Donna Tartt, “*The secret history”*, 1992.

**What’s the story about?**

*Prologue*  
The book starts with a prologue in which the narrator tells what happened some years ago. The narrator tells that he and some of his friends have killed someone named Bunny and that they got away with it, although there was a big police investigation.   
  
*Book 1*  
Richard Papen, the narrator, lives in a small town called Plano, California, USA. He hates his parents because they don't pay any attention to him. His father owns a petrol station. They are middle-class people. Richard wants to leave Plano, therefore he fills in a registration form of a university in a little town called Hampden at the east coast of the USA. After some nagging his parents allow him to go there. He passes his tests and starts studying Psychology.   
  
A the university there is a little group that studies classics. The classics students are very peculiar characters who form a close formation. Their teacher, Julian Morrow, is known as a strange teacher. He only allows a very select group of students in his class and he demands them to drop almost all their other subjects. Richard, who has studied Greek for two years in high school, feels attracted to the group and wants to join them. When he visits Julian he tells him he's sorry but he has to refuse Richard's request. One day when Richard is in the library he helps the classics students solve a Greek grammatical problem. They persuade Julian to let Richard join them.   
  
The group now consists six students: Edmund Corcoran (Bunny), Camilla and Charles Macaulay (twins), Francis Abernathy, Henry Winter and Richard. Bunny, Francis and Henry are rich. Richard is the poorest, he has to work for Dr. Roland to pay his tuition. Camilla and Charles are orphans. The five are good friends, Richard is accepted but although they involve him in everything, he feels he is not really a part of their group. In the weekends they move into a remote country house owned by Francis' aunt. She doesn't live there, the only inhabitant is the gardener.   
  
Bunny's parents hardly give him any money so Henry, who is his best friend, pays a lot for him. During the Christmas holidays, when the campus is closed, Henry even takes Bunny on a trip to Italy. The others, except Richard, go home for the holidays. Richard finds a job and a place to sleep in an old warehouse owned by the old hippie Leo. His bedroom is the attic and in the ceiling there is a big hole. Because it freezes like hell Richard gets ill. He feels very sorry for himself and he even wonders why he had to leave Plano. On a cold night Richard wants to make a call in a phone box but he drops the coin. When he wants to pick it up he bumps his head very hard; he is bleeding. It takes all his power to walk home and when he finally arrives he finds Henry, who came back from Italy prematurely, waiting for him. Henry takes Richard to the hospital. It turns out that Henry has saved Richards live.   
  
When Richard is discharged from the hospital, Henry invites him to stay with him. Some days later, when Richard is fully recovered, he moves back into his own room and school starts again. On Thursday Richard finds out he left a Greek book at Henry's. He still has Henry's key, so he goes over to get his book. When he gets there it surprises him that Henry is not home, it's 6.30!   
Henry's room is a mess and there are packed suitcases next to the door. Richard finds a mysterious note with a flightnumber and a phone number on it. He calls the phone number and discovers that Henry made reservations for four persons on a flight to Buenos Aires next Sunday.   
  
That weekend he tries to get in contact with the twins, Francis and Henry but he can reach neither of them. He then goes to Bunny. On Monday, during class, everybody is present again. When Richard asks them where they were, they all have dubious excuses for their absence. A couple of days later Henry tells him the whole story. Henry, Francis, Charles and Camilla planned to leave Hampden and fly to Argentina. They would use Francis' trust to pay for all the expenses. Unfortunately the trust was collected by his mother some weeks before without telling Francis about it. The reason they were still in Hampden was the lack of money. Henry had given Richard the key to his house so that he could arrange things after they would have left. Richard then guesses they killed someone and they therefore want to escape. This turns out to be the truth.   
  
During Greek classes about Plato and Dionysus Henry got obsessed by the rituals the ancient Greeks used more than 2.000 years ago. These rituals led to a sort of hypnosis, in which men returned to their basic instincts. The five students wanted to imitate these rituals. They went outside in the neighbourhood of Francis' country house wearing robes and being drunk and started the rituals. Bunny didn't really take it serious and had to laugh a lot. Because they didn't succeed in reaching a state of hypnosis, they decided to fast a couple of days before trying again. Bunny couldn't keep his promise and was caught eating by Charles. The group then decided to go on without Bunny. The next time they tried they did succeed. They saw a ghost of whom they thought it was Dionysus. On their way back, still under hypnosis, Henry heard something behind him and hit it. It turned out to be a man. They all start beating the man up and finally killed the man, who was a farmer, in the most horrible and terrifying way. When they came back to Henry's house in the morning Bunny was there and they were all covered with blood. They told him they had bumped up against a deer. The next day none of them exactly knows what happened, they had been drunk, they had fasted some days and were very tired.   
  
