



Underground Time

Delphine de Vigan

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Every day, Mathilde takes the Metro to her job at a large multinational, where she has felt miserable and isolated ever since getting on the wrong side of her bullying boss. Every day, Thibault, a paramedic, drives where his dispatcher directs him, fighting traffic to attend to disasters. For many of the people he rushes to treat, he represents the only human connection in their day. Mathilde and Thibault are just two figures being pushed and shoved in a lonesome, crowded city. But what might happen if these two souls, traveling their separate paths, could meet?

Delphine de Vigan's novel tells of urban isolation with poetic precision and resilient humor, in the much lauded follow-up to her bestselling *No and Me*.

Praise for *No and Me*:

"Thought-provoking and often poetic musings about No's life challenge readers to rethink their responsibilities to humankind...Quiet yet gripping." -*Kirkus Reviews*

"All ages will find much to relish in this deceptively simple tale that is touching and enlightening." -*Herald (Scotland)*

Underground Time Details

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From Reader Review Underground Time for online ebook

Lydia Hephzibah says

Do you ever read a book and think . . . what exactly was the point? After devouring another of de Vigan's novels, the wonderful "No & Me" (No et Moi), I was excited to dive into Underground Time. I love the way de Vigan writes locations, which come to life between the pages with her details of metro stops and more, but I found that this book lacked any semblance of a plot, and for a book that is essentially a character study carried out over a working day, it lacked a bit of character too.

The novel follows Thibault and Mathilde, two separate characters living in Paris. They don't know each other; they have nothing to do with each other. Thibault is working as a paramedic and mourning the end of a relationship that made no sense to me (I thought the woman he loved was a prostitute; I didn't realise it was an actual relationship . . . a dysfunctional one, clearly). Mathilde on the other hand works for a multinational company and after a small altercation with her boss, whereby she corrected him in front of others, he has resorted to making her life hell. It's difficult to read how he bullies and isolates her in the workplace, demeaning and controlling her.

For a book with two protagonists, Thibault got very little airtime. I wasn't interested in his plot, to be honest, as I didn't really understand his relationship. I kept reading because it was only a short book and a pretty quick read, but I was disappointed when I finished as nothing really happened and I didn't feel much for the characters. After the wonderfulness of No and Me, this paled in comparison.

Marivl says

Habiendo conocido a la autora con su novela "No y yo" que me dejó con muchas ganas de seguirla leyendo. Llegué a Las horas subterráneas a ciegas y me encontré con la desolación a través de sus dos personajes Matilde y Thibault, ambos viviendo en esa ciudad omnipresente que absorbe el alma de sus habitantes. La forma en que la autora ahonda en su existencia, el vacío, el cansancio, la incomprensión y lo más triste, la resignación. Todo ello con esa prosa envolvente y adictiva, con esos fragmentos asombrosos.

Son dos situaciones diferentes a las que se enfrentan, la una a esa violencia laboral silenciosa que va desgastando su resistencia, ahogándola; y el otro, a ese tipo de relación unilateral donde el que se enamora termina destrozado. Sus historias son reales, somos testigos de todo esto a diario, ¿cuántos como ellos hemos conocido? y/o ¿en qué momento podemos pasar a ser uno de ellos?, somos parte de este mundo donde a veces la desesperanza quiere ser vencedora, este mundo que no te otorga nada en garantía, este mundo cuya crudeza no siempre comprendemos.

Los libros de Delphine de Vigan nos acercan a esa realidad y a esas personas en las que siempre nos encontraremos de una u otra forma por nuestra simple condición de ser humano.

"Los otros peces tienen colores relucientes, sus escamas son aparentemente suaves, sus aletas no están dañadas. Se han alejado de ella, navegan en otras aguas, más claras, más limpias. Ella ha perdido sus colores, su cuerpo se ha vuelto translúcido, yace en la superficie, con el vientre hacia arriba."

Lolly K Dandeneau says

I almost gave it one star but some of the emotions each character went through swayed me to feel it was okay. This is either an over-rated book or I just don't get it. I admit, the ending is exactly the way the world turns but I kept thinking 'what was the point of this story'? I don't need fantastic endings nor action but there was not a lot to carry the reader. In fact, I could just talk to a friend to hear some of the depressing situations and thoughts in this novel. There are many french novels I devour, so it isn't that. I found it boring, and boring is something a book should never be. Sorry for those of you that are riding the underground love train, I think I'd rather jump in front of it than join you.

