



Douglas County Libraries

## Theo of Golden

by Allen Levi

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## Discussion Questions

1. What was your overall impression of the book? Strengths and weaknesses?
2. Who was your favorite character? Why?
3. What was your favorite scene in the book? Why?
4. If there were a sequel to the book, focusing on one of the characters other than Theo, which character would you want it to be?
5. Of all the friendships that Theo forged in the story, which interested you most as a reader? Which revealed most to you about Theo?
6. Theo insisted on personal presence and participation when he carried out his bestowals. Mrs. Gidley, you might recall, suggested at one point that he do them all at one time with a bit of fanfare. She was thinking efficiency and optimization. In his conversation with Katherine (the news reporter), he further shared some of his thoughts on generosity. Why do you think Theo was so insistent on doing it the way he did, in person, in secret, one at a time? What did that tell us about him and his perspective on giving?
7. Identify instances of Theo's attentiveness. (For example, his listening to Kendrick and taking note of Lamisha's birthday; his careful selection of Christmas gifts for his friends, indicative that he had paid attention to things they offhandedly mentioned in conversation; his notice of the picture of Gammy, Asher, and Pearce —when they were young boys — at the Thanksgiving supper; others?) How do we develop a habit of attentiveness? Are their benefits or pleasures that come with being attentive and present?
8. Did you notice that, with only a couple of very minor mentions, technology has no place in the story. Could Theo have engaged with people he met at the Promenade if he had used texting, Zoom or email? Would his invitations have been as well-received, or as intriguing, if they had been sent in some form other than handwritten letters?
9. Theo saw in Minnette's portrait and spoke to Asher of something he called "good sadness." He also made a statement that "sadness might be many things, but it is rarely stupid. The good sadness, I think, is all trying to tell us something very important." (pp.46, 47, 223-225) Discuss that phrase, and Theo's statement to Minnette. What do you think Theo meant? What role did 'good sadness' play in Theo's life? And, if we could ask Theo what 'bad sadness' is, what might he say?
10. In his description of Theo, Father Lundy said, "Theo was a playful man in the best sense of that word. But it seems more and more certain to me that his lightheartedness was deadly serious and steeped in purpose. It was one more way in which he spoke to us the language of another place." (pp.370, 71) Identify occasions when Theo was 'playful' (e.g. Tony's birthday, the bike ride with Ellen, reading with Lamisha, others) and discuss what Father Lundy meant in his eulogy.

11. How did Theo cultivate a love of beauty in his own life, whether unintentionally as a boy or intentionally as a man? Identify moments when beauty (through music, nature, art) inspired him in some way. Have you had moments like that in your life? How can we encourage a sense of delight and love for beauty in the lives of our children?
12. Did the story of Theo's life challenge or inspire you to change in any way? How? (And if it did, might I say in his behalf, thank you. That is the highest praise you could possibly pay him.)

## Author Interview

# How a nearly 70-year-old debut novelist published 2025's breakout hit

With virtually no marketing or social media presence, “Theo of Golden” became a blockbuster.

by Sophia Nguyen

This past spring, word started to percolate in the publishing industry about “the white book” — a self-published novel with a stark, bright cover that was fast becoming one of the biggest sellers of the year. No one knew exactly how. “Theo of Golden” had limited distribution, and virtually no publicity or marketing campaign. Its author, Allen Levi, lived alone on 1,600 acres of family land — mostly pine trees — in Georgia, where he kept honeybees and a blog, and posted homespun music videos. That was about the extent of his social media footprint. “I’m writing a book, and it’s making me crazy,” Levi, 69, sang in one clip. “I’m writing a book, and I’m losing my mind.”

The novel tells the story of an elderly stranger, Theo, who shows up one day in the small city of Golden. Struck by the pencil portraits displayed in a local coffee shop, he buys the whole lot, aiming to give all 92 of them to their subjects. In doing so, he quietly changes his newfound community. Though Levi, in conversation, is more likely to bring up Wendell Berry or David Brooks, his narrative recalls writers such as Paulo Coelho, Matt Haig and Mitch Albom; it has a soft-lit, allegorical quality, designed to inspire awe at life’s forking paths. And yet, he also put in a late-breaking plot turn so brutal, anguished readers grill him about it at all public appearances.

“I didn’t want someone to misinterpret the story as something that’s naive or purely sentimental,” Levi said, when we spoke over Zoom this month. The author’s own path has taken a few twists. He practiced law in Columbus, Georgia, for 13 years, went abroad to the University of Edinburgh to study Scottish fiction and then became a full-time singer-songwriter, performing at corporate events and for Young Life, a Christian youth organization. For a couple of decades, the Atlanta airport was functionally his second home. Around 2010, tiring of life on the road, he ramped down his tour schedule to spend more time with his sick brother and aging father, a forester. For a time, he even returned to the law, briefly serving as a probate judge in Harris County. But when his term ended, “I didn’t know what was next for me,” Levi said. Then one morning, he was waiting in line at his usual cafe, taking in the portraits on display, and thought: *Wouldn’t it be fun if someone bought all of them?*

He purchased a handful, and “over the course of the next few days and weeks, I would look at them and imagine what stories they might be trying to tell me,” Levi said. These eventually inspired the characters of Kendrick, a custodian at the nearby university; Simone, a cello student; and Ellen, an

unhoused woman who often bicycles around the public square. Gradually, Theo's encounters spark deep friendships and shed light on his tragic past — including his reasons for coming to Golden.

