The Little Friend Study Guide

The Little Friend by Donna Tartt

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Fans and critics had been eagerly looking forward to *The Little Friend* (2002), Donna Tartt's second novel, since her literary debut—a decade earlier. After taking the literary world by storm with *The Secret History* (1992), Tartt spent ten years crafting her sophomore effort. *The Little Friend* is set in the fictional community of Alexandria, Mississippi, which is similar to the two communities in which the author lived as a child, Greenwood and Grenada, Mississippi.

In *The Little Friend*, Tartt explores racial and social life in the South in the late 1970s through the filter of the murder of nine-year-old Robin Dufresnes, which occurred twelve years earlier. Robin's now twelve-year-old sister Harriet takes it upon herself to try and exact revenge on the man she believed murdered him, Danny Ratliff. Hely, who harbors a crush on Harriet, aids Harriet in her quest. Her difficult home life is also a significant focus as the family was devastated by the loss of Robin and never fully recovered. The girl's experiences makes *The Little Friend* very much a coming-of-age story.

Like Tartt herself, intelligent, outcast Harriet loves reading books and is particularly influenced by classics such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. Tartt admitted to Dennis Moore of *USA Today*, "This book is really about other books that I loved in childhood." Critics often compared it to her first novel, *The Secret History*, and generally found *The Little Friend* to be a complex, well-crafted book. Writing in the *Houston Chronicle*, Earl L. Dachslager commented, "Tartt's new novel is denser, more multilayered, than her first. More mature, one could say, and thus a bit heavier and slower, but for all that no less enjoyable and readable."

Author Biography

Donna Louise Tartt was born December 23, 1963, in Greenwood, Mississippi, the eldest of two daughters of Don Tartt, a politician, and Taylor, a secretary. She grew up in Grenada, Mississippi. Tartt started keeping a notebook at the age of four before writing her first poem at the age of five. When Tartt was thirteen years old, she published her first poem in a Mississippi literary journal. As a child, Tartt also loved to read, especially enjoying classic books such as *Peter Pan* and *Treasure Island*.

In 1981, Tartt entered the University of Mississippi at Oxford. When she was a freshman at the university, the influential author-in-residence Willie Morris read her work and declared her a genius. Morris helped get Tartt admitted to a graduate writing class taught by Barry Hannah, though Tartt was only a freshman. Finding that the university did not meet her needs, Tartt transferred to Bennington College in Vermont as a sophomore. There, she became friends with Brett Easton Ellis, who went on to write *Less Than Zero* and *American Psycho*.

While still a student at Bennington, Tartt began writing what became her first published novel, *The Secret History*. After graduating in 1986, she briefly attended art school and lived in New England. Tartt also continued to work on her novel, which took about eight years to complete. Along the way, Tartt's friendship with Ellis led to her signing with his literary agent, Amanda Urban. With Urban's help, Tartt received an advance of nearly half a million dollars for *The Secret History* after a bidding war between publishers. Tartt later received another million dollars for the paperback rights and foreign rights to the book.

The Secret History was published to much acclaim, hype, and media frenzy in 1992. Set in the 1980s at the fictional Hampden College, which resembles the author's alma mater, the story focuses on an elitist, close-knit group of college students who share an interest in the classics and are mentored by an offbeat professor of Greek. The students do not have relationships outside the circle and find their own moral values eroded to the point where they have rationalized murder to keep their secrets. *The Secret History* became an international sensation, spending thirteen weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, selling a million copies in the United States and five million copies worldwide in twenty-four languages.

Over the next decade, Tartt worked on her next novel while reading, living in France for a time, and staying out of the public eye. She published *The Little Friend* in 2002 to mixed critical reception. Like *The Secret History, The Little Friend* has a murder at its center, but this novel is set in the 1970s in Tartt's native Mississippi and features a more diverse cast of characters and circumstances than her first novel. As of 2006, Tartt divides her time between a farm in Virginia and an apartment in New York City and continues to write fiction.

Plot Summary

Prologue

The Little Friend opens with a description of the events surrounding the day Robin Cleve died, twelve years earlier. One Mother's Day, the family, which included Aunt Tat, Aunty Libby, Aunt Adelaide, Robin's mother Charlotte, and Charlotte's mother Edith (called "Edie" by her grandchildren), gathered at Charlotte's house for dinner, which was being prepared by the Cleves' housekeeper, Ida Rhew. Charlotte's husband Dix was away duck hunting. Robin, then nine years old, was playing outside; his sisters, four-year-old Allison and infant Harriet, were outside as well. Charlotte suddenly felt something was wrong. The screams of neighbor Mrs. Fountain brought Charlotte outside, where she found Robin strangled and hanged by a rope on a low branch in a tree on the edge of the yard.

Chapter 1: the Dead Cat

Twelve years later, circumstances of Robin's death remain a mystery. He died of strangulation and was probably murdered, though people refer to it as "the accident." His family talked so much about him and his life to the point that his younger sisters felt like they knew him. Harriet is fascinated with archaeology and artifacts of history—ancient civilizations as well as the Cleve family's storied past.

In May, twelve years after Robin's death, his cat Weenie is dying. Allison is upset about the cat; she considers it her closest friend. Edie tells Allison (who is girlish and fragile) and Harriet (who is "neither pretty nor sweet") that the cat is old and should be put to sleep, and she takes it away to the veterinarian. Harriet's friend, an eleven-year-old boy named Hely, arrives while Edie is gone. When Edie returns with the cat's body, Harriet touches it; it is the first time she touches something dead, and it is a profound experience for her. The three children bury the cat in the backyard. Mrs. Fountain wants to know what they are doing and seems glad the cat is dead. Harriet swears at her, and the woman retreats to call and report the children's behavior to their mothers.

Chapter 2: the Blackbird

Harriet's father, Dix, lives in Nashville, sends checks to support his wife and daughters, and visits on holidays and before an annual hunting trip. Harriet has the run of the house most nights as her mother spends nearly all her time in her bedroom and her sister goes to sleep early. She believes Robin is close by then. Playing with a Winchester rifle from her father's gun cabinet one night, Harriet looks at her neighborhood through its scope.

The next morning, Harriet is in a Sunday School class taught by Mr. Roy Dial, a local car salesman. Dial encourages his students to write a goal on a piece of paper. Hely is

impressed when Harriet only makes a black mark on her paper, like the pirates do in *Treasure Island*.

Alone again at night, Harriet decides to see how long she can hold her breath. She has a strange, dreamy vision of a theatrical spectacle of showy attempts to rescue a person trapped in a block of ice. The next morning, Harriet gets a ride to the library from Edie. Harriet says she is going sign up for the summer reading program, but she is really going to do research about Robin's murder.

At home later, Harriet asks Allison if she remembers anything about Robin's death. Harriet is annoyed that she does not. Harriet tells her sister that she had a dream and she believes she is supposed to find out who murdered Robin. Allison watches television with Ida Rhew, the family housekeeper and the girls' lifelong caregiver. Harriet forges her father's signature on a check to pay their lapsed country club fees so she can swim at the pool over the summer.

Harriet takes the check to the club and leaves it with Hely's older brother, Pemberton, a college dropout who works there as a lifeguard. She asks him about her brother's death. Pem, who had been Robin's friend, tells her that kids like Danny Ratliff used to boast about committing the crime. He cautions her that Danny is crazy and dangerous and was recently released from prison. Pem also asks Harriet if Allison will be coming to the pool this summer. Later, Pem sees Allison walking and gives her a ride. Hely, who has a crush on Harriet, sees Pem and Allison out together, and Harriet sees Pem bring Allison home.

The next day, Harriet tries to question her great aunt Adelaide about Robin's death. Another great aunt, Tattycorum, interrupts, and Harriet asks them both about Robin, but they admonish her for talking about the murder. Later, Harriet visits her great aunt Libby, helps her do a crossword puzzle, and asks about Robin's death. Harriet learns nothing from her. Also that day, Allison frantically asks for Harriet's help when she finds a blackbird mired in a tar puddle. Harriet tries to lend a hand, but she accidentally tears the bird's wing off and it dies.

