

THE GOLDFINCH: A critique

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One of the many interesting aspects of tonight's novel, a book I thoroughly enjoyed reading, was the great contrast between its reception by the public, and the judgment of the book world's most esteemed critics. The book's author, Donna Tartt, who is a consistently slow writer, took nearly 11 years to write this novel, and when it was released in 2013, recipients of advance copies shared the experience on Instagram – not unlike the birth of a child.

Purely by chance, the New York City Frick Collection began exhibiting the painting of the book's title, on the same day the novel was released. This was an unplanned co-incidence, but as a result the Frick had more visitor traffic on that day than anyone could remember. The novel was on the NYTimes best seller list for seven months, and in 2014 it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The Pulitzer judges said it was "a book that stimulates the mind and touches the heart."

About the same time, the novel received from our country's most influential critics one of the most severe pans in memory. Some of the book world's most respected critics seemed to take the book's enthusiastic reception by the public as a personal insult; stating, in their scathing reviews, that what was at stake was nothing less than the future of reading! In the literary world, the highest of the high brows are considered to include the New Yorker, The New York Review of Books, and The Paris Review. These three inner sanctums, the last bastions of true literary discernment, were not happy with Tartt's book. It could even be said that their refined reaction to the novel was the literary equivalent of what John Cleese describes as being the highest level of British public alarm, "a bit cross". And Cleese adds that the last time the Brits reached this level of alarm was during the Blitz in 1940, when their tea supply nearly ran out.

James Wood, critic for the New Yorker, found the book to be at best only suited for children, saying it was stuffed with “relentless, far-fetched plotting; cloying stock characters; and an overwrought message carelessly tacked onto its end, as if a pathetic plea for seriousness.” Perhaps fearing he had not expressed his disdain clearly enough, the day after Tarrt received the Pulitzer for her book, Woods followed up by saying, “I think that the rapture with which this novel was received is further proof of the infantile nature of our literary culture.” He concluded by adding apparently the most damning criticism he could think of, saying, “is this a world in which supposed adults actually go around reading Harry Potter?” (I must confess that I am one of those “supposed” adults; although I must say that I enjoyed the earlier volumes of the Rowling series much more than the later. The story rapidly became too convoluted for me, or perhaps too “adult?”)

I will not take our time tonight to go on to the equally scathing comments of other esteemed critics, but you get the idea. The question this raises, of course, is one as old as fiction itself – namely – what makes a book worth reading, and who gets to decide? Even Dickens in his day was considered to be a “superficial” writer, and Proust simply a pretentious social climber.

To begin our discussion tonight, just a brief recap of the plot. Tarrt starts her novel with a 50-page opening which is in two parts. In the first part the book’s narrator, Theo Decker, as an adult, is holed up in an Amsterdam hotel, at a time and a place where the novel’s climatic end will also take place. Theo is looking at the newspapers, all written in Dutch, which he can’t understand. He is trying to see if his name is anywhere mentioned, amidst all the pictures of crime scenes and police cars.

Then the prelude jumps back 14 years earlier to the day when Theo’s mother died from a terrorist bomb explosion in New York’s Metropolitan Museum. Thirteen-year-old Theo, in a separate room, is spared, and in stumbling about in the smoke and debris – dazed, disoriented, he sees a dying man who gives him his ring, and whispers “Hobart and Blackwell” and tells Theo to “ring the green bell”.

Theo takes the ring, and impulsively also grabs from the burning wreckage the Fabritius Goldfinch painting, his mother's favorite work of art. It is small, only some 13" by 9" and fits easily into his bookbag. And then, in shock, he flees the museum.

For the remainder of the novel's additional 720 some pages, Theo and the Goldfish painting are now fatefully intertwined. Fourteen years of Theo's chaotic life follow.

With his mother dead and his father in parts unknown, Theo goes to live with the Barbours, the Park Avenue parents of his school classmate, Andy. The Barbours, both husband and wife, are upper East Side in heritage, attitude, and values, but they do welcome Theo as another son. Theo also manages to find the home of the man who was dying in the museum. It is part of a nearly hidden antique and furniture restoring shop in Greenwich Village. To quote the author "Through the dusty windows Theo saw Staffordshire dogs and majolica cats, dusty crystal, tarnished silver, antique chairs and a settee upholstered in sallow old brocade, an elaborate faience bird cage, miniature marble obelisks atop a marble-topped pedestal table and a pair of alabaster cockatoos. The owner is Hobie, the dying man's brother. The young red-haired flutist that had so attracted Theo on that fateful day in the museum is also there. She is Pippa, the niece of the dying man. Theo increasingly becomes enchanted with her, but she is still suffering long-term trauma from the museum explosion and the death of her uncle and is soon sent to Texas to live with relatives.

