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Gabrielle Roy , Philip Stratford (Afterword)

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The Tin Flute, Gabrielle Roy's first novel, is a classic of Canadian fiction. Imbued with Roy's unique brand of compassion and compelling understanding, this moving story focuses on a family in the Saint-Henri slums of Montreal, its struggles to overcome poverty and ignorance, and its search for love.

An affecting story of familial tenderness, sacrifice, and survival during the Second World War. The novel was made into a critically acclaimed motion picture in 1983.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Tin Flute Details

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Author : Gabrielle Roy , Philip Stratford (Afterword)

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From Reader Review The Tin Flute for online ebook

?Emily says

Oh, so readable, so heartbreaking, so thought provoking.

What is the consequences of destitution on a family? How does it affect one's psyche? The author of this book shows the devastating affects of poverty on one family., but the author does it in a loving way. I read this book through many tears.

Another theme is war. Why do the poor fight? It can't for loyalty to the country who has crushed their dreams in the past. Who benefits from war? Is it the soldiers or is the ones who stay home and make money?

The book was originally written in French, but my translation is so good, that I found it hard to believe it wasn't written in English. Highly recommended.

Tracey says

A new favourite author. This story set during WWII describes the conditions and people living in the working class area of Montreal. Roy speaks from the heart and for the people. As the Maclean review states on the back of the edition shown; '(Roy's) gift of portraying warmth without sentimentality, joy without delusion' is rarely matched.

Being from a working class family myself, this book spoke to me of the struggles, dreams and courage of such people wherever in the World they may be.

C. says

I am of two poles like **Gabrielle Roy**: Winnipeg-born, with everything we needed but our parents struggled. I encountered one distant resemblance to the Lacasses of "*The Tin Flute*", the most destitute family about whom I've read. Not hitting the right career and financial plan in the beginning, was like a tire that kept puncturing, a black hole. Throw money at the Lacasses and it got sucked up. One of the reasons this award-winning début receives three stars from me, is disbelief that the Father and children did not earn money *somehow*. A catholic place like Montréal in 1945 was ripe for babysitting! The Mother worked but was too often pregnant. That she was run ragged at home, I don't accept. No kids did dishes, cleaned, or cooked? She wouldn't ask her Mother or brothers for help?

The other reason for moderately grading an admirable, complex literary coup is that we never like the eldest daughter, Florentine. **Gabrielle** gives voice to everyone's thoughts, even the awful Jean Lévesque, whom Florentine asininely wanted to impress because he *wasn't* a lover's type. When a story solidifies, after a few chapters of snapshots, she and her Mother are the protagonists. We loathe her sons Eugène and Phillip and Emmanuel would be an adorable beau, if he wasn't as stupid about love as Florentine, in his own way. He becomes her husband, even though his friend, Jean attracted her by being the first to kiss her. We want Florentine to wizen up, whom we admire as her family's sole breadwinner! WWII sees the poorest still reeling from the 1930s. Going to war in aid of England in France, well before Americans, provided jobs and family allowance cheques.

The most poignant example of a negative being a boon is Daniel in a hospital. His Mother saw him with colouring books, blocks, and a tin flute he wanted; thinly-matched English title of “**Bonheur D'Occasion**”. He received in one day, more toys than he ever had. Imagine a hospital being superior to a home life! In their rental homes, one or two kids had rooms, everyone else slept on cots, stowed by day. I forgive Florentine vanity about how she appears and dresses, after doing without. I was too young to remember this film, shown in my French school. It abounds in great discussion fodder, grasped best by adults. I only recalled that it was grim and dreaded reading it all these years. I am happy to discover that it is a highly readable story, that carries you along, outside of unlikeable characters. It concludes with hope, growth, and improvement. However the original title's meaning is more apt, for a book that isn't about music. It means: “occasional happiness”.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

My mother tells us, her children, that when my younger brother was around six years old she was with him one time walking along a city sidewalk when my brother saw a nice toy being peddled by a street vendor. He must have wanted such a toy for a long time, as toys were a luxury in our poor household, that he calls her attention and says mother, that's a nice toy isn't it? My mother said yes, it is a nice toy. Then my brother adds, but we can't buy it because we don't have money? Yes, we can't, we don't have money, she says. Forty years after it happened, my mother still recalls it. It must have broken her heart that her son had to be fully conscious of want at such a young age. That brother of mine grew up a very frugal man, quite unlike my other brother, who was shielded from the enfeebling effects of our poverty that he grew up a spendthrift, buys books like there is no tomorrow and is as generous as the sun on a hot summer day. His grand birthday celebrations are almost always like historical events.