Coincidentally Bunny reads an article about a murder that took place the night when the four came back covered with blood near Francis' house. He suspects his friends of having killed the man but can't really imagine it and therefore he doesn't take his suspicions serious. As a joke he asks the others if they killed the man. He notices his joke sort of scares them and that they don't find his jokes funny. For Bunny that is a reason to continue making this kind of jokes.   
  
Hoping that Bunny would forget about the murder and to make sure he wouldn't talk about it with anyone else Henry takes him on a trip to Italy. In Italy Henry suffered from splitting headaches and lay in bed most of the time. Bunny then translated his diary from Latin into English and saw his suspicions being confirmed. Henry found Bunny reading his translated diary and destroys it. Then he went back to Hampden, leaving Bunny in Italy.   
  
They know Bunny would never go to the police, but they also realize he can't keep his mouth shut. Therefore he is a danger to them: if he told someone else he or she would tell the police. They have a plan to kill Bunny with poisoned mushrooms but it turns out to be too difficult and dangerous. On night Bunny appears drunk at Richards and tells him the whole story. Richard says he didn't know and acts shocked. After Bunny left Richard immediately phoned Henry and told him about Bunny. The five decide to kill Bunny the next day.   
  
When the weather is fine Bunny always goes for a walk. The others plan to wait for him somewhere on his way and to throw him in the ravine. The next day they go there, but when Bunny doesn't appear they want to leave. Then Bunny arrives. He was later than normal because he had went to a party. He asked them what they were doing there. Henry told him they were looking for ferns and then threw him into the ravine. After having confirmed Bunny really was dead and that they had not left any evidence they went back to their houses.   
  
*Book 2*  
That night it starts snowing, so that Bunny's body, covered by snow, is only found after ten days. In the meanwhile a big search operation was started in vainly. Two FBI-agents, Scolia and Davenport, are looking for an eventual killer but they do not find one. Charles can't handle the tension and contracts an alcohol addiction. He's drunk almost twenty-four hours a day. Bunny's parents invite all Bunny's friends to stay with them the days before the funeral. They all came and pretended to be very sad. In a way they really were sad; neither of them could sleep without getting nightmares and they thought about Bunny all the time, but they hardly ever mentioned it to each other. Back in Hampden Camilla moves to a hotel room because Charles battered her. Henry, with whom she secretly developed a relationship, pays the rent.   
  
When Francis and Richard visit Julian a couple of weeks later he shows them a letter. The letter is written by Bunny and tells about the murder and Bunny's fear to be killed by the others. The letter was written the night before the murder, but Julian received it only recently because it was lain in the wrong pigeon hole and because Julian only checks his mail once in a while. Richard and Francis are relieved when Julian tells them he thinks it's a sick joke made by some else, but when they see one page is written on writing paper of the hotel in which Bunny and Henry stayed in Rome, they are scared to death. Julian has not noticed the sign on the writing paper yet, so the try to steel the letter but they fail.   
  
They want to tell Henry. He has the key to Julian's room and can help them get the letter. First they can't find Henry, but when the go to Camilla's hotel room she tells them Henry went to Julian. When they arrive there Richard goes upstairs and finds Julian and Henry reading the letter. They still haven't seen the sign, but before Richard can warn Henry, Julian notices the sign on the writing paper and immediately knows they have killed Bunny. Julian gives Henry the letter. The next day Julian has disappeared which really hurts Henry who saw him as a father.   
  
Meanwhile Charles has turned against Henry, he angry with him because of Camilla and he blames Henry for all his problems. Henry tries to keep things down. When Henry leans his car to Charles, he gets arrested drunk and without a driving-license and they both have to appear in court. Afraid of Charles telling everything to the police during an interrogation, they take him to Francis' country house. Charles is afraid that Henry wants to kill him and therefore doesn't want Henry to know he's at the country house. Francis and Richard assure him they won't tell Henry.   
  
After a couple of days Henry calls to the country house to see if they were there. Unfortunately Charles notices the phone call and thinks Richard has betrayed him. He leaves with the truck he 'leant' from the gardener.   
  
