Underworld Short Guide

Underworld by Don Delillo

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Contents

Characters

DeLillo's critics have accused him of drawing flat characters who serve as mouthpieces for the author's own theories. As in all of DeLillo's novels, Underworld's characters do have intellectual discussions about various topics, debating philosophies of political power, global capitalism, film, avantgarde art, and, of course, baseball. However, Underworld does contain many wellrounded portrayals, sustaining DeLillo's reputation as a chronicler of interior lives as well as cultural phenomena.

In a novel with more than a hundred characters, including twenty or so who will be discussed below, let us start with the most famous and some of the most vividly portrayed: Lenny Bruce, Frank Sinatra, and J. Edgar Hoover. Bruce appears in Part Five, doing a series of monologues on (and during) the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which a recurring punch-line is "We're all gonna die!" Evidence of DeLillo's gifts with language, the novelist invented all of these routines, succinctly capturing the flavor of Bruce's language, his scatological social commentary. "And that's what this crisis is about, incidentally. Instant mashed potatoes. The whole technology, man, of instant and quick, because we don't have the attention span for normal wars anymore, and in the movie version it's Rod Steiger playing Khrushchev as an Actor's Studio chief of state," DeLillo's Bruce says, implying that modern conveniences and modern warfare share a similar underlying logic. As the narrator says of the Beatniks in Bruce's audience, "The bomb was their handiest reference to the moral squalor of America, the guilty place of smokestacks and robot corporations, Time-magazined and J. Edgar Hoovered."

If Bruce skewers The Establishment, Sinatra and Hoover are The Establishment.

This unlikely pair, who appears both at the ballgame and later at Truman Capote's Black and White Ball, represents socially condoned power maintained through different means. Sinatra's aura is sustained through his celebrity: at the ballgame, people gawk and stare at him, unsure of what to say.

When something happens in the game, they look to his face first, using his reaction to gauge their own. In contrast, Hoover stands for the Cold War infrastructure's reliance on doggedly persistent bureaucrats, and all the secrets and personal repressions necessary for success in that system. As the FBI director gets dressed for the Black and White Ball, DeLillo shows us the importance of the character suppressing his homosexuality to maintain his status and, in fact, DeLillo makes the FBI director into a sympathetic, even pitiful, character. But the novel retains no reverence for either mainstream-culture or counter-culture figures. Bruce looks tired and drug-addled, while Sinatra's excessive concern for his clothes causes him to miss Thomson's home run. There are no heroes or anti-heroes in Underworld, but rather complex, flawed people muddling through.

The novel's "other Edgar," Sister Edgar, is also a Cold Warrior of sorts. She is a "Cold War nun" who, prompted by fear of the bomb, lines her room with aluminum foil to protect herself against radiation. She also shares J. Edgar Hoover's obsession with

cleanliness, but her character may be more important for directing our attention to another of the novel's underhistories: class. When she and Sister Grade venture into poor neighborhoods, we see DeLillo's concerns about poverty and class difference, which first emerge in Great Jones Street's depictions of the East Village, and which play some role in most of his novels since then. In their efforts to bring hope to the hopeless, the two nuns confront the material realities of the impoverished and society's indifference. For example, take the tour bus encountered after one of their visits with Ismael Munoz, a squatter/artist who salvages abandoned vehicles, helps the nuns fix their van, and oversees the Wall—an improvised memorial for the murdered children of the neighborhood. The Wall and the battered neighborhood itself are a tourist attraction for the Europeans in the "South Bronx Surreal" bus, which markets class and cultural difference as a novelty. This attempt to peddle poverty infuriates Gracie, who shouts back, "It's not surreal. It's real, it's real." Though young Esmeralda is killed despite their attempts to reach her, the nuns know this poverty is real, and work to try to make even a small difference.

Ismael Munoz, the director of the Wall project, began his career in the 1970s as a graffiti artist, who signed his works "Moonman 157." Ismael, Klara Sax, and a minor character named Jesse Detwiler all share the influence of the 1960s NeoDadaist movement, a component of which concerned making garbage into art. As each avant-garde gets co-opted by the dominant culture, all three artists are courted by, or become, part of the mainstream. In the 1990s, Klara's Christo-like project of painting abandoned B-52 bombers in the Arizona desert—a "landscape painting," she says, because these planes are integrated into the landscape—gets written up in Time magazine, signaling its acceptance by mainstream culture. Jesse Detwiler, a former "garbage guerrilla" who planned to turn J. Edgar Hoover's garbage into performance art, later goes to work for Waste Containment, the same company at which Nick works. However, when Klara's friend, the art dealer Esther Winship, wants to either buy or commission new graffiti art, Moonman 157 avoids her, resisting his incorporation. Though his refusal to enter the community of accepted artists may make him the novel's true avant-garde purist, Klara's plane exhibit also has power. Floating over it in a balloon, Nick and Marian agree that they will never be able to look at a painting or a plane the same way again.

One senses that DeLillo is aware of the power of popular culture to absorb and repackage radical art into something benign, but he still holds out some hope for the avant-garde. Indeed, in several interviews he has said that his visits to the Museum of Modern Art have influenced his writing as much as anything he read.

The third prominent female artist to appear in DeLillo's work (Sullivan in Americana [1971] and Brita Nilsson in Mao II are the other two), Klara Sax brings us into contact with the New York art community in the 1970s, and to screenings of movies, like Unterwelt and the Zapruder film. But Klara's role in Underworld extends well beyond serving as the novel's guide to the art world.

The arc of her character's story runs parallel to and intersects with Nick Shay's story, creating an effective counterpoint that helps bind the novel's many stories into a cohesive whole. In the early 1950s (Part Six of the novel), while still married to Albert

Bronzini and living in the Bronx, Klara has an affair with Nick Shay; in the 1990s (Part One), Nick visits Klara in the Arizona desert. Thus, their meetings provide a frame for the novel in several senses: structurally (Part One to Part Six), temporally (1950s to 1990s), and geographically (New York to Arizona). Further, though Nick's story may be the central narrative thread, Klara's is also important (at least as important as Matt Shea's), and it offers a compelling complement to Nick's. Strengthening the parallels between their lives—and therefore the intersections—are the realities that both characters began in the Bronx and now work in professions that involve garbage.

In addition, at the time of their affair, lifechanging decisions happen: Klara is moving towards the realization that she must leave Albert to pursue her own dreams, and Nick will soon accidentally kill George Manza, an act which also moves him out of the neighborhood. These parallels and the narrative connections make Klara Sax's story significant on several levels, the intersections of her life and Nick's making a circle.

