



Book Club Set

The Goldfinch

By Donna Tartt

About the Author

Donna Tartt is the author of the novels *The Secret History*, *The Little Friend*, and *The Goldfinch*. Her work has been published in forty languages and her third novel, *The Goldfinch*, was awarded the Carnegie Medal and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Retrieved from: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/authors/30597/donna-tartt/>

About the Book

A young New Yorker grieving his mother's death is pulled into a gritty underworld of art and wealth in this "extraordinary" and beloved Pulitzer Prize winner from the author of *The Secret History* that "connects with the heart as well as the mind" (Stephen King, *New York Times Book Review*).

Theo Decker, a 13-year-old New Yorker, miraculously survives an accident that kills his mother. Abandoned by his father, Theo is taken in by the family of a wealthy friend. Bewildered by his strange new home on Park Avenue, disturbed by schoolmates who don't know how to talk to him, and tormented above all by a longing for his mother, he clings to the one thing that reminds him of her: a small, mysteriously captivating painting that ultimately draws Theo into a wealthy and insular art community.

As an adult, Theo moves silkily between the drawing rooms of the rich and the dusty labyrinth of an antiques store where he works. He is alienated and in love — and at the center of a narrowing, ever more dangerous circle.

The Goldfinch is a mesmerizing, stay-up-all-night and tell-all-your-friends triumph, an old-fashioned story of loss and obsession, survival and self-invention. From the streets of New York to the dark corners of the art underworld, this "soaring masterpiece" examines the devastating impact of grief and the ruthless machinations of fate (Ron Charles, *Washington Post*).

Retrieved from: <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/donna-tartt/the-goldfinch/9780316055437/?lens=little-brown>

Discussion Questions

1. Donna Tartt has said that the Goldfinch painting was the "guiding spirit" of the book. How so—what do you think she meant? What—or what all—does the painting represent in the novel?

2. David Copperfield famously says in the first line of Dickens's book,

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will beheld by anybody else, these pages must show.

Because of the many comparisons made between Dickens's work and *The Goldfinch*, that same question could rightfully be asked by Theo Decker. What do you think—is Theo the "hero" of his own life? What, in fact, does it mean to be the "hero" of a novel?

3. Tartt has said that "reading's no good unless it's fun."

The one quality I look for in books (and it's very hard to find), but I love that childhood quality of gleeful, greedy reading, can't-get-enough-of-it, what's-happening-to-these-people, the breathless kind of turning of the pages. That's what I want in a book.

In other words, a good book should propel readers from page to page, in part because they care about the characters. Has Tartt accomplished that in *The Goldfinch*? Did you find yourself rapidly turning the pages to find out what happens to the characters? Does the story engage you? And do you care about the characters? If so, which ones?

4. How convincingly does Tartt write about Theo's grief and his survival guilt? Talk about the ways Theo manifests the depth of his loss and his sense of desolation?

5. What do you think of Andy's family: especially Andy himself and Mrs. Barbour? Are we meant to like the family? Is Mrs. Barbour pleased or resentful about having to take Theo in? What about the family as it appears later in the book when Theo re-enters its life? Were you surprised at Mrs. Barbour's reaction to seeing Theo again?

6. Talk about the ways in which the numerous adults at his school try—to no avail, as it turns out—to help Theo work through his grief. If you were one of the grown-ups in Theo's life, what would you do or say differently to him. Is there anything that can be said?

7. Many reviewers have remarked on Boris as the most inventive and vividly portrayed character in the book. How do you feel? Are you as taken with him as

both Theo and book reviewers are? Talk about his influence over Theo—was it for better or worse?

8. Readers are obviously meant to find Theo's father negligent and irresponsible, a reprobate. Are you able to identify any redeeming quality in him? What about his girlfriend?

9. Talk about Hobie and how Tarrt uses his wood working and restoration as a symbol of his relationship to Theo. How does Theo disappoint him...and why? Theo fears he will, or already has, become like his father. Has he?

10. Tarrt asks us to consider whether or not our world is orderly, whether events follow a pattern (which could indicate an underlying meaning), or whether everything that happens is simply random—like the explosion that killed Theo's mother. What does Theo's father believe...and what does Theo believe? Do Theo's views change by the end of the story?

11. The book also ponders beauty and art. Why is art so important to the human soul? What are its consolations...and what are its dangers? In what ways can we allow ourselves to be trapped by art or beauty? And HOW does this relate to the Goldfinch, the painting at the heart of this story— a painting of a bird chained to its perch and a painting that Theo clings to for 14 years.

