



Underworld

Don DeLillo

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While Eisenstein documented the forces of totalitarianism and Stalinism upon the faces of the Russian peoples, DeLillo offers a stunning, at times overwhelming, document of the twin forces of the Cold War and American culture, compelling that "swerve from evenness" in which he finds events and people both wondrous and horrifying.

Underworld opens with a breathlessly graceful prologue set during the final game of the Giants-Dodgers pennant race in 1951. Written in what DeLillo calls "super-omniscience" the sentences sweep from young Cotter Martin as he jumps the gate to the press box, soars over the radio waves, runs out to the diamond, slides in on a fast ball, pops into the stands where J. Edgar Hoover is sitting with a drunken Jackie Gleason and a splenetic Frank Sinatra, and learns of the Soviet Union's second detonation of a nuclear bomb. It's an absolutely thrilling literary moment. When Bobby Thomson hits Branca's pitch into the outstretched hand of Cotter—the "shot heard around the world"—and Jackie Gleason pukes on Sinatra's shoes, the events of the next few decades are set in motion, all threaded together by the baseball as it passes from hand to hand.

"It's all falling indelibly into the past," writes DeLillo, a past that he carefully recalls and reconstructs with acute grace. Jump from Giants Stadium to the Nevada desert in 1992, where Nick Shay, who now owns the baseball, reunites with the artist Kara Sax. They had been brief and unlikely lovers 40 years before, and it is largely through the events, spinoffs, and coincidental encounters of their pasts that DeLillo filters the Cold War experience. He believes that "global events may alter how we live in the smallest ways," and as the book steps back in time to 1951, over the following 800-odd pages, we see just how those events alter lives. This reverse narrative allows the author to strip away the detritus of history and pop culture until we get to the story's pure elements: the bomb, the baseball, and the Bronx. In an epilogue as breathless and stunning as the prologue, DeLillo fast-forwards to a near future in which ruthless capitalism, the Internet, and a new, hushed faith have replaced the Cold War's blend of dread and euphoria.

Through fragments and interlaced stories—including those of highway killers, artists, celebrities, conspiracists, gangsters, nuns, and sundry others—DeLillo creates a fragile web of connected experience, a communal Zeitgeist that encompasses the messy whole of five decades of American life, wonderfully distilled.

Underworld Details

Date : Published 1999 by Picador (first published 1997)

ISBN : 9780330369954

Author : Don DeLillo

Format : Paperback 827 pages

Genre : Fiction, Literature, Novels, American, Literary Fiction

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From Reader Review Underworld for online ebook

Paul Bryant says

THE PILGRIM 'S HEART IS LIGHT AT THE COMMENCEMENT OF HIS JOURNEY

So I will strap on my backpack and don sturdy walking boots, an oxygen tank might be useful, and a supply of plasters and animal pelts - and then I will begin to scale the North Face of Modern American Literature. Let's see how far I get before I fall off one of its jagged cliffs or collapse choking with one of Mr DeLillo's sentences wrapped around my neck.

BUT DISCOURAGEMENTS ARISE UNBIDDEN

Update - Not even on page 100 and I have a sinking feeling. It's DeLillo's style. It's so very...er...ornate. No noun escapes without an adjective pinned to it, some of which are very odd - consider these from pages 63 to 65:

"... the little splat of human speech" [huh?:]

"A bled-white sky with ticky breezes" [ticky? like a clock?:]

"...a horseman with scabbarded rifle or a lone cameleer hunched in muslin on his dumb-headed beast"

"...the studded vegetation" [with what?:]

"...a clear night with swirled stars" [swirled?:]

Also this -

"There is something about old times that's satisfied by spontaneity. The quicker you decide, the more fully you discharge the debt to memory." Okay, what debt would that be? What's the logic here? Is this something our Don believes or is this something he wants us to believe this particular character believes? If so, why? Who has the time to figure out what it means anyway? Especially when there's another 762 ticky swirled studded scabbarded pages to go....

This isn't going so well.

DESPAIR INGULFS HIS HEART AND HE HEARS VOICES

And finally :

Once more despondent and unenthused, I zipped around the goodread reviews and found remarks such as

"... oh, god... this, this... painful verbal bukakefest is literally 800 pages of DeLillo jacking off at his computer over how deep and verbose he is. i wanted to punch him in the face and shake him, shouting, "JUST GET TO THE FUCKING PLOT, YOU SELF-LOVING PIECE OF SHIT." (from Ethan)

and

"I'll be honest and say that I don't remember much about this book other than an awful lot of baseball. This is partially because there is a lot of baseball in it" (from Chelsea)

and

"Ultimately, I don't think DeLillo knew what his story was about and tried to compensate by adding more and more pages. Critics, never wanting to be the one who doesn't 'get it', fawned and fellated the book, doing no favors to either the author or readers who mistakenly waded into this dank swamp and wonder why they're so dumb for not seeing the brilliance. And then they run back to James Patterson or Nicholas Sparks or some shit like that and we're all a little poorer in the end. ." (from Joseph)

and finally this from an online lit journal:

"Potentially intriguing plots which feature strongly in the earlier parts of the book - an intriguing serial killer subplot, the stories of each person who possesses the winning baseball - are abandoned halfway through the book in favour of overlong childhood memories or the inane ponderings of a performance artist; other stories are neglected for over 400 pages before reappearing at the end of the novel, causing an unwelcome jolt as the reader tries to remember the pertinent details."

THE PILGRIM CASTS THE DEVIL FROM HIM

I groaned and decided to place this great tome gently onto my "Abandoned Halfway And Will Never Finish Unless Some Very Unlikely DeLillo Fans Take My Family Hostage" shelf.

Perry says

Elegy for Left Hand Alone

Title of Part 2

[*4.5 stars*] [footnote added on 10/21]

I just read what to me is likely the most far-reaching American novel in terms of its scope, spanning the 1950s through the 1990s and covering a wide range of American topics, from baseball to solid waste disposal, U.S. nuclear weapons and the Soviet atomic weapons program (i.e., nuclear proliferation), guns, graffiti, the U.S. Roman Catholic Church, the Cuban Missile Crisis, drug addiction, AIDS, marital infidelity, and pulling in a litany of American legends like Lenny Bruce, J. Edgar Hoover and Frank Sinatra.

