

The Merit of English Section

Junior Division

Name of Winner : Joanna Wu

Name of School : St Paul's Convent School

Book Title : *The Secret History*

Author : Donna Tartt

Publisher : Alfred A. Knopf

The Secret History is the first book written by the beloved author, Donna Tartt. If you haven't heard before, the book is known to be a cult classic. It manages to be mesmerising, enthralling and haunting in the most brilliant way possible. The 6 main characters are classics students, devotedly attending a program about Ancient Greece at Hampden College. One of the 6, (Edmund Corcoran) however, was killed by the other five. The narrator, Richard Papen, contemplates what happened years later.

In adherence to Ancient Greece's culture and mythology, 4 of the classics students (Henry, Francis, Charles and Camila) held a bacchanal, an Ancient Greek Ritual. While performing the ceremony drunkenly, Henry supposedly killed someone by accident. Edmund later on found out about this and he became distrustful. But under those circumstances, understandably so. He continuously blackmailed the group, threatening to expose what they've done. Henry later on told Richard about everything, knowing that Edmund would go to him to ask for help and seek advice. And after getting Richard on their side, the 5 students brutally killed Edmund while he was hiking, sending him to a swift death. The next half of the story talks about what happened after Edmund's death, how they desperately try to keep everything under covers; how they cope with the series of traumatic events and their friend group falling apart. At the end, Henry killed himself to protect the group from getting caught, or perhaps because he was still

curious about the mystery of death itself.

If you haven't read the book you might find it strange that Richard didn't tell the authorities about the murder, and instead kept it a secret till the very end and even went to the extent to kill Edmund with the group. But Richard was from a loveless, somewhat emotionally abusive family. He was a transfer to the college and was desperate for approval and acceptance from others. As he said so himself, he was charmed by the group, dazzled by the group's intelligence, wealth and glamour. And since the book was from his point of view, us as readers often think what he thinks. When Richard thinks Edmund is a misunderstood, morally good person, we think he's a misunderstood, morally good person; when Richard thinks that he's a materialistic person who takes advantage of his friends, we think he's a materialistic person that takes advantage of his friends. To be honest, Edmund is always painted in a bad light so it's hard to

really know if he's as bad as the friend group always says he is. Is he spoiled? Yes. Is he self-centered? Notoriously so. Is he as awful as the friend group says he is? No, not at all. The friend group seemingly ignores all his positive traits, nitpicking on his bad traits, always justifying murdering him because of those traits. How they described Edmund after they murdered the farmer felt like a description of a different person, Henry especially. Henry's manipulative and calculated, but empathetic and charismatic. In my opinion, he's one of the most intriguing characters. He's a linguistic genius and said to be inhuman. He killed, yet he talked about it as if the cold-blooded murder had no impact on him whatsoever. Casually brushing it over like it's nothing. All of the characters are three dimensional and complex, their personalities feel authentic. Everyone and everything in this story isn't black and white, just like real life. And to be frank, it doesn't matter. All that matters is who's side of the story you're listening to.

The book lacks uninteresting, overused clichés, which is honestly a breath of fresh air. I love how the story isn't your typical "whodunit" sort of murder mystery. In fact, it reveals who killed Edmund at the very start. The mystery of the book is finding out the whys, hows and the aftermath of the murder. What's also refreshing is that Richard, the protagonist, is often absent from the drama. You could say he's more of a witness, especially at the beginning of the story before things were unraveled. The story is of course improbable, but the author's persuasive, elegant writing just makes it so life-like. The story has a feeling of danger and an unending sense of suspense along with it. It's heavily influenced by Greek philosophy; structurally similar to a Greek tragedy.

Rather than saying that "*The Secret History*" is a story, I'd say it's more of an experience, taking you on a captivating journey. It's an escape from reality, allowing

us to take a glimpse of the world Donna created. You won't feel as if you were reading a novel, it's like playing a silent movie in your head. All you need to do is take a seat, and enjoy.