PAUL HARDING

'*Tinkers* is truly remarkable'
MARILYNNE ROBINSON

Tinkers

WINNER OF THE
PULITZER PRIZE
FOR FICTION

About the Book

An old man lies dying. Confined to bed in his living room, he sees the walls around him begin to collapse, the windows come loose from their sashes, and the ceiling plaster fall off in great chunks, showering him with a lifetime of debris: newspaper clippings, old photographs, wool jackets, rusty tools, and the mangled brass works of antique clocks. Soon, the clouds from the sky above plummet down on top of him, followed by the stars, till the black night covers him like a shroud. He is hallucinating, in death throes from cancer and kidney failure.

A methodical repairer of clocks, he is now finally released from the usual constraints of time and memory to rejoin his father, an epileptic, itinerant peddler, whom he had lost seven decades before. In his return to the wonder and pain of his impoverished childhood in the backwoods of Maine, he recovers a natural world that is at once indifferent to man and inseparable from him, menacing and awe-inspiring.

Heartbreaking and life-affirming, TINKERS is an elegiac meditation on love, loss, and the fierce beauty of nature.

Tinkers

Paul Harding has an MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and was a 2000–2001 Fiction Fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center, in Provincetown, MA. He has published short stories in *Shakepainter* and *The Harvard Review*. Paul currently teaches creative writing at Harvard. He lives near Boston with his wife and two sons. *Tinkers* is his first novel.

Praise for *Tinkers*

‘*Tinkers* is truly remarkable. It achieves and sustains a unique fusion of language and perception. Its fine touch plays over the textured richnesses of very modest lives, evoking again and again a frisson of deep recognition, a sense of primal encounter with the brilliant, elusive world of the senses. It confers on the reader the best privilege fiction can afford, the illusion of ghostly proximity to other human souls.’

Marilynne Robinson, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Home* and *Gilead*

‘There is a striking freedom of style here, which allows the author to move without any sense of strain or loss of balance from the visionary and ecstatic to the exquisitely precise. The novel is compelling to read, sometimes horrific, and deeply moving because it is woven together into the single quilt of our humanity.’

Barry Unsworth

‘Harding takes the back off to show you the miraculous ticking of the natural world, the world of clocks, generations of family, an epileptic brain, the human soul. In astounding language sometimes seemingly struck by lightning, sometimes as tight and complicated as clockwork, Harding shows how enormous fiction can be, and how economical. Read this book and marvel.’

Elizabeth McCracken

‘There are few perfect debut American novels. Walter Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* come to mind. So does Marilynne Robinson’s

Housekeeping. To this list ought to be added Paul Harding's devastating first book, *Tinkers*, the story of a dying man drifting back in time to his hardscrabble New England childhood, growing up the son of his clock-making father. Harding has written a masterpiece around the truism that all of us, even surrounded by family, die alone.'

John Freeman, *NPR's The Best Debut Fiction of 2009*

'In Paul Harding's stunning first novel, we find what readers, writers and reviewers live for: a new way of seeing, in a story told as a series of ruminative images, like a fanned card deck.'

San Francisco Chronicle

'The most memorable parts of Harding's novel may be his depiction of a nineteenth-century landscape complete with mule-drawn carts and "frozen wood so brittle that it rang when you split it." In Harding's skillful evocation, Crosby's life, seen from its final moments, becomes a mosaic of memories, "showing him a different self every time he tried to make an assessment".'

The New Yorker

'Harding is a first-rate writer, and his fascination with what makes his characters tick recommends him as a philosopher, as well. At its mahogany outer shell, Tinkers is a novel about the way families lay down unimpeachable tracks on future generations. But in its inner chamber, it's about the way the mind fetishizes the smallest acts – the gears that keep life trued – even as our bodies enter a final winter.'

Time Out Chicago

'Every so often (and this must happen to you too) a writer describes something so well – snow, oranges, dirt – that you

can smell it or feel it or sense it in the room. The writing does what all those other art forms do – evoke the essence of the thing. In this astonishing novel, Paul Harding creates a New England childhood, beginning with the landscape. And he does this, miracle of miracles, through the mind of another human being – not himself, someone else.'

Los Angeles Times

'[An] outstanding debut . . . The real star is Harding's language, which dazzles whether he's describing the workings of clocks, sensory images of nature, the many engaging side characters who populate the book, or even a short passage on how to build a bird nest. This is an especially gorgeous example of novelistic craftsmanship.'

