Four Questions with Hannah Tinti
By Courtney Watson

Author and editor Hannah Tinti, a native of Salem, Massachusetts who was recently awarded the John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize, is no stranger to the writing life. As the co-founder of One Story literary magazine and the author of the short story collection “Animal Crackers,” Tinti finds herself fully immersed in the writing process both with her own work and as an editor. In her award-winning first novel, The Good Thief, an imaginative tale that follows a young boy named Ren as he embarks on an adventure with a vibrant ensemble of larger than life characters, the author brightens the dark edges of a sometimes scary story with the humor, pathos and charm that are quickly becoming Tinti's signature style. As the first author ever selected for Coastlines new author interview feature, Tinti was happy to answer questions about how she approaches her own craft and issues that she grapples with as a writer.

Coastlines: As a writer of both a novel and a collection of short stories, how, or maybe when, do you know whether a piece you are working on is going to be a novel or a short story? For instance, did you always know that The Good Thief was going to be a novel?

Tinti: Yes, I did. I knew it was going to be a novel even before I wrote anything down. I’d come across this idea of resurrection men, and I knew right away that the concept was too big for a short story. I tried sketching out a scene, and the pacing of it was more “real time” than anything I’d done previously, and confirmed my suspicions. It was daunting, but luckily I had great characters to keep me company through the pages. I’ve just started work on a new project, and I know that it is going to be a novel too. It’s a somewhat intuitive process.

Coastlines: Good Thief contains a cast of interesting characters, from the resurrection men, to the sympathetic killer Dolly, to the loud-voiced Mrs. Sands. Where did these characters come from? Hopefully the more dangerous ones are not inspired by people you actually know, but they spring from the page so fully formed that the reader has to wonder...

Tinti: I think most writers pull their characters from their own personalities. Each person in The Good Thief is an extension of my inner self, even the most frightening ones. But I would be lying if I said that none of the characters were connected to real people. Mrs. Sands, for example, was inspired by one of my grandmothers and also an aunt, who were very tough women on the outside, hard and brutal, but actually quite sweet, if you knew the right way to approach them.

Coastlines: Regarding the setting of The Good Thief, you paid careful attention not just to place, but to time as well. In what year do you envision the events of the novel taking place, and did achieving the wholly believable (for me, anyway) setting require a lot of research?

Tinti: I imagine this happening late 1840s, early 1850s, just after the Mexican-American War. I realized after getting into the writing that I had to make a decision whether to include ‘real history’—what was happening in this country at the time—or not. Ultimately I decided against it, because I didn’t want the history of the country to be affecting my characters. So I made a kind of alternative reality of New England, with made-up names of towns and cities that represented different aspects of the area—factories, farming, fishing and whaling. None of the places they
visit exist, but the characters reference real places. I did read a number of books on the history of medical schools and about resurrection men, and I also went to the library and read old newspapers from the time, and those all gave me a feel for the way things should be. I drew on my experience of growing up in Salem Massachusetts to fill in a lot of the blanks. I also posted photographs from The Gangs of New York above my desk (to get a sense of place), along with Xeroxes of mousetrap patents and dentures and the art of Lee Bontecou (for mood) as well as Edward S. Curtis’s photographs of American Indians. It helped to look at these things whenever my eyes drifted away from the computer screen.

Coastlines: As co-founder and editor of One Story, what do you look for in a submission? Is there a certain something that speaks to you and makes you think, “Yes, this must be published?”

Tinti: I look for the quality of the writing, and also control of language. You can tell, pretty quickly, within the first paragraph, if the author is going to be able to accomplish their storytelling properly. I also look for stories that are unique—interesting jobs, or places, or characters. I want something that I can’t read anywhere else. A story that has a specific point or meaning that the author is trying to get across. I also pay attention to see if at any moment in the story I am emotionally moved. If the writer accomplishes this, I almost always take it. I’m a tough audience, though.

Courtney Watson is a journalist and writer who recently completed her MFA at Florida Atlantic University. She lives in Wellington.