Meghan says

I kept putting off reading it because of some of the reviews below, but I shouldn't have: *Underground Time* is an extraordinarily well-written treatise on the loneliness one feels even when surrounded by people. The language is sparse but beautifully rendered. The city is real and the desperation of the characters is palpable.

Of the two protagonists, Mathilde's story is stronger than Thibault's. The stories don't parallel as closely as I think they were intentioned to and often Thibault comes off as nothing more than clingy and whining to Mathilde's quiet desperation. But without Thibault, I think the novel would falter. It's a quick read as it is, but a very worthwhile one.

The ending is the ending that has to be. I know some people have taken issue with it, but how often do you have a day when all you need is that one bit of human connection. On days like that, connection never arrives. I don't see how the book could be any different.

Keertana says

Rating: 4.5 Stars

Underground Time is a difficult book to read. I found myself setting it down, time and time again, telling myself I wouldn't pick it back up because there was enough depression in life without needing to read about it in a book too. When I did, inevitably, pick it up, I found myself reciting, "It's just a book, it's just a book, it's not real life, don't let it get to you, their story isn't your own," over and over again. Delphine de Vigan, however, makes her character's stories my own; makes their pain so palpable and sharp that it aches my heart. And, after finishing this book, it is all I can do to not bury myself under the covers and lay there, warm and satisfied, unwilling to face the harsh realities of life. I owe it to this book and these characters, which have become so real to me, to persevere on, at least for a little while more.

What makes de Vigan such a brilliant author is her prose. Even in the first novel I read of hers, *No and Me*, I was blown away by the subtle beauty of her writing, the manner in which her phrases were thought-provoking and contemplative, all while retaining an ethereal loveliness about them. Thus, when I heard that de Vigan had written just one other adult book that had been translated into English, I rushed to my library to make them order it, just for me. *Underground Time*, though, is far different than *No and Me* was. Where her young adult story is a coming of age story full of silver linings despite the fact that it acknowledges that certain aspects of life simply cannot be changed, *Underground Time* is a story of two depressed adults for

whom life has simply pressed down upon, much like the sky pressed down upon Atlas, the Titan.

Underground Time charts the story of Mathilde, a single mother of three children who is the victim of corporate bullying. After gently disagreeing with a minor point her boss made, Mathilde has found herself slowly spiraling away from all she loved about her job. Over the past eight months, her boss finds every reason to criticize her and turn her co-workers against her, all while lying about receiving important documents until, finally, on May 20th, Mathilde is replaced. Thibault, who shares the dual third-person narration in this story, is a doctor who is caught in a relationship of unrequited love. Finally, he finds it within himself to end his relationship for giving love and receiving none in return is every bit as painful as it sounds. *Underground Time* is a story that takes place over one day, filled with contemplation, longing, and flashbacks, detailing the joint story of Thibault and Mathilde, strangers who don't know each other, but whose lives contain similar threads of depression and loneliness.

Underground Time takes place over the span of just one day, which is why it tends to drag a little after the half-way point, Mathilde and Thibault having the same depressing thoughts, only expressing them in a slightly different manner. Yet, despite this, the novel is surprisingly readable. Mathilde and Thibault both have their own individual voices which only complement each other. Although both our main characters do not know one another, it is evident from their narration that they *should* know each other for both of them want similar things from life. For me, the story of Mathilde and her heart-wrenching corporate discrimination seemed to be the overarching story arc that the tale of Thibault only enhanced. As a doctor, Thibault travels the city of Paris, meeting dozens of people with their own problems and depressions.

In many ways, *Underground Time* is equally a story of the city as it is of Mathilde and Thibault. It seems as if everyone in the city, despite being so occupied with their own lives, are eventually going to reach that point of exhaustion in their life, in some way or the other. With Thibault, we can see so clearly the multi-faceted side to this city, one teeming with life and death in equal parts. Furthermore, an advantage of having the narration of Thibault told side-by-side with that of Mathilde is that we can see so clearly the cruel game that fate plays with them both.

