

THE LONG-AWAITED NEW NOVEL

From the award-winning author of
The Last Unicorn

Peter S. Beagle



Tamsin

"Peter S. Beagle has both opulence of imagination and
mastery of style." —NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

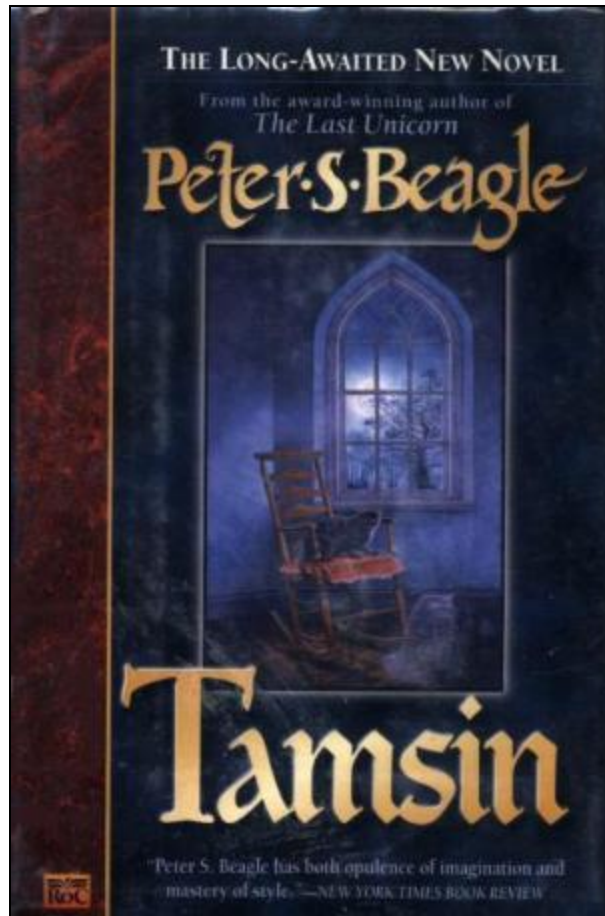


Annotation

After moving with her mother to the English countryside, Jenny, a young American girl, begins to unravel a mystery on the grounds and uncovers evidence of another, hidden occupant of her new home -- a 300-year-old ghost named Tamsin.

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TAMSIN

by Peter S. Beagle

To the memory of Simon Beagle,
my father.
I can still hear you singing, Pop,
quietly, to yourself
shaving.

One

When I was really young, if there was one thing I wanted in the world, it was to be invisible. I used to sit in class and daydream about it, the way the other kids were daydreaming about being a movie star, being a big basketball player. The good part was, if I was invisible, Mister Cat—my cat—Mister Cat would always be able to see me, because invisible doesn't mean anything to a cat. As I know better than anyone, but that comes later.

I used to let Sally see me, too—Sally's my mother—in the daydream. Not *all* the time, not when I was mad at her, but mostly, because she'd have worried. But I really liked it best when it was just me and Mister Cat drifting along, just going wherever we felt like going, and nobody able to tell if my butt was too fat or if my skin had turned to molten lava that morning. And if I got my period in P.E., which I always used to, or if I said something dumb in class, nobody'd even notice. I used to sit there and imagine how great it would be, not ever to be noticed.

It's different now. I'm different. I'm not that furious little girl daydreaming in class anymore. I don't live on West Eighty-third Street, just off Columbus, in New York City—I live at Stourhead Farm in Dorset, England, with my mother and my stepfather, and I'm going to be nineteen in a couple of months. That's how old my friend Tamsin was when she died, three hundred and thirteen years ago.

And I'm writing this book, or whatever it turns out to be, about what happened to all of us—Tamsin Willoughby and Sally and me, and Evan and the boys, too, and the cats.

It happened six years ago, when Sally and I first got here, but it seems a lot longer, because in a way it happened to someone else. I don't really speak that person's language anymore, and when I think about her, she embarrasses me sometimes, but I don't want to forget her, I don't ever want to pretend she never existed. So before I start forgetting, I have to get down exactly who she was, and exactly how she felt about everything. She was me a lot longer than I've been me so far.

We have the same name, Jennifer Gluckstein, but she hated that, too, and I don't mind it so much. Not the Gluckstein—what she hated was the damn stupid, boring Jennifer. My father named me. He used to say that

when he was a boy, nobody was called Jennifer except in a few books, and Jennifer Jones. He'd say, "But *I* always thought it was a really beautiful name, and it actually means Guenevere, like in King Arthur, and why should you care if everybody in the world today is named Jennifer, when they aren't named Courtney or Ashleigh or Brittany?" *His* name is Nathan Gluckstein, but his stage name is Norris Groves, and everyone calls him that except Sally and me and his mother, my Grandma Paula. He's an opera singer, a baritone. Not great, I always knew that, but pretty good—semifamous if you know baritones, which most people don't. He's always off working somewhere, and he's on a couple of albums, and he gives recitals, too. He's sung at Carnegie a couple of times. With other people, but still.

