*The Goldfinch*

Donna Tartt, [*The Goldfinch*](http://www.amazon.com/The-Goldfinch-Pulitzer-National-Finalists/dp/0316055433)(New York: Little, Brown, 2013).

Summary:

Eleven years after Donna Tartt’s second novel, *The Little Friend,* she published *The Goldfinch*, a novel of Russian scope and Dickensian characters that won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. This first-person narrative is told by Theo Decker, who, at age thirteen, visits the Metropolitan Museum of Art with his mother to see her favorite painting, Carel Fabritius’ *The Goldfinch*. A terrorist bombing kills his mother, and Theo spends the next several years living with his best friend’s family on Park Avenue, his absent father in Las Vegas, and finally with a man named Hobie who runs an antique furniture repairing business back in New York City. Theo’s great secret, however, is that he stole the *Goldfinch* painting in the aftermath of the bombing. The painting comes with him as he grows from a child to an adult and in many ways contributes to (or detracts from, you could argue) that transition. Tartt’s story includes interludes involving crime syndicates, prescription drug addiction, posttraumatic stress disorder, counterfeit antiques, falling in love, ruminations on the positive and negative aspects of fate, and murder.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Fate. The novel asks whether our lives are predetermined.
  + Part I of the novel begins with a quote from Albert Camus: “The absurd does not liberate; it binds.”
  + Theo says, “Maybe I only see a pattern because I’ve been staring too long. But then again, to paraphrase Boris, maybe I see a pattern because it’s there.”
* Friendship. Theo engages with various friends throughout his life: Boris, Hobie, Andy, Pippa, and Kitsey.
* Suffering. Each character experiences significant suffering, suffering that could’ve been prevented but also suffering that could not. “[N]o one will ever, ever be able to persuade me that life is some awesome, rewarding treat. Because, here’s the truth: life is catastrophe.”
* *The Goldfinch*. Theo notes many similarities between himself, the painter, and the goldfinch. He also credits the painting with his identity. “[I]f our secrets define us, as opposed to the face we show the world: then the painting was the secret that raised me above the surface of life and enabled me to know who I am.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Theo steal the painting and refuse to give it up?
2. Are humans tethered to fate as the goldfinch is to its perch? Consider one of Boris’ proposals near the end of the novel: “What if all your actions and choices, good or bad, make no difference to God? What if the pattern is pre-set?...What if our badness and mistakes are the very thing that set our fate and bring us round to the good?”
3. Many call this novel a *Bildungsroman*. How and why might one argue against that?
4. Is Theo’s friendship with Boris helpful?
5. With regard to his mother, Theo says, “Things would have turned our better if she had lived.” Is this true?