



Umbrella

Will Self, S?la Okur (Translator)

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A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella. James Joyce, Ulysses Recently having abandoned his RD Laing-influenced experiment in running a therapeutic community - the so-called Concept House in Willesden - maverick psychiatrist Zack Busner arrives at Friern Hospital, a vast Victorian mental asylum in North London, under a professional and a marital cloud. He has every intention of avoiding controversy, but then he encounters Audrey Dearth, a working-class girl from Fulham born in 1890 who has been immured in Friern for decades. A socialist, a feminist and a munitions worker at the Woolwich Arsenal, Audrey fell victim to the encephalitis lethargica sleeping sickness epidemic at the end of the First World War and, like one of the subjects in Oliver Sacks' Awakenings, has been in a coma ever since. Realising that Audrey is just one of a number of post-encephalitics scattered throughout the asylum, Busner becomes involved in an attempt to bring them back to life - with wholly unforeseen consequences.

Umbrella Details

Date : Published August 30th 2012 by Bloomsbury Publishing PLC (first published 2012)

ISBN : 9781408820148

Author : Will Self , S?la Okur (Translator)

Format : Hardcover 397 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Novels, European Literature, British Literature

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From Reader Review *Umbrella* for online ebook

William2 says

Some thoughts on my first reading.

Last winter I happened to read Oliver Sacks's *Awakenings* (see review), which is the urtext for Will Self's new novel *Umbrella*. In the mid-60s Dr. Sacks famously gave L-DOPA, a relatively new drug mimicking the neurotransmitter dopamine, to dozens of post-encephalytic patients under his care at Beth Abraham Hospital in the Bronx, New York. These patients had been infected in 1918 by the *encephalitis lethargica* virus, or "sleepy sickness" (not to be confused with the Spanish Influenza of the same year). In *Umbrella* even where references to Sacks's book do not appear — such as the World War I and present-day sections — it's clear the good doctor's classic collection of case studies serves as the novel's inspiration.

Those patients who survived the virus were able afterwards to lead normal lives for many years, sometimes decades, until they were stricken with symptoms similar to Parkinson's disease: locked postures that turned them into living statuary (akinesia), hurrying gait (festination), frozen skewed gaze (oculogyric crises) and so on. These patients did not have Parkinson's proper, but since the virus reduced dopamine in their brains to about 10 or 15% of healthy levels, they experienced identical if somewhat more severe symptoms than actual Parkinson's patients. The only difference being that Parkinson's is ultimately fatal, while post-encephalitics ("enkies," affectionately) might live for the rest of their natural span with the symptoms. Such is the experience of Audrey Death, a main character here.

Self takes much from *Awakenings* that echoes the trials and tribulations of Dr. Sacks's enkies--and Sacks himself--and inflates it into a grand fiction resembling the inspirational text very little. Here, the doctor, Zachary Busner, a psychiatrist of Jewish birth, is adrift in a vast English hospital called the Friern, known for its ½ mile or so of monotonous corridors. Many of the problems Sacks had in the 1960s — like pulling all the patients into a single ward, studying their hyper-slow movements via speeded up film, dealing with a highly political hospital administration, and other details — are dramatized here.

There are also large sections of entirely new invention in *Umbrella*. In one, we follow Audrey Death in her pre-war family life and war-time work as a "munitionette," preparing shells for the British army. We also follow two of her brothers: Stanley Death, a trench soldier, and the *soi disant* Albert De'Ath, who becomes a big-time government honcho. Stanley has an aristocratic lover, Adeline, who he must leave to fight in the endless and pointless war. One day he is brought to live amid a society of bisexual soldiers from both sides deep under that gap between the trenches known as No Man's Land. I suspect this subterranean world of tunnelers was in part inspired by Alasdair Gray's dystopic *Lanark* (see review). Audrey's other brother, Albert, has Asperger's, and is a savant of *Rain Man*-like propensities, though much higher functioning. Audrey, during her pre-encephalytic days, was a staunch socialist while Albert was a conservative. These divergent political views lead to much conflict between them.