Harriet asks Ida about Danny. Ida tells her that she did not like Danny hanging around Robin when they were children and that Danny was in the yard a few minutes before Robin was found dead. Harriet shares all her information with Hely, and she tells him that she wants to kill Danny. Hely asks if he can help.

Chapter 3: the Pool Hall

Reading *The Jungle Book* that night, Harriet comes up with the idea of catching a poisonous snake. She and Hely find some snakes but cannot catch one, although one nearly bites Harriet. In the excitement of escaping from the snake and the heat of the Mississippi summer, Harriet faints. Hely calls Pem to come get them, and Pem both teases and compliments Harriet about the episode. He takes them to the country club, where Harriet and Hely go swimming. Because Hely is annoying her, she leaves the

club and walks home, encountering Curtis Ratliff, Danny's retarded younger brother, along the way. He seems to say something about snakes, but she does not understand him.

Eugene Ratliff, Danny's older brother, lives in the upper apartment of a house owned by Roy Dial. The lower floor is occupied by Mormon missionaries, so the entire dwelling is known as the "Mission." Eugene is a former criminal who is now a self-styled preacher. In his apartment are many snakes in boxes, owned by Loyal Reese, a snake-handling preacher from Kentucky. Loyal's brother Dolphus was in prison for murder and knew Eugene and Farish (the eldest of the Ratliff brothers) from prison. Farish and Dolphus remained friends, and Loyal's visit was arranged by Farish and Danny. Eugene is suspicious of their motives.

Harriet and Hely both mope around, each wanting to see the other but neither wanting to make the first move to make up after the incident at the pool.

In his trailer, Danny wakes up from a nap. He uses methamphetamine made in Farish's meth lab, located in the back of his taxidermy shop behind their grandmother's trailer. Danny has been using a lot of meth since his brother opened the lab several weeks earlier. He goes outside and finds Farish and Curtis. They discuss Eugene: "while in Parchman Penitentiary for Grand Theft Auto in the late 1960s—he had received a vision instructing him to go forth and exalt Jesus," a calling the brothers regard suspiciously. Farish is using Eugene and plans to smuggle meth in Loyal's car north to Dolphus's territory in Kentucky.

At the pool, Harriet and Pemberton compete to see who can hold their breath underwater the longest. She thinks he is handsome and is irritated when he asks her about Allison and Hely. At the same time, Hely, still brooding about Harriet, goes to buy comic books at the pool hall in a part of town his mother has forbidden him to go. While there, Hely watches drunken Carl Odum offer to play pool against anyone for money. Both Danny and Farish are there, as is Catfish de Bienville. Farish and Odum play pool, with Odum winning the first game.

Farish and Odum play again for all of Odum's money from an insurance settlement for an on-the-job-accident that mutilated his hand. Danny suddenly confronts Hely, demanding to know who he is. After answering their questions and allowing the focus to return to the game, Hely leaves. He calls Harriet to tell her that Danny is at the pool hall. Harriet decides to go there.

At the pool hall, Odum has lost the game and is reluctant to pay up. After doing some meth with Catfish, Danny decides to leave. Across the street sits Harriet, whom Danny mistakes for one of Odum's kids. He is bothered by her perceived stares, but when he gets ready to toss money at her, she is gone. Harriet and Hely eventually end up at Aunt Tat's house, where they play chess in her back porch.

Harriet wants to spend the night at Tat's, who refuses to let her stay. When Harriet gets home, her mother is frantic, confused because she believes that it is morning, not

evening, and that Harriet has been out all night. Allison points out the error and Charlotte apologizes. Allison comforts her mother and informs her sister that it was Robin's birthday, a day that upsets Charlotte every year. Harriet becomes uncomfortable when her mother showers her with attention.

Chapter 4: the Mission

Harriet spies Curtis outside of Eugene's apartment, although she does not know that Eugene lives there, and watches as Dial arrives and talks to Eugene. Curtis sees her and drags the reluctant Harriet to Loyal's truck to show her the snakes. Harriet is amazed by the sight and notes that one is a king cobra. Later, she shares the news with Hely and tries to figure out who owns the snakes. After going to a drive-in restaurant with Pem and Hely, Harriet points out the house to Pem, who tells her and Hely that Curtis's brother lives there.

Because Loyal is leaving the next day and Eugene and Loyal are preaching that night, Danny and Farish plan to come see them so they can hide the meth in Loyal's truck. Though Farish knows Eugene has a migraine and is trying to rest, Farish telephones him, paranoid that Eugene is being followed because he mentioned a car—it was Pem, Hely, and Harriet—had stopped in front of the house the previous night.

Allison and Harriet have a relaxed, affectionate moment with Ida watching birds and telling stories. Harriet tells Ida not to leave anything for her supper. Later, Harriet is upset by her mother's strangeness and suggestion that they may look for a different housekeeper if Ida cannot do her job and make sure Harriet is fed. Hely finds out that Eugene and Loyal are preaching in the town square, and he and Harriet go to see. The snakes are not in Loyal's truck, so they go to Eugene's house, hiding their bikes in a bush on the road median. Hely and Harriet enter his apartment through a bathroom window. Harriet finds the king cobra and insists that Hely help her carry that box out of the apartment.

Just as they get the snake out the back door, Eugene, Farish, Loyal, and Danny arrive. Looking for Harriet, Hely goes back to the apartment and is forced to hide when the men come in. He lets a few snakes free to cause a diversion so he can escape. Meanwhile, Harriet hides under the house with the cobra box. To help Hely, Harriet uses a rock to break the lights on the vehicles to draw the men out. She then tells them that she saw someone break their headlights. Danny is especially suspicious of her and the situation, but Farish is paranoid about Loyal's allegiances. The children escape. As the men try to catch the free snakes, Eugene is bitten and has to be hospitalized.

Chapter 5: the Red Gloves

In the morning, Ida is upset with Harriet for getting her in trouble. Harriet tries to make it up to Ida by picking some tomatoes from Ida's small garden. Harriet remembers that Ida once bought her red gardening gloves but Harriet did not like them; now she feels guilty that Ida spent money on them and she lost them.

As Harriet looks for the gloves, Hely shows up and insists they retrieve their bikes from the median. When she takes some vegetables from the garden into the house, Harriet learns that Charlotte has fired Ida. Harriet and Allison try to get their mother to change her mind, but she will not. An angry Harriet agrees to go with Hely to get their bikes, but makes him promise that they will go back for the snake later. They put the box on Hely's wagon later that night and hide the snake behind a retaining wall near the highway.

The next morning, Harriet learns that Ida is moving to live with her daughter in Hattiesburg and is leaving the next week. Harriet tries unsuccessfully to convince her to stay; both are hurt and hurt each other in this strained exchange. Harriet asks for Edie's help in the matter, but Edie refuses. The great aunts try to console Harriet. Libby especially sympathizes and, thinking of her attachment to her own housekeeper, remarks, "Odean's been with me for fifty years. She's my family."

Harriet goes to the library, where Hely finds her looking at articles about Robin's murder. He tells her that Danny's car—a Trans Am with a T-top—is outside the courthouse and proposes they throw the snake in his car from the overpass. They do so, and they watch as the snake attacks Danny's grandmother, Gum, who had driven the car to jury duty. The cobra bites Gum, who is put in intensive care. Farish blames Danny for the incident.

Scared about the incident with the snake, Harriet gets Edie to enroll her in Camp Lake de Selby, a Baptist church camp the girl had previously taken extreme action to avoid attending. Harriet tells Hely to be silent about what happened, not realizing what she was leaving behind: "it would pain her that she'd been too proud to tell Ida that she loved her."

Chapter 6: the Funeral

Harriet regrets asking to be enrolled in the camp as soon as she arrives, and she tries to get Edie to take her home, but Edie will not give in. Harriet is annoyed by the camp leaders, Dr. Vance and his wife, Patsy.

At the hospital, a still-paranoid Farish tries to figure out what happened to Gum and why. He believes the snake was Loyal's. Danny, Farish, and Eugene suspect that Harriet might have something to do with the incident, although they do not know who she is. Back at home, Farish threatens to kill the girl if she is the one behind the incident at Eugene's and the attack on Gum.

Edie drives her three sisters to Charleston for a vacation. Not even out of town, Adelaide insists that Edie turn the car around to get something she forgot. They get into an accident with another vehicle, but none of the sisters seems seriously hurt.

