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Jonathan Groubert: From Amsterdam, this is Bright Minds, the podcast from the John Adams Institute. A treasure trove of the best and the brightest of American thinking: I'm Jonathan Groubert and this week's guest is one of the great novelists and classicists of our age; the bestselling novelist Donna Tartt. Here she is having a great time answering questions back in 1993. Questions like: who are your heroes, Charles Dickens?

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Donna Tartt Yeah, he is. He's very nice, he's very grandfatherly, his is like; OK, good try, (inaudible) not like Joyce who, Just.....

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Pieter Steinz: Or T.S. Elliot for that matter.

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Donna Tartt: Or T.S. Eliot: I know who just strikes one dumb for the rest of one's life.

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Pieter Steinz: So that's the reason why you put him on your answering machine.

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Donna Tartt: And it works, It works! they hang up, they don't call back.

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Jonathan Groubert: A very young sounding Donna Tartt from this super fun conversation recorded way back on March 14th 1993. The Southern author gave reading and answered questions for the John Adams, hot on the heels of her hit book, *the secret History*. It was the book to have that year and *the secret History* tells the tale of a close-knit group of six students at an elite college who hatch a plan to stage a Greek Bacchanal, a plan that ultimately leads to a death.

I actually met Miss Tart a few years ago when she was touring the Netherlands supporting her novel, *the Goldfinch*. A lot of that book was set in Amsterdam and *the Goldfinch* itself became a best-seller, a Hollywood film, won a Pulitzer and was a *New York Times* book review book of the year. Not bad right? But back in 1993 her excitement as a newly minted celebrity was palpable as she flexed her encyclopedic literary knowledge and great wit and discussed her heroes like Faulkner, unavoidable if you're from Mississippi, which she is, and Edgar Allan Poe, and it probably helps to thumb through your copy of *the secret History* for this interview by the way. And now, with no further ado, here's Donna Tartt, in conversation with the Dutch journalist, author and literary critic, Pieter Steinz.

00:02:12

Pieter Steinz: In *The secret history*, you write about the strange, cold breath of the ancient world and about the classical mind, which is narrow, unhesitating, relentless. Are the classics, is Greek culture, dangerous to fragile minds?

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Donna Tartt: Well, I don't know, I mean I don't particularly think so, but the opening epigram of my, my book, is this quote, quote by Nietzsche; "I inquire now as to the genesis of a philologist and assert the following: a young man cannot possibly know what Greeks

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and Romans are, he does not know whether he is suited for finding out about them." And we all know how poor Nietzsche turned out. You know what happened to him, so....

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Pieter Steinz: *The secret History* is a novel about, about good and evil, about how seductive evil can be, how lives are ruined by crime. It's a very moralist theme, you could say; would you call yourself a moralistic writer?

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Donna Tartt: Well, I think in a lot of ways, just the novel, just the form I've chosen. The novel is, though it's a, you know, it is a popular art form, but it's also a very, very moral art form in a lot of ways. I mean our greatest novels are about, sort of depict. I mean you know, *Madam Bovary*, you know, you know *Anna Karenina*, and I mean these are all about the working, workings out of, of, of moral problems and the real. And I think the reason that novels appeal to us so much is that no matter how much philosophy or, we've studied or how religious we are, we can't really assimilate. I think it's very difficult to assimilate these ideas, you know, into our blood, into our daily lives. I mean, whereas something, like you, know, if we, if we read it, if we see it dramatized, we understand it so much better. You know Jesus, you know in the Bible whenever he can't get people to know, the disciples never understand anything poor Jesus tries to tell them and, and, and he always says you know he tries to explain, they don't understand. He says; let me tell you a story, let me tell you a story, and this is what he does again and again, parables.

