

Maureen Langloss

Answering the Call of *The Goldfinch*



The week *The Goldfinch* arrived to bookstores in October, its catchy title seemed glued to the wind. It whistled through the air, into the nooks and crannies. *The Goldfinch. The Goldfinch. The Goldfinch.* Have you read it? Have you bought it? What do you think? Have you made it to the explosion? To the part when the alcoholic dad returns? That little bird has over 3,000 reviews on Amazon and over 30,000 ratings on *Goodreads*. This, despite the fact that it's nearly 800 pages long.

You certainly do not need another person to review it for you. But, instead, I'd like to share where the book took me, in the hopes that it might lead you there too. I'm writing to convince you to read its non-fiction sister along with it: *To the End of June: The Intimate Life of American Foster Care* by Cris Beam. Donna Tartt's fascinating orphan character will connect you emotionally to the topic of neglected and abused children, and Beam's stories of real-life foster kids will make you want to do something about it.

In case you haven't read it, *The Goldfinch* is a novel about Theo Decker, an adolescent boy whose mother dies in a fictional bombing of the Metropolitan Museum and whose abusive, addict father steps in to take her place. In the confusion after the bombing, Theo manages to make off with [The Goldfinch](#), a priceless Dutch painting by Carel Fabritius. He becomes the painting's flawed guardian, just as a variety of inadequate grown-ups become his.

I have never loved and hated a book so much as *The Goldfinch*. Simply riveted, I devoured all those hundreds of pages in a few days. The characters were so absorbing that they became part of my own life. I found myself telling people, "Oh that reminds me of this friend I have whose mother died..." And then I'd trail off, realizing that my friend was actually a character in a book. The experience reminded me of the week my husband and I stayed up late, binge-watching episode after episode of the TV series "24." In the mornings, out on the real streets of New York City, I would inadvertently check my corners. My heart would race as I searched for snipers and listened to footsteps behind me. Back then, I was living inside "24." And now, three months after reading *The Goldfinch*, I still find myself worrying about Theo Decker. He still steals into my dreams.

My deep attachment to Theo is also why I hated *The Goldfinch*. Things kept getting worse and worse for this character I cared so much about. He kept making bad choices. He kept using more drugs. He kept hanging on to that priceless piece of art. He kept lying and committing crimes. And wasn't it enough that his mother died, did his drugged-out dad have to swindle him and introduce him to a life of addiction too? When person after person did a bad job taking care of him or treated him badly, after he seemed more and more alone

in the world, after he fell lower and lower into a life of crime, I began to think, enough already! I can't take it! This book isn't credible anymore.

Or was it? As I continued to read (because I couldn't stop), I had the distinct, nagging sense of *déjà vu*. Eventually I realized *The Goldfinch* was taking me back to a time I'd mostly pushed out of my mind – a time I spent as a recent college grad in Chile, teaching “creative writing” to adolescent girls in a group home. The girls were, like Theo Decker, survivors of abuse, abandonment and neglect. Although an energetic and caring nun ran the orphanage, she was underfunded and understaffed. The house was stiflingly dark, with bare, cold floors and hard, upright furniture. It had a tiny garden, devoid of any grass or living thing. There was no inherent coziness there, and yet the girls brought intense energy and warmth to the space.

Writing was a challenge for most of them, but many relished the opportunity to tell their stories aloud to someone who cared to listen and write them down. I was soon privy to life stories not so dissimilar to Theo Decker's, stories that also went from bad to worse, that sometimes included sexual abuse and prostitution.

I had many moments of disbelief inside that orphanage. I'd convince myself my Spanish was failing; I couldn't possibly be understanding the girls correctly. My brain would seize, and I would stop listening. There were places my mind could not bear to go.

The girls also felt the urge to escape their reality. Their favorite exercise was to close their eyes while I took them on mental trips – guided meditations through fields of wild flowers, over oceans, beside fairies and cats that could talk. I did these exercises to help them unlock their own imaginary stories. But for the girls, they were much more than this. They were an opportunity to ditch the stern orphanage walls and the haunting memories.

With my mind retracing those walls, still dreaming of Theo Decker, I happened to come across Cris Beam's book, *To the End of June*. I knew, the moment I saw it, that I had to read it, that I had to dive headfirst into the place where my mind shuts down.

It's no wonder that the *New York Times* placed *To the End of June* (along with *The Goldfinch*) on its list of 100 notable books of 2013. Beam's narrative is rich and multi-faceted, because she has experienced child neglect and the foster care system from so many different directions. Herself the daughter of a troubled family, she left home at the age of 14 to fend for herself. Like Theo, she was able to evade child services. Then, in her late twenties, she became a foster mother, when one of her teenage students would have otherwise been sent to juvenile hall. She has since spent years interviewing other foster kids, parents and caseworkers to try to understand why the foster care system is failing.