Meena says—Meena's my best friend here in England—Meena says that if I'm really going to write a book, then I have to start at the beginning, go straight through to the end, and not ramble all over everywhere, the way I usually do. But where does anything begin? How far back do you have to go? For all I know, maybe everything starts with me rescuing Mister Cat, when I was eight and he was just a kitten, from a bunch of boys who were going to throw him off the roof of our building to see if he'd land on his feet. Maybe it really starts with Sally and Norris getting married, or meeting each other, or getting *born*. Or maybe I ought to go back three hundred years ago, back to Tamsin and Edric Davies... and *him*.

Well, it's my book, so let's say it all starts on the April afternoon when I came home from Gaynor Junior High and found Sally in the kitchen, which was strange right away, because it was a Tuesday. Sally's a vocal coach and piano teacher—back in New York she worked with people who wanted to sing opera. A couple of her voice students were in the chorus at the Met, and I think there was one doing small parts with City Opera. She's never had anyone famous, so she always had to teach piano, too, which she didn't like nearly as much. The singers mostly lived downtown, and she went to their homes on different days, but all the piano people came to our place, and they always came on Thursday, the whole gang, one after another; she scheduled it like that on purpose, to get it over with. But *Tuesdays* Sally never got home until six at the earliest, so it was a little weird seeing her sitting at the kitchen table with her shoes off and one foot up on the step stool. She was eating a carrot, and she looked about eleven years old.

We don't look anything alike, by the way. She's tall, and she's got this absolutely devastating combination of dark hair and blue eyes, and I don't know if she's actually *beautiful*, but she's *graceful*, which I will never be in my life, that's just something I know. In the last couple of years my skin's gotten some better—because of the English climate, Sally says—and Meena's taught me stuff to do with my hair, and I'm actually developing something that's practically a shape. So there's hope for me yet, but that's not like being graceful. It doesn't bother me. I can live with it.

"They fired you," I said. "All of them, all at once. A detriment to their careers. We're going to be selling T-shirts in Columbus Circle."

Sally gave me that sideways look she never gave anyone else. She said, "Jenny. Have you been—you know—smoking that stuff?" She never would call boom or any drugs by their right names, it was always *that stuff*, and it used to drive me mad. I said, "No, I haven't," which happened to be true that afternoon. I said, "I was making a *joke*, for God's sake. I don't have to be booted to make jokes. Give me a break, all right?"

On any other day, we'd probably have gotten into a whole big fight over it, a dumb thing like that, and wound up with both of us hiding out in our rooms, too pissed and upset to eat dinner. We used to have a joke about the Gluckstein Diet—stay on it for two months and lose twenty pounds and your family. But this time Sally just put her head on one side and smiled at me, and then suddenly her eyes got huge and filled up, and she said, "Jenny, Jenny, Evan's asked me to marry him."

Well, it wasn't as if I hadn't been practicing for it. I can still close my eyes and see myself, lying in bed every night that whole year, holding Mister Cat and visualizing how she'd be when she told me, and how she'd expect *me* to be. Sometimes I'd see myself being so *sweet* and so happy for her, I'd never have gotten through it without puking; other times I thought I'd probably cry a little, and hug her, and ask if I could still call Norris "Daddy," which I haven't called him since I was three. And on the bad nights I'd plan to say something like, well, that's cool, only it doesn't matter to me one way or the other, because I'm off to Los Angeles to be a homeless person. Or a movie director, or a really famous call girl. I varied that one a lot.

But when it actually happened, I just looked at her and said, "Oh." I didn't even say it, exactly, it just came out—it wasn't a word, it wasn't

anything, but it was what came out, after all that imagining. “Oh.” The story of my life.

Sally was actually shaking. I could tell, because the table had one leg shorter than the others, and it was sort of buzzing against the floor as she sat there. She said, “I told him I’d have to check it out with you.” I could barely hear her.

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s fine.” Sally got up and came around the table and she hugged me, and now I couldn’t tell which one of us was trembling. She whispered into my hair, “Jenny, he’s a good, good man—he *is*, baby, you’d know it if you ever just *talked* to him for five minutes. He’s kind, and he’s funny, and I feel like *myself* when I’m with him. I’ve never felt that way with anybody, never, I never have.” Then she grinned at me, looking like a little kid again, and said, “Well, present company excepted, natch.” Which was a nice thing to say, but silly, too, because she knew better. We got on well enough most days, but not the way she was talking about. I only felt really like myself with Mister Cat, back then. Back before Tamsin.

Anyway, Sally kept hugging me and going on about Evan, and I just kept standing there, waiting to feel something besides numb. My breath was sort of hardening in my chest, like the asthma attacks I used to get when I was little. But I wasn’t wheezing or anything—it was more like things inside me pushing up all close together, huddling together. When I did finally manage to speak, it sounded like somebody else, somebody far away, nobody I knew. I said, “Are you going to have to go to England? With him?”