As with any dual narration, one always expects the characters to meet and while that standard is no different with this novel, it is a patient process. It seems as if, many times, Thibault and Mathilde are just about to meet one another, purely by coincidence, when, at the last instant, they just miss one another. *Underground Time*, unlike what I expected when I cracked open the spine of this novel, is *not* a romance. Instead, it is a story of two people who are forced to make tough decisions in their life, whether it is ending a relationship that isn't working out or coming to the end of an unhappy time in an office building. Yet, what I love about this is that these actions are neither good nor bad decisions. Instead, they are inevitable. At times, life backs us into a corner where we have no choice but one left before us. Furthermore, this is a story not of the hope of a new and better life, but rather of the forlorn and hopeless period in-between; before one feels that life *can* better, they must first feel as if it cannot.

All in all, *Underground Time* is a novel that I know many of my friends will enjoy but it is, in equal parts, a novel I know many of my friends will despise. It is achingly real, to the point where one is compelled only to read stories of happiness afterwards, but it's worth it. Delphine de Vigan has, yet again, managed to write a novel that is unique, thought-provoking, and shockingly realistic. While I do believe the ending is conclusive enough, I know many readers who have felt otherwise for, truly, it is open and ambiguous like few things in this world are. Yet, I found it was the perfect ending, both for this novel and its characters. It was fitting, in a way only life, which continues to go on despite everything it throws at it, manages to be.

You can read this review and more on my blog, [Ivy Book Bindings](#).

Zuzana Schedová says

Tak táto kniha ma dostala. Táto útlá knižka nám ukazuje na príbehu dvoch osamotených ľudí jeden deň v ich živote. Od rána až do večera. Na mňa tento príbeh zapôsobil veľmi silne. Vyvolal vo mne emócie a neskutočne intenzívne som prežívala každú stránku. Nie je to príjemný ani pozitívny príbeh, naopak je to smutný, depresívny príbeh o ľudskej samote v ruchu veľkomesta, ktorý nám ukazuje dvoch osamotených unavených ľudí, ktorí sa snažia preraziť vo veľkom meste, nájsť si svoje miesto pod slnkom a hlavne túžia po tom byť uznávaní a mať vedľa seba niekoho kto ich pochopí, podporí, pomôže a môžu sa na neho kedykoľvek obrátiť. Sú to dve samostatné jednotky, ztratené duše, ktoré ani vlastne nevedia, že hľadajú jeden druhého. A my ako nezávislí pozorovatelia sledujeme ako sa ich cesty stretávajú a rozchádzajú a doufáme, prajeme im, aby sa stretli. Ale toto nie je ružový, romantický román, príbeh veľkej lásky. Autor má neskutočne skvelý rozprávačský talent a dokáže veľmi pútavo písať o bežných veciach, ktoré ľudia zažívajú, klasickom stereotype a do príbehu zapojiť aj vážnejšiu problematiku ako je napríklad psychická šikana na pracovisku, alebo problematika opustených starých ľudí, o ktorých sa nikto nezaujíma. Vynikajúce dielo, ktoré určite svojimi kvalitami vyčnieva medzi knihami, ktoré som za poslednú dobu prečítala. Ale ako som už spomínala, pripravte sa na to, že to nie je príjemné čítanie a mňa osobne ten príbeh veľmi emotívne zasiahol. Zároveň som ale za takýto druh príbehu rada, i keď navyonok pôsobí ako banálny príbeh, opis života dvoch bežných ľudí, v skutočnosti toho v sebe skrýva neskutočne veľa. Je drsný so zaujímavou melódiou, poetikou a metaforami. A na záver v nás nechá otázku, že či nie je niekedy vzdať sa prosté jediným riešením zdanlivo neriešiteľnej situácie? Že zachovanie vlastného psychického zdravia je to najdôležitejšie v živote, dôležitejšie než hrdosť, ktorá nám občas nedovolí sa podvoliť a priznať sa, že na tomto poli sme prosté prehrali. A koľko toho človek dokáže zniesť až kým si uvedomí, že už je toho príliš? A kde je vlastne tá hranica? Veľmi silný príbeh, ktorý bude vo mne rezonovať ešte nejakú dobu.