With songwriting, words had been easier to wrestle to the mat, covering up any imperfections with music. Levi had no plan to publish the manuscript; finishing it felt like accomplishment enough. Then his college buddies, a tight-knit group of six who reunited annually to reminisce and pray together, talked him into sharing the draft. (Working title: "There Was an Old Man.") "We said, 'You've got to do something with this,'" said one of them, Ben May. "'Don't put it back in the drawer, and don't just pat yourself on the back.'"

Levi enlisted the help of his niece Aron Ritchie, then working as a project manager in Alabama, to shepherd "Theo" to publication in October 2023. Though she had thrown herself into researching the ins and outs of independent publishing, she took a low-fi approach to publicity. She compiled a spreadsheet of Levi's sprawling network from the various chapters of his life — childhood, college, music, his volunteer work reading to elementary-schoolers and working at a foster home — asking contacts to spread the word. At night, after putting her kids to bed, she posted to Facebook groups from her phone, trying to reach book clubs across the country. ("Facebook is *not* dead," Ritchie said.) If they were within driving distance, Levi drove to visit in person, meeting with 10 or 20 people at a time. Every few weeks, she prepped him a call sheet titled "Good souls to connect with": readers who had emailed Levi touching thank-you notes, or who wanted to teach the book in a course, or who shared it with their cancer support group.

"Theo of Golden" sold a respectable 3,000 copies by the end of 2023. In 2024: 25,000. Ritchie predicted that sales would drop in early 2025 — "October, November, December: Those are your biggest months" — but instead, they remained steady. The spring brought a surge whose cause she still can't pinpoint, and suddenly they were selling a thousand copies a day. "We'll never know, this side of heaven, how all this connected," she said. Maybe it was a longtime friend of Levi's who worked in athletics at the University of Alabama: "There are a lot of crazy Alabama football fans," May suggested. Maybe it was an enthusiast turned pal in Macon, Georgia, who bought so many books, practically by the boxful, that Levi joked he must be flinging them out his car window.

The book's initial readership has been concentrated in the South and largely came from Facebook, "which is an older demographic," noted Kate Nintzel, editorial director at Atria Books, the Simon & Schuster imprint that acquired "Theo" in October. "And I think that was important to the discovery and to the way the book reads and the way it connects."

Levi's journey to publication "has a purity to it," said Atria Books editor Sean deLone, who described the pitching process for "Theo" as highly competitive: "Everyone around the business knew it was special." Dovetailing with its author's persona, the book's message — of outreach to strangers, of small acts of generosity, of chance encounters unaided (and unhindered) by technology — turned audiences into evangelists.

That message becomes overtly religious toward the end of the novel. Though Levi says he did not set out to write a Christian novel — in fact, when a Christian publisher approached him about “Theo,” he turned it down — his faith and his fiction are bound together. (Besides, he said, quoting Flannery O’Connor, the South remains a “Christ-haunted” region.) The hero of his story, Theo, “wanted people to experience the love of God and to see the image of God in themselves — hence the portraits,” Levi said. “But for a person who doesn’t share that faith perspective, they can still read it as a story about kindness, and I think their hearts can be well served by it.”

As publishers began making offers, Ritchie ran the numbers and told her uncle that he stood to make more money if he stayed independent: “But what he was willing to sacrifice for was the distribution.” Levi had a sense of mission, she said: “If someone reads something that he writes, and it has an impact on them and in his mind pushes them closer to encountering his God, then to him that’s the win.”

The next part of that mission — a sequel focused on erudite, eccentric Ellen — has been “extremely difficult, because there is expectation,” Levi said. It’s also difficult, he added, because something catastrophically awful must have happened to the character. It’s the flip side of the challenge he faced with writing “Theo”: This time, the sadness “just feels almost *oppressive*,” he said, with a chuckle. “And so I’m figuring out how to temper that.”

## **Author Biography**

Allen grew up in Columbus, Georgia, attended University of Georgia for degrees in English and Law, and worked as an attorney from 1980 to 1990. He left law practice for two years in 1990, moved to Scotland, and, while there, received a degree in Scottish fiction from the University of Edinburgh. He returned home, resumed law practice for three years, and finally ventured into vocational music in 1996.

Since then, he has worked as a traveling musician, sharing his whimsical, thought-provoking brand of songwriting and storytelling to audiences across the U.S. He has over twenty albums to his credit, as well as hundreds of other unpublished songs.

In 2014, he published *The Last Sweet Mile*, a memoir of the close friendship he shared with his brother, Gary, who died in 2012. He also wrote and published a children's book, *Oliviatown*, adapted from a song of the same title. Allen published his first novel, *Theo of Golden*, in 2023.

When not reading or writing Allen cares for family acreage where he lives with his father, tries to spend time with family nearby, keeps a full schedule of involvement in the small community around him, and dreams of being an artist someday.

<https://www.allenlevi.com/about>