

REMEMBER--READ IN REVERSE ORDER (bottom to top)

Sunday, March 30, 2014 9:44 AM

Dear Betsy,

We have one more "required" conversation sandwich, so don't despair!

I am intrigued by how protective you were of Theo. I was drawn to him as I previously noted but did not have the same kind of strong connection to him as you did. I was more protective of him when he was young but grew a bit impatient with him as he aged: I caught myself on numerous occasions thinking, "Stop pining for Pippa, Stay true to Hobie, Keep away from Kitsy, and take control of your drinking and drug use...now." Not very understanding of Theo's circumstances, I know, but maybe more parental (and therefore protective) than I originally thought!

As far as the death after death after death. I was less troubled by this than you were. I was relieved by his father's demise but didn't think it would come as unexpectedly as it did, and as far as Andy and his father's drowning went, it caught me off guard for sure, especially because of the strange interaction Theo has with Mr. Balfour upon returning to New York. I expected Theo, in the spirit of Dickens, to reconnect with the entire Balfour family under some strange or tragic circumstances, but the swiftness of this story line was what surprised me, not the actual circumstances.

Interestingly, while recently reading all those novels for Newbery Club I became keenly aware of how parents are almost always done away with in children's/young adult lit in order to let the child go places and do things that wouldn't normally happen under a parent's watchful view. I know this is an important motif of literature for young people, but I am now wondering how much it occurs in novels for adults as well. I am definitely more "dialed in" to this now and saw quite clearly how it played out in *The Goldfinch*.

Thanks for once again for weighing so thoughtfully. I will be in touch soon with a third written conversation starter. If you have any ideas about what we should "discuss" next, I am very open!

Elana

PS You should read Michelle Obama's review. It's ridiculous!

Friday, March 28, 2014 3:10 PM

Dear Elana,

I've had the "what should I read now" conversation with a number of people after each of us finished *The Goldfinch* and, interestingly, everyone seems to gravitate to current non-fiction for a while. I suppose after being so immersed in Theo's world, we need to see what's been going on in our own.

While I hadn't articulated it before, I too loved reading the book more than I actually loved the book. I think it is that, from the start, I felt I knew Theo, and I loved him. It was almost as if I knew his mother and needed, for her sake, to know what and how he was doing, and be sure he'd end up ok. I felt a certain urgency each free moment I had to pick up the book and "hear" from Theo.

I still don't know if all the junk food, drugs, and criminal behavior bothered me because I felt so protective of Theo or that so much attention on the overt ways he was "acting out" his pain felt gratuitous, but if it weren't for Theo's voice telling it all, I would have quickly lost interest in reading. I was also troubled by the number of fairly implausible deaths. But again, I don't know if I experienced

them as “unbelievable” because it seems so unlikely that would all happen or I was truly disturbed by so much “going wrong” in Theo’s world.

Would I recommend that any of those elements be eliminated or scaled back? Definitely not. While reading it, I so believed that *The Goldfinch* is Theo’s true story, and while I may continue to be troubled by some of the most uncomfortable details, they are all part of the world I lived in while reading the novel, and I wouldn’t want to change any of that experience.

I hope this isn’t the end of our conversation sandwich and that we will also talk face to face about *The Goldfinch* soon.

~Betsy

Friday, March 28, 2014 8:17 AM

Dear Betsy,

On Tuesday night I finished *The Goldfinch*! And then you weren't at school on Wednesday and I moped around a bit as a result. And then yesterday I had to save my voice for teaching. Today I have full-on laryngitis. What a terrible time NOT to be able to talk to you about a book!!!

But, alas, we can email...which is convenient considering our second Conversation Sandwich is due on Monday.

When it all was said and done, I felt as if I had accomplished something noteworthy by reading the book in the span of about two weeks. Since Tuesday I have read the newspaper and some magazine articles but haven't settled on a new book to start. This is unlike me but makes sense given the fact that over these past few weeks I gave my all to Theo and his story. The book simultaneously wiped me out and energized me. I remember the same feeling when I took a Dickens class in college.

Interestingly, I loved reading the book more than I actually loved the book. Now I feel I am part of *The Goldfinch* club (thanks for inviting me in). Just this morning I noticed that Michelle Obama even read it (and reviewed it)! I felt committed to the book from the very start, and not just because of the numerous recommendations I received, but because as we discussed in our last email Theo's voice is so honest, thoughtful, and compelling. His descriptions of the grief he felt at losing his mother were some of the most beautifully crafted and deeply insightful writing I have ever read. There was foreshadowing that kept me reading and twists and turns and reoccurring characters that kept me wondering. But when I got to the end, finished that almost 800 page journey, I realized how much I could have done without. In retrospect, despite how much I liked the character of Boris, I remember my interest waning in Las Vegas with all the drug use and junk food. And then there was the New York drug use and the lengthy antique furniture descriptions and the terribly undeveloped Kitsy. And as enthralling as Boris' underworld was, I felt myself getting a little impatient in the same way I do whenever I watch a TV show or movie that has to do with the mob. I just don't get it!

I am not sure I can fully explain what I mean about liking the process of reading *The Goldfinch* more than liking the book itself, but I think it has something to do with how we left our last email conversation. You wrote about how Theo's voice sustained you even through some of the plot turns that felt less than believable. Which "turns" were you referring to? Do you think the book would have had its same impact and rhythm if it had been shorter? If you were Tarrt's editor, which parts, if any, would you have recommended she leave out or scale back?

I look forward to your reply.

Elana