Veraa says

I loved the stories and Mathilde's story got my at some point. It's horrible living that way and I wished that in the end they would actually meet and everything would get better. I hoped for a better happier ending though.

Jill says

This is life in the 21st century: Wake up and hear the noises of the city around you. Heave your body into a train car, squeezing every last inch of yourself into a vacancy. Physically contact several people during your commute; feel utterly alone. Sit at your desk and consider your work. Encounter numerous people throughout the day; connect with none of them. Push your body into the train again; stand mere centimeters from several other human beings. Return home, exhausted by your solitude, miserable from your loneliness. This is life today.

Mathilde and Thibault are professionals in Paris, a city many consider to be the most magical and beautiful in the world, but they both ache from the city's harshness. In beautiful yet disjointed passages, de Vigan describes the day of both Mathilde and Thibault. Unsatisfied with their jobs, they wander, alone, throughout the city.

Reading about loneliness is both comforting yet boring. It's reassuring to realize people have suffered from the same feelings as you, but overall, ennui isn't terribly interesting. That's why *Underground Time* wasn't a spectacular read for me. Nevertheless, it moves quickly and the emotions it evokes are worth more than the less than exciting plot.

This is a very French novel. Things are depicted as they are rather than how we wish them to be. (view spoiler) It's also a very 21st century novel. Gone are novels detailing epic fights or webs of intrigue; nowadays we have these languorous, psychological works, a trend I could come to support if I can learn to spell languorous and psychology can be made more interesting.

The best part of reading this novel is determining what, if anything, de Vigan blames for Mathilde and Thibault's smothering solitude. Personally, I think we are at fault. We can blame the city, urban life, and business culture. We can say the city divides people, separates them until they have no one to turn to. But there are several instances throughout the novel where Thibault or Mathilde could have struck up a relationship or merely a conversation with someone else. But they don't. The city is absolute.

Favorite Quotation:

"His life is in this incessant toing and froing, these exhausted days, these stairways, these lifts, these doors which close behind him.

His life is at the heart of the city. And the city, with its noise, covers the complaints and the murmurs, hides its poverty, displays its dustbins and its wealth, and ceaselessly increases its speed."

Discussing urban solitude and business malaise is popular right now. I recently watched *Medianeras*, an Argentinian film concerned with the same questions as *Underground Time*. I have the same criticisms of the film as I do the book: meaningful but ultimately flat because of the uninteresting subject matter.

Meagan says

This is about as far as you can get from my normal reading. (And for that, you can thank my profession and my coworker for planning a booktalking program on bleak books. Coming this summer!) I read as stress relief, which for me means exploring new places, getting to know characters that I like, finding meaning, or some combination of those elements. Real life is ambiguous, and hard, and filled with people that can be difficult to like. I live real life every day, and it's nice to leave it from time to time, while also gaining knowledge or perspective. That's one of the big reasons that I read.

This book offers none of that. This book offers us an image of what modern life can become, without offering us anything about how to deal with it. This book is full of helplessness and isolation and hopelessness. It is unrelenting in that. What was interesting to me, though, is that the author doesn't use all of this as a blunt instrument to beat you with. She's not screaming "LONELINESS" and then slapping you in the face until you're sad and depressed and angry. Rather, she uses this story and these characters to mimic the isolation and the helplessness and the hopelessness. It's like she wraps you up in cotton wool until everything is muffled and you can't see and no one can see you and so you just stop trying. And perhaps you find a bright spot and you start to focus on it and think maybe you'll escape, but she sees you noticing and plugs it up with more cotton wool. It doesn't hurt, but it's pretty bleak and unfulfilling.

Now, about the story. You've got parallel narratives working here, both of which take place on the same day in Paris. Mathilde is a professional woman with years of experience who, with one tiny misstep, has earned the eternal hatred of her boss, Jacques. (And what a horrible martinet he is.) This manipulative little Napoleon has spent months on a subtle crusade to destroy her and to isolate her. Nothing obvious. Nothing you could point to and say "see!" Just a slow stripping of her dignity and value in her profession. This situation was the worst thing in the book, for me.