The Thomson baseball and its owners connect a variety of characters from different walks of life. Although not all of them are as fully imagined as Nick or Klara, all play important roles in the story. As we trace the ownership of the Thomson baseball forwards to the 1990s and backwards to the 1950s, it passes through the hands of Cotter Martin, his father Manx Martin, Charles Wainwright, his son Chuckie Wainwright, Marvin Lundy, and Nick Shay. Cotter, one of the novel's few African-American characters, sneaks into the DodgersGiants game by hopping a turnstile, and when the home-run ball lands in the stands, he edges towards it, prying his way through the crowd. When he wrests it from the hand of another fan, his temporary victory soon highlights American racism, eliciting our concern for his safety. He leaves the crowd, followed by whites who want the ball. Although his erstwhile friend, Bill Waterson, fends off some of them, Bill's subsequent anger reveals his own hidden hatreds (a fact made more explicit in the original version of the prologue, published as the novella Pafko at the Wall in Harper's, 1992).

While Cotter appears only in the prologue and the first "Manx Martin" section, his character not only introduces race as an issue, but also sets the ball rolling to other corners of the novel. Manx, a sympathetically portrayed ne'er-do-well, realizes the ball's value. The same day as the game, he takes the ball out into the night, intending to sell it. In the second of the three "Manx Martin" sections, we follow him to Yankee Stadium on the night of October 3, 1951, where a crowd stands in line overnight, waiting to buy World Series tickets. Charles Wainwright, who will by the 1980s become an advertising executive, is there with his son Chuckie. Hoping the ball will bring him and his son closer together, Charles buys it and gives it to his son, who is indifferent to the gift. Though these characters are neither vivid nor prominent, we later see Chuckie flying in the "Long Tall Sally" B-52 (which will later become part of Klara Sax's Arizona desert art instalment) and Charles at his advertising offices, in a scene which recalls TV executive David Bell in Americana. Chuckie, like Manx, regrets parting with the ball, which ends up in the possession of Marvin Lundy, who collects baseball memorabilia and is something of an armchair philosopher. Marvin describes the ball in terms of the bomb (see the previous section) and equates the act of collecting with a search for history. He speaks thoughtfully of analyzing the dots in photographs taken at the game because "all

knowledge is available if you analyze the dots," and tries to connect the dots, tracing the lineage of the ball back past Charles Wainwright. Marvin never does find out about Cotter Martin and Manx Martin, though he speaks to Bill Waterson's widow, to whom Bill did not explain what happened the day of the game.

The reader, on the other hand, can follow the imperfect line of ownership back to Cotter and forward to Nick, the ball forming part of Underworld's narrative fabric.

On the day of the Thomson home run, Manx gets a ride in a friend's garbage-filled car—the friend has cut a deal to haul away a restaurant's garbage, but he has no place to dump it. Nick also works in garbage. The company where he is employed is Waste Containment, inherent in its name is the suggestion of "containment policy," a strategic policy theory crafted by U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan in 1947. Kennan advocated preventing Communism from spreading further than it already had, an idea which motivated American foreign policy during the Cold War. By comparison, Waste Containment acts to prevent the spread of garbage of all kinds—toxic and non-toxic, nuclear waste and non-nuclear waste. The people who work at the company constitute another cluster of Underworld's characters. Simeon Biggs (Big Sims), an African-American "famous in the firm for his midbody girth," designs landfills. He has been with the company for about five years when Nick joins in 1978. Brian Glassic, "a man of shambling charm," is given to indulging in risk-taking, vaguely conspiratorial behavior. These are conspiracies in a personal, and not national, sense: Brian calls Nick late at night, advising him to "come alone" to a shop called "Condomology" so that he may marvel at the perverse wonders of a sexually themed store with the decor and demeanor of a malt shop. More importantly—and perhaps hinted at by the Condomology field trip—Brian has an affair with Marian Shay, Nick's wife. Inasmuch as nuclear waste is part of Waste Containment's business, Simeon, Brian, and Nick work in the service of a war that is based on the absence of open conflict; this fact thematically links to the subterranean conflicts in their relationship. In response to Brian's affair, Nick makes aggressive verbal hints, punches Brian, and punches him again; during a discussion about Simeon's wife, Simeon and Nick butt heads—literally. This undercurrent of violence also serves as a reflection on masculine friendships, and on how men expect to interact with one another—competitively and aggressively, even in a joking relationship. But the "waste" theme of garbage buried beneath the surface of things, seems significant in evalu ating their interaction, both spoken and unspoken.

In a way, both Shays are involved in the defense industry: Matt and the Pocket Project theorize the weapons; Nick and Waste Containment reckon with the waste. In the Pocket Project, we spend time with Eric Deming "one of the bombheads," who enjoys spreading conspiracy theories (see "Social Concerns") and whose Cold War fascinations date back at least to the launch of Sputnik, as DeLillo reveals in a section that dramatizes a day in Deming's 1950s childhood. Though he remains skeptical of his friend's theories, Matt Shay listens. In any case, his interest in these technologies seems more intellectual than patriotic. A chess prodigy as a child, his professional allegiances vary like his un-interpretable appearance. Matt Shay "looked a little everything. Mexican, Italian, Japanese even....

A police sketch made from seven different descriptions—that was Matt," suggesting a composite, "multicultural" identity. Though the novel does not delve any further into the racial implications of this description, perhaps the difficulty of pinning a stereotype on him speaks to Matt's eventual embrace of professional change. By the 1990s, he has switched from the Pocket Project to a non-profit "research institute" that is concerned with "draw[ing] up studies to help third world countries develop health services and banking facilities." Like the transformation of B-52 bombers into art, Matt's shift in occupation offers the hope of a benevolent use for dangerous technology.

To a degree, a qualified hope for a better tomorrow helps offset the problem that "[a]ll terror is local now," as Sister Edgar thinks in the novel's final pages. Janet Uribank, Matt's wife-to-be, works as a nurse who "does trauma duty deep into the night," able to be as "matter-of-fact" about "bodies flopping on the just-mopped corridor floor as she is about relatives dragging in a knifing victim, or one who has overdosed."

Echoing "The Triumph of Death"'s presence in the opening scenes, Matt thinks of the scenes that she describes as "like paintings of the European masters, the ones who did miracles and wars." If local terror begins (in the novel) with the paranoia brought out by the onset of the Cold War, it is given a material reality by the Video Kid's videotape of the Texas Highway Killer, whose name, we later learn, is Richard Henry Gilkey. If random violence caught on film is an American phenomenon, the problems of nuclear technologies infect the populace at a deeper level—psychological, as in Eric Deming's playful paranoia, and physical, as in the Museum of Misshapens, shown to us by Victor Maltsev in Kazakhstan (see "Social Concerns"). Though some linger, the problems of these characters recede and the book's very last word is "Peace." Given DeLillo's tendency to ironize the hopeful, one wonders if this is to be taken seriously.