As Harriet suffers through camp, she is called to the Vances' office one day. Edie is there to pick her up in her new car purchased from Dial's dealership. Harriet learns that Libby died of a stroke a short time after the wreck, and that Odean was off because Libby was supposed to be away with her sisters. At the funeral, Harriet is not as upset

as her sister Allison, but she resents that no one picked her up from camp to be with Libby in the hospital before she died. Harriet faints and she is taken out to the funeral home's limo, where she cries in front of the limo driver, Catfish de Bienville. She sees Danny's Trans Am drive by and runs back into the funeral home.

Danny had been looking for Harriet since the cobra bit Gum, and he is surprised to see her with Catfish. Danny knows that this would make the already paranoid and delusional Farish even more suspicious. Farish is even wary of Danny. Knowing that Farish has hidden the meth—$5,000 worth—in the local water tower, Danny thinks about stealing the drugs and starting a new life elsewhere.

Hely shows up looking for Harriet at the funeral reception at Edie's house. He finds her outside and tells her that he has seen Danny driving all over town, even near where they tossed the snake, and lately around the rail yard. Hely is afraid of him. They debate about going to look for Danny, until Odean shows up. Odean is upset because no one told her that Libby had died. There is a scene outside that makes Harriet upset and Hely uncomfortable, so Hely leaves.

Chapter 7: the Tower

Harriet grieves for the loss of Ida—without whose personal touches the house seems foreign—and Libby—who always seemed "as if there were no one in the world whose voice she so wanted to hear"—when Harriet called. Hely is also absent from Harriet's life, busy with a marching band clinic. Harriet's mother is not taking care of the house well, but she tries to get closer to Harriet. Harriet resents her often-misguided efforts. Harriet also is not getting much attention from her grandmother and remaining great aunts as they deal with Libby's estate. The library is closed to be painted, so Harriet spends every day at the country club pool, practicing holding her breath underwater. She is so accustomed to her loneliness that she is flustered when Pemberton chats with her and asks about Allison.

Harriet is still obsessed with Danny. One day, she decides to go to the rail yard alone to look for clues. As she nears the tower, she sees Danny coming down its ladder. Harriet believes that Danny has seen her and runs away. As she walks near the riverbank, she encounters Lasharon Odum, a poor child who is wearing the red gardening gloves Ida gave Harriet. Harriet forcibly takes them back.

Danny is unsure who he saw at the tower. As Farish rambles on about his conspiracy theories, Danny wrestles with his own paranoia. Danny worries that Farish knows that he is planning to steal the drugs from the water tower. High and driving around town with Farish, he sees Harriet talking to Edie on Edie's porch. Danny believes that Harriet was sent to spy on them. He wants to question her and soon finds that she is walking home alone. Seeing the car, Harriet runs through yards until she finds Chester, her family's yard man, doing some work at house in the neighborhood. She hides in a tool shed while Chester deals with Danny and Farish, then Chester takes the upset child home. Danny realizes he knows Edie from when he was friends with Robin as a child.

Danny was stunned and distraught when he learned that Robin had died and, to mask his grief, he started bragging about having committed the murder.

Eugene believes that his snake bite was a sign he should not be a preacher, and he decides to focus on horticulture. While talking with Eugene and Gum, Danny collapses, exhausted from a two-week meth binge. When he wakes up, Danny is sober and Farish is out of his mind, telling Danny he can read his thoughts. Farish beats him and insists that Danny drive him to the water tower to ensure all the meth is still there. Despite Farish's protests, Danny is able to go in and get Gum's .22 pistol to take with him.

That same morning, Harriet decides to go to the water tower. She climbs it and finds her way into the tank. She finds the package—a garbage bag filled with smaller baggies of white powder—but is not quite sure what it is. Reasoning that whatever it is, it is Danny's, she dumps the small white sacs into the water.

Danny drives Farish to an area near the water tower. Though Farish calms down in the car, Danny decided to break free from his brother and escape his reality. Danny pulls the gun on Farish and shoots him twice. He leaves Farish and his two German shepherds in the car. From the water tower, Harriet hears the sound of the gun and the dogs barking. Pulling herself out of the tank, she sees Danny's car, then Danny holding a gun. He shoots the dogs from outside the car, then tosses the now-empty gun away.

Harriet sees Danny coming to the water tower and pulls out her own gun, taken from her father's gun cabinet and perhaps loaded incorrectly. She fires a shot at Danny, who is climbing up a ladder on the tower. The pistol hits her nose then falls to the ground. When Danny has nearly reached Harriet, she jumps into the water, but Danny is right behind her. He grabs her and asks her what she wants. Danny shakes her when he realizes that the drugs are floating in the water, ruined.

Blaming Harriet, Danny holds her under the water until her body relaxes. Believing he has drowned her, Danny lets her go and climbs out of the tank. Stepping on a broken plank, Danny plunges into fairly deep water. As he jumps to grab breaths above the water level, Harriet escapes.

Harriet goes home and tries to wash the smell of the tankwater off herself. She vomits water from the tank, and then she goes to sleep for a while, believing that Danny has drowned. When her mother wakes her up, she is still ill from the experience. Harriet has a seizure and Edie takes her to the hospital.

Eugene is also at the hospital because Farish is in a coma. Eugene sees Harriet is there and tries to get information about her and from her. Eugene later learns from a policeman that Farish has died and the police know about the drug lab.

Hely calls Harriet in the hospital and Harriet asks him to get the gun from the water tower. Hely agrees to do the task, but Harriet worries that he might tell someone. She also worries about Eugene and being arrested. Hely calls her from school and assures her that he has done the task.

When she awakens from being sedated, Harriet hears her parents talking about Danny as "Robin's little friend." Harriet becomes unsure of Danny's guilt: "Never had it occurred to her that she might be wrong in her suspicions about Danny Ratliff—simply wrong."

The next morning, Edie is reading the paper in Harriet's hospital room. Harriet learns that Danny did survive and confessed to killing Farish. The neurologist arrives and examines Harriet. Harriet wonders about her guilt in the matter, what could have happened with Danny, and believes that she might never know who murdered Robin.

Hely tries to tell Pem that Harriet shot Farish and made Danny go in the water tower because of Robin's murder, but Pem does not believe him. Pem tells Hely that Harriet has epilepsy. Hely cannot wait to hear the truth about what happened at the water tower from Harriet.

Characters

Baxter

Dr. Baxter is the neurologist who comes from out of town to examine Harriet after her seizure.

Breedlove

Dr. Breedlove is the local family doctor who takes care of Edie, the aunts, Charlotte, Allison, and Harriet.

The Little Friend was released as an abridged audio book on compact disc by Random House Audio in 2002. It is narrated by the author.

The Little Friend was released as an unabridged audio book on cassette by Books on Tape in 2002. It is narrated by Karen White.

Ida Rhew Brownlee

Ida Rhew is the African American housekeeper for Charlotte's household, who has worked for them for many years. Because of Charlotte's incapacitation, Ida serves as one of several mother figures for Allison and Harriet. Ida does all the housework, most of the cooking, keeps the house as clean as pack rat Charlotte will allow, and tries to impose a sense of propriety and order. While Ida cares deeply for Harriet and Allison, she ultimately walks away from her job partially because of a betrayal by Harriet as well as an extremely low salary of only $20 per week. After Ida is gone, Harriet and Allison have no contact with her.

Chester

Chester is the African American man who works in the yards of a number of white families, including Charlotte's and Edie's. Chester helps Harriet escape from Danny and Farish Ratliff when they are chasing her one day.

Adelaide Cleve

Adelaide is the youngest of Judge Cleve's daughters. She is the most selfish of the sisters, though she does care for her family. It is Adelaide who wants to turn back and get the Sanka she forgot to pack for the sisters' car trip to Charleston, which leads to the car accident. After Libby's death, Adelaide is concerned with getting her share of Libby's estate. Adelaide has been married three times and outlived all three husbands.