Then you have Thibault, a traveling doctor who makes home visits across Paris. He has been long in love with Lila, who does not (or cannot) love him back. Her strange relationship with him, in combination with her indifference, has left him feeling unseen and, you guessed it, isolated and lonely.

What this book does really well is build a horrifying situation and watch it go. You can feel the tension, anxiety, and hopelessness build. It's a pot about to boil. Something's gotta give, and you'll wonder what it will be. Will there be violence? Suicide? A psychological break? Will someone, by some miracle, see things as they are and put a stop to everything?

Well, I won't spoil it for you, but keep in mind - this is a French novel. So probably not. I'm off to find a happily ever after. And maybe something with big freaking rainbows. And glitter on the cover.

Adrian White says

Some books change the way you view the world, if only for a short period of time, affecting your outlook and forcing you to question all you see. The everyday becomes remarkable, the mundane becomes extraordinary and a book in which nothing much happens presses your Refresh button and helps you to face the day. Such a book is *Underground Time* by Delphine de Vigan.

Now, I'm not mad about the title, even if it perfectly describes the book. In the original French, the book is called *Les Heures souterraines*, which has something, I think; I wonder if the author was consulted or advised about the direct translation? That aside, I thoroughly enjoyed the underground world de Vigan describes - and it's underground in many senses of the word. I loved the tension of two lost souls making their inevitable (?) way towards each other in an unforgiving city that has no time for the people who struggle along the margins, avoiding the commuter flow of bodies and fighting against the rules of engagement out there in the world. Graham Swift managed to successfully do the same in his novel *The Light of Day*.

I also really like the story as an antidote to the popular *One Day* by David Nicholls. I appreciated the premise of *One Day* but was very disappointed when I actually tried to read it. My favourite two-hander, boy's story/girl's story, of all time has to be Andrew Davies' *B Monkey* - out of print now, I believe, but if you can get your hands on a copy then do so. It's a treat and a book I return to again and again. Check it out.

Ellen says

I think it lost something in translation (and I hate saying that).

Redkitsune says

I didn't like the narration nor the story of this book. You read like, 75% of it, waiting for something to happen and then you can guess the ending right away. What a waste of an ending!!

Flannery says

If there's one thing this author knows how to do, it is capture hopelessness. I think going into this having no clue what other people thought of it or really anything about the author made for a really exciting experience for me. However, I'm going to spoil something for you. The blurb for this book made me feel a bit optimistic about what could happen:

"Every day, Mathilde takes the Metro to her job at a large multinational, where she has felt miserable and isolated ever since getting on the wrong side of her bullying boss. Every day, Thibault, a paramedic, drives where his dispatcher directs him, fighting traffic to attend to disasters. For many of the people he rushes to treat, he represents the only human connection in their day. Mathilde and Thibault are just two figures being pushed and shoved in a lonesome, crowded city. But what might happen if these two souls, traveling their separate paths, could meet?"

Two miserable people find each other and make a go of it, right? And live happily ever after? You sly, sly jacket copy writer. That is not what this book is about--actually, it is one of the most depressing books I have read lately. Almost the entire book is devoted to descriptions of Mathilde being undermined and underappreciated at work. She is a widow and can't even bring herself to spend time with her friends because they will ask her about work. Thibault, the male lead, is an equally miserable doctor who once dreamed of being a surgeon, a dream that was crushed when he lost several fingers in a bar fight. He is in a relationship with an emotionally unavailable woman and he is unhappy with his job traveling all around the city, visiting patients. The narrative alternates between Mathilde and Thibault, and while I enjoyed Mathilde's portions more, I don't think the story would be complete without Thibault's voice thrown in. The descriptions of Mathilde's work life provided for more instances of pure rage from me as a reader than perhaps any book I've ever read. If it was possible, I'd write myself into this story and I'd have no qualms about torturing her boss in tiny, obnoxious ways until he broke into a million pieces. But both narratives really evoke the loneliness so many of us feel, even when we're surrounded by people.