Will Self is an acquired taste. In the past he has regularly made fun of death and unspeakable cruelty with an almost hysterical glee. His talent is certainly great. It has, however, to my mind, at times been exceeded by his ambition. So that no matter how good his books are, and the ones I've read are outstanding, he nonetheless always seems to outstrip it (his talent) by way of a stridency of tone (ambition). Subtlety of tone is not in Self's gift. His is always a full throttle, no-holds-barred kind of narrative propulsion. He doesn't dance elliptically around a subject, but always seems to bore to its very heart. This style leaves us with some very naked prose, a prose that doesn't skirt its limitations, but is on the contrary quite open about them. I

know readers who can't abide Self's deeply cynical trickster prose. So I'm happy to report that the cackling satire of Self's earlier work seems in abeyance here, in favor of something softer, something less shrill, more compassionate.

The story is rendered in an almost pitch-perfect Modernist style. I found this astonishing. How does Self pick up Literary Modernism and its attributes (stream of consciousness, abrupt transitions, multiple unidentified intersecting voices, etc.) and don it like a hat? The choice of style strikes me as perfect. I note in my review of *Awakenings* how Sacks's, by flipping from main text to footnote and back again, actually introduces a kind of novelistic discursiveness into his text that would not be obvious to those reading his book without the footnotes. It's an almost *Moby-Dick* or *The Whale*-like discursiveness. And I can't help wondering if Sacks's discursiveness did not in part suggest to Self his neo-Modernist approach.

This is a complex book and a single reading will not satisfy those who wish to know it. On first reading I found some 20% of it utterly ambiguous. So I look forward to rereading it soon, though that will probably not render it more "coherent." A stunner and very highly recommended, especially for those who enjoy challenging texts.

Ale*es says

Disfunzionale, come la vita

Si naviga in acque sotterranee in Ombrello, un sottomondo oscuro governato da forze ctonie, esplosive. Mi scontro subito con le onde sismiche della scrittura che sciamano in direzioni imprevedibili, fratturano il tempo, i personaggi, e li ricompongono, o sovrappongono, in una frammentazione che rifluisce in continuum acqueo.

Ma anche forze cinetiche e inerziali irresistibili.

Quelle centrifughe della guerra, o del tempo, che separano, dividono, allontanano.

Quella centripeta, vischiosa, aggregante e gravitazionale dell'infermità mentale.

La "discesa nel Maelstrom" della malattia che ti concentra in un unico punto, il corpo, il lager di te stesso.

Mentre la catatonìa di Audrey (coprotagonista, asse di rotazione, ritmo sincopato del testo) che mi ha ricordato una triste, indomabile Persefone, è un'inerzia solo apparente.

Audrey, la sostanza femminile del libro, plastica ed acustica insieme, di una bellezza altera e dolce, che se ne infischia del decadimento della materia.

Self, oltre ad avere un nome curioso, quasi un manifesto del sè, dichiara, con perfetta coerenza, di non scrivere per il lettore.

E anche se a tratti si naviga a vista, vale la pena il viaggio.

Jackie says

Please save yourself from ending up with Audrey in the asylum and don't even bother with this book.
WHAT?????

Gregsamsa says

There's a rumble in a Brighton-bright Lit-bulb *fried-dust* aromatics for your lifestyle no matter the wattage to The Council (not *Style*) always a dim Heaven 17-er (assymetrical 'do gone as ReagancrossThatch) doomed as rent-rooms to shriek a Being-Boiled "I DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS FUCKING BOOK" or so Frankie say.