When reporter Andrew Billen of the London Evening Standard asked DeLillo if the line was meant ironically, the author replied, "Not at all.... Somewhere in Underworld, someone says, or thinks, that we half believe in everything now but have conviction in nothing. To me this is one of the mysterious effects of technology."

Social Concerns

In a 1997 interview on Terry Gross's "Fresh Air" radio program, Don DeLillo remarked that "toxic waste" is "one of the 'underworlds' to which the title of this novel refers." Plutonium, he notes, "bears the name of Pluto, the God of the Underworld."

However, DeLillo's eleventh novel—twelfth, if you count the pseudonymous Amazons he wrote in 1980 under the pen name Cleo Birdwell—is about more than nuclear waste.

As "waste analyst" Nick Shay says near the end of the book, "waste is the secret history, the underhistory," and in Underworld, garbage, both toxic and non-toxic, becomes a metaphor that resonates through the public and private histories of the Cold War era. Underhistories of baseball, film, modern art, global capitalism, and even language itself radiate through this novel. An epic that spans in time from 1951 to the 1990s and in geography from New York to Kazakhstan, Underworld is not only DeLillo's longest work but also his most ambitious. It is his Cold War and Peace.

The novel opens on October 3, 1951, a day of local victory and national defeat: Bobby Thomson hit a three-run homer, capturing the National League pennant for the New York Giants; the Soviet Union detonated its first atom bomb, adding impetus to the Cold War. In his essay "The Power of History" (New York Times Magazine, Sept.

1997), DeLillo describes the contrast between these two events as the genesis of his novel. In a library basement, looking on microfilm at the New York Times' front page for October 4, he saw a "pair of mated headlines, top of the page. Same typeface, same size type." The "juxtaposition" of "Giants capture pennant" with "Soviets explode atomic bomb," made him feel "the power of history." One power that rises from this conjoining of apparent opposites is a connection between the lives of individuals and the lives of nations, yoking the personal with the political. The novel's prologue—its apt title "The Triumph of Death" borrowed from a painting by Breugel, neatly uniting celebration and calamity—brings ordinary people into contact with the power of history on several levels.

On one level, "The Triumph of Death" brings historical figures together with those who fall out of the grand narrative of events.

Seated together at the famous DodgersGiants ball game are entertainers Frank Sinatra and Jackie Gleason, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, and nightclub impresario Toots Shor (who, DeLillo has found, were in fact there that day); elsewhere in the crowd are Bill Waterson, a white architect who is skipping work, and Cotter Martin, a 13-year old black boy playing hooky from school. During the game, Hoover receives the news of the Soviets' bomb, Gleason grows enthusiastically drunk, and Bill and Cotter become friends—a still-secret national danger, celebrity excess, and tentative racial harmony all at the same event.

As the game ends, these unities unravel concurrently: the threat of the Russian bomb becomes public, Gleason throws up on Sinatra's shoes, Bill and Cotter fight over the ball. Each tension mirrors the other one. Unknown persons do not exactly share the day's experience with the well-known, but DeLillo does create parallels that reinforce connections between these groups, uniting historical nobodies with historical somebodies, involving ordinary lives with an event that feels epochal.

The presence of purely fictional characters (like Bill and Cotter) amidst historically based fictional characters (like Hoover and Sinatra) raises issues of historiography and fiction-writing, a topic also explored both in Libra (1988), DeLillo's fictionalized account of Lee Harvey Oswald and the Kennedy assassination, and elsewhere in Underworld (such as at Capote's "Black and White Ball"). However, perhaps more important, juxtaposed with the "Texas Highway Killer" chapter that opens part two of the novel, the "Triumph of Death" prologue addresses DeLillo's concerns about contemporary news' tendency to become instantly commodified for public consumption. Like the "Airborne Toxic Event" in the National Book Award-winning White Noise (1985), a highway murder accidentally videotaped by a twelve-year old child in Underworld raises questions about television transforming catastrophe into entertainment; the filmed crime is replayed over and over, enticing viewers to watch. In Underworld, the Giants-Dodgers game represents an almost-hallowed place that exists prior to the "infotainment" phenomena exemplified by the Texas Highway Killer's execution of a motorist, captured on video by a young girl the media nicknames "the Video Kid." Though not idealized because of its undertones of anti-Communist paranoia and mass death, the Giants' victory delivers "the power of history" because it exists prior to the commodification and trivialization of history that became so common in late twentieth-century America. As DeLillo writes in "The Power of History," "the shakier and fuzzier the picture [on the newsreel of Thomson's home run], the more it lays a claim to permanence" and radio announcer Russ Hodges' broadcast "is beautifully isolated in time" because it has not been "subject to the debasing process of frantic repetition that exhausts a contemporary event before it has rounded into coherence." In Underworld, as in DeLillo's essay "Total Loss Weekend" (1972), and the short story "Human Moments in World War III" (1983), radio has the power to unify people, to cut through cultural boundaries and create a shared experience.

Though film or radio may have the power to unite, this unity is never without its problems. Explorations of the dangers of the crowd mentality figure prominently in both White Noise (where a Hitler Studies professor teaches a course on the "continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny") and the PEN/Faulkner Award-winner Mao II (which begins with a mass wedding). This concern returns in Underworld. Cascading down from jubilant fans above are pieces of paper, including that month's Life magazine reproduction of Pieter Bruegel's The Triumph of Death. As the apocalyptic painting of a crowd drifts into Hoover's hands, the scene not only weaves the suggestion of atomic holocaust through the local crowd's euphoria but also conjoins two kinds of mass hysteria—that of baseball fans and that of anti-Communist witch-hunters. Echoing the ominous line "The future belongs to crowds" from Mao II's mass wedding, this moment in Underworld reminds us of the dangers of mass movements by implying a parallel between the ball-game crowd's hysteria and ordinary Americans' hysterical fear of

communism and nuclear war. Since the "Shot heard round the world" refers both to Bobby Thomson's home run and the Soviets' bomb blast—a discovery that will soon lead to the espionage trial in 1951 of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, a benchmark in anti-Communist fervor—the temporal coincidence permits DeLillo to fashion a visual underhistory that suggests that the two hysterias are historically related.