Richard and Francis go after Charles but they can't find him. They go to Camilla to tell her what has happened. When they arrive Henry is there too. Suddenly Charles comes in with a gun. He wants to shoot Henry. Francis throws a glass of wine into his face so that they can unarm Charles. They succeed preventing Charles to kill Henry, but Charles is still able to shoot four times. On bullet hits Richard in the stomach. When the hotelkeeper and his wife arrive, Henry fetches the gun and shoots himself through the head twice. He couldn't live his life the way it was: he killed two men, was responsible for the involvement of the others with the murders and the man he loved most, Julian, left him. Henry died twelve hours later. Their story for the police is easy: Richard got shot when he wanted to stop Henry killing himself. To thank him Henry's mother gives Richard Henry's BMW.   
  
*Epilogue*  
The contact between the remaining four decreases. Richard is the only one who finishes his study; English instead of Greek. He got married with a girl from Hampden university and went back to California, but divorced after only six months: she thought she didn't really know him.   
  
On day he receives a letter from Francis in which he announces he will commit suicide. Richard takes the first plane to Boston and finds Francis in a hospital. He was found in bath having cut his pulse. Camilla who had also received a letter had flown to Boston too. Francis tells them why he tried to commit suicide: his grandfather found out about Francis being gay and threatened to disinherit him if he didn't marry a girl.   
  
Camilla tells she takes care of her grandmother and that she lost contact with Charles. The last thing she heard from him was that he got married with an older woman who had been an alcoholic too, that they lived in San Antonio and that Charles had a job as a dishwasher.   
  
Richard who has always secretly been in love with Camilla asks her to marry him, but she refuses. She says she can't because she has to take care of her grandmother. When Richard offers to come live with them she gives him the real reason for her refusal: she is still in love with Henry. Then they both go home and Francis marries the girl.

**The characters**

The main character is Richard Papen. He’s hardworking, he’s very passive and a bit shy. He wants to end up somewhere better than his parents, with whom he has a bad relationship. His parents were poor and unhappy, so he wants to go to college to have a better future. The other important characters are the 5 students who are in his class, Edmond, or Bunny, Corcoran, Henry Winter, Francis Abernathy, and Camilla and Charles Macaulay. They are mostly occupied with studying Greek, but also with enjoying free time in bars or in each other’s apartment. In general they’re okay friends, they aren’t the best of friends but they mostly hangout with just each other. Of course, some like one better than the other but they don’t show hate to any of the main characters.

**Time**

The story is chronological, except for the prologue. There are certain moments that are described in more detail than others, but not in a way that is distracting. There are no flashbacks and the only preview is the prologue. There are no specific dates or years given, but it’s happening in the modern era.

**Place**

The first part of story is set in Plano, where Richard grew up. The rest is set mostly at Hampden College but also in Francis’ manor. The place isn’t really of importance to the story.

**Circumstances**

The story is set in the North-West of the United States. The weather has an influence on the story, namely when Richard, Camilla, Charles, Francis and Henry have dumped Bunny’s body it starts heavily snowing. Because of the snow Bunny’s body gets found after 10 days, the time before that everyone’s looking for him.

**Narrative point of view**

The story is told by Richard Papen, he is also the main character.

**Structure**

The story is organised in chapters, that don’t have titles, and it’s divided into two parts.

**Theme and motive**

The subject of the book is murder, since that is what the story mainly revolves around. Other important elements are friendship, secrecy, and betrayal. The whole reason Bunny gets killed is because he uses what he knows about the previous murder against the other characters. He could betray his friends whenever he wanted, which is why it would be too dangerous to let him live.

**What did the writer want to make clear to the reader?**

Tartt wanted to show what a serious crime like murder does to a group of friends. How it changes people and how the guilt lingers throughout the rest of the murderer’s life.

**Genre**

The story is an inverted detective novel. It’s not about who killed Bunny, you know that the moment you start reading the book, it’s about why the characters killed Bunny and what happens to them after they killed him.

**Explain the title and possible under title.**

The story is written like Richard is in the future telling you about a part of his past. A secret part of his history.

**Information about the author.**

Donna Tartt was born in 1963 in Greenwood, Mississippi. She has a younger sister and her parents are called Don and Taylor. Donna wrote her first poem when she 5 years old, so she had always had a thing for literature. In 1981, after high school, she went to Oxford University. After a year she left and went to Bennington College in Vermont. That’s where she started writing her first novel ‘The secret history’. So far this is her only novel. Bennington College was inspiration for the setting of The secret history.