I mean, and we understand things, Buddhism, I mean the story of the burning house. This is a parable that Buddha tells, I think, in the fire sermon. But there's some little children that are in a house and their mother is going to town and while she's gone the house catches on fire, and the little kids are all trapped in the house and she goes outside. I mean, she comes back and she sees her kids in this burning house, and so she does everything to try to get them to come out, because they're little and they're scared and they don't know what to do and she tries reasoning with them. You know, that doesn't work. They're panic stricken. She tries yelling at them, threatening them. They're still panic stricken and then she has a brilliant idea. She, she's been to town and she reaches in her bag and she pulls out a toy and the kids are out of the house in a second.

And when we see these things enacted out, we we, we, we feel them so much more deeply than if we're you know. This is why Aristotle is for me so much less ineffective. You know, I mean just affects me much less than Plato does, because Plato is such a great dramatist and the ideas that he presents have, have flesh and blood and they walk around and we can, we can, we can see them in the context of our own lives. Things are always easier to understand by analogy.

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Pieter Steinz: So if you're talking about ethics, you would prefer Dostoyevsky or Plato over Aristotle?

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Donna Tartt: Yes, I would. I mean, and it's because, well, I mean it's, it's, because I'm a

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novelist and not a philosopher. Things are always more palatable to me if they're sort of presented in an entertaining form.

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Pieter Steinz: That was also one of the questions I had. You studied philosophy when you were at Bennington College. What is it that made you become a writer? Is that because you think you can have more effect by writing a novel than by writing an academic treatise on ethics, or moral philosophy?

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Donna Tartt: Well, if I had written an academic treatise, would, I mean nobody would want to read it. It would be completely uninteresting. I Have nothing...

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Pieter Steinz: It's well written.

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Donna Tartt: Well, I mean I studied philosophy because I wanted to be a writer. You know writing really came first. I mean this was, this was what I wanted to do is, you know? Because I mean I'm, I'm young, I'm 28. I don't have any great truths to tell anybody that, you know, everybody in this room doesn't already know. You know, like, a lot better than I do. You know, I don't have any special....

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Pieter Steinz: But you have a story.

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Donna Tartt: But.. Yes! A story. And that's the reason that it was interesting for me to study philosophy, because the great problem of young novelists is that they are young and novelists really need a lot of experience before they're able to write. They have to know a lot about the world and how people interact and things like that. There are no child prodigies in novel writing and I think it's really arguable that there are no great novels written by anyone under 40.

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Pieter Steinz: Well, this is probably a good time for interaction with the public. Are there any novels written before 40 people?

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Donna Tartt: I mean people always have examples, but either I haven't read them or I don't think they are, you know.

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Pieter Steinz: This is not a good question for public interaction I guess. Talking about literature; who are your greatest literary examples? We know a little bit about Scott Fitzgerald, not only because you write a little bit like Scott Fitzgerald, but also because in the book Richard Papen's favorite novel is, *the Great Gatsby* and he sees all kinds of parallels between his life and *the Great Gatsby*, is Scott Fitzgerald one of your literary examples?

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Donna Tartt: Scott Fitzgerald is somebody I just love to read. Return to his books with pleasure over and over again. So, yes, I love him very much and there are books perhaps

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that I love less, that I've learned more from just in sort of a technical sense, but, but in terms of, you know, sort of the real sort of emotional part of writing and what, what one responds to oneself. And yeah, what one enjoys reading once sick and bad. You know, yeah, very, very much, I love Scott Fitzgerald.

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Pieter Steinz: Are there any authors who had a great influence on your writing? So not just for reading, but on your writing?

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Donna Tartt: Yes, a great many of them. Dickens is, is, is great writer for young novelist to study, because there's almost no problem that Dickens is unafraid to handle. You know, no technical problem, I mean he, he really just does everything. And if you think of a specific example of something that's difficult to do, you can always, you know, if you think over Dickens, you can, you can think of an example where he did. He was faced with the same problem and of course did it beautifully. So, he, I mean, he's, you know, a great teacher and also, I mean just a very sort of benevolent presence. I mean, some writers, I mean the, I think it was John Irving who talked about, you know, that it was that it was bad for young writers to become overly obsessed with great figures of the past and he used this wonderful line. You know, the ghost of the young James Joyce standing horribly at your back.

