

**IDH2930: Spring 2020 (Un)Common Reads: *The Secret History***

Mondays, 5:10–6:00 p.m. (Period 10) • Hume 119

**Instructor**

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**Description, Purpose, and Policies**

Author Donna Tartt is best known for her most-recent novel, *The Goldfinch* (2013), which garnered numerous literary awards, including the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. But it is her debut novel, *The Secret History* (1992), which has become a cult classic, and continues to generate the most interest among readers.

*The Secret History* is an inverted detective story, where readers are exposed to a murder in the opening pages. Readers are told about the victim, the murderers, and their means, but their motives remain a mystery. The story is told by protagonist Richard Papen, a first-year student at small-but-elite Hampden College in Vermont. Coming from a working-class family, Richard feels out of place at Hampden until he meets a mysterious group of five wealthy and eccentric students—Henry, “Bunny,” Francis, and Charles and Camilla (twins)—that share his interest in classics (i.e., Greek, Latin). Richard is elusive about his working-class background, but over time, Henry and his group grow to accept Richard into their fold. But when the rest of the group—without Richard—attempts to translate their academic interests into ritual practice by recreating an ancient Dionysian rite deep in the Vermont woods, the story takes multiple unexpected turns.

*The Secret History*’s broad themes include envy, guilt, isolation, manipulation, social class, and the link between beauty and terror. Donna Tartt began writing *The Secret History* as a student at Bennington College in Vermont in the 1980s, and several of the characters in the novel are based on her friends, acquaintances, and experiences there.

The purpose of this course is to expose readers to a modern murder mystery masterpiece set in a college town and written by a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who was a student herself at the novel’s outset. Attendance, participation, reactions papers, and leading group discussions will determine grades. Reaction papers will focus on plots and themes that are present in the book. Students will uphold the University of Florida Honor Code in all aspects of this course. Class attendance is mandatory. Students requesting classroom accommodation must first register with the Dean of Students Office. The Dean of Students Office will provide documentation to the student who must then provide this documentation to the Instructor when requesting accommodation.

**Book**

Tartt, Donna. (1992). *The Secret History*. New York: Vintage Books/Random House. (559 pp.; \$13.39 paperback).

**Grading**

<b>Item and Description</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Points</b>	<b>Total</b>
Attendance and Participation	14	2	28
Reaction Papers (“RP”; 250 words)	4	12	48
Leading Group Discussions (6 groups of 2–3 people)	2	12	24
			<b>100</b>

**Schedule and Readings**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Chapters (pages)</b>	<b>Topic or Discussion</b>	<b>Due</b>
1/06	—	Syllabus & Expectations	
1/13	BOOK I: Prologue & Chapter 1 (1–45)	Group: Instructor	
1/20	—	No Class: MLK, Jr. Day	
1/27	Chapter 2 (46–103)	Group: Richard	
2/03	Chapter 3 (104–135)	Group: Henry	RP#1: Chs. 1–3
2/10	Chapter 4 (136–171)	Group: “Bunny”	
2/17	Chapter 5, Part I (172–222)	Group: Francis	
2/24	Chapter 5, Part II (222–269)	Group: Charles	RP#2: Chs. 4–5
3/02	—	No Class: Spring Break	
3/09	BOOK II: Chapter 6, Part I (275–326)	Group: Camilla	
3/16	Chapter 6, Part II (326–376)	Group: Richard	
3/23	Chapter 7 (377–420)	Group: Henry	RP#3: Chs. 6–7
3/30	Chapter 8, Part I (421–454)	Group: “Bunny”	
4/06	Chapter 8, Part II (454–489)	Group: Francis	
4/13	Chapter 8, Part III (489–524)	Group: Charles	
4/20	Chapter 8, Part IV & Epilogue (524–559)	Group: Camilla	RP#4: Ch. 8

**Course Grading Scale**

<b>Letter</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Letter</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Letter</b>	<b>Percent</b>
A	≥ 93.33	B-	≥ 80.00	D+	≥ 66.67
A-	≥ 90.00	C+	≥ 76.67	D	≥ 63.33
B+	≥ 86.67	C	≥ 73.33	D-	≥ 60.00
B	≥ 83.33	C-	≥ 70.00	E	< 60.00