Publishers Weekly (starred review)

Tinkers

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Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781446455999

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Windmill Books 2010

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

First published in the United States in 2009 by Bellevue Literary Press, New York

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by William Heinemann

Windmill Books
The Random House Group Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at:
www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

The author wishes to thank the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts for support during the writing of this book.

www.rbooks.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780099538042

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For Meg, Samuel, and Benjamin

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GEORGE WASHINGTON CROSBY BEGAN TO hallucinate eight days before he died. From the rented hospital bed, placed in the middle of his own living room, he saw insects running in and out of imaginary cracks in the ceiling plaster. The panes in the windows, once snugly pointed and glazed, stood loose in their sashes. The next stiff breeze would topple them all and they would flop onto the heads of his family, who sat on the couch and the love seat and the kitchen chairs his wife had brought in to accommodate everyone. The torrent of panes would drive everyone from the room, his grandchildren in from Kansas and Atlanta and Seattle, his sister in from Florida, and he would be marooned on his bed in a moat of shattered glass. Pollen and sparrows, rain and the intrepid squirrels he had spent half of his life keeping out of the bird feeders would breach the house.

He had built the house himself—poured the foundation, raised the frame, joined the pipes, run the wires, plastered the walls, and painted the rooms. Lightning struck once when he was in the open foundation, soldering the last joint of the hot-water tank. It threw him to the opposite wall. He got up and finished the joint. Cracks in his plaster did not stay cracks; clogged pipes got routed; peeling clapboard got scraped and slathered with a new coat of paint.

Get some plaster, he said, propped up in the bed, which looked odd and institutional among the Persian rugs and

Colonial furniture and dozens of antique clocks. Get some plaster. Jesus, some plaster and some wires and a couple of hooks. You'd be all set for about five bucks.

Yes, Gramp, they said.

Yes, Dad. A breeze blew through the open window behind him and cleared exhausted heads. Bocce balls clicked out on the lawn.

Noon found him momentarily alone, while the family prepared lunch in the kitchen. The cracks in the ceiling widened into gaps. The locked wheels of his bed sank into new fault lines opening in the oak floor beneath the rug. At any moment, the floor was going to give. His useless stomach would jump in his chest as if he were on a ride at the Topsfield Fair and with a spine-snapping jolt he and the bed would land in the basement, on top of the crushed ruins of his workshop. George imagined what he would see, as if the collapse had, in fact, already happened: the living room ceiling, now two stories high, a ragged funnel of splintered floorboards, bent copper pipes, and electrical wires that looked like severed veins bordering the walls and pointing towards him in the center of all of that sudden ruin. Voices murmured out in the kitchen.

George turned his head, hoping someone might be sitting just out of view, with a paper plate of potato salad and rolled slices of roast beef on her lap and a plastic cup of ginger ale in her hand. But the ruin persisted. He thought he called out, but the women's voices in the kitchen and the men's voices in the yard hummed uninterrupted. He lay on his heap of wreckage, looking up.

The second floor fell on him, with its unfinished pine framing and dead-end plumbing (the capped pipes never joined to the sink and toilet he had once intended to install) and racks of old coats and boxes of forgotten board games and puzzles and broken toys and bags of family pictures—

some so old they were exposed on tin plates—all of it came crashing down into the cellar, he unable to even raise a hand to protect his face.

But he was nearly a ghost, almost made of nothing, and so the wood and metal and sheaves of brightly printed cardboard and paper (MOVE FORWARD SIX SPACES TO EASY STREET! Great-Grammy Noddin, shawled and stiff and frowning at the camera, absurd with her hat that looked like a sailor's funeral mound, heaped with flowers and netting), which otherwise would have crushed his bones, dropped on him and fell away like movie props, he or they facsimiles of former, actual things.

There he lay among the graduation photos and old wool jackets and rusted tools and newspaper clippings about his promotion to head of the mechanical-drawing department at the local high school, and then about his appointment as director of guidance, and then about his retirement and subsequent life as a trader and repairer of antique clocks. The mangled brass works of the clocks he had been repairing were strewn among the mess. He looked up three stories to the exposed support beams of the roof and the plump silver-backed batts of insulation that ran between them. One grandson or another (*which?*) had stapled the insulation into place years ago and now two or three lengths of it had come loose and lolled down like pink woolly tongues.

The roof collapsed, sending down a fresh avalanche of wood and nails, tarpaper and shingles and insulation. There was the sky, filled with flat-topped clouds, cruising like a fleet of anvils across the blue. George had the watery, raw feeling of being outdoors when you are sick. The clouds halted, paused for an instant, and plummeted onto his head.

The very blue of the sky followed, draining from the heights into that cluttered concrete socket. Next fell the