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The Secret History

By Donna Tartt



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Donna Tartt, winner of the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for her most recent novel, *The Goldfinch*, established herself as a major talent with *The Secret History*, which has become a contemporary classic.

Under the influence of their charismatic classics professor, a group of clever, eccentric misfits at an elite New England college discover a way of thinking and living that is a world away from the humdrum existence of their contemporaries. But when they go beyond the boundaries of normal morality their lives are changed profoundly and forever, and they discover how hard it can be to truly live and how easy it is to kill.



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The Secret History By Donna Tartt Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Tartt's much bruited first novel is a huge (592 pages) rambling story that is sometimes ponderous, sometimes highly entertaining. Part psychological thriller, part chronicle of debauched, wasted youth, it suffers from a basically improbable plot, a fault Tartt often redeems through the bravado of her execution. Narrator Richard Pape comes from a lower-class family and a loveless California home to the "hermetic, overheated atmosphere" of Vermont's Hampden College. Almost too easily, he is accepted into a clique of five socially sophisticated students who study Classics with an idiosyncratic, morally fraudulent professor. Despite their demanding curriculum (they quote Greek classics to each other at every opportunity) the friends spend most of their time drinking and taking pills. Finally they reveal to Richard that they accidentally killed a man during a bacchanalian frenzy; when one of their number seems ready to spill the secret, the group--now including Richard--must kill him, too. The best parts of the book occur after the second murder, when Tartt describes the effect of the death on a small community, the behavior of the victim's family and the conspirators' emotional disintegration. Here her gifts for social satire and character analysis are shown to good advantage and her writing is powerful and evocative. On the other hand, the plot's many inconsistencies, the self-indulgent, high-flown references to classic literature and the reliance on melodrama make one wish this had been a tauter, more focused novel. In the final analysis, however, readers may enjoy the pull of a mysterious, richly detailed story told by a talented writer. 75,000 first printing; BOMC and QPB selections.

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From Library Journal

This well-written first novel attempts to be several things: a psychological suspense thriller, a satire of collegiate mores and popular culture, and a philosophical bildungsroman. Supposedly brilliant students at a posh Vermont school (Bennington in thin disguise) are involved in two murders, one supposedly accidental and one deliberate. The book's many allusions, both literary and classical (the students are all classics majors studying with a professor described as both a genius and a deity) fail to provide the deeper resonance of such works as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Ultimately, it works best as a psychological thriller. Expect prepublication hype to generate interest in this book and buy accordingly. Previewed in Prepub Alert, LJ 5/1/92.

- *Charles Michaud, Turner Free Lib., Randolph, Mass.*

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From Kirkus Reviews

The Brat Pack meets The Bacchae in this precious, way-too-long, and utterly unsuspenseful town-and-gown murder tale. A bunch of ever-so-mandarin college kids in a small Vermont school are the eager epigones of an aloof classics professor, and in their exclusivity and snobbishness and eagerness to please their teacher, they are moved to try to enact Dionysian frenzies in the woods. During the only one that actually comes off, a local farmer happens upon them--and they kill him. But the death isn't ruled a murder--and might never have been if one of the gang--a cadging sybarite named Bunny Corcoran--hadn't shown signs of cracking under the secret's weight. And so he too is dispatched. The narrator, a blank-slate Californian named Richard Pape chronicles the coverup. But if you're thinking remorse-drama, conscience-masque, or even semi-trashy who'll-break-first? page-turner, forget it: This is a straight gee-whiz, first-to-have-ever-noticed college novel--Hampden College, as a body, was always strangely prone to hysteria. Whether from isolation, malice, or simple boredom, people there were far more credulous and excitable than educated people are generally thought to be, and this hermetic, overheated atmosphere made it a thriving black petri dish of

melodrama and distortion." First-novelist Tarrt goes muzzy when she has to describe human confrontations (the murder, or sex, or even the ping-ponging of fear), and is much more comfortable in transcribing aimless dorm-room paranoia or the TV shows that the malefactors anesthetize themselves with as fate ticks down. By telegraphing the murders, Tarrt wants us to be continually horrified at these kids- -while inviting us to semi-enjoy their manneristic fetishes and refined tastes. This ersatz-Fitzgerald mix of moralizing and mirror-looking (Jay McInerney shook and poured the shaker first) is very 80's--and in Tarrt's strenuous version already seems dated, formulaic. Les Nerds du Mal--and about as deep (if not nearly as involving) as a TV movie. -- Copyright ©1992, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Francis Rutland:

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