12. What do you think the future holds for Theo? Why do you think Tarrt left the book's conclusion open as to whether he will end up with Pippa or Kitsy?

Author Interview

Q. What was the genesis of "The Goldfinch"? Did you have the topic first, or the characters, or the story?

A. The gestation of a novel is really a mysterious process, although with me story almost always is preceded by place, and with mood. The mood itself will suggest a story: that was true of my first two novels and it's true of this one, too. I began writing this book 20 years ago when I was in Amsterdam — some of the early parts of the book were written in Amsterdam as long ago as 1993. And then, I've lived in New York on and off since 1987. As far as I can tell, from looking back at old notebooks, the book really began with a dark Amsterdam mood, a dark New York mood — contrast between high and low, Europe and America, poverty and wealth, Upper East Side and Lower East Side. But it's really impossible to say exactly what came first, as when I first started writing I didn't actually know I was writing a novel. Many different elements combined unexpectedly in just the right way.

Q. How did the work of Carel Fabritius come to your attention? What was it about his painting that attracted you as the fulcrum of your novel?

A. I first saw "The Goldfinch" as a copy, at Christie's Amsterdam — an artist's copy from the 19th century, though I've seen the painting itself numerous times since, and I had a strong emotional connection with the image from the very first. I actually considered several other paintings for the novel, but not very seriously. Fabritius himself is an interesting and tragic figure because he was a great and extremely influential figure in his own day — pupil of Rembrandt, teacher of Vermeer, very famous in his own time, one of the greatest painters in one of the greatest eras of painting — but he died very young, and almost all his work was destroyed. So, apart from the few works that survive, we know him mostly through his influence on Vermeer.

Q. What was the writing of "The Goldfinch" like? I assume it was tricky, given the long period of time it seems to have taken. In particular, were there any lessons learned from your previous books that helped you in the new one?

A. Each book is different from all the others — I'm always starting over again from scratch. If there's any lesson I've learned, it's that writing doesn't get any easier as you go along. In fact, it tends to get harder, as you tend to set yourself harder tasks as a writer than you did when you were first starting out.

Q. Michiko Kakutani of The New York Times has referred to "The Goldfinch" as "Dickensian," a term that is also being applied to Elizabeth Gilbert's new novel, "The Signature of All Things." Are you in fact influenced by Dickens, and if so, how? And why do you think he is still so influential among novelists of the early 21st century, including you, Gilbert, John Irving and others?

A. I can't speak for other novelists and their influences, but I read a lot of Dickens when I was a kid, so much that I've internalized him a bit. There are many reasons to love Dickens, but I particularly love him because he's such a magnificently capacious and versatile writer — gripping storyteller, gorgeous stylist, with such a vibrant command of metaphor and character. As a novelist, in terms of technique, there's nothing he doesn't do well. He's got great intelligence but also has great heart. He's unruly, predictable, chaotic, exciting. And in that sense he's inexhaustibly new and inspiring, like Shakespeare. His worlds are big and all-encompassing; he always has something new and surprising to tell us.

Q. Did you research the places in your novel, including New York, Las Vegas, Amsterdam, by spending time there?

A. I spent a lot of time in all three of the cities in the book. I've lived in New York, I've visited Las Vegas several times during the writing of this book, and I've also spent a good deal of time in Amsterdam over the years. I just got back from two weeks in Amsterdam and Antwerp, actually, for the Dutch launch of "The Goldfinch," which was published first in the Netherlands, in Dutch translation.

Q. Kakutani and others have praised "The Goldfinch" for the way it builds suspense. I wonder whether you think suspense, and the developing thereof, is something of a lost art in literary fiction? Some people would say it is now the domain of commercial fiction, and that literary fiction has largely lost its desire to make the reader want to know what happens next.

A. I don't really think about it in those terms: that it belongs to one or the other category. The instant one starts trying to draw a line, or define or decree with any kind of certainty the elements of a literary novel, is exactly when one starts to simplify and overgeneralize.

Q. What were your earliest intimations that you wanted to be a writer?

A. I started writing when I was very young, in elementary school. I was always scribbling as a child, and I published my first poem when I was 13. But though I started out writing short stories and poetry, it wasn't until I began writing my first novel, when I was 19, that I really found my voice as a writer.