The ballgame is the subject of one of the many films in Underworld, and film itself serves as one of the novel's underhistories. As film director Frank Voltera says in DeLillo's The Names (1982), "The twentieth century is onfilm. It's the filmed century." Underworld explores some of the implications of this comment in the its five films: the grainy newsreel of Bobby Thomson's home run; Abraham Zapruder's film of President Kennedy's assassination; Unterwelt, the invented long-lost Sergei Eisenstein film; Cocksucker Blues, an actual documentary of the Rolling Stones, which the band withdrew from circulation; and the Video Kid's film of the Texas Highway Killer. All of these films offer a kind of secret history, a sense of privileged access to the past, because all are or have been hidden. The ballgame footage is fragile, scarce; Zapruder's film was not only a home movie but never publicly shown until the 1970s; the Eisenstein film was thought to be lost; the Stones' documentary was so unflattering to the band that they prevented its distribution; and, like Zapruder's home movie, the Video Kid's film was never intended for public viewing.

The key difference between footage of the Texas Highway Killer or of the attempted assassination of President Reagan, on the one hand, and these earlier films, on the other, is the mystery and the long time that has elapsed between the filmed event and its public viewing. In Underworld's depiction of these films, it is because the Kennedy assassination footage was not seen for a decade that its images retain the power to shock. When artist Klara Sax and film buff Miles Lightman attend a private screening of the Zapruder film in the 1970s, the people watching cry out "Ohh" and one woman turns away and covers her face; when the two see Unterwelt ("Underworld" in German), DeLillo's brilliantly imagined Eisenstein film, they are riveted by the power of its strangeness, the intimacy of stepping uninvited into a forgotten past. Unlike the Video Kid's "Texas Highway Killer" film, which Matt Shay (Nick's brother) and his wife watch with grim curiosity, these earlier films were not seen immediately and therefore—for DeLillo's characters—deliver a kind of realism. Though Matt and his Janet are troubled by what they see, they do not turn away; the Zapruder film audience did. When, near the end of the novel, Nick Shay "long[s] for the days of disarray" and "disorder" because he felt "real" then, one cannot help but think of the "jostled footage" of the Zapruder film that troubled viewers and made them turn away, hiding their faces.

Neither a grainy film nor a crackly audiotape represent an ideal space for DeLillo. Like the characters in his other novels, the characters in Underworld always remain involved with what they criticize; inevitably they become part of the problems they strive against. Enhancing this moral complexity are the ambiguities brought on by the conclusion of the Cold War. Though most of Underworld's events take place during the Cold War, DeLillo began writing the novel in the early 1990s, and the book often re-reads post-1989 uncertainties back into the Cold War, questioning the era's official logic of right and wrong. As baseball aficionado Marvin Lundy tells Nick's colleague Brian Glassic, the

Cold War is the one constant thing. It's honest, it's dependable." Without it, Lundy explains, you cease being the main "[p]oint of reference" because "other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging.

The Cold War is your friend. You need it to stay on top.

While the wryly humorous tone of this passage cautions the reader against accepting them at face value, the novel repeats the theme of the Cold War balance-of-power as a more stable means of measuring history.

Anticipating his remark (made at the end of the Cold War), in the spring 1978, Lundy passes an activist who hands him a pamphlet that announces "PEACE IS COMING—BE PREPARED." Klara Sax also feels unsettled by the Soviet Union's demise.

Though she stresses that she does not "want to bring it back," Klara notes that, during the Cold War, "you could measure things" but now, "[m]any things that were anchored to the balance of power and the balance of terror seem to be undone, unstuck. Things have no limits now." Underworld is certainly not alone in expressing what could be called a "pre-millennial" anxiety. Leonard Cohen's "The Future" (1992) describes the post-Berlin Wall era as a time in which "[t]hings are going to slide in all directions / Won't be nothing you can measure any more." He warns, "I've seen the future, brother: it is murder." Though less dire than Cohen, the prevalence of uncertainty and apocalyptic images in Underworld suggests that there is a larger cultural anxiety which DeLillo means for us to take seriously.

By presenting the Cold War—an already ambiguous, dangerous time—as a stable, desired reference point, the novel presents one of its many unstable ironies. While, the logic of Mutually Assured Destruction provided a kind of stability, a qualified comfort absent from the post-Soviet world, there was little comfort in the constant threat of nuclear annihilation, and so neither side emerged unscarred from "the urgency of a war without a war," to borrow Matt Shay's words. Reminding the reader that while the America's Cold War victory may not be all that Americans imagine it to be, Underworld implies both sides knowingly exposed their citizens to radiation. During the 1970s, Matt works at the Pocket Project, an organization composed of researchers "who weren't sure whether they were doing weapons work," and at which colleague Eric Deming drops hints and allegations about U.S. citizens who lived "downwind" of nuclear bomb tests, now suffering from a variety of odd and debilitating health problems. Though the novel never pretends to refute or support the veracity of these allegations, the logic of rumor is such that it sustains belief without proof. (As Rumor says at the start of Shakespeare's Henry IV: Part 2, "Rumor's tongues ... brings smooth comforts false, worse than true wrongs.") Though Deming's insinuations have a way of sustaining themselves, the novel only alleges the human side of America's radiation experiments, while it provides visual, graphic proof of such experiments in the Soviet Union. In "Das Kapital," the book's epilogue, Nick Shay and Brian Glassic accompany Russian businessman Victor Maltsev to the Museum of the Misshapens, part of a hospital that treats those Kazakhs who lived "downwind": a woman with half a face, a boy with no eyes, and many hairless children. Unlike Deming, Maltsev is certain that the Soviets

knowingly exposed their citizens to radiation, suggesting that both sides may be morally complicit—the Russians more so than the Americans.

While all this public history unfolds, personal lives go on, affected in more subtle ways than by blasts of radiation. In these other underhistories, it is not that personal secrets mirror or have been directly influenced by state secrets but rather that there may be another layer of covert meaning, a different way in which public histories conceal private, intimate histories. Hidden beneath the veneer of an imagined squeaky-clean 1950s family are missiles, condoms, and media-induced neuroses. A few days after the Soviets launch Sputnik, the Demings are spending a quiet afternoon at home. Dad is "simonizing their two-tone convertible," mom is making "JellO chicken mouse for dinner," and son Eric is masturbating in his bedroom. In addition to Eric's secret, the episode's hidden history arrives through a sharp parody of domesticity. Woven through with an undertone of dread (felt toward the Russian satellite), the scene's language describes all desires as products, insightfully suggesting that the commodification of everyday life possibly serves as a respite from Cold War paranoia: Jell-O enjoyed by mom as the epitome of modern living, dad's car praised in advertising's pseudo-scientific terms, the condom desired because it resembles Eric's "favorite weapons system." While they do not speak to each other about it, each family member notices how his or her favorite things bear a certain resemblance to rockets and missiles, a feeling that is reinforced when after dinner father and son go for a drive. Equipped with binoculars, they are searching for an unobstructed view of the satellite.

