
Reviews of Books

Donna Tartt. *The Goldfinch*. New York, Boston, London: Little, Brown and Company, 2013. ISBN 978-0-316-05543-7 (hardback). 771 pp.

The Goldfinch is the third novel by American author Donna Tartt, who has been highly acclaimed for her two previous novels *The Secret History* (1992) and *The Little Friend* (2002). Her long-awaited third book, *The Goldfinch*, which came out eleven years later, has immediately become an international best-seller and received the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction among other honors. For her three novels, Tartt was listed by the *Time* magazine as one of “the 100 Most Influential People in 2014”.

To review this book is quite a daunting task. First, as a Pulitzer-prize winner, it has attracted serious attention of many literary and amateur critics, which ensued in numerous reviews available online, making yet another one, such as mine, rather redundant. Second, there is no consensus among the reviewers as to the quality and exceptionality of the book, with attitudes ranging from love to hate. Finally, my own perception and viewpoint of *The Goldfinch* is equally complicated: I was absolutely thrilled at the beginning, mildly disturbed in the middle and started skipping lines at the end. However, I decided to pursue with the review, but build it as a way to find out which camp I would rather join — that of the supporters or opponents of the honorary manuscript.

The book opens with the reprint of the famous picture *The Goldfinch* by the outstanding Dutch painter C. Fabritius. Perished in the fire of 1654 with most of his other works, the same year when *Goldfinch* was executed, Fabritius managed to leave this unique masterpiece, which for centuries to come never ceases to marvel and mesmerize many with its simple radiant beauty and mysterious appeal. This picture was chosen by Donna Tartt to become an axis of her novel, qualified by critics as neo-romanticism.

The book is about love, art, love to art, and also about shattered lives, reckless choices, lies and mysteries, but first of all, as it seems to me, it is about love. Love lost, love relinquished, love betrayed, and love cherished and worshipped. The main character Theo Decker at the age of 13 loses his loving and deeply beloved mother in a terrorist explosion in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, right after he encounters the other two great loves of his life — the Fabritius’ painting *The Goldfinch* and Pippa, a girl about his age, visiting the gallery with her grandfather. His mother dies, though he does not know it then, as she was in another part of the museum at the moment. Pippa is also nowhere in sight. Instead, in the midst of chaos and carnage, smoke and fire Theo stays with her dying grandfather who pleads with him to save the masterpiece and to take his signet ring to a certain address in New York. At the end, Theo escapes from the museum in shock but with the priceless *Goldfinch* and the dead man’s ring, which will eventually lead him to the old man’s partner, an amiable antique furniture restorer Hobie, and Pippa. From now on, through all his ventures and exploits, the painting, which Theo obstinately holds on, will hover over his life and consciousness, just like his love to Pippa, forever engraved on his heart. Hobie’s place, with its quaint antiques shop, becomes Theo’s physical and spiritual sanctuary, to which he keeps on returning to grieve his losses and reclaim some normality in his life.

Through twists and turns his fate puts Theo into contact with various personalities, vibrantly described

by Tartt. These are his cheating, unreliable, unpredictable alcoholic father, his fragile, intellectual, overwhelmingly bullied school friend Andy and his family, a vicious cunning nemesis Lucius Reeve, and, most importantly, a Ukrainian immigrant Boris, another motherless teenage vagabond. The most loyal and caring in his own weird way, the young alcoholic Boris introduces Theo to stealing and swearing, drugs and alcohol, setting him on a spiraling course of self-destruction but remaining to the end his only trustful friend. From there on, Theo's life and his narration of it (the book is written from the first person, Theo's perspective) hinges on the borderline between delirium and half-sober, half-drunk haze of an addict, never sure of his actions or motives.

Without going on further into details of a story that you should read for yourself, I'd rather turn to the honors and anti-honors bestowed on the book and what they are grounded on, from my perspective. Besides the Pulitzer Prize *The Goldfinch* also got the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence for Fiction and the Malaparte Prize (Italy), and was shortlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Award (Fiction) and Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction. And it is not surprising as the book is brilliantly written and has some excerpts shining like gems that you would want to read and reread. Consider this (among many others) description of *The Goldfinch*, the picture:

It's there in the light-rinsed atmosphere, the brushstrokes he permits us to see, up close, for exactly what they are — hand worked flashes of pigment, the very passage of the bristle visible — and then, at a distance, the miracle, or the joke as Horst called it, although really it's both, the slide of transubstantiation where paint is paint and yet also feather and bone. It's a place where reality strikes the ideal, where a joke becomes serious and anything serious is a joke. The magic point where every idea and its opposite are equally true. (p. 767)

Tartt is amazing in her mastery of depiction. When she describes streets of New York, you can visualize them in every little detail and smell hotdogs of street vendors or tulips on Madison Avenue. Or you can feel the heat of the Las Vegas desert or get lost with Theo in his feverish semiconscious wondering along the canals of Amsterdam.

Art is abundant in the novel, and Tartt writes about pictures, books, antique furniture, and interior decoration in such a way that you want to see all this with your own eyes. And there is love, love in art and to art, and the author declares: adding our love to the history of people who have loved beautiful things before, we “have a small, bright, immutable part in that immortality” (p. 771). The book that has a message like this definitely stands out in the ocean of mediocre literary mass production of nowadays and is worthy of a prize.

On the other hand, I am somewhat inclined to agree with Sam Jordison, a reviewer for the *Guardian*, who demands that *The Goldfinch*, the book, should be shortlisted for the “Not-the-Booker Prize”¹. Many features of the novel do give the critic a ground for harsh criticism. The narration in many places loses its drive and drags for pages (and mind, there are 771 of them!). Some excerpts are so boring and unnecessary detailed that you'd rather scan them than read. What starts as a page-turner turns at places, especially towards the end, into a sticky mash you want to get out of as fast as possible but can't — for the sake of the story. Description of some important happenings in Theo's life (like his college life or beginning of his courtship of Kitsey) is curt or missing, while numerous “maudlin, self-indulgent, tasteless” states of drunkenness and narcotic oblivion are presented over and over again in all vivid repulsive detail. The concentration, with which Tartt describes the effect of drugs and alcohol on young men's lives does not contribute much to the quality of a Pulitzer-nominated novel. But, on the other hand, this exposure, together with

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/sep/29/goldfinch-donna-tartt-not-the-booker-plot-coincidence>

Theo's repentance at the end, when he passes an admonition to his "non-existent readers" never to pick up drugs or to "stop if you can," might secure the author another, quite a different prize, that of some anti-substance abuse foundation.

Many critics also accuse Tartt of the lack of realism in the novel and too many improbable coincidences happening in the character's life. But this is a work of fiction, after all, and we should not expect much realism from fiction. For me, realism is somewhat overstretched indeed, but not in the way the boy manages to escape with a priceless masterpiece, rather in the quantity of drugs and alcohol the teenagers consume without evident harm to their health. As for coincidences, real life is full of them and even the fate of *The Goldfinch*, the painting, surviving the fire is itself nothing but luck.

So is *The Goldfinch*, the book, "a rarity that comes along perhaps half a dozen times per decade, a smartly written literary novel that connects with the heart as well as the mind," as Stephen King described it²? Or is it, in spite of Tartt's talent, "a deeply flawed novel," as Jordison claims? My answer would be — it is in that "middle zone, the polychrome edge between truth and untruth" (p. 771). Not in that middle zone, "a rainbow edge where beauty comes into being ... the space where all art exists, and all magic" (p. 770), but in a literary middle zone — between works of beauty and those of triviality, between excellence and mediocrity.

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2 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/books/review/donna-tartts-goldfinch.html?pagewanted=all>