It's not because there are no chapters and so very few paragraphs and dialog attributions; it's not because the point of view shifts from one person's to another, decades later or before, in the middle of a "sentence;" it's not because of the generous and seemingly arbitrary use of italics; it's not because of the stream-of-consciousness style where the nagging repetitions of song lyrics surface between random sights during a drive at night or the edges of ideas blur against lush accidental memories. The problems: the Brit-specific details, the slang(s), the legions of Proper Names enrolled as adjectives and labels larger than themselves doing some double cultural duty I cannot discern. I then have two choices: make the stream of Self's stream-of-consciousness into something quite unstreamlike and stop to Google each reference, or stay in the stream and quickly jot each note for later research, when I am sure I will, once learning what was being referenced, then struggle to remember the context. Given how this book already is, it's not like that context is going to be easy to retrieve. Neither of these options seem very close to any of even my nerdy-ass concepts of literary pleasure.

But when he wants to, boyohboy can Will Self provide literary pleasure. Some of his sentences are like good drugs, while others are like bad dreams, then there are the ones like amusement park rides or that rare experience of looking at something and not knowing what you are seeing until you do know. He charges the unnoticed everywhere like-water-is-to-fish nature of language until it sizzles and, contra how so much capital-L Lit is taught, it feels like it might even be bad for you. In the fun way. But I fret: will the hangover have been worth it? I adored *The Book of Dave* (my first; somehow I had never managed to delve into Selfhood before that, and I got more than my time's worth without realizing there was a glossary in the back until I was finished) so I'll give it more of a chance than I'd ordinarily accord to a book so larded up with obscure references and arcane vocab. Ok, actually, I dig the vocab, but I do kinda wish it had a glossary in the back.

In an interview on npr I heard Self defend his modernist approach and it surprised me by being so patently wrong. This is not a matter of opinion. He said that he wanted to write something that wasn't lodged in your conventional third-person omniscient point of view. But the narrator tells us Busner did this, Audrey did that, and we read what they and most other characters *think*. Hate to be pedantic but isn't that the very definition of third-person omniscient? You can see why I was surprised, but I'm even more surprised that most of the complaints about its difficulty are, as far as I've heard and read, about the stream-of-consciousness style, the inventive punctuation, the lack of chapters and dearth of indention (when he did cut the ongoing block into a paragraph I did wonder *why there?*), and all these experimental cutting-edge techniques that are coming up on their hundredth birthday. Why would presumably educated and cultured people act like the reason they find it difficult is because of old-ass modernist techniques instead of how those of us across the pond don't know what the fuck he's talking about and still wouldn't if the style were straight-up BBC?

I feel a touch guilty for reviewing a book I'm still standing in but I had to post this before I knew what I think, wondering if I'll wade on. Sentences like this sure make me want to: [Edit: I've finished it, and want to re-read it]

Regarding a groovy 60s party scene: "Was it Busner who had been time-travelled here from a past as

jarringly austere as his test-card-patterned sports jacket and drip-dry tie, or, to the contrary, they who had been op-art-spiralled from a pre-industrial opium dream of foppery and squalor?"

Amanda says

My first review was a bit harsh, so here's the new version edited after I had time to distance myself.

I am not the best reader, but Umbrella was really hard to read. Run on sentences and giant page long paragraphs. I spent 5 hours on the first 100 pages and a mere 3 on the remaining 300. Conceptually I was looking forward to the novel and I really tried to invest time to follow the story. I like stories that span generations, world war 1, mental illness, and regret. Parts I understood were good, I wanted to like this like Busner wanted L-DOPA to be wonder drug. I did like what I could understand, but it won't have a wide audience, which for the hidden plot and story is a bit of a shame.

Anthony Vacca says

Postmodernism is dead, long live Modernism!

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I slogged through this in order to say I had read all of the Booker shortlist before the award was announced, for once. Let's make one thing clear - without that compelling reason, I would not have kept with it.

There is a difference between difficult writing and good writing. I personally think Will Self careens toward difficult without giving a thought to the reader. Oh, I'm not just complaining because this is hard to read. I get many of the references and imitations, I just didn't think they were necessary to do all at once. As Self himself said on page 86, "simply wishing the madness away won't make anyone regain their sanity."

