



After he filched the finch

A boy navigates life after a museum blast explodes his world

THE GOLDFINCH, by Donna Tartt. Little, Brown and Co.; 784 pp., \$30.

BY MARION WINIK
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Things would have turned out a whole lot better if she had lived," observes Theo Decker, the narrator of Donna Tartt's long-awaited third novel, "The Goldfinch." This understatement sets the tone for Theo's harrowing yet exhilarating account of the troubles that have plagued his life for the past 14 years, since the morning he and his mother made a side trip into the Metropolitan Museum of Art on their way to a disciplinary meeting at his private school.

On a quick tour of his mother's favorites, they stop to take a look at the painting she says is the first she ever loved. It is

"The Goldfinch," a 1634 masterpiece by Carel Fabritius. Theo's mother explains that it is one of very few surviving examples of the artist's work, as he was killed in an explosion of the Delft gunpowder facility that destroyed a quarter of the city, along with his studio.

Minutes later, the museum explodes in a terrorist bombing. "[T]here was a black flash, with debris sweeping and twisting around me, and a roar of hot wind slammed into me and threw me across the room. And that was the last thing I knew for a while."

When Theo awakens, he can't find his mother or the pretty girl he was just gazing at, but he does find the man he assumed was her grandfather, trapped under some debris. In a rambling conversation before he dies, the man gives Theo a ring, as well as some confusing instructions that turn out to be of critical importance.

But first, yet another example of Carel Fabritius' work is about to disappear; for reasons he can't quite explain, Theo carries "The Gold-

finch" out of the museum under his coat.

In the tradition of Tartt's earlier novels, "The Secret History" (1992) and "The Little Friend" (2002), "The Goldfinch" is a blue-black bildungsroman, where loss and lies and unscrupulous people are as much a part of growing up as — oh, you know, drugs, alcohol and television. Like its predecessors, "The Goldfinch" is long — the longest yet at 784 pages — but the suspense about what will happen to the painting, combined with the irresistibility of Theo's persona, makes it fly. It's like seeing a psychological horror movie in a plush, exquisitely decorated theater with the smartest, wittiest person you know. In this regard Tartt, like her contemporary A.M. Homes ("May We Be Forgiven"), is a pitiless, powerful and somehow unmistakably feminine breed of moral philosopher-cum-novelist, graciously showing us how comfortably appointed and hospitable hell can be.

Some of the finer appointments of "The Goldfinch" are its perfectly drawn settings — first, Park Avenue, where Theo, after his mother's death, goes to live with the society family of a classmate. Just as he is angling to get invited to the Barbours' summer vacation, his long-lost father appears and drags him off to Las Vegas. This is not the Las Vegas of casinos and neon, but of empty, indistinguishable suburbs called Pueblo Breeze, Canyon Shadows and Ghost Ridge, places where it makes perfect sense to become a teenage alcoholic. Theo's guide into afternoon oblivion is a 15-year-old kid named Boris, who is "mostly from Australia, Russia and Ukraine." "Long-haired, narrow chested, weedy and thin, he was Yul Brynner's exact opposite in most respects and yet there also was an odd familial resemblance: they had the same sly, watchful quality, amused and a bit cruel, something Mongol or Tatar in the slant of the eyes."

Boris has done it all, even had actual sex with an actual girl in a convenience store parking lot in Alaska. "I don't think she liked it very much," he confesses.

"Did you like it?" Theo wonders.

"God, yes. Although I'm telling you, I know I wasn't doing it right. I think [it] was too cramped in the car."

Tartt's characters are her greatest treasure: Hobie, Pippa, Xandra, both of Theo's parents, the Barbours, and incredible Popchik (a dog). Let them lead you like a band of pirates through the slightly-too-pumped-up action climax to the gorgeous rhetorical denouement. Though Tartt's "Goldfinch" may not make as deep an impression on history as Fabritius' "Goldfinch," it is a beautiful, painful, unexpectedly uplifting work of art.



Donna Tartt