Edith Cleve

Called "Edie" by her grandchildren, Edith is the second oldest of Judge Cleve's daughters, the divorced mother of Charlotte, and the grandmother of Allison and Harriet. Edie and Harriet are very much alike. Edie once worked as a nurse and takes charge of the medical needs of her family and any animals brought to her. She is the confident one of the sisters and often takes charge of situations that concern her family. Edie plays a big role in the life of her granddaughters because of Charlotte's inattention as a mother. Edie is at the wheel when the sisters go on vacation and get into an accident that contributes to Libby's death.

Libby Cleve

Libby is the eldest of Judge Cleve's daughters. She she took care of her widowed father and helped raise her three younger sisters, and she never married. Libby takes care of people in a crisis. She is the most compassionate, gentle, and patient of the sisters and keeps the peace among them, though she has her own personality quirks. Libby dies of a stroke soon after the car accident on the way to Charleston.

Alphonse De Bienville

See Catfish de Bienville.

Catfish De Bienville

Catfish is a local slumlord who works for his wealthy uncle. He has pale skin and a big red Afro. He hangs out at the pool hall and drives the funeral home limo where Harriet rests after fainting at Libby's funeral.

Roy Dial

Roy Dial is a local businessman. His primary focus is selling cars at Dial Chevrolet, though he also owns the house rented by Eugene and the Mormon missionaries. Dial is also the Sunday school teacher.

Allison Dufresnes

Pretty, sixteen-year-old Allison is Harriet's sister, Charlotte's daughter, and Edie's granddaughter. Like her mother, Allison lives in a haze, albeit one that is not drug-induced. It is believed that as a four-year-old child she saw something related to Robin's murder. Allison spends much of her time sleeping, and though popular at school, she is unengaged in life. She considers Weenie, Robin's cat, her best friend, and has a soft

spot for animals and poor children like Lasharon who show up on her doorstep. Allison spends time with Pem outside of the house.

Charlotte Dufresnes

Charlotte is the daughter of Edie, wife of Dix, and mother to Robin, Harriet, and Allison. Once a vivacious teenager and relatively happy wife, Charlotte has lived in a haze since the violent death of her son. She has been taking tranquilizers since his death and spends much of her time in her room, usually sleeping. Charlotte does not play much of a role in raising her daughters (she leaves that to her housekeeper, her mother, and her aunts), and Harriet finds her mother's attempts to connect with her uncomfortable and ill-informed. After Ida leaves, Charlotte tries harder but the home falls in greater disrepair, and she considers moving her daughters to Nashville to be with her husband.

Dixon Dufresnes

Dixon, called "Dix" by everyone but his mother-in-law is the husband of Charlotte and the father of Robin, Allison, and Harriet. He is basically absent from their lives, and he did not play a big role even before Robin's death because of a relatively unhappy marriage. Dix was not home the day Robin died because he was duck hunting. Dix works at a bank and has not lived with Charlotte, Allison, and Harriet for a number of years. He moved to Nashville to take a job and Charlotte would not go with him. Dix lives with a mistress in Nashville, and he sends money to support his family in Mississippi. He only visits Alexandria a few times a year for holidays and a hunting trip. Dix comes when Harriet is hospitalized, but he is not particularly close to or supportive of his daughters.

Harriet Cleve Dufresnes

The central character in *The Little Friend* is twelve-year-old Harriet, an odd sort of child. She is the daughter of Charlotte and Dix, and the granddaughter of Edie, the person in her family whom Harriet most resembles. Harriet is a good student who enjoys reading and learning and has an excellent memory. She sometimes makes her family uneasy, using her intelligence to ask questions or create trouble. Harriet also feels complex emotions about situations she encounters in life, including her love of Ida and Ida's leaving, as well as certain social injustices.

Harriet does not have many friends, but she once had a loyal following of younger boys, with Hely, a boy a year younger being her favorite and closest pal. Harriet enlists Hely's help in figuring out who murdered her brother Robin when she was an infant. Convinced that Danny Ratliff is responsible, Harriet spends the summer investigating him and the murder. She goes as far as to follow Danny, steal a snake, toss the snake on Danny's car, and survive Danny's attempt to drown her in the water tower. By the end of the novel, Harriet doubts her conclusions about Danny and has been diagnosed with epilepsy.

Robin Cleve Dufresnes

Robin is the son of Charlotte and Dix, the grandson of Edie, the grand-nephew of Tat, Libby, and Adelaide, and the elder brother of Allison and Harriet. Robin was murdered on Mother's Day when he was nine years old, an incident that happened twelve years before the beginning of the novel's primary action. Alone for only a short time, he was found hanging in a tree in the backyard. No one knows who murdered him, and his death profoundly affected his family. Harriet spends her time focusing on investigating his death, believing that Danny Ratliff murdered Robin.

Essie Lee

Essie Lee is one in a long series of maids who get fired at the Hull household. Ida believes that Harriet contributed to getting her fired.

Fawcett

Mrs. Fawcett is the librarian at the local library who helps Harriet with her research.

Bonnie Fenton

Nurse Bonnie is one of the nurses who cares for Harriet when she is hospitalized after her seizure.

Grace Fountain

Mrs. Fountain is the widowed, complaining next-door neighbor of Charlotte and her daughters. She is a nosy neighbor who always wants to know what is going on in others' lives. Mrs. Fountain was the one who first saw Robin hanging from the tree when he died.

Claude Hull

Mr. Hull is the husband of Martha and the father of Pem and Hely. He works as the headmaster of Alexandria Academy, where most of the white children in town go to school.

Hely Hull

Hely is Harriet's eleven-year-old best friend. The pair spend much of their time together swimming at the country club and going on various adventures. Hely sometimes thinks that he loves Harriet, whom he believes is a genius, and many of his actions are meant

to impress or help her. Hely assists Harriet with her plans to investigate Robin's murder and get revenge on Danny Ratliff, including stealing a snake and hiding a gun she drops from the water tower.

Martha Price Hull

Martha Hull is the mother of Pem and Hely, and a former classmate of Charlotte. She is known throughout the community for spoiling her sons.

Pemberton Hull

Pemberton, commonly known as Pem, is Hely's brother. Pem is the same age as Robin and was the boy's friend. Pem is now a college dropout who works as a lifeguard at the country club. Pem occasionally helps Hely and Harriet by picking them up when they are tired and offering knowledge relevant to their investigation. Pem is interested in Allison.

Kay

Kay is Dix's mistress in Nashville.

Theodora Lamb

Theodora, commonly known as Tat, Tatty, or Tattycorum, is the third daughter of Judge Cleve, a great-aunt of Harriet. Tat once worked as a high school Latin teacher and had been married to Pinkerton Lamb for nineteen years until his death. Tat spends some time with Harriet, sharing a love of archeology with her grandniece.

Odean

Odean was Libby's maid for more than fifty years. On vacation when Libby dies, Odean comes to Edie's house after Libby's funeral, upset that no one told her that Libby was dying and had died, nor that there had been a funeral. Odean is also concerned that she inherit what Libby intended for her.

Carl Odum

Carl Odum is the widower father of Lasharon Odum. He loses all his disability money to Farish in a pool game in chapter 3.

Lasharon Odum

Lasharon is a poor white girl who lives in Alexandria. She is the eldest child of Carl Odum and charged with taking care of her many younger siblings. Lasharon likes to read and spends much of her time at the library. She shows up at Harriet's house one day with her books and younger brothers; Allison shows compassionate interest in her. Harriet despises her.

Curtis Ratliff

Mentally retarded Curtis is the youngest Ratliff brother. He is large and friendly, but overbearing. Curtis lives with his grandmother and his older brothers in trailers on the poor side of town. Curtis likes everyone, but he gets upset when others are angry around him. Curtis shows Harriet the snakes in Loyal's truck, one of which she eventually steals.

Danny Ratliff

Danny Ratliff is one of the Ratliff brothers. He has recently been released from prison and lives in a trailer near most of the rest of his family. Danny uses methamphetamine on a regular basis and becomes obsessed with finding Harriet after realizing that she has followed him. Danny also has to deal with his sickly grandmother Gum and paranoid older brother, Farish, whom Danny has helped with his drug enterprise. Danny wants to escape his existence and start a new life elsewhere, perhaps by stealing the meth Farish has stashed in the water tower. Danny eventually kills Farish and nearly dies in the water tower. Despite what Harriet believes for most of the novel, by the end she knows that Danny did not kill Robin.