First of all, you have the obvious comparison to Ulysses by James Joyce. In fact, just in case you dared to miss the comparison, he starts with a quotation from Ulysses - "A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella." This quotation comes back to haunt the reader towards the end of the story, but I won't ruin that particularly moment for the two other readers who will make it that far.

Ulysses has something very important that Umbrella does not - variety. It morphs between storytelling styles and points of view, with a rise and fall that keeps the reader interested. Umbrella goes FULL SPEED AHEAD with no chapters, no paragraphs (maybe a few indented starts), no dialogue signs, no breaks. Characters have dialogue and internal thoughts in the same breath, and italicized words aren't one or the other but are frequent throughout the book. There are three time periods covered by the novel but you never know where you are. Is an event being remembered or narrated? Are we moving linearly or going back and forth? Who are all these people? Ha.

Also, if this is Ulysses, this is if Ulysses took place in a mental institution in a Cockney accent. Oh yes. Before I forget, a good portion of the spoken words in this novel are Cockney slang. Good luck.

Suddenly, I got to page 138. And a character said "We're'erebecausewe're'ere." All in one word, no spaces, and repeatedly, and I thought, "Where have I heard that before?" I thought it was either Lem or Huxley, and guessed right by rereading my review of *Memoirs Found in a Bathtub*, where one of my favorite bits was people chanting or singing "We're HERE because we're HERE because we're HERE because we're HERE!" Woah. Okay. So a reference to Lem, interesting. So it must be okay that I don't know where I am and nothing makes sense.

I do think it would have been nicer to hide in a bathtub than to force myself to finish.

I took to a deep skim of the rest. If you try to pick out the important bits, you uncover a story that isn't that different from *Awakenings*, where a psychiatrist treats a patient with Postencephalitic parkinsonism. Audrey Death, the patient, appears throughout the novel in her youth, in her mental hospital self, and everything in between. As far as I can tell the characters DO things but don't feel anything. It is impossible to connect with anyone when you're being bombarded with the songs they have in their head.

I sound impatient. I feel impatient. I read some lovely books this year that were nominated for the Booker. I'm worried the judges will select this one because they don't understand it, because it intimidates them, and therefore it must be good. I hold that this technique itself is not a bad idea, but would be far more interesting in smaller doses.

Steven Godin says

Sorry to say but this was a complete and utter mess!, I never actually got to finishing it the first time around so gave it another crack recently but shouldn't have bothered. I can fully understand those who rated this much higher but it's just not the sort of book I would normally read and at the time thought to try something different for a change. Different it definitely was but that's the only positive I can think of. Will Self does has an audience but sadly I am not comfortable in my seat, so heading for the exit door and finding the nearest bar!

Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

It's been ages since I had to be won over by a book (if ever). Typically I'm won over already before I open the cover. Whatever my system of second-hand knowledge and magic=words may be, however it is that sifts through the hype and the recommendations, I seem to mostly always get it right. Sure, occasionally, I'm not blown-out of the water by a big book with a big reputation, but I'm nearly always quite satisfied (I can't get into reading so-called one/star books). But Self's *Umbrella* sort of demanded that it have the chance to win me over. I was already sold by the hype and by the reputation. But then I started reading. And I read words. Whatever. Not really sure, maybe life was too short, etc. But one thing was quickly clear ;; Self was writing something in some way that other novelists were not. What he was doing was probably the same thing that caused me to be unsold rather quickly, the claim made on the flyleaf that "Will Self takes up the challenge of Modernism and demonstrates how it--and it alone--can unravel new and unsettling truths about our world and how it came to be." Which isn't true. But anyhow.... I read on because the point of reading a novel is to read something *novel*, even if, like Barth says about retracing our steps to find out where we are headed, that thing *novel* is already done and done away with. Modernism may be dead, but it can always have new life breathed into it (cf Habermas still breathing Enlightenment air). So I was finally won over by page 200.

