated with as much moral complexity and literary precision as **The Palace Thief**. Written by acclaimed author Ethan Canin and first published in *The New Yorker* in 1994, this masterful narrative has captivated readers, educators, and critics for decades. At its heart, **The Palace Thief** is far more than a simple story about a cheating student at an elite prep school. It is a profound meditation on integrity, ambition, class, and the long shadow that our choices cast over our lives. This article provides a comprehensive exploration of **The Palace Thief**, examining its plot, characters, thematic depth, and enduring relevance in both literature and life.

Who Wrote The Palace Thief? An Introduction to Ethan Canin

To fully appreciate **The Palace Thief**, it is helpful to understand its creator. Ethan Canin emerged as a significant literary voice in the late 1980s and 1990s, known for his precise prose and deep psychological insight. He studied at Stanford, Harvard, and the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop before gaining widespread attention with his debut story collection, *Emperor of the Air*. **The Palace Thief** appears in his second collection, also titled *The Palace Thief*, published in 1994. Canin's background as a physician and his training in creative writing inform his ability to dissect human motivation with clinical accuracy while retaining a storyteller's warmth. His work often explores themes of morality, memory, and the quiet tragedies of ordinary life, making **The Palace Thief** a quintessential example of his craft.

Plot Summary: The Story of William Hundert and Sedgewick Bell

The Setting: St. Benedict's School for Boys

The narrative of **The Palace Thief** is delivered through the voice of William Hundert, a dedicated and somewhat idealistic history teacher at St. Benedict's School for Boys, a prestigious boarding school in the northeastern United States. Hundert is a man who believes deeply in the transformative power of classical education. He teaches his students about the great figures of antiquity—Cicero, Caesar, Cato—not merely as historical names, but as models of character. For Hundert, history is a moral discipline, and the classroom is an arena where young men learn to become virtuous leaders. It is within this carefully ordered world that the central conflict of **The Palace Thief** begins.

The Arrival of Sedgewick Bell

Into Hundert's orderly classroom steps Sedgewick Bell, the son of a powerful and wealthy United States senator. Sedgewick is immediately established as a disruptive force. He is arrogant, lazy, and dismissive of Hundert's lessons. He possesses a sharp intelligence, but he uses it to mock rather than to learn. Sedgewick represents a challenge to everything Hundert stands for. He is a product of privilege, accustomed to getting what he wants without effort. From their first encounter, a quiet war of wills begins between the teacher and the

student, a conflict that will define both of their lives for decades to come.

The Mr. Julius Caesar Competition

The pivotal event in **The Palace Thief** is the annual Mr. Julius Caesar competition, a prestigious academic contest at St. Benedict's. The competition is a grueling oral examination on Roman history, and winning it is a mark of great honor. Hundert genuinely believes that the contest can inspire his students to greatness. Sedgewick Bell, seeing an opportunity for glory and perhaps to prove his superiority, decides to enter the competition. Hundert is suspicious but allows him to participate. On the day of the competition, Sedgewick performs brilliantly, answering every question with apparent ease. He seems to have transformed overnight into a model student. However, Hundert soon discovers the truth: Sedgewick cheated. He had someone feed him the answers through a hidden earpiece.

The Teacher's Choice

Here lies the moral crux of **The Palace Thief**. Hundert is faced with a terrible dilemma. He can expose Sedgewick publicly, which would result in disgrace, expulsion, and the ruin of the boy's future. Alternatively, he can handle the matter privately, allowing Sedgewick to save face while still administering some form of punishment. Hundert chooses the latter. He confronts Sedgewick privately, forces him to forfeit the trophy, and exacts a verbal promise of future good behavior. Hundert believes he has acted wisely and compassionately. He believes he has taught Sedgewick a lesson. But as **The Palace Thief** unfolds, it becomes devastatingly clear that this choice may have been a profound mistake. By not exposing the cheater to the full light of accountability, Hundert may have failed in his most fundamental duty as a teacher.

The Reunion: Twenty-Five Years Later

The second act of **The Palace Thief** takes place twenty-five years later. Hundert is nearing retirement when he receives an invitation to a reunion at St. Benedict's. The reunion is being organized by Sedgewick Bell, now a wealthy and powerful businessman. Sedgewick proposes a re-enactment of the Mr. Julius Caesar competition, a nostalgic return to their shared past. Hundert is wary but agrees. He hopes, perhaps, to find that his former student has reformed and become a man of substance. The re-enactment, however, proves to be a cruel echo of the original event. Sedgewick and a friend manipulate the contest again, and this time, Hundert realizes the terrible truth: Sedgewick has never changed. He has simply become more sophisticated in his dishonesty. The title **The Palace Thief** takes on its full meaning here. Sedgewick is not just a cheater; he is a thief who steals honor, integrity, and the very meaning of the institutions he exploits.

