

## The Goldfinch

# The Flight of a Painting of a Little Yellow Bird



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“Bad artists copy, good artists steal.” Toward the end of this novel, Hobie, the elderly painter of masterpiece copies, says this to Theo, his sorta-kinda adopted son. Is it ironic that Theo has stolen a famous painting, *The Goldfinch*? This long, convoluted, powerful novel tells the story of a young boy whose life was transformed at age 13 by this random act.

And a random bombing in the art galleries of New York’s Metropolitan Museum that killed his mother. Theo’s mom had left him to buy a present in the museum store when the bombing happened. After the blast, Theo crawls amid bodies on the floor to find one older man alive. With some of his last breaths, the man points to the painting and says, “I beg of you.” Theo interprets this as a plea to rescue it. The dying man Welty also gives the boy an elaborate ring and the name of a business in Manhattan: Hobart and Blackwell. “Ring the green bell.”

Thus begins the travels/travails of Theo. His dad, an alcoholic is alive, but in no shape to care for him. Ditto for his one surviving grandparent.

The rich family of a friend, Andy, takes him in. The Barbours live on Park Avenue, and are part of high society. Mrs. Barbour is cold and aloof. Mr Barbour acts loving but crazy, batty for sailing, and with deep psychological problems that only come to the surface later. Andy’s three siblings hate the attention that Theo receives from both parents and even the family’s cook who gives him special treats.

Eventually, after a few months, Theo makes the trip down to Greenwich Village with the ring, and meets Hobie, who owns the antique store, Hobart and Blackwell. Before long, Theo is sneaking down there—Andy reports that he’s studying at the library. Theo is drawn both to Hobie’s calm, the interesting items in the shop, including paintings, and especially Pippa, the niece of the man he watched die at the museum. Red-headed, wispy, and a talented musician, Theo immediately loves everything about Pippa. She too was at the museum that day and suffered head injuries. Both share the weightiness of grief.

Before long, Theo’s dad returns. He’s accompanied by a very unappealing girlfriend; they spirit him off to Vegas where Mr. Decker has replaced an alcohol addiction with one for drugs and gambling. In the exurbs with empty foreclosed houses surrounding him, Theo meets Boris, a big-hearted Polish/Ukrainian youth with a dad who either beats him or leaves him alone for weeks with no food or money. Boris teaches Theo how to steal food from the supermarket, because Theo, too, is mostly abandoned.

The Vegas scenes are intense, visceral, full of drugs, drinking, and surprisingly philosophical chats on philosophy and literature. All this time, Theo hides the painting behind the headboard of his bed. Things eventually turn sour in Vegas, and Theo returns to New York with the painting that has become a major burden for him. If he returns it, will he go to jail? What will people think of him for stealing it?

After college, he enters the antique business with Hobie, reconnects with the Barbours—now much diminished—and continues with drugs and drinking and worrying about *The Goldfinch*. Amazingly, after years he runs into Boris again, and they leave Theo’s engagement party to fly to Holland on a special

recovery mission.

This novel is intense, violent at times, visceral, but also philosophical. Not exactly a beach read but one that surprises you often in its ricocheting journey through the worlds of art, beautiful objects, and especially family.

A novel of similar scope and psychological insight though not on the same topic is David Mitchell's *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob De Zoet* set in Japan in 1799.

Posted by Dory L. on March 25, 2014

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