Anyway, this is a book by a Canadian author, Gabrielle Roy. She was born and educated in Manitoba where my only sister, who doesn't read anything but her patients' charts, is based now. What a waste. If we can exchange places, I most likely would check out where Gabrielle Roy had lived or studied in Manitoba, and maybe get an idea where she got the wonderful insights which helped her write this extraordinary novel.

Florentine, the protagonist, is a 19-year-old waitress in a small diner/store. She's skinny because she (the eldest) and her eight siblings have very poor nourishment. Her father, Azarius, is a taxi driver. He's in and out of jobs. Well-meaning and kind, he does not have much luck, however. He has had many grand schemes to earn money which all failed. He and his wife Rose-Anna are just in their early 40's. They live in the slums in Montreal (the story is set during the Great Depression, just before the second world war). Rose-Anna is again with a child, the 13th pregnancy of her young life. Three of her children had died during infancy.

There are a lot of novels about the poor and about being poor. But what makes this book different, I think, is the author's remarkable understanding of how the poor thinks and feels. She knows how it is to be a young woman in love, but poor, so that the object of her longing would be both attracted by her beauty and repulsed by her poverty; or how it is to be a mother, who love her children, but does not have enough to feed and clothe them all properly. Details which only those who are poor, or had been poor, would notice sear the pages of the book. There were moments when I felt like taking all of my money from my wallet, insert the same inside the book's pages and hope that this poor family can take the cash and spend them for their needs.

There are several scenes here that will strike you as so true, but I have a favorite because it reminds me of my young brother and the toy our mother couldn't buy for him.

The mother, Rose-Anna, decides to leave the house one day to look for a new house they can rent as they are about to be evicted from their present dwelling. As she was leaving, one of her small children, a 6-year-old

boy named Daniel who is often weak and with a fever (unknown to them, he has leukemia) asks her several times to buy him a tin flute. He had long wanted one.

Rose-Anna walked all day but failed to find a house they can afford to rent from the meager budget they have which comes mostly from Florentine's wages and her husband's (if he has work). On her way home, pregnant, hungry and tired, Rose-Anna decides to drop by the diner/store where Florentine works. She asks only for a cup of coffee "to perk her up" a little, but Florentine knows her mother is hungry and gets her a chicken meal which costs only forty cents (on sale that day) and insists that she eats it. As Rose-Anna was eating all she could think of is how expensive the meal is, and with forty cents she can prepare something at home more plentiful and more filling. After eating the chicken meal, Florentine also serves her a piece of pie which Rose-Anna would not have eaten had Florentine not told her that the pie is already included in the chicken meal. Later, as Rose-Anna was about to leave, Florentine also gave her two dollars--the tips she had earned for the day. Then Florentine--

"saw her mother's piteous, beaten look, full of gratitude and admiration. She saw her mother rise painfully and leave, skirting the counters and stopping here and there to touch an object or feel a piece of material.

"Her mother! Rose-Anna seemed very old to her. She moved slowly and her tight coat made her stomach bulge out. With two extra dollars hidden deep in her bag, the bag held close to her side, she was less sure of herself than before. Pots and pans, bolts of material, all the things she had long denied herself the privilege of looking at, fascinated her. Countless yearnings swelled within her, but she went steadily on her way, the money that had given rise to them buried in her pocketbook. Certainly she was poorer now than when she had entered the store.

"As she watched this silent drama, all Florentine's joy was turned to bitterness. The rapture she had felt in being generous and unselfish gave way to a sense of aching frustration. It had been a total loss, completely useless. It was a drop of water in the desert of their lives.

