

Beloved children's author Louis Sachar writes for older readers, too



By Laura Stevenson

Louis Sachar, a prolific author of children's fiction, is best known for "Holes," which won both the National Book Award and the Newbery Award in the late 1990s. "Holes" is a witty, slightly postmodern tale and its treatment of social (in)justice quickly earned it a reputation as a children's book with breakthrough adult overtones, and it has remained a classic for a quarter century. Its earliest readers were also the earliest readers of Harry Potter—and now that they are pushing 40, Sachar has written them an adult novel with a nostalgic glance at the wizards of their childhoods.

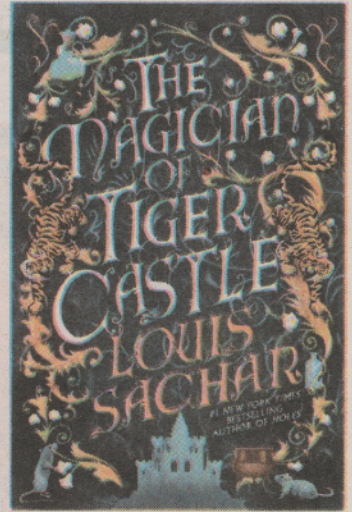
Anatole, the narrator of the tale, is not a Rowling wizard. He's an empiricist, a proto-scientist in the 1523 court of King Sandro and Queen Corinna, the rulers of Esquaveta, a European

country somewhere near France. On the side, he is also a middle-aged father figure for Princess Tullia, of whom he, unlike her parents, is deeply fond. Tullia has been betrothed to Prince Dalrympl of Oxatania since she was 3 years old. Now she is finally old enough to marry him, just in time to forge a political alliance that will save Esquaveta from financial collapse. Unfortunately, Tullia has fallen in love with Pito, the recently hired apprentice court scribe, and only weeks before the marriage of the century, she refuses to marry the prince. The king and queen throw Pito into a dungeon and call on Anatole to conjure Tullia's cooperation.

Anatole knows that success in this endeavor would save his national reputation, which is at its nadir because of his failure to prevent the country's economic collapse by transforming its desperate import of black sand into gold. Yet, he shudders at the royal order to guarantee Tullia's compliance by dosing her with poppy tears. Instead, he invents a memory potion that will make her forget that she and Pito ever met. To do this, of course, he must experiment with the potion's effect by trying it on another person—and since Pito is immured in

the dungeon and due to be executed at the pre-wedding banquet, he becomes the laboratory mouse. Thus begins Anatole's friendship with Pito, who, during the tense countdown to Tullia's wedding, turns out to be a brilliant scholar, a stoic, and an extraordinary chess player.

As is usual with Sachar's villains, Prince Dalrympl is a thoroughly disgusting human being. He looks forward to having Pito beheaded "before dessert" in front of Tullia at the wedding banquet. He also looks forward to throwing dissenters to the tiger that is one of his wedding presents to the castle. To top it off, Anatole discovers that he is the unknown aristocrat who years ago made Babette, youthful Anatole's sweetheart, clean his muddy shoes with her exquisitely-made lace—and fatally wounded her when she refused. And so, in addition to inventing a potion that will erase Tullia and Pito's memories of each other, Anatole finds he must invent one that will prevent the alliance between Tullia and Dalrympl. His success earns him a reputation as the "Greatest Wizard In All The Land," but it would be odd if all his complicated chemical and political tampering succeeded without "unintended consequences" ... like war, flight, sanctuary, arrest, and



Louis Sachar, "The Magician of Tiger Castle," Ace, 2025.

revenge.

In a recent interview, Sachar revealed that he had initially intended to write this book from the point of view of Pito and Tullia, but Anatole kept taking over the story. Finally, he decided to write the book for adults and let Anatole narrate it himself. His Anatole is a charming, witty, brilliant, cowardly, clumsy, totally bald middle-aged man, and more mysteriously, one that the reader gradually intuitively is ... er, long-lived. That's another "unintended consequence" of a potion with a story of its own. The embraided tales, while short of the philosophical and literary depth of "Holes," together create a good yarn for readers of all ages.