If a dread lingers beneath the surface of the Deming household, the same can be said for other families in the novel, particularly in the home of Nick and Marian Shay.

Though their domestic life has not been as vividly imagined as the Gladneys' in White Noise, the Shays are like Jack and Babette because they also live with an unspoken emotional weight that creates tension in their lives. In addition to each concealing an infidelity—Marian with Brian Glassic, Nick with a swinger he met at a convention—an important silence between the Shays is Nick's refusal to discuss his past. When he was a teenager living in the Bronx, Nick accidentally killed waiter George Manza and spent some time in prison. Klara Sax, when she was still Mrs. Bronzini, also lived in the Bronx neighborhood at the time and endured a quiet disaffection with her own marriage. Just as the Cold War never erupted into major conflict, these past and present personal violences remained hidden.

Nick does open up near the end of the novel and, just as Babette and Jack reconcile before the end of White Noise, so too do Nick and Marian before the end of Underworld.

Klara leaves Bronzini embarking upon a successful artistic journey in which her work provides fulfilment. Thus, there is a sense in which unfinished personal business is resolved, even if the Cold War's resolution introduces more problems than it solves.

What is the purpose of all of these underhistories? Upon the release of his novel Libra, DeLillo told the Los Angeles Times' Elizabeth Mehren that "there is a sense in which fiction can rescue history from its confusion." In subsequent interviews, DeLillo often

offered variations on this phrase. Grappling with the confusions of post-World War II America, Underworld joins novels like E. L. Doctorow's The Book of Daniel (1971), which approaches this period through the story of the Rosenbergs' son, and Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow (1973), which intertwines the Second World War with the Cold War. Gravity's Rainbow even implicates the United States by tying its anti-Communist strategies with the Nazis' anti-Semitic ones, particularly in America's assimilation of ex-Nazi rocket scientists like Wernher Von Braun. White Noise more than Underworld investigates affinities between American and Nazi ideologies, but Underworld sets out to "problematize" history, too. Even more than Libra, Underworld imposes a narrative structure that maintains the moral, political, and cultural confusions of lived experience, leaving any "rescuing" of history to the reader.

Or, at least, DeLillo's idea of "rescuing history from its confusion" is to frame the debate, to raise the issues, to ask the questions. As for answers, he seems to be saying, you are on your own.

Techniques

Underworld's subject and date of composition identify it as a postmodern novel, but its epic scope, Joycean reverence for language, and recurring motifs reveal its debt to modernism. Discussing whether or not Underworld is "postmodern," DeLillo told interviewer Richard Williams of the British newspaper The Guardian: In architecture and art it [postmodernism] means one or two different things. In fiction it seems to mean an other. When people say White Noise is post-modern, I don't really complain. I don't say it myself. But I don't see Underworld as postmodern. Maybe it's the last modernist gasp. I don't know.

Whether Underworld is modern or postmodern is a question with no answer (and DeLillo's "I don't say it myself" and "I don't know" suggest both a reluctance to name the books as "modern" or "postmodern" and a dismissiveness towards the modern-postmodern binarism). Even so, it is worth considering a few of the stylistic and structural traits that link Underworld with each literary period.

The work is modernist in its ability to weave its themes through a rich, layered language; its epic scope suggests comparisons to James Joyce's Ulysses (1922) and John Dos Passos' U.S.A. trilogy (1930-36).

DeLillo has often cited Joyce as one of his primary influences, and Underworld's investigations into economies' impact on people from many social classes establishes a parallel not only to U.S.A., but also to Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer (1925). Many reviewers found themselves reaching for modernist antecedents, whether for textual reasons or because a modernist work is today synonymous with "classic." In The Guardian, Richard Williams compared Underworld to Virginia Woolf's book The Waves and to Joyce's Ulysses. Harper's Vince Passaro invoked not only Eliot and Joyce, but Flaubert, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad.

In the New York Times Book Review, Martin Amis quoted from F. R. Leavis. In the Atlantic, Tom LeClair (whose In the Loop was the first full-length study of DeLillo) outdid them all in a review that offered a catalogue of potential influences. Speaking of the title alone, he noted that it "includes Dante, the Mafia, hollowed earth, humankind's sediment, ghetto life, underground politics, the subconscious, and linguistic roots."

While the modernist comparisons are definable, Underworld could just as easily be classified as postmodern, inasmuch as it addresses a historical condition in which there may not be fragments to shore against the ruins (to paraphrase Eliot) of late capitalist (to paraphrase Fredric Jameson) Cold War and post-Cold War America. At the same time, the novel's rejection of linear time suggests it could be considered either modernist or postmodernist, depending on how one defines those terms. Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury (1929), Joyce's Finnegans Wake (1939), and Toni Morrison's Beloved (1987) share this characteristic. Framed by a prologue set in 1951 and an epilogue set in the early 1990s, Underworld's narrative moves gradually back in time: Part One, "Long Tall Sally" (spring to summer, 1992); Part Two, "Elegy for the Left Hand Alone"

(mid1980s to early 1990s); Part Three, "The Cloud of Unknowing" (spring, 1978); Part Four, "Cocksucker Blues" (summer, 1974); Part Five, "Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry" (1950s and 1960s); Part Six, "Arrangement in Gray and Black" (fall, 1951 to summer, 1952). Slicing through this structure are three "Manx Martin" chapters inserted every other section—between Parts One and Two, Three and Four, and Five and Six. Given the difficulties of classifying the novel's structure, perhaps we should turn to an interview published in the Hungry Mind Review (fall, 1997), in which DeLillo told Gerald Howard (editor of Libra) that the narrative structure reminds him of the bomb. After writing the book, DeLillo says, "it occurred to me that in a curious way [the novel's structure] duplicates the countdown voice we associate with a nuclear test—ten, nine, eight, seven ..."

As both DeLillo's comments on the "countdown voice" structure and the previous sections of this essay (especially "Themes") have suggested, Underworld's form is integral to the presentation of its themes. Though we have discussed how the baseball, Lucky Strikes, garbage, and many other themes provide literary coher ence, there are a few that deserve further attention. The final section of the novel takes its title from Karl Marx's Das Capital, and a very "modernist" way of threading the theme of capitalism through the novel is the recurring image of the eye over the pyramid on the back of a U.S dollar. In Manx's neighborhood, a streetcorner preacher endows the image with a part-paranoid, part-spiritual significance, when he tells his listeners, "This is how they flash their Masonic codes to each other." He continues, explaining that because he has begun to figure out their codes, now he knows that the eye is watching him. "This is why they're watching me with the eye that floats over the top of the pyramid. They're watching and they're following all the time," he says.