"At the other end of the store, Rose-Anna had stopped at the toy counter, and picked up a little tin flute. As a salesgirl approached, however, she put it down hastily, and Florentine knew that Daniel's desire for the flute would never be any closer to realization than this. Her mother's good intention was quickly suppressed. Likewise between her desire to help Rose-Anna and the peace of mind her mother would probably never have, nothing would be left but the aching memory of a good intention. If she alone could escape from their narrow life, that would be a great achievement, but even for her it was very hard. She would have been happy to take her family with her and raise them also to a position of ease and comfort, but she knew that it was useless to think of it.

"She forced herself to smile at her mother, who seemed to be asking her advice: 'Should I buy the flute, the pretty little toy flute, or should I buy stockings, underwear, food? Which is more important? A flute like a ray of sunshine for a sick child, a happy flute to make sounds of joy, or food on the table? Tell me which is more important, Florentine?'

"Florentine brought herself to smile once more as Rose-Anna, deciding at length to leave the store, waved goodbye, but by that time she was ready to rip all her good intentions to shreds, like a useless rag."

An Te Chu says

Rose Anne feels like the only character with depth. But the story paints a beautiful picture of Quebec.

Annika says

Haha this book took me two months to read! Why? Because it's terrible!!!

Dirck de Lint says

I should rather pull a toe off than read this book again. It's no more than a catalogue of misery without redemption, and while it may be realistic, it's nothing I need to be told about in careful detail. I had feared that this was an artifact of translation, but apparently it can move people the same way in the original language; I finish with the perfect summation from this review:

Livre obligatoire à l'école. C'est supposément un classique mais j'ai trouvé ça atrocement plate.

Margaret Virany says

Gabrielle Roy has marvelous powers of description that make winter wind, snow, cold and choking city smoke descend and engulf the reader as well as her fictional characters. Just as invasive are her powers of discernment which take the reader right inside the thoughts and desperation of a family caught inside the slums of Montreal during the depression that preceded world war two. This is a Canadian classic, one of the finest books ever written. However, don't expect to lift your head from its last page feeling any more optimistic about life than you did before.

Sheldon Farough says

This book really surprised me. I feel like not a lot happens, and a lot of the characters aren't very likeable, but I really liked this book.

The language is incredibly artful, and I found myself just underlining random sections of the page that struck me as being particularly beautiful. The depiction of the poor was very heart wrenching and combined with some of the sentimental family/love stuff and the french flavour of Montreal, makes this book feel like a Canadian version of Les Miserables (my favourite book!).

The early-WWII atmosphere with the recruitment efforts and characters leaving to join the army does a great job of affecting my emotions as I read it. It's just the tragedy of war, mixed with the thrill of adventure, the sense of duty, and the need for money by any means really combine to make a good emotional cocktail in a story that already does a good job of touching emotions.

As far as characters go, I wasn't a big fan of Florentine or Jean. I found both of them to be irritating and

frustrating characters (though they were certainly well drawn by the author). I did like Emmanuel a lot and also Rose-Anna and Azarius quite a bit. Rose-Anna is such a tragic figure (a very poor mother of 12 children with a husband who won't work) and I found her to be my biggest connection throughout the story. But even though she was suffering because of Azarius' lazy ways, it was hard to hate him because it made sense why he was lazy and poor. One of the more tragic lines in the story comes from the description of Azarius by Florentine towards the end of the story where she says he just never had good luck. It isn't that Azarius never tried, or that his decisions were particularly bad... it's just he had terrible timing and nothing really quite worked out.

This book is really excellent for a lot of reasons but I have one major complaint which prevents it from being a 5 star book. I like a book with a driving plot. Les Miserables definitely had long sections of melancholic emotions and overdone character development, but things in that book were constantly moving forward. In The Tin Flute, you could read 100 pages and nothing has really happened except for a conversation or two inside of a restaurant. I still liked it a lot and would definitely recommend it to a certain type of reader, but I know I would've liked it more with a stronger plot.

Catherine Matte says

Gabrielle Roy réussit à bien rendre la misère de l'époque. Saint-Henri, la guerre, la dépression, la pauvreté sont bien dépeints. Le roman aurait été excellent, si ce n'eût été des personnages, qui ne sont pas aimables du tout. Florentine est bête comme tout, Jean est inintéressant et Emmanuel est ridicule. Rose-Anna est probablement le personnage le plus intéressant, mais elle n'a qu'une seule dimension: celle de la pauvre femme encrassée dans la misère.

Elizabeth (Alaska) says

This is a book that got stronger as I read further into it. The novel takes place right at the end of the depression and the beginning of WWII. The LaCosse family at the center of the novel has gotten poorer as the years - and the children - added up. It was this poverty that that prevailed.

She was brooding over the fact that poverty is like a pain, dormant and not unbearable as long as you don't move about too much. You grow used to it, you end up by paying no attention to it. But once you presume to bring it out in the daylight, it becomes terrifying, you see it at last in all its squalor and you shrink from exposing it to the sun.

I might have wanted more from the prose, and I was tempted to blame the translator. Then I remembered that I'm not likely to give the translator credit when I *do* like the prose, so maybe I should treat them fairly. I might have wanted a bit more in terms of characterization, but those became clearer as I got deeper into the novel.

I never really felt comfortable, never felt connected to the characters or invested in the future that was being revealed. Still, I couldn't put it down for the last 50 pages. I needed to know how all of the issues were resolved. I wanted to like it more, but it's just a strong 3-stars for me.

Orla Hegarty says

This book is an important fictionalized version of herstory that sadly reflects many of the same issues we have in society today.

Steve says

Gritty tale of poverty and squalor in 1940's Montreal.

Roy gives us a poignant look at the pain and humility of the Lacasse family, struggling and impoverished. With no hope for escape except through a war which, for most, has no real impact other than a way out.

Tin Flute is wrought with personal misfortune and disappointment.

The relationship between Rose-Anna and Eugene, mother and son, was for me the most poignant. Encompassing just a few paragraphs. Eugene's best intentions are short-lived as we watch him sacrifice his family for his own puerile desires. An act for which he suffers a guilt he easily looks beyond for a brief moment of delight.

Eugene's acts are a strong contrast to the manipulations of his sister, Flo, or the starry-eyed dreaminess of his father, Azarius. The latter at least dream of a better life for themselves and their family.

For Eugene it is impossible to think beyond tomorrow.

Mother Rose-Anne holds the family together and we watch as she, resigned and pregnant with her 12th, trudges through the wintry streets of Montreal looking for decent shelter before the spring evictions begin. She is the inspiration through-out, and we are drawn to her and, "...the docility of the humble..."

Don't look for a feel-good ending, the last paragraph reads, "Low in the sky, dark clouds heralded the storm."

El says

Originally titled *Bonheur d'occasion* (trans. *Second-hand Happiness*), *The Tin Flute* is the vivid story of the working poor in Quebec during World War II. The story begins with the eldest daughter, Florentine, who works in the Five and Ten in order to help support her parents. She falls for a machinist, Jean, who agrees to date her merely to benefit himself. His friend, Emmanuel, in the meantime, falls for Florentine who has eyes only for Jean. As the Afterword (Philip Stratford) mentions, Florentine was Gabrielle Roy's first and foremost character for the story, but Florentine's mother Rose-Anna pushed her way into the story and was there to stay. Lucky for us, the readers, as Rose-Anna is truly the heart and soul of the entire story. There would be no Florentine without Rose-Anna, nor would Florentine's many siblings exist. Mother holds the story together. She is the glue.

The story is told from the perspectives of the different characters, and because of this the reader walks away feeling a little bruised around the edges. Not since Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* have I finished a book feeling like I've just suffered with an entire family. Like Steinbeck did for the American literary landscape of the Great Depression, so does Gabrielle Roy for the Canadian slums of Montreal of World War II. The characters could be real people, with real reactions and real hopes and real fears. The situations, though perhaps dated at times, are not too far removed from the ones imagined by most contemporary readers.

Wonderful story, deserving of its place on the 1,001 Books to Read Before You Die list. But if a happy ending is ones goal for picking up this book, you will be sorely disappointed. Life isn't always a bushel of cherries.

Julie Touchette says

J'ai lu ce livre alors que j'étais très jeune et que je voulais tout apprendre du monde des adultes. Ce que j'y ai appris n'était pas très beau mais l'écriture de Gabrielle Roy, quelle fluidité. Un des livres marquants de ma vie, sans aucun doute.