The novel opens with a lengthy prologue (perhaps the longest I've read) set primarily on October 3, 1951 at the New York Giants' home field, the Upper Manhattan Polo Grounds in a renowned game with the Brooklyn Dodgers to decide the National League pennant winner to play in the World Series. In the bottom of the 9th inning, the Dodgers were up 4-2, and two men were on base when a player named Bobby Thomson stepped up to the plate and hit a 3-run walk-off (game ending) homerun to give the Giants the win 5-4.

The homer has gained a sort of mythical status among baseball fans (such as myself), known as "The Shot Heard 'Round the World." The whereabouts of that baseball is still unknown in real life. But DeLillo creates a young fellow who skipped school and sneaked into the game and a scenario in which this student named Cotter Martin is befriended by an older man and we follow their conversation through parts of the game. The homer is initially caught by the older guy and Cotter wrests the ball away from him and runs home. Yet his father, a drunk, takes the ball out of his room as Cotter sleeps and sells it for \$32.45.

Front page of New York Times on October 4, 1951

The remainder of the book follows a very nonlinear narrative, mostly about a guy named Nick Shay who is an executive VP at a waste disposal company. Shay grew up in Brooklyn. And his life is slowly unfolded, where we learn that he shot a guy when he was a juvenile, around the same time as he was having an affair with a 30-something married woman. DeLillo writes as if he's a bit repressed when it comes to carnal relations. Nick messes around on his wife and his best friend/co-worker is having an affair with Nick's wife.

While Nick is the novel's centerpiece, DeLillo blends in a number of themes (some of which are listed above) and integrates a mosaic of memorable luminaries, the primary two being Hoover and Bruce. Several times, he goes to bits of Bruce's routines in the early 1960s slamming and riffing on the Cuban Missile crisis and nuclear proliferation. Part of Lenny Bruce's routine discussing a guy (generally speaking) on a date :

"you're thinking all the universal things men have always thought about and said to each other, get in her pants? did you get in? did you get some? did you make it? how far'd you get? how far'd she go? is she an easy lay? is she a good hump? is she a piece? did you get a piece? it's like the language of yard goods, piece goods, you can make her, she can be made, it's like a garment factory, ... he's a makeout artist, she's a piece,**

The Underworld Hoover likes sneaking little peaks at his right-hand man showering and changing.

The titles of most of the parts are quite memorable, including the DuPont ad slogan, "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry," and the song titles, "Long Tall Sally," by Little Richard, and an infamous Rolling Stones song, not released on any album, called "Cocksucker Blues." The title of the prologue was "The Triumph of Death," a 16th Century oil painting by Dutch artist Pieter Brugel the Elder.

"The Triumph of Death," which fascinated Hoover in the novel

I don't know if I subscribe to this being "The Great American Novel," as a couple of critics have claimed, yet I don't think it's too far off, with such a clever and cunning layout to the book, an intelligent treatment of a number of American themes, drawing in a number of known characters, and its imaginative breadth. My only complaints were that the nonlinear narrative is a little hard to follow and the dialogue of what seems to be a conversation in which two people are talking but it sure doesn't seem like they're conversing with each other, which gets on my nerves.

I'll admit I heard this type of banter in college, and will further plead no contest to having said at least one of these things to close friends when I was **fourteen and didn't even know what a piece was [seriously, but realize that I was 14 in 1979]. Yet, I can swear that in my numerous years in grade school locker rooms or in a group of beer-fueled college buddies swapping juvenile tales, I never once heard a guy say that he grabbed a girl by her crotch or her breast. Never. At 14, in 1979, I knew better than to ever touch a girl there or there.

Nonetheless, we have a man one step away from being elected POTUS who thought he was entitled to do

that, in his late 50s, in the aughts. Or, at the least, joked about doing that? Wow. SMH. Where are the social conservatives, those who argue for censorship in schools to protect kids from smut? Shouldn't they be raising a ruckus? No, they are too busy trying to sell bullshit from Trump about how 9 *12* women, each and every one of them, are lying and how SNL is part of a grand conspiracy to steal the election from a brazen, irreligious New Yorker. Hypocrisy? A sign that the apocalypse is upon us?

Jason says

I'm on page 387 of *Underworld*. Please. Help me decide if I should finish. Yeah you.

Here's a few things I think are better than *Underworld*:

1. The song *Born in the USA* by Springsteen
2. The blonds on the Danish women's Olympic curling team
3. Opening a third beer
4. A clean stove
5. Any 5 pages of *War and Peace*
6. The Greek flag
7. When I catch an attractive woman looking at me
8. Picking my teams for the NCAA basketball tournament
9. An afro
10. Any 15 minutes of *Shawshank Redemption*
11. Deja vu
12. A good picture on my driver's license
13. Shade
14. The shape of Alaska

Here's a few things I think are worse than *Underworld*:

1. Keanu Reeves
 2. Beach sand in my shorts
 3. Tatoos from the knees down
 4. Gin
 5. The shape of Colorado
 6. 'Carnies'--small hands, smell like cabbage
 7. The physical appearance of a goiter
 8. Smoke breath
 9. Non self-deprecating people
 10. When a fucking crowbar gauges out my eye and falls with it's full weight on a single small toe
-

Joseph says

An excellent example of the critical consensus being just plain wrong. *Underworld* is bloated, confused, and turgid - yet critics who should have known better drowned it in praise. I think this is due to a number of factors.