Eugene Ratliff

Eugene is the brother of Farish, Danny, and Curtis, and the grandson of Gum. Unlike the rest of his family, he lives in an apartment in a house owned by Roy Dial. Eugene had once been in prison with Farish for grand theft auto, but he became a self-styled minister who preaches on the side of the road and in abandoned warehouses. It is from outside Eugene's apartment that Harriet steals the king cobra owned by Loyal Reese. Eugene shares Danny's concerns about Harriet following them. After being bitten by one of the snakes, Eugene rethinks being a minister and begins an interest in horticulture.

Farish Ratliff

Farish, called "Farsh," is the eldest Ratliff brother and the former head of the family larceny gang. He has been in prison many times as well as the state mental hospital, and he is now in poor physical condition. Farish runs a taxidermy shop near the family

trailers, the odors from which conveniently masks his meth lab. Farish and his brother Danny consume much of the product, and Farish grows increasingly paranoid over the course of the novel. He has many conspiracy theories, and he becomes sure that Danny will steal the meth stashed in the water tower. Danny eventually kills Farish and his two German shepherds.

Gum Ratliff

Gum is the paternal grandmother of the Ratliff brothers. After a life of hard work and hardship, she is quite old and suffers from many physical ailments. She favors Farish over the others, and she undermines any attempts they might have to better themselves. Gum nearly dies when the king cobra Harriet and Hely toss over the highway into Danny's car bites her.

Loyal Reese

Loyal is the minister from Kentucky who handles snakes as part of his ministry. His visit with Eugene was arranged by Farish and Danny as part of scheme to move Farish's meth to territory operated by Loyal's older brother, the imprisoned Dolphus. The scheme ultimately fails.

Lyle Pettit Rixey

Lyle is the man whose car was hit by Edie's in the accident. He later decides to sue Edie over the incident.

J. Rhodes Sumner

J. Rhodes Sumner grew up near Edie and her sisters, and he attends Libby's funeral. He flirts with Adelaide, who considers him for her fourth husband.

Charley T.

Charley T. is Ida's husband.

Vance

Dr. Vance is the overenthusiastic director of the Baptist summer camp, Camp Lake de Selby, which Harriet briefly attends.

Patsy Vance

Miss Patsy is Dr. Vance's wife and the woman in charge of the girls at Camp Lake de Selby.

Weenie

Weenie is Robin's cat who is put to sleep at the age of sixteen. His death devastates Allison.

Themes

Intrinsic Nature

The world of Alexandria, Mississippi, is not rendered in such handy opposites as black or white, left or right, all or nothing. While its residents are complicated people with better moments and worse, they do, however, sort quite tidily into the categories "good" and "bad." Though Harriet is independent, intelligent, and capable, she is still an innocent twelve-year-old child. She has heard about her murdered brother Robin her whole life and still feels a certain closeness to him. Out of these and other complicated feelings, Harriet decides to figure out who killed her brother and punish the culprit. She comes to believe that Danny Ratliff killed Robin, though it is revealed by the book's end that Danny did not do it. To exact her revenge on Danny, Harriet enlists the help of another child, Hely, and they both commit several illegal acts in the process. While their innocence is tarnished in the novel, their motivation for simple, childlike justice is pure, thus their natures are "good."

In contrast, all the Ratliffs except for poor, retarded Curtis are as bad as a bunch can be. Even Eugene, the brother who turned away from crime after a religious calling, remains menacing and dark. They grew up in an abusive family whose primary occupation was larceny. Prison seemed inevitable, and nothing more was expected of them. Farish, and to a lesser extent Danny, are out to make money through their drug business. Farish has served several terms in prison, as have Danny and Eugene. Two other brothers are in prison during the action of the story. Though innocent of Robin's murder, Danny is driven to try to drown Harriet in drug-fueled paranoia and genuine criminal guilt. Though he shows a glimmer of goodness in his grief or regret for loved ones, as the novel's antagonist, Danny is never anything but a "bad guy," even though he is not responsible for the deed at the heart of the plot.

Coming of Age

More than a simple whodunit, *The Little Friend* is also a coming of age story, primarily for Harriet, though Allison and Hely have some important experiences as well. At the beginning of the novel, Harriet is a precocious girl thrilled by the possibility for adventure in the world; by its end, she is older and wiser and all-too-aware of the world's harshness. In the first few chapters, Harriet is already leaving childish things behind, such as putting on elaborate Bible-based pageants in her backyard, to focus on more personal goals. While using her intelligence and fearlessness to deal with the villain Danny Ratliff, Harriet also has other innocence-eroding encounters with death: first the cat, then the blackbird, and then Aunt Libby die over the summer. Harriet is asking and trying to find answers to some of her life's biggest questions. She sometimes retreats into childish refuges, at the bottom of the pool or away at camp, but Harriet matures as she comes to understand the complex, unjust nature of life.

Obsession and Control

The related ideas of obsession and control can be found throughout *The Little Friend*. Harriet becomes obsessed with finding, getting, and perhaps killing Danny to avenge Robin's death. It is the focus of the summer of her twelfth year, and she drags Hely headlong into it. Harriet's obsession feeds into Danny's obsession with her as the child he sees following him. Danny becomes obsessed with finding her to learn what she wants with him. Harriet's obsession with Danny also becomes part of Farish's greater paranoid obsessions with grand conspiracies against him. Farish's questionable mental health and extensive drug use add to these problems for Danny and the rest of the family. More than superstitions or habits, these obsessions are all based on uncertainty.

The flip side of obsession is control. Their uncertainty about their own security forces the characters to obsess about the thing they believe is causing their anxiety. They all try to control that anxiety by controlling their situations. Harriet tries to control a home awash in dysfunction by righting the wrong she blames for her family's problems—her brother's murder. Farish tries desperately to control his fate by controlling the people around him to mitigate his drug-induced paranoia. Farish does not trust anyone, especially Danny, and eventually beats him because of his suspicious, though sometimes well-founded, delusions. Danny drives around looking for Harriet so he can control the fear that someone is out to get him. By the time he finds her, he has finally asserted some control over his life by killing Farish. Danny does not hesitate to try to drown Harriet when she does not provide answers. Ultimately, none of these characters is able to achieve the control they yearn for, and they must face other ways to quell the obsessions that haunt them.

Social Status

Issues of race and social class are touched upon throughout *The Little Friend*. In the book's fictional but realistic late-1970s small-town Mississippi setting, respectably well-off white people have only a certain kind of relationship with black people. African American men and women work for them as household help, but they are not their friends or peers. As servants, African American household workers can be appreciated, as Ida and Odean are, but they are still only employees and there is a definite social distance. Harriet and Allison are very attached to Ida, the only stable adult in their daily lives, but Charlotte sees Ida as disposable. Ida's attachment to the children also has limits, because she knows her relationship with them is on a flimsy foundation.

Even Ida looks down on poor whites and blacks. She will not allow someone like Lasharon Odum to hang around the house for Allison or Charlotte to pity. Ida looks upon such children as bugs or pests who must be shooed away lest they become too familiar with the respectable family she works for. Ida believes allowing such "trash" to linger will lead to disease and later criminal activity after such children get older. Ida expresses a difference between poorer people who work hard, like herself, and poor people who are not taught to work but only to steal, like many of the poor whites in the novel. Harriet

shares Ida's disdain for such poor white children. It is Ida's prejudice against such white children that initially fuels Harriet's belief that Danny Ratliff killed her brother, vital to the action of the novel.

Style

Third-person Omniscient Point of View

The Little Friend is told from a third-person omniscient point of view, which means that the narrator has knowledge of everything going on in the story, including the characters' thoughts. This way, the characters' memories, thoughts, and feelings can be directly revealed to the reader. The narrator also knows about things outside the direct action, such as Hely's feelings about Harriet or that Harriet will never see Ida again. The third-person narrator is not a character in the story.