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Pieter Steinz: Looking over your shoulder

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Donna Tartt: Yes, yes, which of course, you'd never want to write again. But this is what I mean. That Dickens is a very benevolent presence because you don't get that. You know, you don't get that feeling from him. He's kind of.

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Pieter Steinz: A sort of nice grandfather?

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Donna Tartt: Yeah, he is. He's very nice. He's very grandfatherly, like; Ok, good try, you know, not like Joyce who Just...

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Pieter Steinz: Or T.S. Elliot for that matter.

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Donna Tartt: Or T.S. Elliot, I know, who can just strike one dumb for the rest of one's life.

00:10:02

Pieter Steinz: So that's the reason why you put him on your answering machine?

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Donna Tartt: And it works, they hang up, they don't call back.

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Pieter Steinz: A few questions on your southern inheritance. You were born and raised in the deep South, Mississippi, the country of William Faulkner, and that's the first person that we think of.

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Donna Tartt: We too.

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Pieter Steinz: Well, Mark Twain is a good one.

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Donna Tartt: But in Mississippi, Uncle Bill, that's Uncle Bill's country.

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Pieter Steinz: Did your native.. Well, the south has a very, very strong literary tradition, perhaps even stronger than the north or the west or the east.

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Donna Tartt: I think very much so I mean definitely I mean that's.

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Pieter Steinz: And did your native region influence your writing very much? You wouldn't call yourself a southern writer, but you are a writer from the south.

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Donna Tartt: You know Oscar Wilde, for instance, is not really an Irish writer. He never writes about the old Sod, or you know County Clare or anything like that, or digging potatoes out in the yard, but, but, but.

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Pieter Steinz: starving.

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Donna Tartt: But, but, I mean, he's just an Irishman through and through and through and through his humor, his, his way of telling his story, his extravagance, you know his, his teasing, jocular tone. He just is Irish, his temperament, even though he doesn't choose to write about Ireland. He's so Irish yet he didn't ever write about Ireland.

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Pieter Steinz: He was a sort of would-be Englishman, you would say.

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Donna Tartt: Well, in a way, yeah, he was, you know, but, but he wasn't English at all in terms of temperament, or at least the English would wish to have you think so.

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Pieter Steinz: So, you're a sort of southern writer in the way he is an Irish writer?

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Donna Tartt: Well, this is something that Flannery O'Connor said, because people are always asking about. You know, if you're a Southerner and you're a writer, people always ask you. You know, aren't you oppressed by the ghost of William Faulkner? Like the answer is no, I mean no more than I'm oppressed by saying the ghost of Joseph Haydn. You know, I'm, I'm glad that he is there, he wrote some great music. No, I'm not oppressed by this at all. But somebody asked Flannery O'Connor the same question. And how could you know this very long involved question. You know how could she possibly have anything new to say about the South because it had been, basically this is a country that belongs to a master and who

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had you know best said all there was to say. And you know what did what could she, Flannery possibly add? And she just said: you know, well, you know, you, you get off the track when the Dixy Special comes through, you know.

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Pieter Steinz: So, you don't think you will ever write a book about the glorious pre-civil war past or race relations or anything that's typically southern.

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Donna Tartt: Well it's possible, anything is possible. Actually, my my, new book is set, is set in the South. The South now is, is, a very, very different place than it was when William Faulkner was, was, writing about it. I mean there's a whole school of sort of new southern writing that you know we're faced with a whole different set of problems now than what William Faulkner had to deal with. I think William Falkner will be pretty shocked if he walked through Oxford, Mississippi today, and saw what, you know, it's very, very different.

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Pieter Steinz: What do these writers deal with then?

