

Tracy Flick Can't Win by Tom Perrotta.
Scribner, New York, 2022. 257 pages. \$27.00.

Book review by Ed Meek

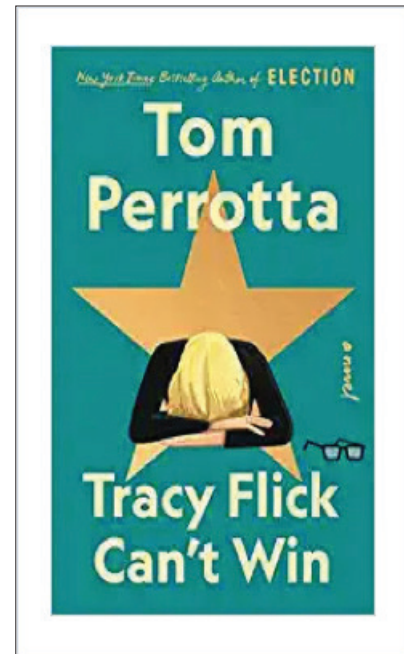
TOM PERROTTA is one of the best satirists writing fiction today. His new book is a sequel to the very funny novel *Election*. The main character of both novels is Tracy Flick. In *Election*, she is a high school overachiever running for President of her class. She is the type of student everyone hated in high school—always knew the answer, hand up first in class, front row student and leader of half a dozen high school clubs. Tracy is played to perfection in the movie version of the novel by Reese Witherspoon (although the novel is funnier than the movie). In our me-too era, the movie feels a little out of date with the main character involved in a consensual affair with her English teacher. Is there such a thing as a consensual affair between a student and a teacher today? The fact that my next-door neighbor married his junior high math teacher just doesn't compute anymore (they did wait until he graduated).

Well aware of the fraught atmosphere of today's political correctness, Perrotta has recreated Tracy as a sympathetic woman whose dreams of becoming the first female President were dashed when she had to leave law school to take care of her sick mother. Now, a single mom and the Assistant Principal at the high school she graduated from, she just wants to be Principal. Is that too much to ask?

A rich member of the school board, Kyle Dorfman, who made his fortune with an app called Barky. Barky has a "Love Bank. If you did a nice thing for Barky, gave him a biscuit or a bath or a bone, you would earn Gratitude Hearts—they would float up from the dog's head and deposit themselves in a treasure chest—and you could use those hearts as currency." Kyle has decided to create a hall of fame in the high school that will be public relations for the school and for him.

Meanwhile, the principal, Jack Weede, is retiring to take his wife, who is a cancer survivor, on the cross-country trip of her dreams. Jack was involved for years with one of the secretaries at the school who is known as Front Desk Diane but he ended the affair when his wife got cancer and now, he is ready to retire and make his wife happy.

At first, Tracy seems to be a shoo-in for the principal position, but things get complicated when she signs up as a member of the committee choosing who will go into the hall of fame. A heavy favorite for induction is Vito Falcone, a quarterback who was a star at the high school and made it to the NFL. Maybe the high school needs a revitalized football program with Vito's former coach winning coach to lead the school in a new direction rather than Tracy Flick.



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Vito has his own challenges. Football left him with concussions that cause him to lose his temper and hit his wife. As a result, he's living in an apartment by himself and trying to atone for his transgression.

It is a little harder to write satire in 2022 than it was twenty years ago. In *Tracy Flick Can't Win*, it is not just a coincidence that those who commit transgressions are all males. Perrotta could have followed Tracy into politics but instead he has decided to make her into a single mom we root for. Perrotta sacrifices humor for realism. If you're so inclined, I'd encourage you to read or reread *Election* before picking up *Tracy Flick Can't Win*. Humor is partly based on violating taboos, but what is acceptable to audiences today is not the same as what was funny twenty years ago. In any case, both of these books make great summer reading.