Q. Because you are from Mississippi, do you have any particular affinity for Southern writers? If so, who?

A. Although I've always liked Tennessee Williams, and grew to love Flannery O'Connor in college, I've not been as influenced by Southern writers as one might think. Poe is the great exception. But otherwise I didn't read many Southern writers while I was growing up, except for the occasional short story in an anthology. Nineteenth century novelists — James and Hawthorne, but also many British, French, Russian, German novelists — were mostly what I liked to read in my late teens and early 20s, when I was learning the

basics of what I do. And I think that this was probably really good for me, as I think it's extremely helpful for a writer to look outside his own tradition in learning the fundamentals of his craft. When there's a cultural (and temporal) distance, questions of craftsmanship stand out much more plainly. A young Irish writer (for instance) would be ill-advised to take Joyce as a primary model, or follow too closely in the footsteps of Joyce: He would be much more likely to come up with something interesting, or new, if he looked to something outside his own tradition in finding a voice of his own. That said, the South itself, as place, is very influential, since — in Mississippi as in Ireland — there's a very active storytelling tradition in the South, a playful and musical habit of speech, and a great reverence for the spoken word. So — I'm definitely a Southerner in this respect. I grew up in a family of wonderful storytellers, and stories and storytelling were a big part of my upbringing.

Q. What about non-Southern American writers? Any in particular who inspired or influenced you?

A. I love Melville, Poe, Fitzgerald, Henry James, Raymond Chandler, Joan Didion. Much of Hawthorne. But as I said above: British and European novelists were particularly important for me, and still are. And as anyone who read "The Secret History" will know, I also love, and was greatly influenced by, classical Greek literature: particularly Homer and the Greek tragedians.

Q. Why do you prefer to do interviews via e-mail rather than on the phone or in person? I ask in part because it's unusual, and also because I think the reader would like to know.

A. I hope you don't mind, but I express myself more clearly and concisely on the page than over the telephone ... so I think it saves time for both of us.

Q. You and other novelists (including Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides and Michael Chabon) have been the subject of a certain amount of media commentary regarding the infrequency of your publications. For example, Dwight Garner of The New York Times wrote: "Obviously, some of this is about personal style. There have always been prolific writers as well as slow-moving, blocked, gin-addled or silent ones. It's worth suggesting, though, that something more meaningful may be going on here; these long spans between books may indicate a desalinating tidal change in the place novelists occupy in our culture. Suddenly our important writers seem less like color commentators, sifting through the emotional, sexual and intellectual detritus of how we live today, and more like a mountaintop Moses, handing down the granite tablets every decade or so to a bemused and stooped populace." Could you respond?

A. Well, as an artist, change is far less important to me than what's stable and changeless. I've never been so concerned with the *aura popularis* as with the individual; my ideal is more to explore subliminal truths, private and inner truths that have to do with human nature itself. I never came at being a novelist from any sort of journalistic or

current-events angle; and this notion of the novelist's role as color commentator, checking in frequently with the public as a prerequisite for being central to the culture, seems to be more a journalist's ideal than anything I subscribe to as a writer myself.

Q. Do you feel any sort of pressure with regard to the frequency of your books?

A. One of the greatest things about being an artist of any sort is that you work on your own time, by your own rules. The way I enjoy working, and am happiest working, is by spending a lot of time on one subject and getting to know it deeply. I enjoy exploring things in depth, and I love the sense of richness that you can achieve in a text by spending a long time with it.

Q. Is there, as Hannah Rosefield suggested in Prospect, a "Cult of Donna Tartt"? If so, how is it that it sprung up? And how do you feel about the phenomenon?

A. I don't read press about myself, so I'm not the best person to talk to about any of this. My job is to write the books and not to really think too much about these other aspects.

Q. What are you working on now? A new novel? If so, can you tell our readers anything about it?

A. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid not. I've begun work on a new novel, but I don't like to talk about work in progress; too superstitious.

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Other Links and Resources

THE GOLDFINCH - Official Trailer 1:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcG06hZooHM>

Donna Tartt discusses The Goldfinch | Waterstones:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPgPixshbXo>

Why is Art Important to Society:

<https://www.eden-gallery.com/news/why-is-art-important>

How Art Influences Society:

<https://www.miicreative.com/blogs/painting/how-art-influences-society>

Grief and Bereavement Support:

<https://hospicesimcoe.ca/community-programs/grief-and-bereavement-support/>

<https://www.grievingchildren.com/>

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As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: