



Ticknor

Sheila Heti

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On a cold, rainy night, an aging bachelor named George Ticknor prepares to visit his childhood friend Prescott, a successful man who is now one of the leading intellectual lights of their generation. With a hastily baked pie in his hands, and a lifetime of guilt and insecurity weighing upon his soul, he sets out for the Prescotts' dinner party--a party at which he'd just as soon never arrive. Distantly inspired by the real-life friendship between the great historian William Hickling Prescott and his biographer, *Ticknor* is a witty, fantastical study of resentment; and a biting history of a one-sided friendship.

Ticknor Details

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Author : Sheila Heti

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From Reader Review Ticknor for online ebook

Laura says

“I knew I was not as important as Claire, so returning after the funeral I just stood around, wanting to let him know I was there — standing there with everyone else rushing about. I am not good at those sorts of arrangements, pouring drinks or holding out a hand to a woman to help her from her chair; even sitting in the corner of the parlour with the men, smoking and talking in appropriate ways. I had nothing to say in the appropriate ways. I could not help out because I no longer knew the house, not as some of the others did, or what was needed, or what they might have wanted from me. Several times, though perhaps as few as one or two, he did give me a direct, tired look, but I didn’t know what it meant, whether it was mostly incriminating or not. I cannot go to his house. I can tell he doesn’t see inside me or even care to anymore.”

“Exhausted and near tears, I went to the mirror. I often go to the mirror when crying, to see how I might look. I wonder whether I’d have any sympathy for a man such as myself. Sometimes I feel I would, and it makes me cry even harder; other times I do not and it fills me with despair — well, then I weep more pitifully than before. In these ways I find I am able to enjoy myself. The pure times I spend alone are rare.”

John says

I liked this book. It was very funny - tongue in cheek. Only thing sometimes I felt I was being hit over the head with the same information over again. But it fits the characters in the real story. If you want to study people who think the same thoughts in circles this is the book for you. If you are looking for an intervention for people who definitely need it, then I would skip this. It would be very sad if it were not so funny. But then again what is obvious to an outsider confounds the people in the middle of it. The characters don't bend and they don't break either. They just are what they are. We all know people like these people, but why can't they see the obvious and just be different?

I can't wait to see what Heti does with similar material as she develops. She'd probably not agree with the idea of development as each work stands alone. But certainly 'How Should a Person Be' is just better than this book in practically every way. If she were to write a quasi historical novel now I am sure it would flow, nuance and richly develop each character much more than this book does. I could see how Heti could create a masterpiece out of similar material by presenting the story as if she were living it herself. But historical fiction does not really fit into her current aesthetic. Perhaps she will come back to it at some point perhaps she won't. There is no downside either way.

Dusty says

William Hickling Prescott, the author of such insanely popular nineteenth-century titles as *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843), was mostly blind--the unfortunate result of being hit in the eye with a biscuit while he was attending boarding school. In *Ticknor*, Sheila Heti offers a fictionalized account of Prescott's life that is told from the perspective of his friend and intellectual contemporary, George Ticknor. In a note at the end of the book, Heti acknowledges that Ticknor was, in fact, a family man and a successful author in his own right, but for some reason the character she presents in the book is a self-absorbed misanthrope who can't quite manage to bake a decent pie, let alone write a book on the history of Spanish literature. I found the novel off-putting and a little tedious in the beginning, in part because Heti's Ticknor speaks to himself in

both the first and second person, but by the end I found myself drawn into the author's fantastical depiction of early nineteenth-century Boston and the Ticknor character's struggles to overcome his own self-doubt. If Prescott, on the one hand, is physically blind, then Ticknor, on the other, is intellectually blind, as he is unable to perceive anything except for the failure of his own life in contrast to the triumph of his friend Prescott's life. The book is a disappointment as a biography, I guess, but it is more than satisfactory as a novel.

Nathanial says

A great little book that really exploits the first-person lens, both in voice and perspective. She's too young to write this good!

Melanie Page says

Two stars look really "bad," but the Goodreads definition is "it was okay." That's really how I felt about *Ticknor*. It took me many, many, many tries over several years to get into this book because my brain kept puzzling out "you" vs. "I." Turns out it's basically the same person, only when "you" is addressed, it comes from a voice of criticism, or perhaps a more honest side of the narrator. However, these changes aren't noted with italics or set off in any way. You just have to catch them, and I felt that made the book unnecessarily difficult to read.

Ticknor is supposed to be the best friend from Prescott's childhood, but the whole of the book focuses on Ticknor's jealousy that Prescott has other friends as an adult, that there are numerous people at Prescott's parties, and that Ticknor was not meant to be the only guest. The confusing bit in terms of Ticknor's feelings is that there are no scenes that prove Prescott was his friend. Therefore, we're taking his jealousy and his "failure" when compared to Prescott's writing success at his word.

When the book finished, I was quite surprised and not entirely certain what I was meant to feel when I finished. Perhaps I was extra bemused by *Ticknor* because I'm so used to Heti's more whimsical fiction.

Tim says

Ticknor is going to a party at an old friend's house, but so much goes wrong. He leaves late, the pie is ruined, he misses the streetcar, the advertisements are overwhelming. Most of all, at some point in their pasts, his life and Prescott's (his old friend) life diverged. Now, with his humiliation looming all he can do is catalogue this divergence, obsessing over how it was that Prescott was such a success, and Ticknor nor such a failure.

This is a slim novel that is written in the first person, all of it bouncing around the overwrought head of George Ticknor. Though it seems like he constantly obsesses about his friend, I choose to be charitable and assume that this is relatively infrequent occurrence, brought on by the circumstances. It has all gone wrong, which reminds him of his life, at least in comparison to his famous friend.

Heti's prose shines in the mind of George Ticknor. She effortlessly moves from past to present to imagined future. There were only a few passages at the beginning that confused me. She makes no effort to introduce the narrator, allowing his muddled mind to introduce itself in time. Which is very effective and helps the

reader to get acquainted with Ticknor in an organic sort of way. The book doesn't feel like a book. You feel like these thoughts are actual thoughts, not sentences composed to look like thoughts but also obey a narrative order. This leaves a bit of work for the reader but not too much.

If the novel was any longer (thank you Sheila Heti for resisting the urge to compose an epic) it would've been boring and confusing. This is manageable and entertaining. We get one trip to one party; but it becomes a symbol for the general progression of the narrator's life. In the end you don't want to be like Ticknor, but he is not unsympathetic. I think this style of resentment is something we are all guilty of, or at the very least capable of. This universal quality is what makes it so funny.

Michael Vagnetti says

What happens, in biography, when people become word-people? I experienced *Ticknor* as an exhibit-puzzle, or documentary sculpture, about this question. The book is on to this meta-dynamic in a cunning way. The oracle-sage is speaker who is stumbling with neurosis, unconfident, and of existentially cloudy presence. He is cognitively "wrong" in term of literary makeup, choices, and "quality", but his timid anthems are extraordinarily interesting. Why? They coagulate into an extended, oblique riddle on being. Build a seminar on it, theorists.

Reading *Ticknor* is a weird experience in self-assessment. It is written in a modern interpolation of late 19th-century period language that is studded with rereadable profundities that wink and peek out of the dross. Picture someone reading about someone writing about someone else, and, in a leap of imagination, watch imaginary tracers buzz through the resulting stream of consciousness. You might approach a kind of frontier. In front of you is the broad expanse of things have to do with reading and writing that no one acknowledges. It is a space of false silence: things ride on words that pass through us unrecognized, but with noisy effects.

How do the words you use: create trust, make people change their mind about you, erode you? What is forgotten? What is essential? Why do some paragraphs seem relevant, while others are obtuse? How much can you skip over and still get by? What makes an approach obsessive, or crass? What creates influence? Why are some people prattling into the void, while others are lionized? How does this happen? These are *Ticknor's* problems, Ticknor's problems, and yours.

Ursula Pflug says

This review appeared in The Peterborough Examiner in December, 2005.

TICKNOR
by Sheila Heti
House Of Anansi Press
April 2005 HC
112 pages
\$19.95
ISBN: 0-88784-191-0

Review by Ursula Pflug

515 words

Ticknor is Toronto writer Sheila Heti's first novel. Her previous book, also published by Anansi, was a collection of confounding, quirky, clever short stories about, among other things—an old woman who lived in a shoe. And since rewritten fairy tales or in this case nursery rhymes written for the adult contemporary reader are one of my absolutely favourite things, well, I was smitten by *The Middle Stories*. Even the stories that weren't based on fairy tales read like fairy tales.

