

Art and despair: Tess Gunty's *The Rabbit Hutch* wins National Book Award

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The Rabbit Hutch by Tess Gunty, New York: Knopf, 2022, 334 pp.

The Rabbit Hutch, the debut novel from Tess Gunty and the 2022 National Book Award winner, is in many ways a gem. This year's National Book Awards, handed out each year by the National Book Foundation, were announced November 16. The panel of five judges is selected by past winners and judges.

In a literary environment cluttered with self-obsession and identity politics, where the most common responses to the crises of contemporary life tend to be pessimism and misanthropy, Gunty's novel stands out as a smart, funny and humane alternative that recognizes to a degree the importance of class and environment on the formation of character.

The Rabbit Hutch follows the lives of a number of residents of La Lapiniere Affordable Housing Complex, nicknamed by its residents "the rabbit hutch," in the fictional post-industrial city of Vacca Vale, Indiana. These lives, mostly bleak, are intertwined by a single, climactic event that is both disturbing and, in the novel's terms, triumphant.

The novel's main character is 18-year-old Blandine, a brilliant young woman who has recently dropped out of high school and graduated from the state's foster care system. The novel opens as Blandine "exits her body," stabbed by a group of boys. Blandine, we learn, is formerly Tiffany Watkins, a student at St. Philomena's, Vacca Vale's only private high school, where "the teachers like her because she is brainy and tragic." At St. Philomena's she comes under the sway of music teacher James Yager, who does not particularly like being a teacher but who "accepted the job as a consolation lifestyle," and who eventually sleeps with Tiffany when his wife and children are away. Left in the cold by James, Tiffany turns in her grief to medieval mysticism, hauling around a large book called *She-Mystics* and quoting at length from Hildegard von Bingen.

Other characters in Gunty's novel include Hope, a new mother who develops a phobia of her baby's eyes; Moses Robert Blitz, the disaffected son of child television star Elsie Blitz, who lives an almost exclusively digital life and terrorizes his "enemies" in an unintentionally hilarious way; Malik, Jack and Todd, the three young men who are Blandine's roommates, and Joan Kowalski. Joan, who "has the posture of a question

mark" and a "voice like a communion wafer—tasteless, light," screens user comments for Restinpeace.com, an online obituary site. Eventually emerging as one of the novel's most significant characters, Joan is also one of Gunty's finest, most deft creations.

Gunty has peopled *The Rabbit Hutch* with a number of memorable characters, but as she herself has said, the novel's real primary character is the city of Vacca Vale, "a city designed for cars, not for people," which has been left for dead by the bankruptcy of the Zorn Automobile Company.

Vacca Vale is a miserable place to live, and it is to Gunty's credit that none of the characters can be understood without reference to this "supposedly dying," Midwestern blightscape. From self-serving politicians to the polluted local river, from inadequate housing to the exploitative "renewal" project that has Blandine's beloved park, Chastity Valley, in its crosshairs, Vacca Vale is an economic and social disaster created by rapacious capitalism, and Gunty's characters are first and foremost the system's victims. Blandine feels so dominated and oppressed by her environment that she imagines her insides are actually a miniature of Vacca Vale.

Blandine, who has adopted her new name from a Christian martyr tortured by the Romans in the second century, is winningly resourceful and rebellious. She is the one character in the novel who does not accept Vacca Vale's fate as an inevitability, and she also casts about for a salve for the deep wound James has caused her. But Blandine is very young, and she is alone, and the courses of action she hits upon reveal these limitations. The conclusion of the novel, a novel that is both clear-eyed and compassionate toward almost all its characters, is appropriately moving but somewhat disappointing in the limited vision Blandine arrives at.

Tess Gunty grew up in a working class neighborhood in South Bend, Indiana. She earned her BA, with a concentration in creative writing, at Notre Dame University, and an MFA degree at New York University, where she was a Lillian Vernon Fellow and studied with author Jonathan Safran Foer (*Everything Is Illuminated*).

Speaking to a *Los Angeles Times* interviewer in July, Gunty said of Blandine, "I think she's an extremely principled person who is interested in acting on her principles, without

performing, and finding ways to make her immediate environment a more just place. ... I don't think anything she does is guaranteed to work and she knows that ... and yet she resists anyway, and that is extremely hopeful to me."

One of the things Blandine resists is the profit system, the commodification of herself and her beauty, the commodification of human labor, and the commodification of the natural world, such as her beloved Chastity Valley. Blandine's resistance takes a form meaningful to her—she rains animal bones and fake blood down upon the fancy dinner of a group of city planners and developers—but it is a form that even she realizes is futile.

In her last encounter with James, in which she accuses him, a little wildly, of being the exploiting bourgeoisie in their relationship, Blandine summarizes her position vis a vis her environment as a whole:

"I'm not arguing *for* anything. I'm just arguing against you, and this [Marxism] is the best framework I have for it. I'm not smart enough to lead a revolution, okay? I'm very aware of that. All I know is that we fucking need one."

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Blandine may be speaking for Gunty herself here, and if so their conception of revolution is undeveloped. In the *Los Angeles Times* interview, Gunty qualifies her opposition to capitalism in a familiar way:

"Lately and increasingly I feel a very visceral dread about poorly regulated capitalism," she admits. "I do think that almost every major crisis that America is facing right now is enabled and worsened by the extraction economy."

Whether Gunty intends to hold out hope for a better "regulated" capitalism, *The Rabbit Hutch* never hints at a class-conscious, working class solution to the "extraction economy." Revolution in the novel, like the revelation experienced by Blandine's mystics, remains a personal affair and one ultimately destined for martyrdom. Blandine also extolls the righteousness of the #MeToo movement, again seemingly acting as a mouthpiece for Gunty, with no thought given to the right-wing, anti-democratic character of that movement.

Nevertheless, Gunty's novel breaks free to an extent of the pessimism and misanthropy that mar so much contemporary fiction. The epiphanies in *The Rabbit Hutch* involve human connection and hope in the face of a degraded culture. In an

interview with *Bomb Magazine*, she offers an incisive critique of that culture:

I was sick of the self. I thought, How can I write something that's resisting that extreme individualistic worldview that feels so corrosive? In America, at least, it's everywhere you look.

For all its brilliance—and the outstanding sentences do pile up quickly ("I hope your pre-nup was cynical," Tiffany quips at James)—*The Rabbit Hutch* suffers from some first-novel foibles. It is overwritten in places where a lighter, more straightforward touch would suffice, and Blandine's speeches can become essayistic and heavy-handed. One senses Gunty feels the need to get all the words out, to put everything on the page, as in the book's two and a half pages of acknowledgments.

Contemporary culture, and this includes literary fiction, is in a state of considerable ideological and social crisis. Divisive identity politics, isolating pessimism and fantasies of apocalyptic violence are officially rewarded and tend to reign from movie screens to university campuses and bookstore shelves. Resistant voices are still few and far between. Gunty inevitably carries much of the political baggage of the time, but hers is also a resistant voice in certain ways. More will sound, and more effectively, as the working class continues to come to political consciousness and assert its own interests against exploitation, the pandemic war and climate change. These are still early days, but a new literature is emerging.



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