One, pedigree: DeLillo is a critical darling, deservedly so. Two, Heft: just like in movies, critics assume size equals importance, and thus the longer it takes to get through something, the more that something must have to say. It's 854 pages, 600 of which could have been cut. Three, it's DeLillo, who rivals Toni Morrison and John Updike for riding the line between brilliant and laughably overwrought and critics will always prefer the "difficult" to the plainspoken. Fine by me - I don't have a problem with occasionally making the reader work for his/her supper. But there's a difference between challenging the reader and flexing your cleverness, and you can guess which one I think DeLillo does here. Ultimately, I don't think DeLillo knew what his story was about and tried to compensate by adding more and more pages. Critics, never wanting to be the one who doesn't "get it", fawned and fellated the book, doing no favors to either the author or readers who mistakenly waded into this dank swamp and wonder why they're so dumb for not seeing the brilliance. And then they run back to James Patterson or Nicholas Sparks or some shit like that and we're all a little poorer in the end.

Franco Santos says

Submundo es una obra autodestructiva, decadente, regresiva, un suicidio literario que moldea a su antojo el espacio-tiempo inalterable desde lo real pero posible desde las letras. Don DeLillo nos ha obsequiado un *magnum opus* que recorre cincuenta años de historia, manipulando cuerpos solitarios con un temor inquebrantable hacia la muerte y la falta de respuestas, que va a hacer del lector un dolido testigo de lo que no quiere ver; todo esto a partir de un juego narrativo en el que el autor nos presenta las consecuencias de la historia y luego sus causas, una aproximación de 900 páginas a aquello que intenta darle una solución a la pregunta: ¿Cuándo fue el momento en que nos equivocamos?

Todo libro tiene su inicio, sin importar lo mucho que juegue con la linealidad. *Submundo* abre con un prólogo de una calidad insuperable que relata el mítico partido entre los Giants de Nueva York y los Dodgers de Brooklyn del 51. Un buceo en los miedos y los sueños de la sociedad americana retratada en setenta páginas de pura maestría literaria. Este prólogo, titulado «El triunfo de la muerte», es una *novelette* que actúa por sí sola, no necesita de un contexto que la sustente. En particular me sentí fascinado y hasta asfixiado por tanto la tensión como por su inquietante avance hacia su párrafo final. En este prólogo hay dos realidades, dos líneas paralelas que no se ven entre sí: la euforia, la felicidad colectiva, y en el trasfondo, como un secreto que nadie quiere oír, el inicio de la guerra.

Luego *Submundo* se quiebra, y de esa rotura se escapan cuarenta años y surgen decenas de personajes, desde reales, como el director del FBI Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra o el polémico humorista Lenny Bruce (con su famoso grito de «¡Vamos a morir todos!»), hasta ficticios aunque no por eso menos palpables, como Nick Shay o Klara Sax, o el encantador Albert Bronzini, el maestro de ciencias y ajedrez. En esos personajes se verán vestigios de una sociedad trémula ante la guerra y la inminencia de la muerte, con algunas escenas que personalmente me han hecho estremecer. DeLillo ha sabido formar personajes —debido en parte a un manejo brillante de la autorreflexión— complejos y profundamente entrañables que habitan tanto en la mente del lector como en su entorno.

Y así *Submundo* se dobla y se desdobra, se estira, se tuerce y se achata, deformando el tiempo. Comienza una regresión hasta los 50, pasando por la Guerra Fría, por la Crisis de los Misiles, por el asesinato del presidente Kennedy, por las protestas contra la guerra de Vietnam, por la experimentación nuclear, la segregación racial, el abuso de drogas duras y blandas, las mafias y los suburbios de Nueva York, que presentan una realidad tapada por rascacielos que arañan la fantasía. Personajes nacen y mueren a lo largo de los años que pasan en *Submundo*, crecen en diferentes contextos sociales y se adueñan de diferentes culturas ligadas a las

épocas. Así se presenta una red polifónica que hace mella de lo que somos, que no ignora sino enfrenta el aislamiento que nos separa los unos de los otros y la superficialidad del consumismo salvaje en un claro desafío hacia la muerte. Un camino por la bondad y por el dolor inseparable de vivir.

La escritura de DeLillo es de lo mejor que me he encontrado en mi vida. DeLillo trata las palabras con cuidado, no escribe por escribir; cada oración tiene una consciencia aparte, una identidad que corresponde a otro relato, al relato del lenguaje. Un emocionante homenaje a la escritura. Todavía no me puedo quitar de la piel el capítulo que da inicio a la parte dos, sobre el Asesino de la Autopista de Texas y una niña sin nombre que filmó uno de los asesinatos de casualidad. Ese capítulo es de lo mejor que he leído en mi vida. Escalofriante desde su inicio hasta su última frase, no solo por lo que se narra, sino también por *cómo* está narrado. *Submundo* es de esa clase de obras que pueden abrirse en cualquier página y con solo leer un párrafo aleatorio ya te conmueve.

En cuanto a los diálogos, carecen de un elemento lineal o progresivo, puesto que funcionan como una reproducción de la soledad inherente a cada personaje. Los diálogos en *Submundo* son minimalistas, se superponen, se chocan entre sí, se rozan hasta desgastarse y frustran la verdadera conexión, y muchas veces salen de la boca de su emisor sin llegar nunca a su receptor. Son soliloquios demasiado personales de los que desprenden solo unos pocos fragmentos de información capaces de llegar al oído de su oyente. Esto, lejos de volverse desesperante, me resultó un recurso (aunque ya lo había visto antes en otro gran libro de DeLillo, *White Noise*) que renueva un poco lo que puede hacer un escritor en una obra de ficción.

Pocas veces me ha ocurrido de estar leyendo un libro y ya sentir que me va a acompañar por años. Hay libros que marcan, y *Submundo* se ha marcado a fuego en mi memoria. *Submundo* es todo lo que no vemos, todo lo que ocurre detrás de la prensa amarillista y de las ondas electromagnéticas salidas de la radio y de la televisión. *Submundo* es lo que se oculta detrás de nuestros deshechos, de la podredumbre, de nuestra mirada hacia lo que carece de sentido. Una búsqueda de la verdad, de lo que constantemente tratamos de tapar con objetos sin vida, porque encontramos consuelo en figuras preconcebidas que le hacen sombra a la esencia humana. Unos hermanos sufriendo de diferentes formas la desaparición de su padre, un anciano juntando las piezas de un pasado más dichoso o una monja en plena crisis religiosa. Esto es lo que no vemos. Esto también respira. Esto es historia.

