

Review of *The Goldfinch* by Donna Tartt

Jonnie Sandy Ferrainola - 11/17/2013

Impressive, complex, yet this character driven tale's plot is bound into the most riveting foray of human trust, love and intrigue a reader can absorb. Most will find its lucrative descriptions of places and people so tempting, putting this tome down will be impossible, except that one will need to stay employed and eat. Beginning with a look at the end, Tartt plunges us into Theo Decker's life wishing for the mother who he still idolizes with a child's love. Although she rarely leaves his mind, the author's alluring language; "she looked startled, as if she'd forgotten I was there. The white coat—flapping in the wind—added to her long-legged ibis quality, as if she were about to unfurl her wings and sail away over the park," keeps us immersed in her memory as well.

Moving swiftly into circumstances that would cripple a savvy adult, recently turned thirteen year old Theo must recognize and process an overflow of dire events after his mother, Audrey, is killed in a diabolical explosion while making an impromptu stop at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to view the Dutch master's exhibit. Theo stumbles erratically through the darkness of death and debris. A talisman given him by a dying victim, Welty; (a brother of Theo's soon-to-be soul mate, Pippa) leads him into the adult world where he literally grows up before his own eyes. The Goldfinch painted on a "dusty rectangle of board," which he sweeps up in delirium as instructed by the dying man to "take it away from there, ...Take it with you!" becomes a spiritual beacon leading Theo away from the day that changed everything. Later in his journey he finds he can't explain, "...the chain of disorder and senselessness that had followed her death."

All the while, recalling what his mother's love meant to him he holds back grief, certainly suppressing "angrief" (anger + grief) as he thinks when questioned on her loss; "Not very politely, I looked away—blindsided by a queasy, unwelcome swell of emotion. Since my mother's death, I had cried hardly at all and certainly not in front of anyone—not even at her memorial service, where people who barely knew her (and one or two who made her life Hell, such as Mathilde) were sobbing and blowing their noses all around me." This is how boys and men react to grief and Tartt nails it. The agony in this Dickensian-style character is expressed like no other and I agree with Stephen King saying in the October 13th New York Times Book Review, "Surprisingly few novelists write well of grief, but Tartt—whose language is dense, allusive and so vivid it's intoxicating—does it as well as it can be done. 'I had fallen off the map,' Theo says. 'The disorientation of being in the wrong apartment, with the wrong family, ... groggy and punch-drunk, weepy almost. ... I kept thinking *I've got to go home* and then, for the millionth time, *I can't.*'"

Who to blame? -- how to *explain* the sickening turmoil we sometimes face are overriding themes as characters come and go and come again to Theo's life. His father Larry, missing in action from family life for six months (after writing a farewell note in "go-to-hell sprawl" on Doubletree Inn stationery), turns up, apparently to take Theo to the comfort of a new home. Only the home is in Vegas; typically full of deceit and devoid of compassion, where his father's addictions are at home. It's propped in a wind beaten strip of stylish status houses in a destined-to-be ghost town since developers over estimated the

lure of the desert's edge. So vast, "the school bus didn't actually go all the way out to the edge of Canyon Shadows." A major portion of the story resides in these 200 pages of how the seedy side of Vegas lives; bad deals, good drugs, mistaken advances and shit-faced language that many-- let's say those attracted to sweet yellow birds portrayed in art-- might find revolting, yet it is the riveting part of the plot that catapults us into an underworld.

Astute language from this veteran author keeps the reader on a virtual escape to Theo's world. "A wilderness of guilt, ... gilded commodes and torchieres, and -undercutting the old-wood smell--the reek of turpentine, oil paint, and varnish," introduces us to a shop owned by Hobie, a master antique furniture restorer who befriends Theo. In one swift sentence we meet Boris Pavlikovsky, a well-traveled classmate he meets in Las Vegas, "Though he spoke English fluently enough, with a strong Australian accent, there was also a dark, slurry undercurrent of something else: a whiff of Count Dracula, or maybe it was KGB agent." Before bonding with Boris, Theo earns the nickname Potter (I'll let you keep guessing why). He shares Americanisms to educate Boris to common references like knowing that California is not a province and New England doesn't have a capital city. Their conversations include as many terms of vulgarity and disgust as two adolescents determined to be men can offer. All while endearing you to them as the loss of boyhood catapults the pair into chaos that only the recovery of the Goldfinch painting can cure.

The creation of *The Goldfinch* by Carel Fabritius in 1654 was the last of his work as he was killed that year in a gunpowder magazine explosion that decimated much of the Dutch city of Delft. Catering to the spell of this painting's undeniably charismatic bird -- which some say symbolizes death and resurrection -- the story takes a circuitous journey to the home of the art masters. Also a popular pet in Dutch homes during the 17th century, perhaps artists kept these beautiful songbirds tethered to a perch for entertainment as they created. A seemingly inhumane captivity was obviously accepted in the Golden Age of art. Possible captors were the likes of Rembrandt van Rijn, Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch; Rembrandt a teacher to Fabritius and Vermeer a student.

The Goldfinch becomes an illusion of safety and comfort Theo returns to - even if only in thought-- when the ruthlessness of life overwhelms him. We enter a realm of stolen art as Tartt aptly escalates the importance of art and its meaning as well as the danger its sometimes priceless value presents to owners be they individual collectors or museums. With a mesmerizing look we're left to consider how this important aspect of histories recorded, past and present, is being excluded from mainstream education as an elective to be learned elsewhere. What I found an interesting parallel to fine art in the story is Tartt's exploration of the misunderstood world of antique collecting (as opposed to Mr. King's expressed boredom of the subject in his review) and how restored fakes are vetted out from the originals and devoured by the wealthy for show 'n' tell. Sometimes they are naïve to the authenticity like any buyer. Learning restoration from Hobie taught Theo the craft of caretaker he found solace in while realizing, "Caring too much for objects can destroy you. Only--if you care for a thing enough, it takes on a life of its own, doesn't it? And isn't the whole point of things--beautiful things--that they connect you to some larger beauty?"

As a coming of age obstacle, dealing with the loss of a parent as a teenager is the heartbreak few can explain-- Theo shares his insider struggle to make sense of it.

Immediate loss of peer friendships and a support system was an unexpected result of his mother's death. The relationships with the ultra-wealthy Barbour family, whose son he protected from bullies at a posh Manhattan school, Hobie, Pippa and, Boris become his salvation instead of placement in foster care. Clever, well researched connections to the illicit world of addictions, art and international intrigue lead us through the deadly decisions a young man with no competent role models, succumbing silently to grief can make. Ms. Tartt gives the male adolescent years so much realism you want to pull the cover back on every secret Theo is coerced to keep.

All this in a 771 page bible-sized hardcover; unless you're progressively attached to the e-readers, then it's 3440 KB of a Kindle's memory. Do not let size deter you (because you know what they say!) from making this a must have for the library or a gift to a bibliophile who is *also* an avid reader. This rarity in literature is a trendy blend of old world and new that gives us the means of experiencing human frailties in today's culture. Donna has given us a gift in *The Goldfinch*.

#####

If you'd like to comment on this review or discuss contact me at
Callsandy222@gmail.com