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Donna Tartt: I mean race relations have changed just dramatically in the course of my own lifetime. I mean when I was a little girl. I can remember very clearly. You know, separate entrances at the, at the hospital even, you know, a colored entrance. You know, things like that. You know, schools were segregated; it was. It was a very different place than it is now. You know, because that's, that's, certainly not at all the case now and I think it's really arguable that, you know, the South has. The American South has such a reputation, and rightfully so, of being, I mean so full of prejudice and hatred. I mean, Walker Percy called it dark, bloody, mad, old Mississippi. But in America now, in the Northeast and in Los Angeles, people are now dealing with problems that Southerners had to deal with. Maybe you know 20, 30, 40 years ago, because you know the, the, racial crimes that are now happening in America are not happening in Birmingham, they're not happening in Jackson, they're happening in Los Angeles and they're happening in New York because the South, in a funny way, has, has, worked through this. We have a terrible history, a terrible, unforgettable history of, of, racial violence, but, but, it's something that, that, that, both sides have really learned to live with and it's, it's, a much newer problem, I think, for other parts of the country.

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Pieter Steinz: Next is a question which is from, from, the audience. Well, in your book there is not much of these directly southern themes, but there is a lot of gothic in the story: horrible things that happen, although they're, they usually happen offstage. Is Edgar Allan Poe a big influence on you? He's sort of the founder of the gothic mode in America.

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Donna Tartt: Oh Edgar, you can't beat him with a stick. He's great. I love him.

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Pieter Steinz: You read it before bedtime?

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Donna Tartt: Sometimes I do actually Edgar Allen Poe is very fun to read when you're sick and because he..

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Pieter Steinz: You get sicker?

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Donna Tartt: You do get sicker, just very much an influence, and also he's another writer who I just kind of instinctively love. I mean just someone I'm very drawn to just on. On, on a very personal level, I mean someone whose books I really enjoy reading to amuse myself.

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Pieter Steinz: Well, this we'll take a sort of sorting out, because some, some of the questions I took in in my own interview, but now I have to really deal with the questions that are on this table. First one is; "hi, I'd like to know in which way you got the idea for your story and why did you choose this subject?"

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Donna Tartt: Well, that's, that's, really hard because it changed over the course of, because I worked on this book for eight years and it changed during the writing so many times. 5, 6, 7 years into the writing I would see a film or, or, read something that I hadn't read before that really would kind of change everything that had gone before. So, it was, it wasn't as if I had the whole idea. I had an idea of the plot structure, just a very basic skeleton of this, that it would be about some young people committing a murder and sort of the consequences. But, but I didn't have just this, this huge idea in my mind when I began it began very sketchily and kind of built-up over a period of time.

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Pieter Steinz: It was not a newspaper clipping or something like that?

I took Greek and secondary school for five years, but I couldn't speak a Greek sentence to save my life.

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Donna Tartt: This man sounds like a friend of mine.

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Pieter Steinz: But the question is: what do they teach you at American schools that makes such a difference?

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Donna Tartt: This is why we call it fiction. I mean, you know.

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Pieter Steinz Some questions on the characters, a lot, lots of questions that were put on the paper are about Julian, one of the central characters, not one of the students, but the master of the class, in which all these hideous things are, are, worked out. Well, the easiest question for me to begin with at this moment is: could you say a bit more about Julian's role in the story, because at first he seems very strong and influential, but later on just moves and he fades away.

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Donna Tartt: Well, Julian in some way, in most ways, is sort of the, the, animating presence of this book. I mean he's, he's, he's, he's, where it all begins, but the reason that he's a shadowy presence is that, I mean, it's very, very deliberate, because in the world of this novel, this, this is a novel where, where, adults are either ineffective or absent or completely horrible. I mean these. These are very young people you're talking about and they, that are the protagonists of this book and in every single, every single one of them, I mean two of them are, are actually even orphans, and Julian is, is, really, very much a moral neutral, but he's someone upon whom they all sort of project this. This, this, this desire for, for, a father, and really kind of refuse very strongly to see.