(En caso de que alguien esté interesado en tener mis notas sobre esta lectura como guía, solo mándenme un mensaje por acá y se las paso).

Michael Finocchiaro says

I thoroughly enjoyed *Underworld* by DeLillo. I was a bit scared of it for years, but after having successfully tackled two other post-modern über-works *Infinite Jest* and *Gravity's Rainbow*, I decidedly it was time (admittedly, I have not been able to bring myself to attempt *The Recognitions* by Gaddis yet). I enjoyed the writing style and loved the story. The background of the postwar 50s and 60s was interesting and I loved the image of the open art exposition in the desert (no spoilers). It was my first book by DeLillo and after now having read 7 others (*Players*, *Falling Man*, *Libra*, *White Noise*, *Mao II*, and *Zero K*), I have to day it is my favorite so far (*White Noise* and *Libra* being runner's up and *Zero K* being my least favorite by far - Ratner's *Star* is on my shortlist before the end of the year and perhaps I'll try *Great Jones Street* as well). I thought that the sweeping prose style was more efficient and worked better in this particular story than in the other aforementioned DeLillos. In fact, *Underworld* may be the only one - besides *White Noise*- that I will return

to in years to come. Honestly, I prefer Pynchon - particularly *Mason&Dixon* and *Against the Day* - to DeLillo but of his work, this one was for me the most fun.

Since originally writing this review, I have trudged through (and reviewed on GR) *The Recognitions* and have to say that I preferred *Underworld*, GR, AtD, M&D, and IJ. Of those four, it would be hard for me to pick a favorite. I think that DeLillo took less chances than Pynchon or DFW, but the narrative is still captivating and entertaining.

Adam says

This is now my favourite novel alongside *Blood Meridian*, *2666* and *Infinite Jest*. I'm too fatigued and mentally exhausted to write a decent review now, which fact is a shame.

Underworld is, to use a quote from Roberto Bolaño's *2666* to illustrate my take on this DeLillo novel, one of "the great, imperfect, torrential works, books that blaze a path into the unknown."

Those who will tell you that *White Noise* is DeLillo's best, or some other short, compact, precise DeLillo work, "want to watch the great masters spar, but they have no interest in real combat, when the great masters struggle against that something, that something that terrifies us all, that something that cows us and spurs us on, amid blood and mortal wounds and stench." THAT is what DeLillo does here.

Underworld is DeLillo's *The Trial*, his *Moby Dick*, his *Bouvard and Pecuchet*. It is not his *Metamorphosis*, his *Bartleby*, his *A Simple Heart*.

Like all great writers, DeLillo's given you the chance to watch him spar if that's what you want, and there's nothing necessarily wrong with that. But as far as I'm concerned, nothing is as beautiful as reading a book by a literary master embroiled in what Bolaño terms "real combat" and so eloquently describes in the quote above.

Matt says

The central metaphor in *Underworld*, as I saw it, revolves around trash. One of the main characters, Nick Shay, works for a waste-disposal company. No matter how many different recycling bins his family divides their waste into (seven and counting), it cannot all be reclaimed. The trash builds up – and what holds true for the physical also holds true for the personal and the historical. No matter how we might try to reprocess, recast, or ignore our history/memory, our past accumulates, and the weight of our mental and personal garbage is heavy.

An interesting twist that DeLillo works into *Underworld*, as I realized during a recent discussion with a friend, is that one of the characters, the painter Klara Sax, is able to find a sort of redemption. Yet the reader sees redemption at the beginning of the book, not the end – the book works backwards towards the trash and detritus of her past, leaving Klara, rather, at an seemingly insurmountable (although we, as readers, know better) low point.

One of the greatest successes of the book is the fluidity with which it moves between personal and cultural memories. The opening prologue of the book, in fact, starts off with an incredible recreation of the historic 1951 Dodgers/Giants playoff game – the earliest point, temporarily, in the whole book. When we then jump forward to the present, we meet the characters for the first time – and the rest of the book is spent working backwards, following the personal histories as they weave in and out of the cultural history we met at the beginning. The way in which DeLillo allows these two memories to inform and define each other is an unbelievable triumph, on par with the personal/cultural archives of Joseph Cornell's boxes, from half a century earlier.

Roberto says

Un mondo in pericolo

Underworld è un libro sovrassaturo di contenuti. E' ricco, straripante di riferimenti, di fatti, di concetti, di pensieri, di riflessioni, di arte moderna, di storia. Una carrellata di eventi che non segue apparentemente un filo logico e dove l'ago del tempo scorre su diverse direttrici.

Nel 1951, più o meno all'inizio della guerra fredda, ebbe luogo la partita di baseball Dodgers contro Giants con cui inizia il romanzo; contemporaneamente gli americani fecero esplodere un ordigno nucleare, come test, a fini militari. Il libro segue il percorso immaginario della palla leggendaria battuta da Bobby Thomson in quella partita, che lancia un fortissimo fuori campo; la palla, che passa di mano in mano, ci consente di seguire i principali eventi che avvengono in America fino alla fine della contrapposizione col blocco sovietico, con la caduta del muro.

La fine del blocco sovietico causa una crisi di valori e di identità negli americani, che vedevano nei russi un obiettivo, un antagonista, un fattore che li faceva sentire "uniti". Una volta che i russi non sono più il nemico da battere, che fare? Con chi prendersela? L'uomo ha bisogno di qualcosa in cui credere, di nemici da combattere, di idoli, di oggetti, di Dei. Su che valore convergere?

All'inizio della storia c'era il baseball, sport per il quale gli americani si potevano sentire uniti (più o meno come accade in Europa con i campionati di calcio). La palla lanciata da Thomson, filo conduttore di eventi, continua a ricordare il momento leggendario in cui tutti erano uniti.

Una palla che man mano che il tempo procede testimonia la decadenza dell'America (e perché no, del mondo intero): la guerra, le scorie radioattive, la società dei consumi, il danaro, gli interessi, la politica. La disumanizzazione dei valori.

