



TANIA UNSWORTH

on writing

THE ONE SAFE PLACE

When I was a kid, somebody told me that you only use 16 percent of your brain. Apparently the rest of it just sits there, gathering cobwebs. I wondered what would happen if you found a way to use the whole 100 percent. I thought you'd probably be able to read minds or lift objects off the table using just the force of your eyes. At the very least, you'd be able to memorize every single word in the *Oxford English Dictionary* after flicking through it once.

It turns out that the 16-percent theory is just a myth. But the reason it sounds *almost* plausible is because there's so much we still don't know about how the mind works. The brain may be the most complex structure in the universe, but even the brain doesn't seem able to figure itself out. I love the fact that we're all walking around with no real idea of what's going on in our own heads. And I love the idea of our having secret powers that we may not be aware we possess.

I was thinking about secret powers I might like to have when the idea for *The One Safe Place* came to me. I had to go to the dentist and was sitting in the waiting room pretending to read a magazine but actually feeling slightly sick and wishing I wasn't there. *Nobody likes the dentist*, I thought. *Wouldn't it be great if there were people who could take your place while you were in the exam chair?* It would have to involve some kind of mind-swapping procedure. While your teeth were being



TANIA UNSWORTH, the daughter of the late Barry Unsworth, spent her childhood in Cambridge, UK, before moving to America in her early twenties. She is the author of two previous novels for adult readers—*The Seahorse* and *Before We Began*. She currently lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with her husband and two sons. This is her first book for young readers.

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filled and cleaned, somebody else could suffer all the discomfort. In the meantime, *your* mind would be enjoying a small vacation elsewhere. Inside the head of a small child skipping happily down the street perhaps. Wouldn't that be great?

Wouldn't that be *terrible*?

What happens to Devin at the Home for Childhood is certainly terrible. But he has a secret power to help him. For me, one of the biggest challenges—and pleasures—of writing the book was telling the story through the eyes of a synesthete. Synesthesia is a rare condition in which two or more of the five senses are blended. Colors may be experienced as sounds, for example, or shapes may have flavors. A person with synesthesia might see the word *happy* as fuchsia pink or smell burning when they hear the sound of a trumpet. All five of Devin's senses are blended like this. He experiences the world in a completely different way than most people. When he first discovers his synesthesia, he feels isolated by it. Later, his friend Kit questions whether it has any practical use. But toward the end of the book, as the children desperately search for a way out of the home, Devin's synesthesia actually proves to be very useful.

The One Safe Place is also about another kind of secret power, more common perhaps but just as mysterious. Although he starts the story quite alone in the world, Devin finds kinship among the other children at the home. They're an odd assortment of kids, some eccentric, most traumatized, all victims. But time and again, Devin is able to see beyond surface impressions and recognize the goodness in even the most annoying of his companions. In the end, it's Devin's unwavering faith in his friends that makes all the difference.

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