Something that I try to do throughout the book, is give, because in the early part of the book they speak so glowingly of Julian and I try to give little clues to the fact that this is really not the case. The things that they're telling you about Julian don't quite coincide with the way that he behaves. You know, because if he loves them so much, why do they see him so little? He seems very unconcerned with their. You know, they, don't talk about how he loves him all the time, but he, he, is very removed from their lives in a physical sense and you know he just looks the part. He looks like this wonderful, old, kindly, incredibly cultured gentleman. I mean sort of the-dream parent. You know it's the parent that you wish that you had the sort of fairy godfather and they, I mean they're all kind of blind to his faults because of that. And that's why, when you know when what happens with Julian happens and it's such a terrible betrayal when it's just thrown in their face, I mean what they've really refused to see, again and again and have pushed it back every single one of them with both hands repeatedly throughout the book.

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Pieter Steinz: And then he fades away?

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Donna Tartt: Yes.

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Pieter Steinz: In an interview this week, one of the many interviews you gave. You told the interview that character, characters in this secret history are based on abstract ideas and principles. Could you say what the abstract idea behind the character of Julian is then?

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Donna Tartt: When I was in college I was, actually when I was studying Dickens. There's, there's, a book called, called, Authority by Richard Senate, which is largely, about, about. You know, you know. It has nothing really to do with, with what we're talking about here. But the opening quote is, Senate says that people are always attracted to authority figures whom they secretly do not feel to be legitimate. You know it's a book about dictatorship and about political power. I mean it's very hazy, it's, it's, it's, not. It's not an abstract idea that you know, it's, it's, not as if Julian stands for you know truth or some you know, sort of very, very simple sort of. I mean that that was.

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Pieter Steinz: He's just charismatic.

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Donna Tartt: Yeah, a charismatic figure, I mean frequently charismatic figures are very empty. I mean charismatic figures are frequently all surface. You know there, there, there's, nothing there and that makes them more powerful. The fact that they are all surface because you can project whatever you want to upon them. Everybody has different things that they want in different people and the more sort of blank someone is, the more they're able to reflect back your own desires. To, I mean Julian is described in the book, is being, being, like a mirror. He's very brittle, he's very shallow, but he creates the illusion of warmth and depth. Like a mirror does any emotion you throw at him, he throws right back at you and you get the and you get the sense that he really is just sort of imitating in a way, but you get the sense that that he understands you perfectly because he's, he, somehow is picking up what, what, you want from him and throwing it back at you.

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Pieter Steinz: He would make great dictator now understand.

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Donna Tartt: Well, at the end of the book, you know, there's, there's a story that that Julian has gone off to, to, has been hired by a royal family somewhere in Africa and they know which turns out to be a rumor. But you know they're all enchanted by this idea. You know maybe he'll bring up. You know, like Aristotle, they bring up a man who will conquer the world. You know they say, you know I don't know what I would be if Julian got hold of me when I was eight years old.

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Pieter Steinz: Why did you choose to write the story from a male point-of-view, while you are obviously a female author?

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Donna Tartt: Well, for a very, very technical reason, it was obvious to me from the outset that this this book had to be told from the point-of-view of, of a first person narrator. It was essential that one never knows what the other characters are thinking. There couldn't be an omniscient view point. You could never go into Henry's mind or into Julian's because this is a novel of how the narrator is sort of gradually drawn into this and gradually fooled, and the reader should be fooled along with him. So I knew that I needed, needed, a first person narrator, and the reason that I made the first person narrator male was simply because the eyes of the narrator are the only pair of eyes that I have in the book. And....

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Speaker2: Wouldn't a pair of female eyes have ...?

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Donna Tartt: No, they wouldn't have because if you, I mean if you think about it, a character like Bunny, for instance, wouldn't have really behaved, wouldn't have really been his real self around a woman, he would have been a very different character around. He would have acted. He would have behaved very differently towards, you know, a young woman who had joined the class then, and he would, I think, much less himself. I mean, I think he would have, you know, restrained himself much more. I think he would have. You would have seen a better side of him. That was probably less true. The same with Henry. I think that that you

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just you, just wouldn't have been able to see these, these, characters as clearly as you would have from, from, the point-of-view of a young man. And also I didn't want to bring the question. If the narrator had been a young woman, there would have been, you know, always, always, the question. You know, obviously there's some sexual attraction that you know that she has to hand to Julian and I didn't want to bring that in at all because it's not. I mean that's, that's, not that's and if she had been a woman that that question would have been asked. Just you know it, just it justuld have been and you know not necessarily something I want to come.