The Middle Stories garnered lots of attention, most of it praise, along with a little puzzlement. And Heti was young and cool and lived in New York as well as Toronto and had her stories published in *McSweeney's*, and got people feeling cranky because of it. I wasn't cranky. I ate the stories like the chocolates I thought they were.

Ticknor is about a couple of 19th century male writers in Boston, but it's not a historical novel in any traditional sense. It all takes place on one night, in one man's mind, that of George Ticknor, a Prufrockian sort who sporadically publishes long dull articles about canals, and lives in rented rooms while his few suits get shabbier and shabbier. He's a bit of a sad sack, our George, and envies his childhood friend William Prescott, who is an ambitious, driven, and wildly successful historian in spite of compromised eyesight due to a bun catching him in the eye at boarding school, which really happened. Ticknor and Prescott are historical figures, but this novel in no way tries to give us an accurate account of their lives. Heti was inspired to write it after swiping a Ticknor biography of Prescott from an Annex pub down in the big smoke. But she didn't read the book from end to end; she slipped in and out of it, engaging in a process wherein the style and the feelings in Ticknor's book influenced the style and psychology of her own.

In *Ticknor*, Ticknor has been invited to a soiree at Prescott's home, a place awash in good food and drink, pretty women, and the leading lights of the time. Anyone who has ever dithered even a little about an invitation will empathize with poor George, who does nothing but dither. The novel is basically a meditation on failure and envy and the aspects of friendship often little discussed. Poor George's mental tape loops go over and over the same ground for over a hundred pages as he worries about what to wear and what to bring and whether to even go and changes his mind on each count a dozen times. We feel sorry for Ticknor; we pity him; we don't particularly like the Prescott we are shown, and wonder if George couldn't have pulled more out of the fabric of his own life and gifts than to spend most of it looking over his shoulder at his friend, feeling he compares badly, hoping for attention.

Like *The Middle Stories*, *Ticknor* is sharp and clever and short and fearsomely original. But I liked *The Middle Stories* more.

Perez Malone says

Ticknor is going to a party at an old friend's house, but so much goes wrong. He leaves late, the pie is ruined, he misses the streetcar, the advertisements are overwhelming. Most of all, at some point in their pasts, his life and Prescott's (his old friend) life diverged. Now, with his humiliation looming all he can do is catalogue this divergence, obsessing over how it was that Prescott was such a success, and Ticknor nor such a failure.

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Evan says

this seems like the kind of thing i would really like

Jim says

It took me a long time to work out who the 'you' was in this novel. It's the narrator addressing himself. Since much of the ensuing monologue—since that's what it turns out to be (the whole thing takes place inside the narrator's head)—relates to letter writing I did wonder whether the book was actually a letter but it seems not. Rather it is a stream of conscious narrative in which Ticknor—who was a real person, a nineteenth century historian—talks about his lifelong friendship with a certain William Prescott—also a real person although their fictional counterparts are gross caricatures of the actual men.

From being bosom buddies Ticknor and Prescott are now friends in name only; as if often the case they have drifted apart and now Ticknor is something of an embarrassment to Prescott and his wife:

But no matter, I will still be as I am, whether I go and congratulate him on his book or not, and if I do not, another instance will have passed when I did not say a word, and if I do not show myself it will be too late. He will close up his face upon reading my note and pass it to Claire, who will toss it with a frown and a remark about what kind of man I really am, about how unfortunate are these childhood friends who stick around so long. There's nothing to be done about it, Claire, I've known him all my life, even our fathers were friends. Then back to the newspaper or whatever it is they do. Everything should have been said already, so long ago, and with an air of gracefulness and ease.

This particular night it seems he has been invited over—so often they forget about him these days—and he is prepared and with a pie as a gift but as he sets about setting out doubts start to creep over him:

It will take me a while to get there. You will get there soon enough. Getting somewhere always involves more effort than the effort of getting there is worth. Of course, there is nothing to be done about it. No one is eagerly awaiting you now. Your arrival is not anticipated with any great longing. Other men must hurry. If I am late it will mean nothing to anyone.