This same image occurs much earlier, in a context that finds atomic annihilation mingling with paranoia—when J. Edgar Hoover looks at the Breugel reproduction and thinks of the bomb as "that weird peeled eyeball exploding over the desert." The presence of the eye quietly links capital to weapons to paranoia, but it makes these connections subtly, beneath the reader's awareness, until in the Museum of the Misshapens we suddenly meet the pickled cyclops fetus with its "eye centered" above a blank face. The earlier pictures of the eye hovering over the desert are called to mind, and these connections reassert themselves once more, but on a deeper level: money, nuclear weapons, death. By burying these themes in densely figurative language, Underworld operates with such a hypnotic suggestiveness that, when Detwiler makes the connection between money, waste, and death, the novel has slyly prepared the reader to listen. "Consume or die. That's the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump," he tells Nick.

If the ways in which the themes insinuate themselves posits a paranoid structure for the novel, we should remember three things: first, since Robert Towers called DeLillo "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction" (New York Review of Books, 1988), the label has stuck, frequently deployed in articles on him; second, in "American Blood" (1983), DeLillo's essay on the Kennedy assassination, he remarks, "paranoia in some contexts is the only intelligent response" (or, as Delmore Schwartz once said, "Even paranoids have real enemies"); and, finally, DeLillo has said that each of his

novels "is unresolvable, absolutely, and could probably not have been written in the world that existed before the assassination." Underworld is unresolved in the sense that Marvin Lundy, whose documented investigations are as extensive and as detailed as the Warren Report, never finds the final link to the baseball. But the reader does and, unlike the novels that precede it, Underworld provides at least a narrative closure. While it maintains the sense that no ultimate ending or explanation can or will be offered, Underworld offers a moment of qualified transcendence, concluding with the word "Peace." Though a character in the novel envisions the 1951 Giants-Dodgers game and the Kennedy assassination as opposite events, perhaps Underworld—unlike DeLillo's other work—takes as its moral and spiritual center the world view of the ballgame and not of the assassination. Or, if the Kennedy assassination epitomizes the emotional attitude of Cold War for DeLillo, it could be argued that the novel's conclusion is an attempt to distance the postCold War world from the "paranoid" perspective of the Cold War. Not that DeLillo has lost all reasons for anxiety—the play Valparaiso (1999), which followed Underworld, extended his examination of broadcast technologies. The conclusion of Underworld suggests that the novelist may be seeking different areas to investigate, new fears to encounter, dangers that could not have been imagined before the end of the Cold War.

Themes

Examining DeLillo's life for answers to questions raised by Underworld is enticing, because the novel offers the first extended treatment of the Bronx of the author's childhood. With the exception of a few early short stories, DeLillo has rarely revisited this literary landscape. As if to emphasize the connections between the author and his book, in the fall of 1997 DeLillo allowed himself to be photographed for Vanity Fair at a Bronx lot where he played as a youth.

He also visited his boyhood home with journalist David Remnick, an incident that was reported in a profile that Remnick wrote for The New Yorker (September 1997). And since DeLillo is reticent about revealing autobiographical details, it is tempting to seek them in Part Six of the novel, which takes place in 1951 and 1952, or in the 1951 ballgame of the Prologue. Based on references in the text, it seems that both Cotter Martin and Nick Shay were born between 1935 and 1937; DeLillo was born in 1936.

Though it is tempting to ponder parallels between the author and his characters, the scant information available about DeLillo's own life reduces the value of such an endeavor. DeLillo's imaginative return to his old neighborhood is important, but its significance can be found less in specific characters and more in the novel's language and tenor. As DeLillo remarked in several media interviews around the time that Underworld was published, returning to the Bronx also returned him to its words and its rhythms of its speech. In his interview with Terry Gross, DeLillo spoke of the pleasures of returning to this vernacular in Part Six, and of "American language" itself. The difference between the literary voice in Part Six and the rest of the novel, DeLillo told the Book of the Month Club's Diane Osen, "reflects the journey that Nick Shay takes from adolescence to adulthood."

One strand of this journey can be seen in Nick's compulsion to define things, naming each component part. He tells his children that the "ridged section at the bottom of the toothpaste tube" is called the "crimp," that a "hawser is a rope that's used to moor a ship," that a "saddle" can refer to the "hump in the floor between rooms." Nick acquired this habit from studying Latin in Catholic school, and from the Jesuits in Minnesota, where he spent part of his prison sentence for killing George Manza. A priest in Minnesota uses the act of naming like a catechism; when Nick is quizzed on the names of the various parts of a boot, it is a meditative, spiritual exercise. Learning and saying words becomes Nick's way of grounding himself in the world so that he can overcome his past—"This is the only way you can escape the things that made you," he decides. And this is how, for Nick, language becomes a means of growth, progress, and even redemption. In early 1998, when DeLillo told the London Evening Standard's Andrew Billen that language is "how Nick got out of the Bronx," Billen asked if that was DeLillo's story too. DeLillo replied, "kind of." Evasion is the author's standard response to personal questions (such as when he handed Tom LeClair a card inscribed with the words "I don't want to talk about it," as LeClair reports in the first extensive interview with DeLillo, published in Anything Can Happen, 1983), but perhaps the spiritual significance DeLillo finds in language is rooted in his own path from a Catholic

childhood to becoming a novelist in adulthood. The Names addresses language's religious dimensions most explicitly and all of DeLillo's work investigates a dimension of this issue, so it should not surprise us that DeLillo returns to the subject in Underworld.

Words in Underworld connect not only to faith but to the connective tissue of the novel. "How do you connect things? Learn their names," repeats The Names' narrator.

In Underworld, the novel consistently reminds you that everything is connected, rephrasing its recurrent images and ideas while carefully leaving traces of them throughout the novel. Indeed, the phrase "everything is connected" is a theme of the novel, spoken at least once in every section of the book and reminding the reader of the intricate layers of meaning that link Underworld's many parts. Just as Ulysses and Gravity's Rainbow are to be read and reread, Underworld rewards repeated readings. For instance, the "Lucky Strike" cigarette packet might be skipped over at first glance, but a closer look reveals how the phrase's recurrence stitches together unexpected pieces of the book. When a cab driver in 1978 says, "Light up a Lucky. It's Lucky Strike time," Nick finds it "odd and unsettling" to hear the phrase, wondering if "it had shot to mind out of somewhere in the memory."

