

The Secret History: by Donna Tartt

[B2]

L'autrice americana ha esordito con questo thriller psicologico in cui un gruppo di giovani universitari si imbarca in un gioco pericoloso ai limiti della moralità. Un romanzo coinvolgente che combina intrattenimento e riflessione filosofica.

Born in 1963 in Greenwood, Mississippi in the US, Donna Tartt was an avid reader and writer from an early age. She went to the University of Mississippi, but in 1982, transferred to Bennington College, Vermont, where she studied classics. Tartt's time at Bennington provided the [backdrop](#) to The Secret History. Four [clever](#) and eccentric college students studying classics at an elite college kill the fifth member of their class, Bunny.

DEFYING GENRE

This is not a spoiler: the narrator, Richard Papen, says as much in the opening lines of the prologue. But then, this book is not a classic crime story. More of a '[whydunnit](#)' than a [whodunnit](#), the first half of the novel deals with the painful circumstances that lead up to Bunny's murder and the second half explores the even more devastating consequences.

FITTING IN

When Richard Papen transfers from California to Hampden College, Vermont, he is something of an outsider. He feels himself to be at a disadvantage socially, economically and intellectually and therefore determines [to enrol](#) in Professor Julian Morrow's classics class. The five students already in the group [strike Richard as](#) being incredibly sophisticated and he [yearns](#) to join them. However, once accepted into the group, Richard is rarely able to be himself and often lies about his [background](#), pretending to be as wealthy and well-educated as the rest of them. He feels a hypocritical [disdain](#) for anyone with a similar [background](#) to his own.

UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

Richard's romantic, idealised view of his classmates makes him an [unreliable](#) narrator. The reader is frequently left wondering whether his friends Henry, Francis, Camilla and Charles are refined and brilliant intellectuals who get

into trouble because of [a twist of fate](#), victims of a Greek tragedy; or whether they are [spoilt](#), egocentric psychopaths who commit a horrendous act while under the effects of drugs and alcohol, and then commit a second crime to save themselves.

TRUTH AND LIES

Throughout the novel, we [catch glimpses](#) of the other characters' true natures: Henry is manipulative and cold-hearted, Charles is almost certainly sexually and physically abusing his twin sister, and Camilla herself rarely demonstrates any [warmth](#) or emotion. Nevertheless, Richard loves them all. The question is, should we. "Henry had become angry when the twins were voicing moral objections at the idea of killing Bunny. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he snapped. 'But how,' said Charles, who was close to tears, 'how can you possibly justify cold-blooded murder?' Henry lit a cigarette. 'I prefer to think of it,' he had said, 'as a redistribution of matter.'" "Henry si era infuriato con i gemelli quando loro gli avevano fatto obiezioni di ordine morale dinanzi all'idea di uccidere Bunny. «Non siate ridicoli» aveva tagliato corto.«Ma come puoi giustificare» aveva ribattuto Charles, quasi piangendo «un assassinio a sangue freddo?». Henry, dopo aver acceso una sigaretta, aveva risposto: «Preferisco pensare a ciò come a una redistribuzione di materia».".

BUNNY

Seen through Richard's eyes, only Bunny's negative aspects [stand out](#) in [loathsome](#) clarity. Overweight, with a loud, [braying](#) laugh and [beery breath](#), he makes [brash](#) homophobic and racist comments, steals food from other students and relies on his friends to pay for his [lavish](#) lifestyle. When the murder takes place, it comes as something of a [relief](#), even for the reader. "His position in the group had started to slip at roughly the same time I'd arrived; his resentment was of the most petty and childish sort, and doubtless would never have surfaced had he not been in such a paranoid state, unable to distinguish his enemies from his friends. By stages I grew to abhor him. Ruthless as a gun dog, he picked up with rapid and unflagging instinct the traces of everything in the world I was most insecure about, all the things I was in most agony to hide." "Cominciato a perdere terreno all'interno del gruppo, proprio in corrispondenza del mio arrivo; ma il suo rancore, meschino e infantile, non sarebbe mai affiorato alla superficie senza il particolare stato di paranoia in cui si trovava, incapace di distinguere amici da nemici. Gradatamente imparai a detestarlo. Spietato come un cane da caccia, scovava, con rapido e instancabile istinto, le tracce di tutto ciò che al mondo mi rendeva più insicuro, tutte le cose che con più ansia cercavo di nascondere.".

REMORSE

After Bunny's death, this all changes. Although Richard comments [sneeringly](#) on the [outburst](#) of hysterical [grief](#) amongst students and faculty on the college campus, he himself begins to feel [fleetingpangs](#) of [remorse](#). While making coffee at Camilla and Charles' house he discovers a [jar](#) of Horlick's malted milk that only Bunny ever drank and the [label](#) "[stares] at him like a reproach." He mentions it to Camilla: "'You know,' I said, 'you ought to throw away that [jar](#) of malted milk you have in there.' It was a moment before she answered. 'I know,' she said. 'In the closet there's a scarf he left the last time he was here. I keep running across it. It still smells like him.'" "«Sai,» le dissi «dovresti buttar via quel barattolo di latte e malto che tieni lì dentro. Rispose dopo un momento. «Lo so. E nell'armadio c'è una sciarpa che ha lasciato l'ultima volta. Continuo a ritrovarmela davanti; ha ancora il suo odore»".

CONSEQUENCES

Richard and Camilla might be able to push memories of Bunny to the backs of [cupboards](#) and the backs of their minds temporarily, but the reader can't help but feel a growing sympathy for their victim, as the better side of his nature and the tragedy of his absence only now begin [to assert themselves](#). Whether or not the police can [pin them down](#) for Bunny's murder, suppressed [guilt](#) and fear of discovery are a crushing [burden](#) which affects each of the characters in a profound and devastating way. Donna Lousie Tartt was only twenty-nine when *The Secret History* was published. *Vanity Fair* magazine described her as a precocious literary genius and the book soon established itself as a modern classic. It brought her both acclaim and financial success, although attempts to film the book have so far been unsuccessful. Tartt's second novel, *The Little Friend*, was published ten years later in 2002. Readers had to wait until 2013 for her third novel, *The [Goldfinch](#)*, which was adapted into a film of the same name in 2019.

Glossary

- **whydunnit** = perché l'ha fatto
- **remorse** = rimorso
- **jar** = vasetto
- **burden** = carico
- **loathsome** = ripugnante
- **braying** = raglio
- **brash** = sfacciati
- **grief** = dolore
- **backdrop** = sfondo, scenario
- **lavish** = sontuoso
- **fleeting** = fugaci
- **clever** = intelligenti
- **pangs** = fitte, strette
- **cupboards** = credenze
- **to enrol** = immatricolarsi
- **a twist of fate** = un giro del destino
- **spoilt** = viziati
- **to assert themselves** = affermarsi
- **Goldfinch** = cardellino
- **whodunnit** = poliziesco (lett. chi l'ha fatto)
- **yearns** = desiderare fare
- **disdain** = disprezzo
- **catch glimpses** = intravedere
- **stand out** = risaltare
- **sneeringly** = beffardamente
- **outburst** = esplosione
- **strike Richard as** = sembrare a
- **background** = passato
- **unreliable** = inaffidabile
- **warmth** = calore
- **beery breath** = alito da birra
- **relief** = sollievo
- **label** = etichetta
- **pin them down** = individuare
- **guilt** = colpa