Una società in crisi di valori tende a concentrarsi sugli oggetti, assegnando loro dei significati che, purtroppo, non possono avere. Oggetti che, per definizione fuggenti, sono destinati a diventare rifiuti, sommergendoci. Se procediamo così il mondo sarà presto distrutto. Dove stiamo andando? Stiamo inseguendo una utopia?

Uno spiraglio positivo DeLillo lo lascia intuire: sono solo i valori che rimangono, i rapporti umani; non le cose. Ed è su quelli che dobbiamo concentrarci.

Un inizio strepitoso, una prosa raffinata e bellissima, riflessioni profonde e assolutamente degne di nota, uno stile caotico sul breve ma visionario sul lungo. Per me è un libro di 1772 pagine, ossia due volte 886. Perché alla prima lettura è quasi impossibile cogliere tutti i dettagli e i riferimenti incrociati (che non mi metto

nemmeno a elencare, tanti sono).

Faticoso, indubbiamente, e tutt'altro che facile. Ma regala riflessioni e sensazioni impagabili. Sono questi i libri per cui, dopo tutto, vale la pena leggere.

Cosimo says

I giorni del disordine

Un homerun e la bomba atomica: l'inizio della guerra fredda coincide con la fine della partita, due eventi collegati da un caso che diventa destino e che innesca, in un certo senso, il meccanismo della trama. Ma, come De Lillo dimostra poeticamente, le trame ci portano sempre verso la morte. Mentre l'incompletezza si rivela in un legame d'amore, un evento misterioso e traumatico innesca una narrazione alla rovescia, un percorso a ritroso nel tempo segnato da complessità e interconnessione, che si concretizza in una cosmologia storica del contemporaneo. Un padre scomparso, un padre che è assenza, mancanza di risposte e un'eco vuota della memoria. Nick e Clara si conoscono intimamente e tornano a guardarsi dentro al sorriso nel deserto. Lui vive con l'ossessione logica della perdita e lei cerca di trovare un senso controcorrente nelle trame vulnerabili del tempo. Il romanzo mantiene una struttura aperta, verticale e multiforme, dove i detriti di storie collettive e private raccontano qualcosa di ciò che sfugge, ciò che non è misurabile, ciò che è irrimediabilmente perduto. Il Bronx, i writers e il baseball, J. Edgar Hoover e il Trionfo della Morte di Bruegel, l'assassinio di Kennedy e la crisi missilistica, Lenny Bruce e l'Unione Sovietica, il Vietnam e i B-52, il ballo di Capote al Plaza e l'incubo atomico. La narrazione è come lo specchio di un'esistenza che non riesce più a prendere la realtà, ad avvicinarla e a narrarne la forma, il soggetto si sviluppa quindi nella scrittura come spazio del possibile, luogo della vera vita, mosaico che scava dentro le cose per restituirci noi stessi, composizione della rimozione, ma anche coscienza dell'irreale, dell'indicibile e del suo orrore. Contro questo rapporto ambiguo, illusorio e indefinito tra parola e oggetto, nel testo si generano infiniti livelli di realtà e plurimi universi di esperienza. La molteplicità di prospettive, voci e sensazioni, si frantuma nel ricordo dell'era post-atomica, mentre l'incarnazione dell'innocenza oppone la nudità del trascendente alla forza della paura e della distruzione. Mentre la forma romanzo evolve in un prisma di onniscienza con innumerevoli stili, registri e punti di vista, ci si trova a desiderare un riparo, un luogo tranquillo dove esistere, dove rendere familiare e meno minacciosa quella forza segreta e catastrofica che ci insidia. Ma sembra non sia possibile, quello che scartiamo ritorna inevitabilmente a consumarci.

“Una ragazzina alta e magra dotata di una specie di intelligenza selvaggia, sicura nei gesti e nel passo – sembrava esausta ma vigile, aveva l'aria di non lavarsi ma di essere in qualche modo assolutamente pulita, pulita come la terra, affamata e svelta”.

Violet wells says

I love reading James Wood on the novel. For me he's up there with Virginia Woolf as a critic who genuinely enriches the experience of reading the novel. Even though he often denigrates authors I love. Don DeLillo for example. Underworld for Wood was gratuitously obsessed with paranoia as if this was a concern peculiar to only DeLillo. But one could say paranoia was a state of mind invented by America. Did it even exist in the 19th century? The Cold War saw the invention of paranoia as a mass media tool for manipulating public opinion. DeLillo's fascination with it was not only entirely legitimate but incredibly eye-opening in tracing

the changing psyche of post 1950 America. I don't have Wood's book with me here but to my recollection he wrote brilliantly about Underworld without getting it.

Underworld doesn't have much in the way of plot. It's like the literary equivalent of a musician jamming on a theme. As if DeLillo has submitted wholly to the tides of inspiration and allowed himself to be taken wherever they lead him. It reminded me, in form, of a web page full of hyperlinks. DeLillo is fascinated by the ghost paths of connections and the panoramic grids they form; the secret lives of objects and the far reaching stories they tell.

He wanted an object that would provide a surreptitious link to fifty years of American history and chose the baseball that won the 1951 World Series, during which – here's one of the hyperlinks - the Russians tested their first atomic bomb. The ball is initially pocketed by a young black kid who has jumped the turnstile without paying. From the game itself, seen through the eyes of various celebrities, we enter the life of an impoverished black family in Harlem. The first intimately observed narrative begins.

There's so much in this novel it's inevitable some "storylines" will appeal more than others. Ultimately, it's the clairvoyant power and beautiful urban lyricism of the prose which makes this a masterpiece in my eyes. DeLillo is like a soothsayer of the technological consumerist age. ("Bemoan technology all you want. It expands your self-esteem and connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived.") He takes you behind the glossy surfaces of contemporary life, excavates for deeper meaning in the newsreel footage. The novel's central character is employed by the waste industry which perhaps epitomises perfectly the buried volatile poisoning underworld of our culture.