Back-story

Throughout the primary stories in *The Little Friend*, Tartt scatters a great deal of back-story in the form of narrative digressions. This back-story provides information on the background of the characters and their lives, adding a deeper understanding of their experiences and motivations. Much of the back-story in the novel relates to the past and how current situations came to be. For example, at the beginning of chapter 2, Harriet is exploring her father's gun cabinet. For the next few pages, Tartt describes the original owner of the guns, Uncle Clyde, and describes Dix and his relationship to his wife and daughters. After this digression, Tartt returns to the main action: what Harriet is doing with the guns.

Southern Gothicism

Literature that explores the culture, characters, and society of the modern American South, particularly eccentric families and unusual situations that drive the plot, is part of a genre known as "Southern Gothic." In *The Little Friend*, Tartt inserts many details in the story to give readers a sense of when and where the action occurs—in a small fictional community in Mississippi in the late 1970s. The novel's key event is the long-unsolved murder of a child. The characters that populate the novel are the vestiges of the mythical antebellum era; the wealth, or poverty, or tragedy in their families' pasts echo in their present situations. The characters are imperfect but compelling, and the stories raise more questions than they resolve.

Foil

Several characters in *The Little Friend* act as foils to other characters in the story. A foil is a character who has qualities that are in strong contrast to certain other characters, underscoring their related qualities. For example, Harriet serves as a foil to Charlotte and Allison. Harriet is industrious, intelligent, and active, in contrast to Charlotte and Allison, who sleep most of the time and do not seek meaning in their lives. Edie serves as a similar foil to her sisters. Ida is also a foil to Charlotte, caring for the family while

Charlotte lives in a tranquilized haze. Curtis also serves as a foil to his family, especially Farish, Danny, and Eugene. Curtis is mentally retarded and is very loving, innocent, and open. In contrast, his brothers have been in and out of prison, and Farish and Danny have a serious drug problem. Curtis provides a stark contrast to his brothers' bad natures.

Historical Context

Segregation in Mississippi in the 1970s

In *The Little Friend*, Tartt writes, "[Harriet] and Hely attended Alexandria Academy, as did almost every white child in the county. Even Odums and Ratliffs and Scurlees practically starved themselves to death in order to keep their children out of the public schools." Later in the same paragraph, Tartt states that Alexandria Academy was an "all-white school." This fact reflects the racial prejudice in Mississippi in the 1970s, an idea subtlety explored in *The Little Friend*.

One way this racial separation and resistance to the progress of the Civil Rights movement was expressed in Mississippi was in school enrollment. In October 1969, the Supreme Court decision in *Alexander v. Holmes County* stated that school desegregation had to take place in Mississippi during the 1969–1970 school year. Within a few years, many white students disen-rolled from public schools—about 8 percent alone during the first year of desegreation—and the number of private academies established in the state began increasing drastically. Private schools in Mississippi numbered 236 in 1970, while only 121 such schools existed in 1966.

Nearly all of these private schools had all-white enrollments and were generally seen as a reaction to the desegregation effort. Whites essentially created a new, private school system. Similar private schools soon could be found throughout the South, a widespread alternative to integrated public schools. It was estimated that nearly 750,000 students attended such private, all-white academies in Southern states in 1975.

Methamphetamine Use and Abuse

Methamphetamine, commonly known as meth, is the drug of choice for Farish and Danny in the novel. Farish has a meth lab in his taxidermy shop, and the chemicals used to stuff the animals cover the distinctive odor of a meth lab. Meth was first developed for asthma and congestion in Japan in 1919 and soon hit the U.S. pharmaceutical market. It also became a treatment for narcolepsy and obesity, among other conditions. It proved highly addictive, and its use as a diet pill was curtailed after World War II. However, it remained a widely accepted stimulant for athletes, truck drivers, and college students for many years.

An injected type of meth known as "speed" was popular in the 1960s, but by 1970, the federal Controlled Substances Act curtailed most of the legal production of meth. While the illegal production and distribution of meth then increased, by the time period of *The Little Friend*, the popularity of meth was on the decline as cocaine came into vogue. Meth was then regarded as a "trailer park" drug, used primarily by working class or poor white men, and usually inhaled or injected.

The popularity of meth began surging again in the 1980s with the development of "ice" (also known as "glass" or "crank"), a crystallized type of meth that can be smoked. Like other forms of meth, ice can be easily and cheaply made in a homemade lab from easy-to-obtain chemical ingredients. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, meth in its many forms was again a commonly abused drug in the United States. By 2000, nearly 8.8 million Americans had at least tried meth, as opposed to only 4.7 million two years earlier. Meth use reached across age, gender, and race distinctions.

Nearly all the meth used by addicts in the United States in this time period was illegally manufactured. Meth labs were no longer found just in rural areas, but in a variety of urban environments as well, creating hazards for those who lived around them. Some observers believed meth abuse had reached the epidemic stage in some parts of the country, including the South. In 2004, Texas-based narcotics investigator Kent Graham told Pamela Colloff of *Texas Monthly*, "Meth is the most destructive thing I've ever seen."

Critical Overview

When *The Little Friend* was published in 2002, readers had been waiting ten years for Tartt's second novel after her smash debut *The Secret History* (1992). Critics generally responded positively to *The Little Friend*. Jason Crowley of the *New Statesman* called the novel "audacious, implausible and enchanting," and noted that by novel's end, "there remains something indefinable and ultimately mysterious about this novel, a certain elegiac tone and lingering regret for the passing, if not of youth, then of an innocence that perhaps never existed at all."

Many commentators saw it as a Southern novel. In *World Literature Today*, Marvin J. LaHood said,

It is Tartt's understanding of southern ethos that gives *The Little Friend* substance. Those things that every great southern novelist seems to understand—family, tradition, class, race, the tradition of storytelling—Tartt enhances with her own memorable and brooding style.

Much critical praise focused on the main characters. Gail Caldwell of the *Boston Globe* explained, "Harriet Cleve Dufresnes is a likable mix of innocence and bluff. She's unnervingly shrewd, with far more imagination than most of the adults in her Mississippi family." The depiction of Harriet's relatives also received critical kudos. Dave Ferman of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* commented, "[Tartt's] deft portrayal of Harriet's family (and their strange ways of navigating the terrain of their shared memories, and their mundane but vaguely unpleasant existence) is magnificent. These people feel instantly real."

Critics also praised Tartt's exploration of the lives of the poor whites and African Americans of the community. Brooke Allen of the *New Leader* wrote, "Tartt is really impressive in her ability to enter, with sympathy and credibility, into the Ratliff's world, and even, with a certain respectful distance, into Ida's." Though critics were divided in their opinion of the Ratliffs and their plotline, a number found them interesting. Though Tom Murray of the *San Francisco Chronicle* found the novel "hypnotic but ultimately infuriating," he said, "Danny and his whole sorry, inbred, paranoid clan are a brilliant invention, switching from hilariously stupid to frighteningly dangerous in the twitch of a meth-bleared eye."

A few critics, however, believed that the book was not a worthy follow-up to *The Secret History*. Writing in the *New York Observer*, Jennifer Egan commented, "Though *The Little Friend* ratifies and even amplifies the range of Ms. Tartt's abilities … and though it has emotional and sociopolitical dimensions that were completely absent from the earlier book, it's finally less satisfying."

Much of the criticism of the novel, even from critics who found much to like, focused on its length and sometimes loose prose. Jane Shilling of the London *Sunday Telegraph* concluded, "Plot, however, it not really what interests Tartt." Others found the extensive

amount of detail sometimes misplaced, if not overwhelming. Writing in the *New Yorker*, Daniel Mendelsohn commented that the novel "meanders through the two families' lives and their homes … with an attention to detail that makes it easy to forget why you're being told all this." For some, the ending was also unsatisfying. Allen of the *New Leader* wrote, "The ending is also irresolute, almost arbitrary, not really an ending at all."

While A.O. Scott of the *New York Times Book Review* agreed with such sentiments, the critic found more in the novel: "*The Little Friend* is overgrown with symbolism and spooky implication … but it is also crowded with a bustling, ridiculous humanity worthy of Dickens."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso is a history and screenwriting scholar and freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Petrusso examines Tartt's negative depiction of fathers in the novel.