The way Sally looked at me was like that moment in a cartoon where the fox or the coyote runs straight off the cliff and doesn’t know it right away, but just keeps on running in the air. She said slowly, like a question, “Well, honey, sure, of course we are,” and then her eyes got all wet again, so now of course *she* couldn’t talk for a bit. I gave her my wad of Kleenex, because to this day she absolutely *never* has one—I don’t know how she manages. She blew her nose and grabbed hold of my shoulders and shook me a little. “Baby,” she said. “Baby, did you think I was just going to walk off and leave you? Don’t you know I wouldn’t go anywhere without you, not for Evan McHugh, not for anybody? Don’t you know that?” Her voice sounded weird, too, like a cartoon voice.

“Why can’t he just move *here*?” I mumbled it, the way I still do when I can’t not say something, but I don’t really want people to hear me,

especially the one I'm saying it to. Meena says I've practically quit doing that, but I know I haven't.

"Honey, that's where his work is," Sally said. God, I remember it used to drive me wild that she'd never talk about Evan's *job*, it always had to be his *work*. "I can do what I do anywhere, but Evan's got to be in England, in London. Besides, the boys are there, Tony and Julian, they're in *school*—"

"Well, I'm in school, too," I said. "In case you didn't notice." Mister Cat jumped down from the top of the refrigerator and stalked across the table to me with his legs all stiff, doing his Frankenstein-cat number. I hadn't seen him on the refrigerator, but Mister Cat's always *there* or *gone*, he's never anywhere in between. That's how I wanted to be, that's what I mean about being invisible. Most black cats are really a kind of red-brown underneath, if you see them in the right light, but Mister Cat's black right through, even though he's half-Siamese. "Black to the bone," my friend Marta Velez used to say. He stood up and put his paws around my neck, and I could feel him purring without a sound, the way he always does. He smelled like warm toast—dark, dark toast, when you get it out just right, just before it burns.

"You could take him with you," Sally said, really quickly, as though I didn't know it. "He'd have to wait out quarantine, but that's just a month, I think." She looked at me sideways again. She said, "You know, I had this crazy idea you might actually be glad to start a whole different life somewhere else—another country, new school, new people, new friends, new ways of doing things. I mean, let's face it, it's not as though you've been having such a great time this last year or two—"

And I just lost it right there, I have to write it exactly like that, I just went up in smoke. I didn't know it was going to happen until I heard that faraway voice screaming at her, "Yeah, well, maybe I don't have the greatest life in the world right now, but I'm *used* to it, you ever think about that? And I know I've only got a couple of friends, and they're even weirder than I am, but I know them, and I don't want to start everything all over in some shitty, snobby place where it rains all the damn time and they make you wear uniforms." Sally was trying to interrupt, and Mister Cat was looking at me and flicking his tail, the way he still does when I'm not being cool like him. I just kept going, "It's fine, it's okay, I'll move in with Marta, or Norris or somebody, I'll call Norris right now." And I grabbed up the phone, and the receiver slipped right out of my hands, they were so shaky

and sweaty. It just made me crazier. I told her, “Don’t worry about me. You go to England, that’s fine, have a nice life. Say hello to the *boys*, okay?”

And I banged the phone back down, and then I *did* head for my room, and the door was already slamming while she was still yelling something about finally getting me away from my damn druggy friends. Mister Cat ran in right after me—someday he’s going to get *nailed*, I keep telling him—and jumped up on the bed, and we just lay there for I don’t know how long, hours. The Gluckstein Diet.

I guess I must have cried a little bit, but not very much. I’m really not a big crier. Mainly I lay there with Mister Cat on my chest and started reviewing my options. That’s something Norris used to say all the time—how when you’re in a bad place and confused and not sure which way to turn, the best thing is to get yourself quiet and think really coldly about your options, your choices, even if they’re all shitty, until you can figure out which one’s the *least* shiny of the bunch. Of course, when Norris talks about options, he mostly means a better contract, or a bigger dressing room, or a first-class ticket instead of flying business class. Whoever thought artists were a lot of dreamy twits with no clue about money never met my father.

My options narrowed down in a hurry. Marta would have been great, but I knew she didn’t even have enough room for herself, with five other kids in the family. Unlike Sally, who’s an only child, and Norris, who’s got the one sister way up in Riverdale, Aunt Marcelia. *She’s* got a daughter, too, my cousin Barbara, and we were always supposed to be lifelong buddies, but the first time we met, when we were maybe two years old, we tried to beat each other to death with our toy fire engines, and it’s been downhill from there. I *still* can’t believe we’re cousins. Somebody’s lying.

So in about a minute and a half it was Norris or nobody. Something I should put in here is that I like my father. Sally always says, “That’s because you weren’t married to him,” but what’s funny is that I know Norris a lot better than she ever did. As much time as she’s spent with show people, she’s never understood, they’re *real*, they’re just not real all the *time*. Norris really likes having a daughter, he likes telling people about me, or calling me up—the way he still does now, when he’s singing in London—and saying, “Hey, kid, it’s your old man, you want to come down to the wicked city and hang out?” Only he’d be a lot happier if I were electric or electronic, something with a cord he could plug in or a remote he could turn