Drew says

Seems like to most people, Delillo is a love-or-hate proposition. His pace is either relaxed, or his books are boring as hell. His prose is gorgeous, or it's stilted and awkward (or just plain bad?). His dialogue is pitch perfect, or it's unrealistic and/or wooden. His philosophical musings are either profound or so pretentious as to be laughable. His plots are either nonexistent in such a way that you don't even notice, or they're nonexistent in such a way that you want to throw the book at the wall (which, with a book like Underworld, could do some significant damage to the wall).

I've felt both ways. The Body Artist was torture, and Cosmopolis was mostly torture. But they were short and I made it through them and appreciated parts of them. *Libra* was the first one I read that had some semblance of a traditional plot, and it was mostly stolen from history. Underworld's definitely got a plot, but it's not the plot on the book jacket, which in fact makes Underworld sound pretty unappealing. The book follows the life of a baseball? Most people don't give a shit about baseball, let alone one *specific* baseball.

What the book really is is a coming-of-age-during-the-Cold-War story, told backwards. Does that not sound more interesting? Yes, it follows tons of characters, from real ones Jackie Gleason and J. Edgar Hoover and Lenny Bruce to fictional ones like Nick Shay and Klara Sax. But I'd argue that most of the stuff that doesn't involve Nick directly is in there for tone. I don't necessarily think that a book has to be long for it to be great, but it helps. You need some time -- a few hundred pages, quite often -- to feel like you've lived through a period, or in a place, that you really haven't. No doubt Delillo could have cut some stuff and I wouldn't have thought, "Hmm, I still don't quite get cold-war America," but I have no complaints about the length as it is.

The structure of the book is really cool, and saying it's "shaped like a mushroom cloud" is clever but doesn't

explain why anyone might want to actually try reading this. But it starts in 1951 with the climactic Giants-Dodgers baseball game, which sets the tone for the rest of the book. I'm not talking about the jubilant Giants celebrating their victory. I'm talking about Jackie Gleason vomiting on Frank Sinatra's shoes, Hoover's foreboding at the falling Life magazine pages and The Triumph of Death, Cotter Martin's duel over the baseball-in-question with the spectacularly and insidiously evil Bill Waterson, the unexpectedly low attendance of the game.

Then it jumps to the 1990's, with Nick Shay as a middle aged and nearly-complete human being. From there, it goes backwards in increments, describing events (global and local) pivotal to Nick's life, ending with the crime hinted at much earlier that changed Nick's whole character. Then for the epilogue, it jumps back to the present, and Nick's completion, or self-actualization, or whatever. That sounds lame, but I'm trying not to give anything away. I'm not always crazy about fragmented or jumbly timelines, but this one just *makes sense*. And to be perfectly honest, I feel like most of the more vehement negative criticism on this site has to come from people who didn't make it far enough to see that it *does* make sense.

I wouldn't normally try to defend Delillo's characters; they're often postmodernly flat in the most annoying way. Jack Gladney? Bill whatever from Mao II? Jesus, *Eric Packer*? Who could possibly care about these guys? They're just vehicles for Delillo's "systems" philosophy, which is also not always that appealing. One of his few successes with character was Lee Harvey Oswald, for whom, again, he could draw on a certain amount of real information. The Warren Report or whatever that enormous project was. But Nick Shay is unexpectedly real. Maybe that's because we get his whole life, and most of the lives of those close to him. And it's so great to finally* see Delillo write a long book with a real plot and a real protagonist.

Last thing: the prose style. Some people think what he writes is stupid, or makes no sense, or whatever. And I'd agree as far as to say that yes, he does have some clunkers. Some absolutely horrible sentences. Counterintuitive metaphors that never get explained. Unnecessary floridity. Dialogue between certain characters seeming way too intelligent. These are all present in *Underworld*, but I'd say much less so than his other novels. You never quite forget it's Delillo writing, but the clunkers come off like the tics and mannerisms of a brilliant but slightly irritating uncle extemporizing at dinner, and are easily ignored and benefit-of-the-doubted. Whereas *The Body Artist* consists almost exclusively of these tics, and is consequently intolerable.

My favorite scene from the book is one that may be a throwaway for most people, including maybe Delillo himself, but I really like it and I think it does what good books have to do: teach you how to be a (better) human. Nick is meeting with this Jesuit priest who's been enlisted by a friend of the family as a mentor/role model. (I think there should have been more of these scenes, actually, even if it had made the book 50 pages longer) Nick at this point is a cocky Italian-Bronx teenager who's full of piss and vinegar, as they say. But the priest asks him to name the parts of a shoe. Nick says the laces, the sole, the heel. Not much else to it. Smug. The priest insults him and prompts him to name the tongue. The priest points at parts of the shoe and names the cuff, the quarter, the welt, the vamp, the eyelets, the aglets, the grommets. The point being not the arcaneness of shoe nomenclature, but instead how little you know when you're young -- or how little you know, period. From that last list, I personally only knew eyelets, aglets and grommets. Father Paulus to Nick: have some goddamn *mindfulness*. Try to know something about the things you do every day.

So it's worth sticking out, I think. One caveat: Delillo's meditation at the very end of the epilogue, on the Internet as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of everything, is laughable, *and should be disregarded at all costs*. He's established his systems over the course of 800 pages, and this last bit is beating the proverbial dead horse. Sorry, Mr. Delillo.

Now onto 2666, the next installment in the Winter of Longass Books.

*I realize that the chronology's a little weird here if you're thinking about The Body Artist and Cosmopolis, etc., but I regard Underworld as the culmination of DeLillo's career writing books that are actually good; it came right after Libra, White Noise, and Mao II (not necessarily in that order), and I wanted to read as many of his books as I could before I tried this one, which turned out to be a good idea.