Theo's father unexpectedly appears and decides to take Theo with him back to Las Vegas where he lives with his gum-cracking, drug-taking girl friend, "Xanda". The father spends fulltime betting on the outcomes of professional sports games, bankrolled by loans from Las Vegas underground characters. And it is here in Las Vegas that Theo meets Boris, who. Like Theo, is a young teen-ager living with his father, who happens to be an abusive alcoholic.

Soon, unable to pay back the money he borrowed, Theo's father dies in a mysterious car crash; and Theo, fearing a life in a foster home, steals money from Xanda and takes a bus back to New York City; eventually finding his way back to Hobie's Greenwich Village antique shop. In the years that follow, Theo learns the antique business from Hobie and becomes the "front end" of the business. He is good at it, but unfortunately also decides he can make much more money if he represents and sells restored antiques as the originals.

But thru all these years The Goldfinch painting remains with Theo, carefully sealed in layers of paper and duct tape – or at least Theo thinks it is. By chance, Theo meets Boris again on the streets of New York. Boris has grown very rich in the shady underworld of drugs, using The Goldfinch painting, which he had stolen back in Las Vegas, as drug deal collateral. What Theo has been so carefully protecting for the last 14 years was a well-wrapped textbook.

Boris, however, has just lost the painting to another underground character. But true to their boyhood friendship, Boris hatches a plan to get the painting back for Theo. A series of frantic and chaotic scenes follow, all in Amsterdam – a man dies at Theo's hand – and the novel has come full-circle.

The story ends with the painting being returned to its museum owner for a very handsome reward, and Theo using the money to track down and buy back from their owners the fake antiques he had sold from Hobie's shop. Theo and Hobie renew their friendship, and all is well in the world, with Theo left pondering the meaning of his life.

When I initially recommended this book to the Novel Club Selection Committee, I called the book "Dickensian" – a greatly overused term today. But in the case of The Goldfinch, I think it is justified. Like the devoted Dickens fans lining the NYC docks waiting for the steamer bringing the latest installment of Little Dorrit from England, this is a novel where the term page-turner is perfectly appropriate.

Vivid prose and descriptions; happenings so expertly detailed they immerse the reader in each scene; a totally engrossing plot and story line; with a cast of utterly exotic but still convincing characters. And what could be more Dickensian than the young protagonist Theo Decker, fighting alone against the world in his constant struggle thru life. The people he meets are in turn comical, ironic, lovable, demonic, quirky, and tragic – in a word – Dickensian.

And this might be an appropriate moment to remind ourselves that Dickens, like Tartt, was in his day derided by the high-brow critics for his “superficial” work. Henry James called Dickens “the greatest of superficial novelists” and added that it was an offense to literature to place him among the really great novelists, since “he has added nothing to our understanding of human character”. To which I can only say, if that is so, he certainly can take us on an enjoyable ride while not doing so.

There are many faucets of this novel to admire, but for me one of the most powerful emotions come from the authors evocation of the great friendship between Theo and Boris, the Ukrainian outsider that Theo meets on his first day of school in Las Vegas. This thieving, drinking, drug-taking teenager leads Theo into a world of excess, but at the same time a friendship is beautifully and unforgettably captured. A friendship that is simple, yet complicated – one that certainly can only be experienced when we are young.

When else in our lives are we free enough, unformed enough – uninhibited, irrepressible and energetic enough – to bond in such a friendship, where even after years of absence, we can reasonably hope the friendship is unchanged? I was blessed with one such teen-age and then life-long friendship, and Tartt’s writing certainly evoked that experience.

In creating the hard-drinking, foulmouthed Boris, Tartt, I think does her best character creation. And in showing us this relationship in all its dizzy, unclassifiable glory, Boris is so real he leaps out at you, swearing, of course. I find it amazing that Tartt manages to make her 200 hundred pages devoted to these two teenagers, not only intriguing, but actually much more interesting than most teenagers really are.

Tartt is also intentionally very sensitive to the settings of her novel. The Goldfinch had its beginnings during her trip to Amsterdam, some 10 years before Tartt started putting words on paper for this novel. She long resisted a visit to Las Vegas for another of the novel's settings, but once there decided it should be a good fit. She saw Las Vegas as ideal to capture the feeling of rootlessness and desolation she sought, but at the same time the sweep of country that made it so different from Amsterdam and New York City. Listen to her words: "a toy town, dwindling out at desert's edge, under menacing skies. Most of the houses looked as if they had never been lived in. Others – unfinished – had raw-edged windows without glass in them: they were covered with scaffolding and grayed with blown sand, with piles of concrete and yellowing construction material out in front. The boarded-up windows gave them a blind, battered, uneven look as of a face beaten and bandaged."