Bit by bit we get to learn the men's history. Prescott is by far the more successful of the two. He has a beautiful wife, Claire, a blossoming career as a writer and professor and many want to be able to call him

friend. Ticknor is a failure. Whereas Prescott has published several acclaimed works, for the last ten years Ticknor has been working on an article (not even a book!) about canals, a subject he finds hold no interest for him. Even this, his verbal history of the two of them, is flawed from the very beginning; he just can't seem to get his facts straight. The book opens, for instance:

There were no books when I was a boy. Books were hardly accessible, yet there were some books. That is why I did not develop literary taste. I read what I found and it was for fun. You read mostly for idle pleasure. I did not read for fun, nor was I cultivating my mind. I cannot imagine cultivating anything as a young boy. It is not my fault if I was not an erudite boy. Other boys had books and other boys had libraries. No, the whole country lacked books then. Comparatively few were published here, and they were borrowed with difficulty. There is no possible way I could have read good books. It was for pleasure that I read them, when I finally did. Today you read books. Yes, today I read books but there were no books when I was a boy, and I do not read books the way that other men read books. My taste, then, was juvenile. But you were like all the other boys. Sometimes you went to the library, but there was no library until much later. When I went to the library I would read the books that amused me. I had no taste when I was young. I had no books. It is not my fault if I read the lighter books, and that when I found them I read them with a juvenile fever.

After a while I have to say I longed for an omniscient narrator to come along and tell me what was what. I was particularly puzzled by the ending. Up until the last few pages I had assumed that our narrator was dallying on his way to an evening with the Prescotts. But then the next thing you know Prescott is ailing—dying from all accounts—and being cared for by Florence Nightingale whose been seconded especially to care for him. Ticknor relates this as if it was the past tense and maybe it is. Maybe he's been readying himself for an invitation he received many years before when he was a regular and appreciated guest. It's never made clear and I found that infuriating if I'm being honest.

That said the book has its moments and some entertaining ones at that. It just lacks cohesion. Ticknor is unreliable, yes, by why? Is he demented or crazy or a bit of both?

Patty Cottrell says

one of my favorite books. you can read it in an afternoon. there are some unforgettable lines. i had three of them in my head for a year without realizing where they were from: TICKNOR. the writing is crisp and elegant: TICKNOR. i loved the sad & pathetic narrator: TICKNOR.

Ronald Wilcox says

What is there to say about this book? Has some good prose in it at times but overall the story did not draw me in. Did it even have a story? Hard to say. Very tangential or free flowing writing

Amber says

Favourite Character: N/A

Least Favourite Character: N/A

Pros:

*There were some real stand out lines in this book. I was moved to re-read a few sections of prose two or three times because of how striking they were.

Cons:

*I really didn't like the creative element of this book; was it a conversation? Sometimes there would be a sentence or two from a different speaker, but it would not be differentiated in any way in the long blocks of text. It was just difficult to get a reading flow going. I kept being pulled out of it.

Leila says

“Ticknor,” a novella by Sheila Heti, is inspired by an actual 19th Century biography of William Hickling Prescott by George Ticknor. It is the internal dialogue of protagonist Ticknor, who endlessly compares himself to his successful, socially adroit, and much loved friend Prescott. By comparison, Ticknor is anxious, indecisive, socially awkward, self-absorbed, jealous, and envious. In short, he is not very likable.

Summaries and reviews of the novella suggest Prescott is self-absorbed and even cruel when it comes to his treatment of childhood friend Ticknor. But remember we are seeing him through the distorted gaze of Ticknor, who is by no means subjective. The extroverted Prescott simply can't comprehend Ticknor's lack of vim and vigour, his crumpled dress, his perpetual lateness, and his inability to socialize at gatherings. He doesn't appear to actually undermine Ticknor in any way.

In fact, when the boy Prescott is hit in the eye with a hard bread roll at boarding school -- leading to a lifetime of semi-blindness and health concerns -- I wonder if it wasn't Ticknor who accidentally hit him while ineffectually trying to participate in boyish rabble-rousing over lunch. Ticknor's thoughts about how the perpetrator likely feels very bad about the incident, but didn't tell anyone that it was he who had done the deed, seem to support my theory.

What I like most about the book is Heti's back-and-forth, I-and-you, treatment of Ticknor's thoughts. This approach underscores his nervousness, his bumbling demeanor, and his general incompetence. He is a fellow who is trapped by, and suffers more from this own personality traits, than his friend Prescott does from actual maladies.