Ethan Fixell says

i've only put down three books in my entire life.

the first was Ayn Rand's "Atlas Shrugged," which i absolutely loved but got terribly sick of after about 700 pages of the same goddamn philosophy being crammed down my throat. (which sounds like its awful, but i really did adore those first two thirds).

the second was a speed reading book. it wasn't a very quick read, and i got bored.

the third is now Don DeLillo's Underworld, supposedly one of the greatest masterpieces of 20th century literature.

i have no shame in saying that i stopped reading this bullshit after 550 pages. because as "brilliant" as DeLillo may be (and granted, he does have a more-than-firm grasp on the english language and on the power of dialogue), he is absolutely, hands down, one of the most long winded, convoluted writers i have ever read.

i've done "White Noise," and got through it without too much discomfort, but was ultimately let down by the end. and i mean that in both senses of the phrase--the ending sucked, and i was considerably less interested by the time the book ended than when i started. nevertheless, i'd still recommend it for certain redeeming qualities.

but this one... oh, god... this, this... painful verbal bukakefest is literally 800 pages of DeLillo jacking off at his computer over how deep and verbose he is. i wanted to punch him in the face and shake him, shouting, "JUST GET TO THE FUCKING PLOT, YOU SELF-LOVING PIECE OF SHIT."

there's nothing wrong with elegant, poetic writing, even in novel form. but without a fucking interesting narrative?

last time i checked, a novel is defined as:

1. a fictitious prose narrative of considerable length and complexity, portraying characters and usually presenting a sequential organization of action and scenes.

yeah, i get it: he's such a fucking genius because of the way he weaves esoteric and seemingly unrelated themes throughout the lives of dozens of characters within a bevvvy of settings and a nonlinear timeframe.

but WHO FUCKING CARES?

if its boring and the characters suck, who really fucking CARES? i don't want to read that shit. i could crack open my 10th grade chemistry textbook for that.

i came here to read a STORY, Don. it's a shame you couldn't help.

Manny says

I'm surprised to see how many people here had the exact same reaction I did. They start reading, they find a few bits that seem quite gripping and well-written, they lose momentum, and they stop. Some hypotheses:

- None of us are smart enough to get the point.
- There is a clear point, but you have to reach the end to discover what it is, and we didn't have the requisite fortitude. (Also, it must be like *The Mousetrap*: readers who find out are sworn not to reveal it).
- The point is that life feels this way if you're a certain kind of person, i.e. interesting in places but ultimately pretty meaningless.
- The book just isn't very good.

Now that I write it down, I do feel vaguely interested in discovering which of the above guesses is closest to the truth. But not interested enough to open it again.

When I try to imagine *Untitled*, the spectacularly unsuccessful novel that Richard writes in Martin Amis's *The Information*, I must admit that the first thing I think of is *Underworld*. At least DeLillo's book doesn't cause nose-bleeds, sinus headaches or inexplicable drowsiness. Okay, maybe the last one.

I note with interest that Karl Ove Knausgård is another member of the club. A passage from near the end of *Min kamp 2* (he has just visited a bookstore and made some purchases):

DeLillo-romanen angret jeg på i det samme jeg kom ut, for selv om jeg en gang hade hadde vært fan av ham, særlig romanene *The Names* og *White Noise*, hadde jeg ikke klart å lese mer en halve av *Underworld*, og siden neste bok hadde vært forferdelig, var det åpenbart at han var på hell.

My translation:

I regretted the DeLillo novel the moment I came out, since even if I once had been a fan, particularly of the novels *The Names* and *White Noise*, I hadn't been able to read more than half of *Underworld*, and considering that the next book had been terrible, it was clear he was on the way down.

Lauren says

People married, were born, and died in the time it took me to read this book. A kid sitting next to me on a plane commented "that's the fattest book I've ever seen. What's it about?" I told him "I have no idea--I'm only 580 pages into it." Having finished I still don't know what it was about but reading it was an extraordinary experience. The novella that introduces the book is perfect and complete in itself. What follows is discursive and ephemeral like some new kind of music. Reading it was like learning how to listen.

karen says

seriously, why does everyone suck this book's dick so much?

this book was recommended to me by an ex (who also recommended *zuleika dobson* and *the joke*, so he had a good track record until then) who knew how much i liked *infinite jest* so he thought i would like this one. and if i only liked infinite jest because it was a long book written by a white male, then i suppose i would have liked this book. but i didn't, so it must be something else i'm drawn to in the wallace.

i remember i was reading this at the airport where i was going to meet him, like a dutiful girlfriend, and just having my jaw drop at the first part. not because it was soooo goooooood like everyone here seems to think. am i really the only one who felt embarrassed by the whole *life* magazine thing? i remember looking around after i read that part to see if someone was playing a trick on me. when he got off the plane, i just sat there, shaking my head at him sadly. it was the beginning of the end.

look - i really liked *white noise*, but this i just felt to be a bloated, wooden, oddly-phrased book whose language didn't charm me, but made me unhappy. and then he goes and publishes the first bit as a separate book? who does that?? sorry, deLillo - its not terrible, so it gets no 2 stars, but i barely cared about anything in this book, and it ruined a relationship. if i die alone, it's your fault.

come to my blog!

Sentimental Surrealist says

With every DeLillo novel I read, I realize that *Underworld* is the pinnacle of the man's artistry. Every novel he wrote beforehand leads up to it, hints at it, contains thematic foreshadowings of it, and the sixty-odd pages of *Cosmopolis* I've read are so far from this that it seems DeLillo understood there was no going back to his older style, because he'd already perfected it. This, of course, invites the possibility that DeLillo could release another masterpiece in his later style, but with the man getting up there age-wise and with *Underworld* having twenty-plus years of DeLillo Mark I (or DeLillo Marks I and II, depending on how you define terms) to draw on, it's hard for me to see him ever topping this.

Like most of the major postmodern novels, *Underworld* is a beast of a book. It's long, it's dense, its character roster is massive, and it runs through the twentieth century's eventful second half with grace, insight, and humor. Real-life figures such as J. Edgar Hoover, Lenny Bruce, and Sergei Eisenstein all factor in, with Bruce brought to vivid and hilarious life throughout several chapters towards the novel's end. It begins with a breathless retelling of Bobby Thompson's shot heard 'round the world juxtaposed against another such shot, the Russian testing of a nuclear warhead, and ends with an equally breathless tale of poverty, terrorism and

the internet. If you've only experienced DeLillo through the artful awkwardness of *White Noise*, you'll see an entirely different side of the author here.

