



"This book blew my mind! Utterly original and unique."

— SOPHIE HANNAH

THE 7½
DEATHS
— OF —
EVELYN
HARDCASTLE

a novel

STUART TURTON



READING GROUP GUIDE

1. What or who do you think are the deaths in *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*? Where does the half death enter the narrative?
2. *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle* begins in a typically linear way, then shoots off in many different directions. How did the different narratives and perspectives enrich the story?
3. The mystery and escape in Blackheath is set up like a puzzle, and the reader plays along with Aiden as he puts the solution together. Were there any pieces you couldn't find a place for?
4. Aiden Bishop has a backstory that readers will never know in full; however, what we do know is there is plenty of revenge, cruelty, and questionable intentions wrapped up in who he was and why he entered Blackheath. With what you know about him, would you call him a hero? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think the Plague Doctor wears that particular costume, and how does it affect his relationship with Aiden? Is the Plague Doctor really the good man that the voice in Aiden's head claims he is?
6. Annabelle Caulker, or Anna, is unmasked as someone very different from whom Aiden believes her to be. What do you feel she did to deserve her time in Blackheath, and how do you think Aiden was able to forgive her?
7. Were there any tactics Aiden didn't think of that could have

- solved the mystery of who killed Evelyn Hardcastle? If you were in his shoes, or hosts, what would you have done differently?
8. The construct of Blackheath as a prison feels like something from the future, but do you feel this sort of punishment (and possible redemption) could one day be considered a viable solution for criminals? What do you feel the advantages are, and in what ways could this be considered even more cruel than a standard incarceration sentence?
 9. No character is ever what they first appear, something Aiden remarks on a few times throughout the novel. Who was your favorite character, and why did they resonate with you particularly? Which character undergoes the biggest transformation, and were there any characters you started off liking or loathing and changed your opinion about?
 10. Was there one host who felt more important, or can you see how each character, despite their vices, provided something crucial to the story?
 11. As Aiden switched from host to host, his protection against their memories and personalities waned until he was feeling their lust, their disgust, or their impatience. What characteristics do you feel are solely Aiden's? Outside of Blackheath, what sort of man do you think he is?
 12. What recurring symbols or themes did you see throughout the book, and what role do you think they played in the story or Aiden's escape from Blackheath?
 13. If you knew someone you loved had a devastating secret, would you choose to find out what it was or love them for who they've become? If you knew you did something terrible, would you want to remember or live with that shadow for the rest of your life?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What was your inspiration for *The 7½ Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle*?

Inspiration is a flash-of-lightning kind of word. What happens to me is more like sediment building. I love time travel, Agatha Christie, and the eighties classic *Quantum Leap*, and over time a book emerged from that beautiful quagmire. Truthfully, having the idea was the easy part, keeping track of all the moving parts was the difficulty.

Which character was the most interesting to write, and in which host do you feel Aiden truly flourishes?

Lord Cecil Ravencourt, by miles. He occupies the section of the book where the character has to grapple with the time travel elements, the body swapping elements, and the murder itself. I wanted my most intelligent character for that task, but I thought it would be great to hamper him in some way, as well. Interestingly, I wanted to make him really loathsome—which is why he’s a banker. And yet, for some reason, I ended up quite liking him, and feeding a few laudable qualities into his personality. I think Derby ended up getting a double dose of loathsome instead. Other than that, it’s just really nice seeing the evolution of his relationship with Cunningham.

Is there a moral lesson to Aiden's story or any conclusion you hope the reader walks away with as they turn the final page?

Don't be a dick! Kind, funny, intelligent, and generous people are behind every good thing that's ever happened to me. Everybody else you just have to put up with. Like dandruff. Or sunburn. Don't be sunburn, people.

In one hundred years, do you believe there will be something similar to Blackheath, and would you support such a system?

Yes, and not exactly. Our prison system is barbaric, but some people deserve it. That's the tricky part of pinning your flag to the left or right of the moral spectrum. I think the current system is unsustainable, and I think personality adjustment and mental prisons are dangerous, achievable technology somebody will abuse. They could also solve a lot of problems. Would you trust your government with it? I suppose that's the question.

The book is so contained, and we don't get to see the place that Aiden is escaping to! Did you map that out, and is there anything you can share about the society beyond Blackheath's walls?

It's autocratic, technologically advanced, but they still haven't overcome our human weaknesses. You can get everywhere in an hour, but television's still overrun with reality shows, basically. Imagine the society that could create something as hateful as Annabelle Caulker.

There are so many puzzle pieces and characters and perspectives! How did you keep it all organized while writing the book?

A wall of Post-it Notes, an Excel spreadsheet, and a lot of muttering. My editor, Grace, will testify that I didn't nail it out of the gate. Every time I changed one small thing, it felt like the

entire book fell apart because everything's so connected. One early draft was basically a David Lynch movie spread across four hundred pages. Each draft pushes you closer to the final book, though—which is worth remembering when fourteen impossible things are all happening at 1:42 p.m. and you're trying to fix it while hungover.

How long have you been writing?

This Q&A? About twenty minutes. I was a journalist for about eight years, and this book was happening for the last three of them.

What do you love most about writing?

Everything. Every single thing. I love that first blank page, finding that perfect first line, the moment your character says something unexpected and you realize they're a proper character. I love when it takes over a part of your brain and sits there, like a puzzle you're always working on, even while you're talking with friends or eating dinner with your wife. I love talking to people who've read my book and hearing their theories. I love beautiful writing, lines so good they bug you a week later. I love the collaborative spirit of editing and the joy of a good metaphor. Everything. Every moment. Wouldn't change a thing.

Do you have any writing rituals?

Is drinking a dozen cups of tea every day a ritual? Other than that, I like to write scenes for my characters that take place before the book starts. They're a way of getting into their head and finding their voice. Usually they have nothing to do with the story. They're little domestic scenes. A character planning a holiday, or shopping. Something unusual.

What do you do when you're not putting pen to paper?

I'm a travel journalist, so I'm always putting pen to paper. The poor paper must wonder what it's done to deserve my inky wrath.