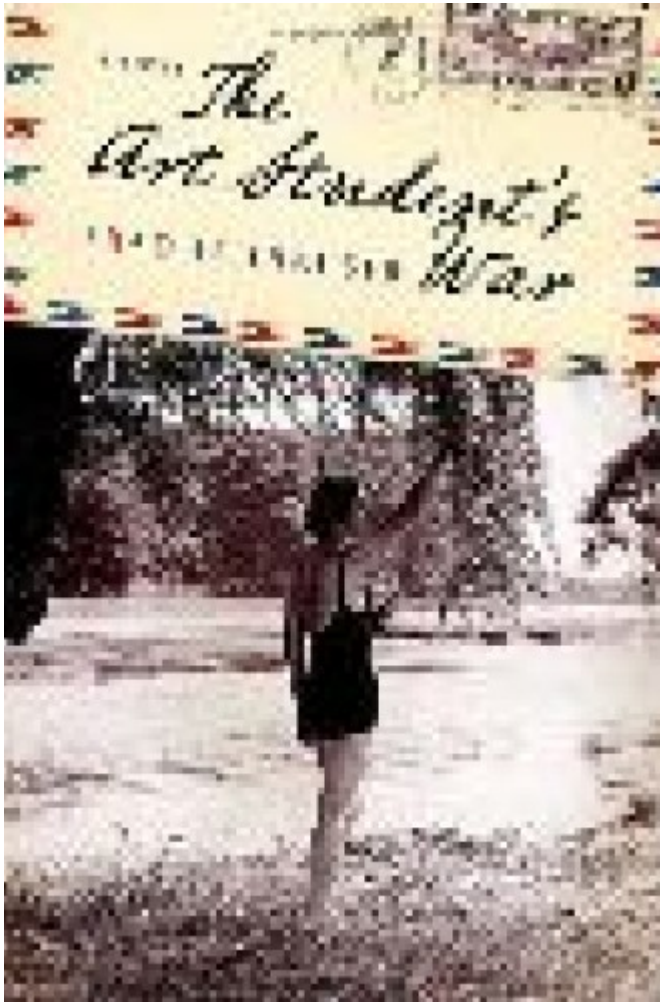


The Art Student's War

reviewed by [Lawrence Wood](#) in the [May 4, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Art Student's War

Brad Leithauser
Knopf

You can take people out of Detroit—in fact, that’s happening more and more—but it seems you can’t take Detroit out of artists who know what to do with large-scale

tragedy. The novelist Jeffrey Eugenides professes himself “haunted” by his former city’s decline. Elmore Leonard remains near, though not in, the city that has inspired some of his best crime stories. The much-honored poet and novelist Brad Leithauser lives in Baltimore these days, but he considers Detroit his hometown and believes that it once represented the best of America’s possibilities.

An old-fashioned novel about old-fashioned values, *The Art Student’s War* brings to life that vanished city. As it opens in 1943, streetcars carry people of every class and ethnicity. Business seems to be booming as auto plants convert to war production, and despite a shortage of materials, home construction is booming, too. The Paradisos, an Italian-American family, live on Inquiry Street not far from the Sgouroses (“who once kept a goat in their backyard”), the McNamees, the Szots, and the Lustigs, who are Jewish. Their neighborhood is so harmonious that when a race riot leaves 34 people dead, these good people manage to rein in their fears and find some understanding for the rioters.

But even in the Paradiso household, all is not paradise. Sylvia Paradiso, a depressive matriarch whose recipes have names like Shipwreck and Slumped Pork, imagines that her sister has been making eyes at her husband. In one moment of crystallized insanity, she says, “If Grace and I can only both recognize that she has ruined my life, there is no reason in the world the two of us cannot get along.”

Meanwhile, Bianca Paradiso, just 18, faces the daily reality that men her age are fighting a war. Assigned by her art school to an army hospital, she draws portraits of wounded soldiers—tactfully rendering them not as they are, but as they were. Their bandaged faces and missing limbs suggest a much more serious world than does the foolish war brewing in her family. As these grateful young men fall in love with her, she slowly realizes that she is beautiful—that despite the losses all around her, she has prospects.

Bianca is an altogether charming character. Blessed with the eyes of an artist, she drinks in the visual details of her city, mentally painting all the time. Modern in her aspirations but an innocent at heart, she may seem a throwback to the days when women in fiction swooned simply at the touch of a man’s hand. But she has plenty of wit and independence. Will she choose the heir to a drug-store chain? Or the mathematical-theological-poetic wounded soldier? Before we find out, she will confound them both.

Leithauser springs several gentle surprises. The best of his chapters work like fuses, burning toward little explosions. He specializes in social disasters—a birthday party that turns into an utter mess, a ladies' luncheon that takes a paralyzing turn. Accordingly, his most vivid characters are those who create the most uncomfortable situations. One boy friend's mother gives Bianca unsolicited advice about sexual politics, while another mother provides a dreadful lesson in Dutch Reformed theology. The suitors, too, fashion moments that make us squirm. "I can have no meaningful theology that doesn't include you," declares her beloved religious philosopher, just before he tries to deflower her.

So Leithauser is under no illusions that people in the 1940s were a great deal more moral than people today, but he does invite comparisons between wartime then and now. Simple measures like rationing sugar, coffee and gasoline made that war seem much closer. *The Art Student's War* captures that era of shared sacrifice, when the home front was not just a rhetorical figure. In one lovely scene, a soldier steps onto a streetcar. Everyone wants to give a seat to him, but he wants to give his to Bianca. How shall she accept the gift? It's the moral dilemma of the war in miniature. Throughout these pages, people pay a high cost for the war, physically and emotionally, in and out of uniform. This is a very different world from today's United States, with our distant adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Leithauser deftly implies that if a war is not felt by everyone, then it must not be very necessary.

Three hundred pages into this novel, something strange happens: Bianca goes into a fever dream, and an omniscient narrator looks ahead to such things as the riots of 1967. We then land with a bump in 1952. By then Bianca has settled into adulthood, more sure of herself and even more attractive as a character. Her family's rifts have widened, but to little consequence. The last third of the book doesn't build to an explosion—it just slowly burns out.

Detroit's true decline is still far off, but there's an elegiac quality to Leithauser's closing chapters as local landmarks disappear and characters face their mortality. In the end, *The Art Student's War* declines to make large statements about war or even Detroit. It is instead a meditation on lost youth and lost promise, profoundly nostalgic for the heartsickness of first love, when everything about the world seemed so much more vivid.

Bianca recalls how a minister once told her youth group that they would have to choose between purity and filthiness. What pops into her head is an answer so blasphemous that she burns with shame: *I say shit to that*. Sure enough, experience

proves that her life, everybody's life, is a mixture of the pure and the foul. Bianca Paradiso's city is no paradise and never has been, but it does turn out to be a marvelous art studio—for the art of living. Detroit gives her an education that will survive the radio days and trolley cars. There's nothing like a war to make us feel that our youth is past, but that's really just the beginning of the story.