Elsewhere we learn that Nick's missing father was last seen when he stepped out for cigarettes and Nick associates "Lucky Strike" with his father's disappearance. The cigarette package's concentric-circled, bull'seye logo intersects with Nick's belief that his father was a target, shot dead by the Mafia. On another page, the same target imagery makes Nick think of missiles. Only pages from the end of the novel, he remembers the cigarette package while looking at Bobby Thomson's home run baseball, making one think of the term "strike," as in "strike out" or "strike the ball," as Thomson did in hitting his famous home run. The recurring "Lucky Strike" imagery threads through the novel, tying it together at the elemental level of words, of language.

Words, baseball, numbers, capitalism, technology, garbage, avant-garde art, the Kennedy assassination—so many themes recur on so many levels in this novel that each reader will compile different, overlapping lists. The Thomson home run baseball links together the six people who, since it landed in the stands, have owned the ball over the course of Underworld's six parts.

Add the prologue and epilogue, and the novel has eight parts; so, to maintain symmetry, add the last two people with whom the baseball came in contact before it entered the stands—the hand of Dodgers' pitcher Ralph Branca and the bat of Giants' batter Bobby Thomson. Branca and Thomson appear every hundred or so pages, photographed with a different U.S. President each time: Eisenhower, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, and Bush all appear in photos with the pair of former ballplayers. Just as the day of the game is also the day of the Soviets' atom bomb test, the physical dimensions of a baseball are the same as the dimensions of the atomic core center of a such a bomb. As Marvin Lundy remarks, "when they make an atomic bomb, . . . they make the radioactive core the exact same size as a baseball." Nick's response to the end of the ballgame anticipates America's response to the Kennedy assassination: Nick's team was the defeated Dodgers, so instead of rushing outside like the rest of New York, he "went inside and

died." BBC producer Jane Faris says, "You were anticipating Kennedy," the killing of whom is an opposite event, according to Brian Glassic.

"When JFK was shot, people went inside....

But when Thomson hit the homer, people went outside." The "shot heard 'round the world" returns in the sense of both homerun baseball and exploded bomb when, in Kazakhstan in the 1990s, a Russian tells the same "Speedy Gonzalez" joke told at the 1951 ballgame. And finally, Nick's description of the ball—"bronzed with nearly half a century of earth and sweat and chemical change"—resonate far beyond the object itself, not only encompassing the Cold War but the phrase "chemical change" recalling the changes technology has wrought in the latter half of the twentieth century.

DeLillo's book Ratner's Star (1976) leads the reader through a fictionalized militaryindustrial complex that the author called White Noise; that book is a "comedy" about "fear, death, and technology." Underworld brings us the technologies of weapons, information, and garbage. The latter novel's attitude towards these various technologies is neither derision nor praise, but an anxious ambivalence. For example, a website devoted to miracles includes the story of Sister Edgar witnessing the ghostly image of the murdered teenage Esmeralda's on a billboard. And, when Sister Edgar dies, the novel imagines her absorbed into the Internet, where the fact that "[e]verything is connected" brings promise and peril. "All human knowledge gathered and linked, hyperlinked, this site leading to that, this fact referenced to that, a keystroke, a mouse-click, a password—world without end, amen," the narrator reports, making her journey into cyberspace sound like ascension into heaven. The very next sentence corrects this impression: "But she's in cyberspace, not heaven, and she feels the grip of systems. This is why she's so uneasy." DeLillo has previously introduced the idea of the corporeal body being absorbed into technology in Mao II, when Jean-Claude Julien (the poet being held hostage) imagines himself "a digital mosaic in the processing grid." But here DeLillo extends the implications of this metaphor further, including Sister Edgar when "you decide ... to visit the H-bomb page," having her witness the blast, and even linking her name to that of J. Edgar Hoover, "her male half." This confluence of Edgars and H-bombs, which takes place on the final pages of the novel, conveys a fascination with and a dread of technology—DeLillo seems intrigued by the connections, but he is also worried by the flattening out of historical difference. This final scene means that the novel has been framed by the visions of two Edgars, and the reader suspects that DeLillo enjoys having brought us full-circle from J. Edgar Hoover contemplating The Triumph of Death to Sister Edgar succumbing to the Triumph of the Internet.

Key Questions

With a novel as complex and ambitious as Underworld, possible topics for discussion are as numerous as DeLillo's cast of characters. The questions below are intended to serve as starting points for more detailed exploration of just a few of the novel's many issues.

1. As Capote's book In Cold Blood (1965) and many of Tom Wolfe's novels— The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test(1968), The Right Stuff (1979), to name two—have done, Underworld relenders historical events in fictional form. But even more so than these novels do, Underworld frequently and obviously mingles "fact" with "fiction." Fictional Klara Sax attends Truman Capote's Black-andWhite Ball, which was an actual event.

What are the effects of DeLillo's melding of fact and fiction? Should there be a clearer line between the two? Why do you suppose the novel allows this line to remain blurry?

2. Explore the implications of Underworld's non-linear narrative. Why did DeLillo structure the book in this way? What might his approach tell us about memory, history, and time? What does a nonlinear approach provide that a linear approach might lack, or vice-versa?

3. In his essay "The Power of History," DeLillo wrote, "Language can be a form of counterhistory." Of Underworld, he has said, "In a novel about conflict on many levels, this was the primal clash— the tendency of the language to work in opposition to the enormous technology of war that dominated the era and shaped the book's themes." As an example, DeLillo cites writing the words Styrofoam, Velcro, and Plexiglass in lower case; when the book was done, he realized that he had done it to "unincorporate these words, subvert their official status." Does his language subvert these systems of power or reinforce them? If it does offer a "counterhistory," how effectively does language challenge systems of power?

If it fails to do so, what prevents language from succeeding?

4. The Prologue, "The Triumph of Death," was first published as the novella Pafko at the Wall (1992). Following the first paragraph of the excerpt, which is reprinted below, is some dialogue between Bill Waterson and Cotter Martin which appears in Pafko but not in Underworld (where it would appear on page 56): "You can talk all you want," Cotter says. "The ball's not yours, it's mine.

I'm not selling it or trading it."

The next words come with substantial spacing. Don't be so god-damn al-mighty nigger-ish. Not with me, okay?"

Then Bill pauses, he stops cold and looks up and away in a dumb show of self-exasperation—a pained regret in his face and stance. He is fixed to the sidewalk, arms

flat at his sides, and Cotter stands and waits. "Look at that now, Cotter. Aw Christ, you made me say the word. Goddamn, you made me say it and there's no forgiving the fact, is there? Aw shit, good Christ, but I'd never said it if you hadn't made me. Jesus in heaven, I'm completely mortified."