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Pieter Steinz: Once *the secret history*, a novel about repressed sexuality. Is that what it is?

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Donna Tartt: In a lot of ways it is. I mean, yes, I mean the sexuality in the book just kind of bursts out at these sort of weird points and there's, there's, never a sex scene or anything like that. But I mean in a way, I mean that what the Bacchi is about, you know just sort of repression, repression, repression, and you know you repress anything for too long. It will eventually kind of come out in some way. You're not expecting it and don't want it to. I mean, I think it's no accident at all that you know serial killers. I mean, you know civilians, you know, not kings and queens, you know sort of went around killing people. The first time that we see these are in Victorian England. You know this is. This is this is the first time...

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Pieter Steinz: Repressed societies?

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Donna Tartt: Yes, Doctor Jeckyll and Mr Hyde. It wouldn't have been so much fun for Doctor Jeckyll to turn into Mr Hyde had he not lived in Victorian England. Do you know what I mean? He could have just been Doctor Jeckyll and gone out and done these things and no one would care.

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Pieter Steinz: Much easier. There are two questions about the names in the book. The first one is: is it mere coincidence that Henry the Evil One is named after Lord Henry from the picture of Dorian Gray?

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Donna Tartt: Well, it is coincidence, but it's an interesting question because I mean you know something else that this book is concerned with the sort of the ideal of the Dandy or the self-centered one, I mean, you know one of the characters. I think the friend, not Dorian but Dorian's friend, says, says of Lord Henry Watton. You know he, he never, he never says a right thing and he never does an incorrect thing. He's, I mean the person of the Dandy is very controlled and very, very stylized, and I mean very sort of very sort of kabuki like, unreal presence, and that's what these young people are trying to. Henry in particular, is moving towards, but is, is, is kind of unable to get at. Julian is a perfect example. Julian is very much like Lord Henry Watton, who's also moral neutral. And in in the book I mean picture of Dorian Gray.

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Pieter Steinz: The other one is Bunny, whose name whose nickname I guess has associations

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with the writer and critic Edmund Wilson from, I think it's the '30's of this century. The fact that Bunny's real name is Edmond, Edmond Corkoran strengthens the association. Is there any connection or is it an homage to Edmund Wilson?

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Donna Tartt: Well, it's not, but it's, it's, it's, an interesting point to bring up anyway. I mean because I don't like Edmund Wilson and we almost always disagree invariably. So maybe it's some, some, unconscious thing.

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Pieter Steinz: Well then, there's a so-called short and simple question, and that is: are you bunny?

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Donna Tartt: I wouldn't be here if I was.

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Jonathan Groubert: She wouldn't be there because Bunny dies. It's not a spoiler. You learned that at the start of the book. There is also more of that conversation and reading from the secret history on our YouTube channel and linked to that in the show notes, that was a conversation with Donna Tartt back in 1993 at the kleine comedie.

Did you know that we also have a newsletter? You can sign up for and a veritable treasure trove of great American thinkers and speakers at <https://www.john-adams.nl/> , <https://www.john-adams.nl/> . And while you're there, why not become a member of the John Adams? Not only will you support what we do, you get a discount of future live events. In the meantime, you should go to wherever you get your podcasts and leave a review of the show. This will help get the word out, and we can keep on sharing the very best of American thinkers in Europe with you free of charge. That's it for this week show. Our theme song is called La Prensa by the Parlando's. Our editor is Tracy Metz from Amsterdam. This was Bright Mines, broadcast from the John Adams Institute, Jonathan Groubert. Thank you for listening.