



The secret history

By Donna Tartt

First published in 1992

Genre & subject

Psychological fiction

Classical fiction

Synopsis

Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* is the original American university campus novel. When Richard Papeen joins an elite group of clever misfits at his New England college, it seems he can finally become the person he wants to be.

Author biography

Donna Tartt was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, in the Mississippi Delta, and raised in the nearby town of Grenada.

She enrolled in the University of Mississippi in 1981, and her writing caught the attention of Willie Morris while she was a freshman. Following a recommendation from Morris, Barry Hannah, then an Ole Miss Writer-in-Residence, admitted eighteen-year-old Tartt into his graduate short story course. "She was deeply literary," says Hannah. "Just a rare genius, really. A literary star."

Following the suggestion of Morris and others, she transferred to Bennington College in 1982, where she was friends with fellow students Bret Easton Ellis, Jill Eisenstadt, and Jonathan Lethem, and studying classics with Claude Fredericks. She dated Ellis for a while after sharing works in progress, *The Secret History* and *Less Than Zero* respectively.

Discussion starters

- Richard states that he ended up at Hampden College by a "trick of fate." What do you think of this statement? Do you believe in fate?
- "I suppose there is a certain crucial interval in everyone's life when character is fixed forever: for me, it was that first fall term spent at Hampden". Did you have such a "crucial interval" in your life? What/when was it?
- In the idyllic beginning it is easy to see why Richard is drawn to the group of Greek scholars. It is only after they begin to unravel that we see the sinister side of each of the characters. Do you think any one of the characters possesses true evil? Is there such a thing as "true evil," or is there something redeeming in everyone's character?

- In the beginning of the novel, Bunny's behaviour is at times endearing and at others maddening. What was your initial opinion of Bunny? Does it change as the story develops?
- Henry says to Richard, "...my life, for the most part, has been very stale and colourless. Dead, I mean. The world has always been an empty place to me. I was incapable of enjoying even the simplest things. I felt dead in everything I did.... But then it changed.... The night I killed that man". How does Henry's reaction compare to that of the others involved in the murder(s)? Do you believe he feels remorse for what he has done?
- Discuss the significance of the scene in which Henry wipes his muddy hand across his shirt after throwing dirt onto Bunny's coffin at the funeral.
- List some of the signs that foreshadowed the dark turn of events. Would you have seen all the signs that Richard initially misses? Or do you believe Richard knew all along and just refused to see the truth?
- The author states that many people didn't sympathise with Richard. Did you find him a sympathetic character?
- What do you make of Richard's unrequited love for Camilla? Do you feel that she loved him in return? Or did she use his love for her as a tool to manipulate him?
- The author mentions a quote supposedly made by George Orwell regarding Julian: "Upon meeting Julian Morrow, one has the impression that he is a man of extraordinary sympathy and warmth. But what you call his 'Asiatic Serenity' is, I think, a mask for great coldness". What is your opinion of Julian?
- While the inner circle of characters (Richard, Charles, Camilla, Henry, Francis, and the ill-fated Bunny) are the centre of this tale, those on the periphery are equally important in their own ways (Judy Poovey, Cloke Rayburn, Marion, and so on). Discuss the roles of these characters.
- What are your feelings about making the novel into a movie? Who would play the main characters if you were to cast it?
- What is the meaning of Richard's final dream?

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