Tracy Flick Can't Win

by Tom Perrotta



About the Book

Tracy Flick is back, and once again the iconic protagonist of Tom Perrotta?s ELECTION --- and Reese Witherspoon?s character from the classic movie adaptation --- is determined to take high school politics by storm.

Tracy Flick is a hardworking assistant principal at a public high school in suburban New Jersey. Still ambitious but feeling a little stuck and underappreciated in midlife, Tracy gets a jolt of good news when the longtime principal, Jack Weede, abruptly announces his retirement, creating a rare opportunity for Tracy to ascend to the top job.

Energized by the prospect of her long-overdue promotion, Tracy throws herself into her work with renewed zeal, determined to prove her worth to the students, faculty and School Board while also managing her personal life --- a 10-year-old daughter, a needy doctor boyfriend and a burgeoning meditation practice. But nothing ever comes easily to Tracy Flick, no matter how diligent or qualified she happens to be.

Among her many other responsibilities, Tracy is enlisted to serve on the Selection Committee for the brand-new Green Meadow High School Hall of Fame. Her male colleagues? determination to honor Vito Falcone --- a star quarterback of dubious character who had a brief, undistinguished career in the NFL --- triggers bad memories for Tracy, and leads her to troubling reflections about the trajectory of her own life and the forces that have left her feeling thwarted and disappointed, unable to fulfill her true potential.

As she broods on the past, Tracy becomes aware of storm clouds brewing in the present. Is she really a shoo-in for the Principal job? Is the Superintendent plotting against her? Why is the School Board President?s wife trying so hard to be her friend? And why can?t she ever get what she deserves?

In classic Perrotta style, TRACY FLICK CAN'T WIN is a sharp, darkly comic page-turner, and a pitch-perfect reflection on our current moment. Flick fans and newcomers alike will love this compulsively readable novel chronicling the

second act of one of the most memorable characters of our time.

Discussion Guide

1. In chapter 1, while reflecting on the importance of her administrative work at Green Meadow High, Tracy Flick thinks: ?It was easy to forget, when you were a grown-up and high school was safely in the past, how it felt to be a captive audience, the way time could stand still in a classroom, and one bad teacher could poison your entire life? (page 7). How does this idea --- of the outsize impact high school experiences have on people?s adult lives --- echo throughout the book? Do you agree with Tracy?s assessment? Name and discuss one example of an experience that has followed one of the adult characters into adulthood.

2. Whose idea is it to start the Hall of Fame? Consider what we know about this character and their previous career by the end of the novel. Why might they have been drawn to the concept of a Hall of Fame?

3. When Tracy Flick first hears about Vito Falcone, she thinks, *Ugh, I know that guy* (page 52), even though she?s never met him. What does she mean? What kind of guy does Tracy understand Vito to be, and why does she find this archetype frustrating?

4. Throughout the novel, Vito suffers from headaches, memory loss and disorientation. What is causing Vito?s symptoms? Consider the fact that the very thing Vito is famous for in Green Meadow --- his track record in varsity football and his short career in the NFL --- is causing him pain in his personal life. Why is this apparent contradiction meaningful to the story?

5. Tracy Flick struggles with negative self-talk. As she meditates (pages 98?99), she compulsively plays two phrases over in a loop, *You failed* and *You did the best you could*, before realizing both are true. Why is coping with failure so difficult for Tracy? Where do her impossibly high expectations of herself come from?

6. Consider Jack and Alice Weede?s relationship. What is the secret Jack has been keeping from his wife? After it is announced that Diane Blankenship will be inducted into the Hall of Fame, Alice reveals that she?s known Jack?s secret all along. Why do you think Alice had not confronted Jack previously?

7. In a conversation with Tracy, Marissa confides that Kyle has cheated on her previously, and that, while in her 20s, she once slept with a married man. In response, Tracy tells a secret of her own --- that she had a relationship with a teacher when she was 15. Based on this conversation, what about her experience with Mr. Dexter do you think hurt Tracy the most?

8. Who is Reggie? Why doesn?t the Selection Committee (other than Lily) consider Reggie to be a serious candidate for the Hall of Fame, even though he and Vito were both football stars at Green Meadow High? What role does race play in the difference between Vito?s career and Reggie?s?

9. Consider the rapport between Tracy and Lily. How does Lily?s opinion of Tracy differ from that of some other students and faculty at Green Meadow High? How do Tracy?s feelings about Lily differ from her feelings about her own daughter? What do you think accounts for the friendliness between them?

10. Who is Larry Holleran, and why was he being considered for the Principal job? In your opinion, what theme or idea does Larry represent in this novel?

11. Many of the adult characters --- in particular Tracy, Kyle and Vito --- are ambitious and deeply concerned with succeeding, both personally and professionally. What does *success* mean to the characters in this book? What does this novel have to say about the limitations of success as a primary motivation? Which, if any, of the adult characters do you feel is truly happy, and why?

12. By the end of the novel, has Tracy achieved her goals? What does she have to endure to receive the recognition she sought at the beginning of the novel? In your opinion, has Tracy ?won?? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Tom Perrotta is the author of 11 works of fiction, including ELECTION and LITTLE CHILDREN, both of which were made into Oscar-nominated films, and THE LEFTOVERS and MRS. FLETCHER, which were adapted into acclaimed HBO series. His new novel is GHOST TOWN.

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