In reviews of Donna Tartt's *The Little Friend*, several critics commented on the way families and parental figures are drawn in the novel. One reviewer, Andrew Pyper of the *Globe & Mail*, wrote:

Harriet's family is wholly free of men, as is the novel, with the exception of the white-trash, meth-head Ratliffs, who, aside from their hateful grandmother, Gum, live in a world without women. It's hard to know what Tartt intends by this segregation of genders, aside from the point that men on their own will eventually kill somebody and women on their own will make spiteful remarks to each other.

While Pyper makes an interesting observation, he oversimplifies Tartt's depiction of men, particularly the fathers, in *The Little Friend*. There are three significant father figures in the book—Dix Dufresnes, Judge Cleve, and Claude Hull—as well as several secondary fathers, such as Carl Odum, the Ratliffs' deceased father, and Charlotte's long-gone father. Though at least three of these fathers are dead, all the fathers are leaving or have left a sad legacy that echoes through their children in the novel.

The fathers, indeed all the primary adult male characters, in *The Little Friend* are ineffectual and self-centered. None of the fathers actually kills anyone in the course of the novel, though their children do. The younger children—Harriet, Allison, Hely, Pem, and Lasharon—lack any fatherly direction in their lives. Harriet, in particular, is able to make her own rules in part because she does not have a strong hand running the household or guiding her life.

Underscoring much of the action of *The Little Friend* is the idea that absent or ineffective fathers damage their children, even once those children are grown up. This concept can be seen in each character with a mentioned father, from the aunts to Charlotte to Harriet and Hely and even the Ratliffs and Lasharon Odum. Good fathers apparently do not exist in Tartt's fictional Alexandria, Mississippi.

Dix Dufresnes and Judge Cleve are the novel's most important fathers. Dix is the primary father in *The Little Friend*, primarily because he is still alive, appears in the novel several times, and is the father of the primary character, Harriet. Dix has essentially given up on his family, though Tartt allows that he was never particularly engaged in his family's life. Even before Robin's death, Dix was more concerned with hunting, his job at the bank, and visiting his own mother than his wife and children. Tartt also notes that Dix married Charlotte for her position and money. Dix was not home when Robin was killed, and he was absent even more often afterward. "Dix had never spent much time at home, and now he was hardly there at all," readers learn.

The author also claims that Dix does not even care much for his daughters: "his low opinion of girl children he expressed unashamedly and with a casual, conversational good humor." The feeling is mutual for Harriet, who thinks about her father this way: "Because her father was so quarrelsome and disruptive, and so dissatisfied with everyone, it seemed right to Harriet that he did not live at home."

Many of the Dix-related events of the novel are filtered through Harriet's perspective. Though Harriet may not fully understand how deeply the lack of a caring father in her life has affected her, Tartt points out that Dix has tried and occasionally does the right thing where his family is concerned. Twice, Dix wanted to move Charlotte and his daughters to different cities where he had job offers to start over again after losing Robin. Charlotte, her mother, and the aunts did not let that happen. Though Dix lives in Nashville with his mistress, he still financially supports his family and makes the effort to visit on holidays. Near the end of the novel, Dix drives for hours to visit Harriet when he learns that she is in the hospital. He visits Harriet there as much as Charlotte does, though he does not even live in the same state.

Dix has not divorced Charlotte, leaving open the possibility of return to his marriage and family. Yet he is still the selfish, self-absorbed, absent father to Harriet. Ideally, Dix would be more to Harriet as well as to his other neglected, needy daughter, Allison. How different would Harriet's actions be if her father limited her access to his gun collection or played a bigger role in guiding her choices? Would Harriet and Allison be better adjusted if Dix had taken charge of the household instead of leaving Charlotte, Ida, and the aunts to raise Harriet and Allison in such a haphazard manner? But happy lives do not make for intriguing stories. Obviously, the primary plot in *The Little Friend* would not exist in its same form with a better father in Dix, and Tartt's depiction of him adds to the undercurrent of loneliness and loss that pervades the story.

Dix's absence affects his wife, daughters, and (to a lesser extent) mother-in-law. The absence (through death) of Judge Cleve, father of Edie and the aunts, has a ripple effect on more characters in the novel. The judge was put in a difficult situation as his wife died during the birth of the youngest of four daughters, Adelaide. As with Dix, Tartt describes the judge negatively, both as a person and as a father. She calls him "selfish old Judge Cleve" and calls the mother of his children his "harried wife."

The judge is regarded as selfish because he made his eldest daughter, then seventeen-year-old Libby, raise her three younger sisters and chased off any man interested in taking her away. Judge Cleve insisted that she take care of him and the rotting family house, called "Tribulation," for the rest of his life. In death, he left her nearly destitute and deeply in debt with an antebellum house that had not been maintained for nearly a century. His family was once wealthy, but he lost a lot of money in the stock market crash of 1929. Later in his life, he was a primary investor in a company that was allegedly developing a flying car. The family home had to be sold to pay his debts. Tartt emphasizes how dastardly Judge Cleve was by noting that Libby "had adored her sulky, ungrateful old father, and she considered it a privilege to stay at home and care for her motherless siblings."

Judge Cleve's legacy is his four daughters, his granddaughter, and his great-granddaughters. While his daughters have a close relationship and have helped raise Harriet and Allison, none have had particularly successful personal lives. Libby loved and cared for Charlotte after Robin's death, and she spent a lot of time with both Allison and Harriet. Yet her life was stunted by the judge's choices. While Tat and Adelaide also care for their grand-nieces, they, too, lead limited lives and also have no children. Tat's only husband, Pinkerton Lamb, was older than her and died suddenly after nineteen years of marriage. The couple had considered adopting but never got around to doing so. Tat "had nearly forgotten that she'd ever been married at all." Adelaide was married three times, outlived all her husbands, and, at Libby's funeral, seems to be selecting a fourth, a man her father and sisters did not approve of in their youth, J. Rhodes Sumner.

Edie, and in turn Harriet, are direct inheritors of the judge's take-charge attitude and both also resemble him physically. Edie was married and divorced to man who had a drinking problem. He was Charlotte's father, but he played no described role in their lives other than progenitor—another failed father figure. Instead, Edie took on the masculine role needed in the family: "There were not many men in the Cleve family and headstrong, masculine activities … had for the most part fallen to her." She is the only one of the sisters who can drive, and she runs the family like a patriarch. While there are only a few comments about Judge Cleve in *The Little Friend*, his nature and fathering abilities formed all these women, none of whom lives a full life.

While Dix and the judge are absent fathers, Hely and Pem's father Claude Hull is present but ineffectual. Like the other men, Claude is only mentioned a few times. Claude holds a somewhat prestigious position in the community as the headmaster as well as the junior high science teacher for Alexandria Academy, the private school that most white students in the community attend.

Though his job is respectable, the townspeople see that he has done nothing while his wife spoiled their sons. Tartt writes of his wife, Martha Price Hull, "She adored them frantically, and allowed them to do exactly as they pleased, never mind what their father had to say." As a child, Pem only ate chocolate pie for three years, and as an adult, he is a three-college dropout who works at the country club pool during the summer. There are a few rules, which Pem and Hely may or may not follow, and the boys do what they like, no matter what the consequences. Hely and Pem are two of the few children in the book who actually have a father in the home, but Claude's influence seems no stronger than any absent father.

While Dix, Judge Cleve, and Claude Hull are not the only fathers in *The Little Friend*, they are emblemic of Tartt's negative depiction of father figures, and perhaps men in general, in the novel. Carl Odum has much in common with Judge Cleve as a widower trying to raise his many children, and he is more focused on playing pool and losing money than fatherly responsibilities. Young Lasharon Odum spends much time reading at the library, reminds her father of appointments, and takes care of her siblings as best she can in their poverty, and her potential is clearly withering from inattention. The deceased father of Farish, Eugene, Danny, and Curtis Ratliff, who made robbery the family business, had a drinking problem, and acted out of a bad temper, is not

mentioned by name. His harsh legacy of violence lives on in Farish and Danny in particular. Even the men in the book who are not shown as fathers are slimy and suspicious, such as Roy Dial, who only seems out for the car sale in every action he takes, and Mr. Vance, the off-putting camp director.

Only women and girls have any strength or semblance of true character in *The Little Friend*. In some ways, the novel is about how outstanding girls such as Harriet can be, even if their fathers do not understand them. Parents, especially fathers, do not seem to be needed. With father figures so lacking in the book, Tartt implies a need for more effective, compassionate, caring men by showing what a world is like when such men are missing.