They are both walking again, slowly now.

"You have to tell me we're still friends. Cotter, I'm depending on you to tell me it's okay. I said the goddamn word and I swear I didn't mean it." Use DeLillo's decision to omit this passage as an occasion to discuss the role of race in Underworld. In the course of your discussion, you may also want to look at the three Manx Martin sections, Rosie Martin (in chapter 2 of Part 5), Ismael Munoz (a.k.a. Moonman 157), and the relationship between Simeon Biggs ("Big Simms") and Nick Shay. Given that the Civil Rights movement emerged at the same time that the Cold War was at its height, what do you make of Underworld's references to the movement in particular and to race in general? How does race figure into DeLillo's novel? Should it figure more, or less, prominently? To what extent does the novel explore issues of racism?

5. Does the novel's structure replicate the structure of the Cold War? To answer this question, examine the ways in which the book works and then consider the Cold War. Inasmuch as the Cold War can be said to have a "structure," what is that structure?

6. The cover photograph (for both hardcover and paperback, in both American and European editions) suggests dual, possibly opposing forces at work in this novel. Look at the cover, consider what some of the pairs of forces might be. Which ones does DeLillo seem more invested in? Which ones is he more critical of?

7. Discuss the implications of choosing garbage as one of the novel's central metaphors. Nick manages it, Klara uses it in her art, Antoine Cooper (in the second "Manx Martin" section) looks for a place to dump it, etc., etc. Using these and other examples, consider the possible meanings of waste in Underworld. Why have these characters decided to work with garbage? Are there any political, moral, or social lessons suggested by this recurrent theme?

8. Since the novel's epilogue, "Das Kapital," takes its title from Karl Marx, examine the role of capitalism in Underworld. Think about the behaviors and events that have been motivated by money, for example. What jobs do people work at? What effect does capitalism have on the culture at large? The opening sentence of (DeLillo's) "Das Kaptial" is "Capital burns off the nuance in a culture." What does this mean?

9. Has film or videotape altered the way in which we perceive the world? Does the repeated viewing of a crime caught on videotape (such as the Texas Highway Killer, in the novel, or the real-life beating of Rodney King) make the event more terrible or diminish its reality?

Answer this question by looking at the four "documentary" films in the novel: the footage of the 1951 Dodgers-Giants game, the Zapruder film, Cocksucker Blues, and the Video Kid's tape of the Texas Highway Killer's murder.

Literary Precedents

As a novel that addresses the period between 1945 and 1991, Underworld echoes the work of Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Joseph Heller, Robert Coover, and E. L. Doctorow. Though Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, Vonnegut's Slaughterhouse Five (1968) and Heller's Catch-22 (1961) are all set during the Second World War, each addresses post-War cultural paranoia. They are all concerned with "[t]he secret history that never appears in the written accounts of the time or in the public statements of the men in power," as Lenny Bruce says in Underworld. As World War II novels written through the lens of the Cold War, they address paranoid belief systems and depict America as being morally complicit in the very things it purports to condemn: Vonnegut implies that the Allied fire-bombing of Dresden was also a war crime; Pynchon makes much of the fact that German rocket scientists work for the American government in the post-War period; and, as Heller has said of Catch-22, "I deliberately seeded the book with anachronisms like loyalty oaths, helicopters, IBM machines, and agricultural subsidies to create the feeling of American society from the McCarthy period on." Coover's The Public Burning (1977) and Doctorow's The Book of Daniel address McCarthyism directly in their versions of the Rosenbergs' spy case. DeLillo's interest in "personal relationships in bureaucratic authority" (to again quote Heller on Catch-22) places Underworld in the company of these novels, but there is also a key difference: Heller, Pynchon, et al., wrote about the Cold War and the Second World War from within the Cold War; DeLillo writes about the Cold War afterward. While Underworld addresses Cold War paranoias (both justified and unjustified), it also looks at the Cold War as history. Though it recognizes that the effects of this history linger on into the post-Cold War period, Underworld conveys more of a sense of looking back, while those other novels convey a stronger sense of having been written within the history they examine.

Related Titles

If the above line in Underworld recalls the nun in White Noise who pretends to believe because the nonbelievers need to believe in her belief, there is good reason for the similarity. Underworld represents a culmination for DeLillo, who brings the motifs and ideas of earlier works together through the texture of this much larger one. White Noise's comedy about technology and death resurfaces not only in Eric Deming, but also in the deadpan irony of Waste Containment, an enterprise devoted to designing landfills—a job that sounds simultaneously ridiculous and perfectly realistic. DeLillo has explored the connections between sports and the arms race before, too. End Zone's thematic linking of football and nuclear war finds its Underworld analogue in Marvin Lundy's observation that an atomic bomb's radioactive core is the same size as a baseball. While the underground research facility of Ratner's Star looks ahead to the Pocket Project beneath New Mexico, finding numbers of mystical significance is an even stronger link: as Henrik Endor in Ratner's Star speaks of numbers with an almost religious awe, Underworld registers a prophetic significance in the number thirteen. Sharp dialogue from and tension within domestic lives of married couples, prominent in both Players (1977) and White Noise, appears here in the relationship of Nick and Marian Shay, and, to a lesser degree, Matt Shay and Janet Uribank. Reclusive rock star Bucky Wunderlick of Great Jones Street (1973) finds a thematic counterpart in Underworld's presentation of Cocksucker Blues, the hidden film of the Rolling Stones' rock-star excesses. As DeLillo's only other novel to use historical figures as characters, Libra establishes a precedent for Gleason, Sinatra, Hoover, Bruce and the other "real people" of Underworld. Libra's Nicholas Branch's obsession with the Kennedy assassination returns thematically in Marvin Lundy's quest for the Thomson home-run baseball and the several references to the Zapruder film throughout the novel. Film and filmmaking, as embodied by David Bell's experimental film in Americana or the missing film of Hitler as Charlie Chaplin in Running Dog (1978), returns here in the novel's five films (see "Social Concerns"). And, finally, concerns with language and terror, explored most fully in The Names and Mao II, emerge in Underworld as part of the cultural anxiety of living in the shadow of the bomb.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults
Includes bibliographical references.
Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.
Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.
1. Young adults□Books and reading. 2.Young adult literature□History and criticism. 3. Young adult literature□Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography□Bio-bibliography.
[1. Literature□History and criticism. 2. Literature□Bio-bibliography]
I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952
Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048ISBN 0-933833-32-6

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994