Major Themes in The Palace Thief

The Fragility of Integrity

The central theme of **The Palace Thief** is the difficulty of maintaining integrity in a world that often rewards its opposite. William Hundert is a genuinely good man. He works hard, believes in his students, and tries to do the right thing. Yet his integrity is no match for the corrosive power of privilege and ambition represented by Sedgewick Bell. The story suggests that integrity is not something that can be achieved once and then held forever. It must be constantly defended, and even then, it can be fragile. Hundert's quiet, virtuous life is a stark contrast to Sedgewick's flamboyant success, raising uncomfortable questions about whether goodness is ultimately rewarded.

The Seduction of Ambition

Sedgewick Bell is a study in unchecked ambition. In **The Palace Thief**, his ambition is not merely a desire for success; it is a hunger for dominance. He wants to win, to be seen, to conquer. He views the world as a game to be manipulated, and other people as tools or obstacles. The story does not condemn ambition outright, but it warns of its dangers when it is divorced from moral restraint. Sedgewick's ambition makes him successful in

business and politics, but it also leaves him hollow. He becomes a man who can have everything and appreciate nothing.

The Failure of Education

On a deeper level, **The Palace Thief** is a story about the limits of education. William Hundert believes that by teaching his students the great works of history and philosophy, he can shape their character. He believes that knowledge leads to virtue. Sedgewick Bell proves him wrong. Sedgewick knows the history of Rome as well as anyone, perhaps better. He can quote Cicero and debate the merits of Caesar. But that knowledge has not made him a better person. He has used it as a tool for manipulation. **The Palace Thief** asks a painful question: If education does not build character, what is it for?

Class, Privilege, and Power

The story is also a sharp critique of class and privilege. Sedgewick Bell is unmistakably a product of his environment. His father's wealth and power have insulated him from consequences his entire life. He has never had to face true accountability. Hundert, by contrast, is a man of modest means and background. He has earned his position through hard work and dedication. The conflict in **The Palace Thief** is not just between two individuals; it is between two worlds. One world is built on merit and effort; the other is built on birthright and entitlement. The story's tragic arc suggests that the second world often wins.

The Palace Thief as a Film: The Emperor's Club

In 2002, **The Palace Thief** was adapted into a major motion picture titled *The Emperor's Club*, starring Kevin Kline as William Hundert and Emile Hirsch as the young Sedgewick Bell. The film is a faithful and moving adaptation that captures the essence of the original story while expanding certain elements for cinematic effect. Kevin Kline delivers a subtle and powerful performance as the principled but flawed teacher. The screenplay, written by Neil Tolkin, preserves the moral ambiguity of the source material, refusing to offer easy resolutions.

The film changes some details—the setting is shifted slightly, and the ending is made somewhat more explicit—but it remains true to the spirit of **The Palace Thief**. It is a quiet, thoughtful film that earned positive reviews for its intelligence and restraint. For many viewers, *The Emperor's Club* served as an introduction to Ethan Canin's work and to the profound questions at the heart of **The Palace Thief**. The film remains a valuable companion to the story, offering a visual and emotional interpretation of its central conflicts.

Literary Style and Significance

Narrative Voice

One of the greatest strengths of **The Palace Thief** is its narrative voice. William Hundert is a deeply unreliable narrator, not because he lies, but because he is blind to his own flaws. He tells the story from his perspective, and he genuinely believes he is in the right. Yet the reader gradually sees the gaps in his understanding. He overestimates his influence on his students. He underestimates the cunning of Sedgewick Bell. He fails to see how his own need for order and respectability has prevented him from taking decisive action. This technique—the unreliable narrator—gives **The Palace Thief** its tragic depth. We see Hundert making mistakes, and we understand why he makes them, but we cannot save him from the consequences.

Symbolism and Title Meaning

The title **The Palace Thief** is rich with symbolic meaning. In ancient Rome, a palace thief was one who stole from the emperor, a crime considered particularly heinous because it was a betrayal of trust. Sedgewick Bell is a palace thief in multiple senses. He steals from the institution of St. Benedict's, violating its code of honor. He steals from Hundert, betraying the trust his teacher placed in him. On a broader level, he steals something more abstract: the possibility of a just world where virtue is rewarded. The "palace" can be seen as the entire

edifice of civilized values that Hundert represents, and Sedgewick is the thief who undermines it from within.

Comparison to Other Works

Readers familiar with American literature will notice echoes of other works in **The Palace Thief**. It shares thematic DNA with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, another story about the corruption of the American dream. It also calls to mind the moral dilemmas of Henry James, where characters must navigate complex ethical situations without clear guidance. More directly, **The Palace Thief** fits into a tradition of stories about teachers and students—works like *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark or *Dead Poets Society* by N.H. Kleinbaum. However, Canin's story is distinguished by its refusal to romanticize either the teacher or the student. Both are flawed, both are human, and the ending offers no easy comfort.

The Enduring Relevance of The Palace Thief

Why does **The Palace Thief** continue to resonate with readers more than twenty-five years after its publication? The answer lies in its timeless themes. In an era

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