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AJC STORYTELLERS

The story behind 'Theo of Golden' and its Georgia author

Allen Levi was a lawyer, a musician and a judge. Then, in his 60s, he wrote a novel about a mysterious stranger.



Allen Levi sits inside his writing shed in Hamilton, where he prefers to write without access to his phone or the internet. In 2019, he told friends that he was going to try writing a piece of long fiction. HYOSUB SHIN/AJC

By Thomas Lake | thomas.lake@ajc.com

COLUMBUS

About seven years ago in this riverside city, a man walked into a coffee shop. He saw portraits on the walls. And he had the idea that would make him a bestselling novelist.

'Theo of Golden' was self-published in 2023. It was picked up last year by an imprint of Simon & Schuster. Late last week, it was No. 1 among all the books on Amazon. It has sold more than 750,000 copies.

Allen Levi's novel does not involve spies or guns or forbidden romance. Indeed, the absence of those things makes the book seem almost radical.

It's about a mysterious stranger who comes to a town a lot like Columbus, next to a river a lot like the Chattahoochee. The old man walks into a coffee shop and sees portraits on the walls. He buys a portrait of a woman with a kind face, gives it to her, and tells her she is "capable of saintliness."

The book's protagonist is a careful observer of the world. He notices the birds and the sunsets. He looks closely at the faces of the people in the portraits that he buys and bestows. In those faces, he sees weariness and loss. "Theo

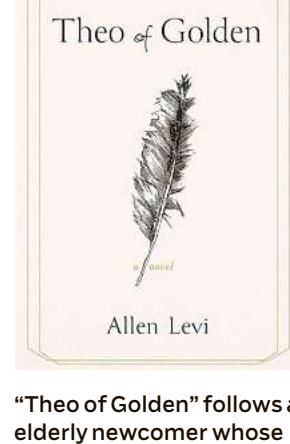
of Golden" is about the importance of seeing each other with clarity and kindness in a world filled with both joy and sadness.

The author does not laugh the way he used to. But he is a cheerful man, and one day in January he returns to Fountain City Coffee in Columbus and looks again at the portraits.

"I recognize that voice," says a woman he doesn't know. Her name is Liz Lampton. She remembers hearing him on the audio-book of "Theo of Golden," where he makes a brief appearance. They have a conversation.

The book says that Theo spent only a year in Golden, "long

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"Theo of Golden" follows an elderly newcomer whose quiet acts of kindness and pencil portraits transform a small Southern town.

Georgia waives billions in sales taxes for data centers



ILLUSTRATION BY JON REYES/FOR THE AJC

The boom of the server farm industry in the Peach State means taxpayer-backed incentives have also ballooned far beyond earlier projections.

By Zachary Hansen
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Last May, Georgia expected to waive roughly \$327 million in sales and use taxes for the equipment that Big Tech purchased this fiscal year for its data centers.

That estimate turned out to not even be close — missing the mark by more than \$2 billion, according to new data released by the Governor's Office of Plan-

ning and Budget.

The state recently updated that projected tax incentive figure to \$2.5 billion, a 664% increase from the initial estimate published eight months earlier, according to Georgia's latest tax expenditure report. It's a staggering jump in the amount of potential tax revenue that Georgia will forgo to support data center development, a

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TODAY'S TOP STORIES INSIDE

OPINION, A13

Are you a Bad Bunny or a Kid Rock American?

The artists' competing Super Bowl halftime shows felt like a musical rematch of the 2024 presidential election.



METRO, B1

Family of man killed on Peachtree still waiting for crosswalk

A raised crosswalk was OK'd in June, but work hasn't begun, frustrating safety advocates.



SPORTS, C1

Chris Sale says he hopes to spend the rest of his career with the Braves

"I really like being here. These guys obviously gave me a shot and picked me up off the ground."



LIVING & ARTS, E1

Atlanta restaurants know you're stealing

And they aren't happy about it. Stolen whimsical spoons and fancy glasses are a burden to replace — and not cheap.



BUSINESS, H1

Atlanta's industrial market is recovering

Local companies, especially large warehouse users, are shaking off a post-pandemic hangover as activity returns to historic norms.

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