Source: A. Petrusso, Critical Essay on *The Little Friend*, in *Literary Newsmakers for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

In the following interview excerpt, Tartt discusses the influence of classic literature in The Little Friend.

The Little Friend is set in 1970s Mississippi, the location of Tartt's own childhood. It is a big, expansive novel involving two very different families: the Cleves and the Ratliffs. The story opens with a devastating family tragedy: the death of a Cleve child, nine-year-old Robin, found mysteriously hanged—presumed murdered—from a tree in the family garden. Robin's sister Harriet is only a baby when the tragedy occurs, but years later, as a strong-willed 12-year-old who easily dominates her admiring playmates, Harriet becomes intensely curious about this unresolved episode in her family's history, the unspoken reason behind her mother's tranquilliser-fuelled abdication from life.

Piecing together information gleaned from family anecdotes, Harriet identifies a culprit in Robin's childhood schoolmate Danny Ratliff. But Danny has now grown up, and as Harriet sets out on an adventurous plan to seek revenge for her brother's death, it becomes clear that Danny—and his druggy, exconvict brothers—are potentially dangerous men to cross.

Tartt, her Southern vowels clearly audible on the phone line from her home in Virginia, is robustly unapologetic about the long delay before the appearance of *The Little Friend:* "You can try to commodify writing, you can try to regulate it and make people turn it out, but in the end it is a process that is kind of organic. There are some flowers that only bloom every two years."

It is the process of writing the book that fascinates her more than the achievement of the final novel anyway, she says. "It is very analogous to getting into your car on the east coast and driving to California. It's a long journey, you're in your car for a long time, you have to enjoy the process of rambling and poking around, which I do—I think it's very evident, even in the way I build my sentences, that I like to meander."

The Secret History (1992) is Tartt's first novel. It focuses on a group of college students who commit two murders and the fallout of their actions.

The Sound and the Fury (1929) is an icon of the Southern Gothic genre by Nobel laureate and Mississippian William Faulkner. It centers on a family tragedy and the different reactions of those affected by it.

The Catcher in the Rye (1951), by J. D. Salinger, is a classic American coming-of-age novel. Its protagonist, Holden Caulfield, spends a few unchaperoned days between being kicked out of school and returning to his family, which has made him an archetype on American disaffectedness.

The Member of the Wedding (1946) is a novel by Carson McCullers that was later turned into a popular play. The story, set in the South, focuses on a disaffected twelve-

year-old girl named Frankie as well as her complex relationship with an African American servant, Berenice.

Captain Scott (2003), by Ranulph Fiennes, is a biography of Captain Robert Scott, an influential figure for Harriet in the novel.

Harriet the Spy (1964) is a children's novel by Louise Fitzhugh. The primary protagonist is eleven-year-old Harriet Welsch, who longs to be a spy.

At the same time, she felt she set herself new challenges this time around: "I wanted it to be a different, self-contained world that was just as real as the world of *The Secret History*, and it takes time to build up those layers of richness—you can't fake that. Also the style of this book was different: instead of a piece written for a single instrument, it was written for a full orchestra—a much broader range of characters and voices, and there were many technical difficulties in writing the book that I simply didn't face with *The Secret History*. So in that sense it's satisfying for me, and that's why it kept me engaged for all these years."

Tartt describes *The Little Friend* as a novel about how stories—whether the stories told in children's books, or the myths concocted within the family itself about its own past—can take on the quality of absolute truth in a child's mind. In that respect it bears some resemblance to *The Secret History*, whose characters also suffer from having taken their classical reading matter a little too seriously.

"The thoughts of other people do have a curious life in us, which is why literature is the most spiritual of all the arts," says Tartt. "The stories that are told to children have a particularly great pull, which they don't necessarily have in later life."

For her diminutive heroine Harriet, the stories are mostly those told by 19th-century British writers: Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Charles Dickens. These were the staples of Tartt's own childhood reading: "That's partly what it was like to grow up in Mississippi when I did. I read the books that my grandparents had read, and the books that were in the library. That is very much how the sensibility of this novel is formed, but also my sensibility as a writer—those were the books I read first and the formative ones."

But there is another strand of 19th-century literature—of which Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* is the classic example—that presents children in a different light: unable, despite and because of their forthright view of the world, to comprehend the complexities of adult behaviour. For James' Maisie it is the inability to understand how she is used as a pawn between two manipulative, warring parents; for Harriet it is an inexperience in life that leads her to treat family tales as gospel truth.

"Children see things very clearly but at the same time with an eye that's too naive to quite understand what they're seeing," observes Tartt, who adds that she found writing from the view-point of a child much more difficult than she had expected—write them as too advanced and they seem like adults, but too simple and you fall into the trap of making them cute.

Source: Benedicte Page, "The Child Who Read Too Much," in the *Bookseller*, June 28, 2002, pp. 30-31.

Topics for Further Study

- Many critics believe that *The Little Friend* can be labeled as a New Southern or Southern Gothic novel. Research one of these literary traditions and put together a classroom presentation in which you argue either that this novel fits or does not fit into such a literary tradition.
- Read the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, a book to which *The Little Friend* is often compared. Write a paper in which you compare and contrast the novels and their primary, young female protagonists, Scout and Harriet.
- Research the illegal drug methamphetamine, including its history, manufacture, effects on its users, and extent of its addictive qualities. How do your findings affect your understanding of the Ratliff brothers? Imagine how the brothers would change if their criminal activity focused on a different drug, or different type of crime altogether. In a brief paper, describe three different profiles of what the Ratliff characters may have been like if they were involved in three other criminal businesses.
- The text of *The Little Friend* contains references to many books and historical figures. Dividing the class into pairs or small groups, have each group read the book or research the figure in question and analyze how this book or person represents themes or ideas in the novel. Have each group present their findings to the class and stage a larger discussion of the ideas generated.
- Many critics of *The Little Friend* were unsatisfied with the unanswered questions at the novel's end: "What about Ida? What about Allison and Pem? What about Robin?" Outline an ending for the novel after Harriet gets out of the hospital that resolves any or all plot lines that left you wanting closure.

Further Study

Johnson, Dirk, *Meth: America's Home-Cooked Menace*, Hazelden, 2005.

Johnson provides an overview of the social, environmental, and personal impact of methamphetamine on the United States.

Stevenson, Robert Louis, *Treasure Island*, Signet Classics, 1998, originally published in 1883.

Both a classic among coming-of-age stories and pirate yarns, Stevenson's *Treasure Island* features a map on which "X" marks the spot, a one-legged pirate, and a talking parrot in a teenage boy's high-stakes and perilous adventure that takes him far from home.

Talbot, Kay, *What Forever Means After the Death of a Child; Transcending the Trauma, Living with the Loss*, Brunner-Routledge, 2002.

This guide offers advice to parents suffering such a loss and the people who support them.

The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs, edited by Joseph M. Flora, et. al., Louisiana State University Press, 2001.

This reference includes more than five hundred entries to explain Southern history, culture, figures, and issues that often appear in the literature of the region.

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Colloff, Pamela, "Life and Meth," in *Texas Monthly*, June 2004, p. 120.

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Mendelsohn, Daniel, "Murder and Manners: The Quest for Retribution in a Small Southern Town," in the *New Yorker*, October 28, 2002, p. 109.

Moore, Dennis, "A Decade Later, Another 'Illusion' Crafted," in *USA Today*, October 15, 2002, p. 8D.

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Pyper, Andrew, Review of *The Little Friend*, in *Globe & Mail* (Toronto, Canada), November 2, 2002.

Shilling, Jane, "Light in a Gothic Darkness," in the *Sunday Telegraph* (London), October 27, 2002, p. 15.

Scott, A.O., "Harriet the Spy: Donna Tartt's Strong-Willed Young Heroine Systematically Rattles the Skeletons in he Southern Family's Closet," in the *New York Times Book Review*, Vol. 107, No. 44, November 3, 2002, p. 11.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

"Night." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the "Criticism" subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on "Winesburg, Ohio." Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. "Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition," Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. "Richard Wright: "Wearing the Mask," in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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