Her explanations are layered with historical context, legal background and multiple perspectives. While she is critical of the child welfare system, she expresses great understanding for the many foibles of the individuals within it. The stories she tells about these families are, like Donna Tartt's fictionalized version, incredibly moving and impossible to put down.

Beam focuses on teenagers in the system, because they are in the worst of all situations. She explains that they generally come from economically-challenged biological families; families with means are usually able to avoid the purview of a family services machine that would take kids away in the first place. Teenagers are the least likely to be adopted. And the emotional damage that they have already suffered often makes them behave in ways that are difficult to love. Teenagers who have been abused or neglected make horrible choices, just like Tartt's imaginary character. They choose the wrong friends. They break their foster family rules. They turn to alcohol and drugs. They lie. And, unfortunately, this behavior gets them kicked out of foster homes and group homes again and again. Even worse, foster kids who are never adopted will "age out" of the system and be abandoned to fend for themselves before they are anywhere near ready. As a result, many become homeless, turn to crime or land in prison as adults.

Beam repeatedly explains that what these kids really need is someone to stay with them, even if the kids fail. And to stay into adulthood. She quotes one foster child as explaining, "You gotta rock with the kid, all the way." What made *The Goldfinch* bearable – and beautiful – for me was the wonderful character of Hobie, an antiques restorer, who takes Theo under his wing, flaws and all. Amidst the Dickensian bleakness, Hobie is the one shining star, the center of hope. And while he fails Theo in a variety of ways, he mostly "rocks" with him, even when Theo disappoints and hurts him. It turns out that this may just be the most unbelievable aspect of Tartt's novel – not how hard Theo's life is, but how good!

Beam is also able to find light in the darkness. She follows a wonderful foster mother named Mary who takes in young adults and offers them a place to heal and grow well into their twenties. Beam studies a foster care agency in Coney Island called "You Gotta Believe," which works creatively to find adoptive homes, not merely foster homes, for the children it serves. Rather than appealing to strangers, the agency seeks out people who already have some connection to the child – a teacher, a neighbor or a relative. Beam explains how there has been a recent shift toward preventive care – toward giving biological parents the training and assistance they need to keep their own kids.

Beam also tells the poignant story of a foster child who, when struck by a car, doesn't have a single adult to bring her a change of clothes and pick her up from the hospital. Her foster mother cannot be bothered, and her caseworker is inept. The only person who does show up is another foster child, a kid who'd shared the same foster family for a brief stint. Although it was very disturbing that this young woman had no adult to turn to, it was also inspiring that another foster child understood her situation and met her need. It made me think of the wonderful, nuanced bond that Theo Decker forges with his friend Boris, also a victim of

child neglect and abuse. Boris is one of my all-time favorite characters in a novel – hilarious, mysterious, clever, imperfect and loveable. He, too, is the only one to come to his troubled friend's aid.

Both Tarrt and Beam beautifully capture the profound human need to forge connections, no matter with whom. My most lasting memory of the group home in Chile was how physical the girls were with me. They wanted to hug me and touch me and sit as close as possible. They craved physical contact so deeply that they would take it even from me, a virtual stranger. When it was time for me to leave after our classes, some would cling to me the way my two year old did at pre-school drop-off. Sadly, I was not one of those people who stay. I was just another adult who abandoned them to go back to my own life, full of family and loved ones.

Reading *The Goldfinch* and *To the End of June* made me consider what my responsibility to these forgotten children is now. I hope these books stir your own sense of obligation to children in need. One of my favorite things about reading is that it exposes us to the inner workings of another's reality. I deeply believe that books can help bring about social change. The popularity of *The Goldfinch* is an opportunity. It has captivated so many, and perhaps it can take us all a step further.

I have known many people who have struggled for years to have their own child, to adopt a baby. But I have only met one person who took in a foster child. Perhaps being a foster parent is too much for you or me to handle. Perhaps not. But you Project Eve members are creative entrepreneurs – full of ideas, passion and industry. I'm sure you can find many meaningful ways to “rock” with a child.

In her epilogue, Beam explains, “[W]e don't have to fix the system directly to make things better for our kids. Work on one small aspect and we'll be working on the whole. Better school lunches, better libraries, better afterschool care, neighborhood resources – anything that touches social reform touches foster care too.” For me, the only thing I know is books, so I have taken a baby step toward helping the kids served by [Lawyers for Children](#) access a reading life. I want those foster children to find gripping characters like Theo Decker or Curious George or Bilbo Baggins to keep them company. What will your thing be? Where will *The Goldfinch* lift you?

[This essay originally appeared in GettingBalance.com on January 30, 2014.]