

The Goldfinch (Donna Tartt)

I worry about Donna Tartt. She seems to know an awful lot about illegal pharmaceuticals. Didn't crystal meth feature strongly in *The Little Friend*? And there's stuff I never heard of in *The Goldfinch*. It all smacks(!) of first hand experience. Tut, tut. The jabbering of uppers and the enchanting ease of opiates are well described and distinguished. But the endless round of appalling drug crashes made me feel rather ill myself, especially in the second half.

Cracking good book, by the way. She can write, can Tartt. Not short, though, is it? Do American authors get paid by the kilo? I guess when you only write a book every ten years you're allowed to weigh in heavy. I think her first, *The Secret History*, is my favourite to-date. I must re-read it, it's been a while. But things got darker after *The Secret History*. In that story the murder, the central theme, was stylish rather than realistic. There was something of the Agatha Christy vicarage about it. That changed emphatically in *The Little Friend* and the adherence to the down-and-dirty continues in *The Goldfinch*.

Tartt is a literary writer but does not neglect the page turning inducement of simple suspense. The basic story telling tactic is to set up a mystery or two in the reader's mind. You want to know why/what/who/how? Keep reading, bud. So, in the first few pages Tartt sets up two mysteries. Why is our hero (Theo) ill, in a hotel and expecting to find himself in the newspapers? You will have to get near the end of the book to have that one answered. But a shorter term draw is: why does Theo think he is responsible for killing his mother? The answer to that we find out fairly soon, and the answer is the pivot upon which the book turns, the art gallery explosion.

The story follows Theo from being motherless child to fatherless child to antiques fraudster via lots of inebriation and some self pity. Give him a slap, someone, and tell him to stiffen his upper lip or something. As regards the inebriation he is aided and abetted by Boris with impressive expertise for his tender years ("*Was an alcoholic from ten. I know this, yes*"). Boris is a great character, of course, though the Eastern European thing is a little clichéd. Despite all this, and despite Theo's friendship with Tom cable, it dawned on me only slowly that our hero is a bad 'un. Always willing to give the poor orphan the benefit of the doubt, me.

But then there's the unrequited love theme. That's always effective at showing the good in a shady character. But, Donna, Donna, you didn't really ladle on the pathos by having Theo first meet Pippa as an invalid in bed, did you? Quelle chutzpah! It's OK, I fell for it (but did I see a sign on the bedroom door "Love interest within"?). And "she'll never play the concert flute again"! Argh! And her physical injury just a slight limp. It wouldn't work if her legs were blown off, would it? No, I don't mean to be cynical. I loved it really. In fact, come to think of it, just leave Pippa alone, Theo, *she's mine*.

A strong theme is Theo's anxiety about the stolen painting which he has in his possession (or does he?). The two halves of the book seem disconnected until Boris reappears, now in the form of a fully matured international gangster. There follows an upbeat bit of thriller writing bringing the book to a finish at a sprint - except for the last few pages. Here Tartt allows herself to philosophise freely on the meaning of it all - life that is.

The basic fact of existence - of walking around trying to feed ourselves and find friends and whatever else we do - is catastrophe. Forget all this ridiculous 'Our Town' nonsense everyone talks: the miracle of a newborn babe, the joy of one simple blossom, Life You Are Too Wonderful To Grasp etc. For me - and I'll keep repeating it doggedly until I die, till I fall over on my ungrateful nihilistic face and am too weak to say it: better never born, than born into this cesspool. Sinkhole of hospital beds, coffins, and broken hearts. No release, no appeal, no "do-overs", no way forward but age, and no way out but death.

Holy fuck, she's grimmer than Dostoyevsky. And there is more than a spot of crime and punishment about *The Goldfinch*. But the above passage is not the ending. The last pages reveal a more upbeat message. Instead of quoting from it I will quote Steven Weinberg who was expressing a similar sentiment in terms that us nerdy scientist types empathise with more readily. Looking down from an aeroplane: "*It is very hard to realize that this is all just a tiny part of an overwhelmingly hostile universe. The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless. But if there is no solace in the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy*".

Score: 8 out of 10, bearing in mind no mortal will ever get more than 9.