"Carried along by the dense, disorganised tide, he thought that the city would always impose its own rhythms, its haste, its rush hours, that it would always remain unaware of these millions of solitary journeys at whose points of intersection there is nothing. Nothing but a void, or else a spark that instantly goes out."
(257)

Today, when I was driving downtown, I saw a young woman about my age who had crutches and a walking boot on her leg. It was raining, she was going very slowly up a hill, and she looked miserable. I asked if I could drive her to wherever she was going. While we went around the block to her bus stop, we figured out that her ultimate destination was on the other side of Lake Washington, right near my house, so I told her I'd take her the whole way. We chatted about our lives, our families, her injury, African safaris, and I'll never see her again. Or perhaps I will, but I'd have a hard time recollecting where I knew her from. It was just a

moment, like any other moment, when I made a choice. In *Underground Time*, the entire book builds up to just one of those moments, and I'm confident in saying that the ending will not satisfy a majority of readers, but it satisfied me. Then again, I'm someone who quite enjoys when a book punches me in the stomach.

I wish I knew French so I could read this novel in its original language. Even so, the translation is wonderfully descript. Though not overly flowery, the book is filled with metaphors and turns of phrase just so perfectly apt that I found myself repeatedly impressed:

"So a moment must come when she'll wake up, when she'll grasp the division between reality and sleep, and realise that that is all this was: a long nightmare. When she'll experience the intense relief that follows the return to consciousness, even if her heart is still beating fit to explode, even if she is bathed in sweat in her darkened bedroom. A moment when she will be free." (211)

This was 4/5 stars for me. I think it will appeal to anyone who likes to read about the bleaker aspects of life, people who enjoy French literature, anyone who may or may not daydream about murdering their horrible boss, and people who like imagining what would happen if you stopped to talk to that person on the subway.

This was my first pick for our Readventurer feature, Library Quest, where we (and guest posters) pick books from the library that we've never heard of to read and review in the quest to find some hidden treasure.

Licinius says

Ici, pas de batailles héroïques, de héros qui sauvent le monde, d'érudits qui découvrent quelque chose de révolutionnaire. Non, juste deux personnes, une salariée Mathilde et un médecin Thibault, deux âmes vivantes mais écorchée, vidée, acculée par un monde indifférent mais ravageur. C'est incroyable comment l'être humain est à la fois si fragile et si résistant. Mathilde endure toute les pires horreurs, celle des non-dits, des mensonges, de l'hypocrisie, du mépris hiérarchique. Dans le monde rigide de l'entreprise, il n'y a pas d'insultes frontales, pas de cris, pas de gifles. La douleur physique n'existe pas, juste morale. On ne cherche pas à vous faire du mal. On vous ignore, on ne reconnaît plus l'humain qui est en vous. Il faut faire semblant. Respecter les règles tacites. Un bonjour souriant. Un remerciement touchant. Une motivation inébranlable. Sinon gare à vous !

Mais ce roman ne fait pas de l'entreprise un lieu infernal pour autant, bien au contraire, Mathilde elle-même le sait, c'est aussi une machine à faire revivre, c'est par elle que Mathilde a repris goût à la vie. Et même quand son supérieur l'a foutu dans cet infâme bureau, l'espoir (gâché!) d'une mutation lui fait imaginer une multitude de choses. Le bonheur, cela tient aussi à cela, une imagination qui s'emballe, qui fait espérer. On hurle avec ces gens là. Ils hurlent intérieurement. Car ils ne savent plus crier à la face du monde. Comme pour pleurer ! C'est un roman où apparaît souvent le verbe pleurer. Et pourtant, l'acte du pleur ne sera jamais décrit. On se raccroche à n'importe quoi. A une carte de WoW même, pourvu qu'on trouve un sens à une situation idiote. Et en trame de fond, la Ville, inextricable, tentaculaire, valétudinaire. Ce lieu où la nature n'a aucun droit, et où l'homme y a fait son nid. Bref, ce roman est une excellente surprise.

Glenn says

Not what I expected. I loved 'No and Me' but this book was not at all as beautiful to me. It followed two characters having a very bad day and for many many pages I was waiting for them to meet. I wondered what

would happen when they did meet and how it would change their attitude to their life/day but I never really got to find out... nothing changed by the end. really a disappointment after 'No and me' was one of my favourite reads of last year.
