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

Sunday, April 06, 2014 8:49 PM

Betsy,  
  
Such fun to read through your NYC "connections" with *The Goldfinch*.  I must have watched enough "Seinfeld" in my day because I felt as if I understood all of the reference points you mentioned.  I guess if I had to find a location in the book that felt familiar to me, it would be the Las Vegas suburb Theo lives in.  The half-constructed housing developments and the intense dry heat reminds me a bit of my home town in Southern California (San Bernardino).  Of course, Las Vegas is a entity like no other, but I do understand what it's like to live in a place that once had promise but due to demographics, drought, poor planning, and financial crisis now feels more like a ghost town.    
  
I really enjoyed your stories of the doormen.  I've seen TV and movie characters like the ones you described, but thought they were just that: characters.  I don't think I ever imagined them to be "real."  Their involvement in your boys' lives makes me think of that famous line..."it takes a village."    
  
Thanks for being such a great contributor to my Conversation Sandwiches!  Your responses have been wonderfully "meaty."  
  
Elana

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Sunday, April 06, 2014 10:36 AM

Hi Elana:

Thanks for sharing those reviews.  The Amazon one definitely channels our earlier emails!

I’ve been thinking more and more about the opening section and the chapters when Theo first returns to New York.  Like you, I’ve long been drawn to literature about places I’ve lived and often seek novels set in places I yearn to revisit.  Theo’s New York not only brought me back to the place, but also to a very particular time – when my sons were Theo’s age.     I wish I had the book in front of me to point out some particular passages and words, but I will have to rely on my recall to explain the the overall sense I had while reading was that what Theo did is what so many New Yorkers do – created a smaller world of specific “home base” places within the big city.

Theo’s recollection of his life with his mom home life contains so many elements of how my boys and I lived.  The night of the bombing, as he becomes anxious waiting for his mom to come home, Theo was looking for something and opened a kitchen drawer.  He describes the odds and ends everyone has in a “junk drawer,” and also something very specific to New Yorkers – a collection of ragged old take out menus.  Theo names the particular restaurants and, while not from the specific restaurants whose menus were jammed in between cookbooks in my apartment, they represented the same mix of Chinese, Italian, and “family” restaurants.

Later in the novel, Theo tried to recall the last meal he had with his mother and thought it might have been at “the Greek diner.”  I loved the use of “the.”  There’s a Greek diner on nearly every corner (or at least there were when my boys were Theo’s age; many of them have since been replaced with Starbucks); they all have names and pretty much same menu of decent but uninteresting food; and every New York family has the one they are loyal to and will walk an extra few blocks to go to.  That’s the one a New York kid calls “the Greek diner.”

There were other details too, like when the first time Theo went to Hobbie’s and asked Andy to"cover" for him with his parents.  When Andy asked how long he’d be gone, Theo computed the time by subway rides and transfers.  But as I wrote earlier, it is Theo’s relationship with the building employees that was so perfectly real to me.  For New York kids, the men who open the lobby door or operate the elevator and hold on to packages and dry cleaning deliveries that come during school hours and tell kids to be careful and give them to their mom right away, are kind of like uncles.  Jack, the Saturday morning doorman in my building, helped Matt with his tie as he headed off to friends’ bar mitzvahs, and a few years later Jim the night doorman told Josh that if and his friend from apartment 11A continued to sneak cigarettes on the roof, he’d have to tell me.  That Theo had unique relationships with each of his building's employee and such complete trust in them rang so true.

Theo’s school is fictional, but combines very specific elements of from a few real independent schools, and details about some of Theo’s classmates echoed some of what my sons would say after visiting  “upper east side” classmates – kids who lived like the Barbours.   Theo describes the shocked look Mrs. Barbour gave when he asked where the washing machine was and I was brought back to the day my son told me he tried to help set the table at his friend Zach’s house.  As he started to bring an extra chair from the “foyer” to the table, Zach's mom looked shot him a look and Zach explained, “that's not a chair; it’s art.”   It’s moments like those that best express how middle class kids begin to recognize how the rich are different.

I just love how Tartt offered all of these details!!

Promise me we get to do this again next year with another great book!

Betsy

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Friday, April 04, 2014 9:44 AM

Hi Betsy,  
  
I'm getting a jump start on my third Conversation Sandwich which is due on Thursday.  I definitely want to hear more about how you feel Donna Tartt captured the world of Manhattan in *The Goldfinch*.  I am always drawn to literature about places I have lived.  In fact, this idea of geographical literature was an interest of mine when I started graduate school (I was obsessed with John Steinbeck  after being immersed in the Monterey Bay/Central California locale while attending UC Santa Cruz).  The familiarity we feel when reading about a place we know can be very powerful.  Since I have not lived in New York or Las Vegas or Amsterdam, the setting didn't heighten my engagement (nor detract from it, actually), but I am sure it did so for you.  You said the descriptions of the doormen were "spot on."  What else rang true for you?  
  
On another note, I found two interesting reviews I want to share with you:  
  
The first is from An Amazon Best Book of the Month, October 2013 Review.  Here's the first line:  "It's hard to articulate just how much--and why--*The Goldfinch* held such power for me as a reader."  Doesn't that sound like me when I first wrote to you about the book?  Then the next line:  "Always a sucker for a good boy-and-his-mom story, I probably was taken in at first by the cruelly beautiful passages in which 13-year-old Theo Decker tells of the accident that killed his beloved mother and set his fate." While the wording is quite different from what you wrote, it certainly reflects how taken you were with the "boy-and-his-mom story."  I am so intrigued by how these lines echo so much of what we said in our emails.  
  
The second comes from Publisher's Weekly.  The reviewer says the following: "Some sentences are clunky (suddenly and meanwhile abound), metaphors are repetitive (Theo's mother is compared to birds three times in 10 pages), and plot points are overly coincidental (as if inspired by TV)."  I think we "conversed" about the third point (plot) in our last set of emails, but I was wondering if you remember thinking the sentences were clunky or the metaphors repetitive.  I definitely did not!  I loved the writing which, as this same reviewer admitted had "a bewitching urgency to the narration that's impossible to resist."  
  
So setting and writing style--care to comment?  
  
No rush; I have until Thursday!  
Elana