And it is not only geographical settings, but also her settings using slices of American society that Tartt uses to add considerably to the impact of the plot, for example:

- the tribal rituals of the entitled Manhattan upper East Side denizens
- the Bohemian rhythms of Greenwich Village
- the surreal existence of rootless individuals living in the nearly abandoned subdivision in the open desert surrounding Las Vegas, where instead of the light pollution of NYC, there is a brilliant-black constellation-filled sky; and beneath it a ruthless drug culture and criminal underworld.

Appropriate to its title is the time and care that Tartt obviously took to craft this book, (770 pages written over 10 or 11 years, means conservatively writing on average one page every four days).

She could even be said to have a Dutch master's attention to fine detail, a Fabritious or even a Vermeer of authors – with her detailed creation in characters, in settings, in the emotions of her protagonist. And she is just as attentive to the tragic gambler father and his floozy girlfriend as she is to the brittle Park Avenue clan with their unconscious privilege and gold-plated, unaware dysfunction.

Since I have revealed myself as a Harry Potter admirer, (or at least an admirer of the earlier volumes of the seven that make up his saga), I must also comment specifically on Tarrt's attention to the atmosphere of Hobie's furniture and antique shop, "a magical place where every clock in the house said something different, and time didn't actually correspond to the standard measure, but instead meandered along at its own sedate tick-tock, obeying the pace of this antique crowded backwater, far from the factory-built, epoxy-glued version of the world." How perfectly her words recalled the wizardry shop hidden in Diagon Alley behind the Leaky Cauldron, in Harry Potter's London.

That is not to say that I found Tarrt's novel without faults. In particular, I think that some of the episodes could have used an editor's firm hand. For example, the many and lengthy descriptions of Theo's depressed and disruptive behavior while living with the Barbours after his mother's death seemed repetitive, and they unnecessarily slowed the narrative of the story. I also found that the extended philosophical musing at the end of the book a bit disjointed and for me at least, muddled. To quote just one example, when Tarrt muses on the magic of art and says:

"Between reality on the one hand; and the point where the mind strikes reality, there is a middle zone, a rainbow edge, where beauty comes into being, where two different surfaces mingle and blur and provide what life does not, and this is the space where all art exists, and all magic, and I would argue as well, all love.'

And she continues:

“And that is why I’ve chosen to write these pages as I’ve written them. For only by slipping into this middle zone, the polychrome edge between truth and untruth, is it tolerable to be here writing at all.” I’m afraid, however, that I’m not really sure what this means.

Donna Tartt is obviously a very intelligent and accomplished author, but I would suggest that she is much more effective in using her writing skills in the structure and plot of her story to explore some of the great themes of our world – how tragedy marks a young person, the obsession of young love, the nature of friendship, the power of art – than when she tries to use those skills to discuss such themes as abstract concepts.

But these are minor quibbles in a long novel which rarely appears long and is nearly always a page-turner. Filling a vast canvas can be a challenge for an author, but Tartt, I think, was fully up to the task - from her novel’s opening on Christmas Day, with Theo Decker rotting in a hotel room in Amsterdam, sweaty with fever and narcotics - his only solace a brief dream visit from his mother who had died 14 years earlier – to the novel’s last chapter when the author takes us back again to where the book started – we are continually reminded of the joys inherent in good narrative when in the hands of a master.

THE GOLDFINCH: Discussion questions

- 1) Author Tarrt said that the one quality she always looks for in a book is:
“that childhood quality of gleeful, greedy reading, can’t-get-enough-of-it ... the breathless turning of the pages.” Do you feel she succeeded?
- 2) Do the Barbour’s seem like real people? Does their behavior and conception of themselves capture an actual aspect of American society, or only the stereotypes that are often used in novels?
- 3) Many book critics make comparisons between the Goldfinch book and the characters, themes, and style of Dickens, just as I did in the critique. Does this work for you? What comparisons might you find to justify the term “Dickensian” for Tarrt’s book?
- 4) Why do you think Tarrt might have chosen her title and the recurring presence of the Goldfinch painting throughout her book? Does it’s use have any meaning other than as a convenient mechanism or framework for the structure of the nove?
- 5) One of the “big questions” that Tarrt appears to pose (and then answer), in her book is the enduring value of art to the human soul. Does she do this effectively? How would you answer this question for your own life?
- 6) Did you finish the book to find that you had a favorite character? If so – who and why?