Of course, it couldn't have happened without the novels that came before. DeLillo writes about poverty, consumerism, mass media, fear of death, conspiracies, strained sexual relationships, crowd psychology, history, language, and everything else he'd done before, but here he weaves it all together into a dense and beautiful tapestry. The use and weaving of these diverse themes, coupled with the novel's unique structure - it starts in the '50s, shoots forward into the '90s, digs decade by decade back into the '50s, and then leaps forty years into the future for its grand conclusion, thus creating an excavation for history - make it a novel like none other before it. This means that, while it occasionally overreaches, the overreaching can be forgiven: since DeLillo's working without a net, it's inevitable and acceptable that he sometimes runs ahead of himself. Besides, who wants to read authors that sit around in their own little bubbles all day?

Underworld is a big, bold, astonishing and challenging work, one that asks a lot from you and rewards the patient reader. In love with history and language, it's a novel of ideas that tells a hell of a story, a story much broader than you might expect it to be. Definitely one of the preeminent works of twentieth century fiction.

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

There is no review here. I'm merely registering a score.

It's been years since I last picked up a DeLillo. This one's been waiting far too long. I rewatched the *Cosmopolis* movie last week. It's not good. *Underworld* is pretty fine.

My motivation was this. There are *Underworld* detractors on gr who I'm almost certain should have known better. There are *Underworld* boosters on gr who have never (not quite) convinced me. So I set out to do that thing which I rarely need to bother doing myself, Making up my own mind about a gargantuan postmodern tome. I had already four DeLillos tucked away, but hadn't quite decided about him. *Underworld* would be a break it or make it? Maybe.

Results. The detractors should know better. This is a pretty great novel. The boosters I think oversell a bit. I'll be reading more DeLillo.

Here's the thing. During most of my reading of *Underworld* I felt it pulled in two directions, in the directions of two other novels; *Women and Men* and *Infinite Jest*. Clearly for different reasons. And I thought both of those novels did what they did better than how *Underworld* did it. In part because *Underworld* gave me that rare experience of feeling a bulking novel was slightly too baggy. I mean maybe fifty pages too baggy ; but mostly the bagginess would have been fixed probably by adding *more* pages. No need to take stuff out. But sometimes, and perhaps here in *Underworld*, that pace is important and "tightening it up" would have destroyed the rhythm which comes with a certain spaciousness. At any rate, I got the century-long expansiveness in a richer measure with *Women and Men* and I got the pyrotechnic/smart prose better in *Infinite Jest*. Not to mind.

But one thing's for sure ; stop boosting that short story that begins the novel. It's an overture. You know *The Lone Ranger*, but do you know *William Tell*? "*Das Kapital*", the epilogue, is also quite fine.

Becca Becca says

I felt like this was one of those books where you kind of start getting drunk on the words and then you begin to think everything is super deep and has about 100 meanings and everything is interconnected. Then you start reading every sentence about 5 times and get lost in a daydream about how everything is related to waste, nuclear energy, more waste, and nuns.

When you finish the book you feel like you've gone on a journey but it's hard to talk about it and your not really sure exactly what happened.

Szplug says

Don DeLillo is a first-rate *modern* writer: his clipped and adamant use of words, his compacted sentences and digitalized detail, all come together to tell his stories in a taut and invigorating manner—and he can dissect the quirks and pathologies that are running through our culture, probe the leavenings that have adumbrated modern societies racing towards the western horizon, with impressive acumen. However, I am not convinced that he is a first-rate characterizer, and this aspect of his writing is the main ballast that prevents *Underworld* from attaining the heights its ambition aims for. His characters are alive as they move from page to page, they impress themselves upon the reader in the moment, but I never get the sense of really *knowing* them, of *getting* what makes them tick, what drives them to make the curious choices that all DeLillo characters inevitably do. They are fleshed out with shielded circuitry; we are given access to their thought patterns but find too many blind alleys. It is not necessarily flawed for a writer to construct their fictional milieus in such a manner, but I felt it to be so for much of *Underworld*: while it made scant difference to the brilliance of certain set-pieces, such as the series of monologues from a fictionalized Lenny Bruce in the later-stages of the novel, it reduced Nick Shay to a mere performer, one whose childhood mysteries stand revealed as more of a joke than an abrasion; the highway killer to a caricature; and tempered the narrative with tacked-on characters like Shay's wife and her improbable lover.

The writing *can* be stunning, though: the opening prologue, a masterly mural of the infamous *Shot Heard Around the World*—the walk-off home run hit by the New York Giants' Bobby Thomson off the Brooklyn Dodger's Ralph Branca in 1951, a shot which clinched the National League pennant for the Giants and capped a dramatic clash between two Empire State titans—starts things rolling with authority. A young black Giants fan, Cotter Martin, catches the ball that Thomson drove over the fence; this souvenir will relive its historical role at points throughout the book as the mystery of what Martin actually *did* with it is revealed. Such deeply rooted and emotionally-charged pastimes as baseball prove to be one of the tethers that nuclear-armed America clings to—one of the traditions that drew our eyes away from the eschatological mummery of the Cold War. The omnipresent threat of the nuclear powers, the permanent state of non-war between them, forms one of *Underworld's* linchpins, along with Nick Shay's work in the waste-disposal business and the basically ephemeral and dispensable nature of postmodern America. The accumulated wastes of consumption and fear must be bundled up and eliminated so that society can keep itself focussed on the goal: work, buy, sell, die, all in the pursuit of that elusive chimera proclaimed *happiness*. The trash is growing exponentially, however, and disposal systems get backed up: the resulting strain produces tics, breakdowns and obsessions that cast a distracting pall over the entire performance.

Underworld falls short of greatness—as in his other books that I've read, there are diamonds and there is rust. The pitches were there, but he missed the opportunity to hit it out of the park a la the aforementioned Giant

giant Thomson. Yet it held me through to the end, and its high points were towering. If, as I set the finished tome aside, the sum total of Nick Shay's story seemed less than compelling—if I already found several of its scenes slipping away to memory's waste bins—perhaps that is only fitting for a novel about the temporality of nigh everything today.