But and so what I find is that I wasn't altogether only being cheeky when I rhetorically asked whether it ever be ethical to review a book one has read only once ; one is not really capable of so doing, at least for a book at the level of *Umbrella*. On the other=hand, some would say that a lifetime is only time enough to read one novel (that 'some' was a prof whose one novel was *Don Quixote*--nicht schlecht!) ; but I'd have to confess I suspect that principle would not apply to *Umbrella*, perhaps to *Bottom's Dream*, I'm thinking, certainly to *Ulysses* and Rabelais and others which demand a life's sentence. But all the same, I'll have more Self please.

The Steven Moore Review (31Dec12) ::

“Warning: “Umbrella” is what’s known as a “difficult” novel. If that sounds as appealing as a difficult pregnancy, stop reading now. But if you enjoy challenges, in literature as well as life, read on because “Umbrella,” which was a finalist for this year’s Booker Prize, is a virtuosic performance.”

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Ben Dutton says

Will Self has always been one of those writers whose work I hear about. His novels all sound tricky, clever and comic – three qualities I adore in fiction, and yet, somehow, I’ve managed to avoid reading his fiction all these years. This is not to say I’ve not read his other work – his occasional pieces in British newspapers have been interesting, insightful, if occasionally sending his readers to their dictionaries. This later quality is often seen as a negative to the Self-bashers – why does he see fit to exclude the majority of his readers by using words not in common usage? It’s a crap question, and only an idiot would ask it. That said, he is not going to win many over with his new novel, *Umbrella*, which will not only have them rooting out their dictionaries, but also their medical encyclopaedias. This, as I see it, is a good thing.

Self has been very open about *Umbrella*. He wanted to write a modernist novel for the twenty-first century, to prove that the modernist tradition wasn't moribund and could still prove insightful. He has succeeded totally in his intended aims. *Umbrella* is a literary tour-de-force, undoubtedly Self's best novel (I can make that claim without having read the others, because the sheer depth and range of this novel is vast) and is utterly brilliant.

It is an apparently difficult novel in construction. It is stream-of-consciousness told without chapter breaks, almost no paragraph breaks, no speech marks and run-on sentence; it has scenes that switch characters, time and location, sometimes within a paragraph and over 400 pages of it. You hear this, you think it will be tough to read. It really isn't. I found *Umbrella* flew past, that I followed its shifts with relative ease, and that it all built to such a wonderful conclusion.

The story concerns Audrey Death, whose Encephalitis lethargica forms the spine of the novel. We see her life in World War 1, and we see her Doctor, in the 1970s, attempting to wake her with experimental treatment. We also see this doctor, Busner, in 2010, returning to the hospital where Audrey once lived and he once worked. Along the way we meet Audrey's brother, Albert, who has an eidetic memory and who has turned his back on his sister. The novel unravels these various histories – personal and case – and builds a commentary upon memory, life, health and friendship.

At first I thought it surprising that Self had a novel on the Man Booker Prize long list in 2012. After reading *Umbrella*, I think he might just win it.

Will *Umbrella* Win?

I think it might. It has the scope that Booker judges love. It has a story that engages intellectually and emotionally, and is absolutely superb. Where it might fail is that its construction is deliberately complex, and this might put people off. If it wins, I suspect it will become one of those winners that people talk about but rarely read (or at least finish). It's not populist, but it should be rewarded. British fiction can be quite tame – it is good to see some experimentation is left in the old beast.

James says

When the war has took its part, When the world has dealt its card ... The pile of folded papers lay on the table in front of Colin. His eyes play across them: choosing, selecting, winnowing out the wrong ones. There is no difference between them that he can see: some are smaller, some larger; some are folded more tightly than others. He chooses at random and reads it out loud: *Umbrella (Ella ella eh eh eh)* — What kind of a title is that? Donna shrugs at her boss as she looks up from the roughly tied manuscript bundle on his desk. And, I know Self's an intellectual, but he's forgotten to put in any paragraphs, chapters or dialogue. Surely just give it back to him to at least tidy up, I can't edit it like that. What? She was totally confused now. It's meant to be like that? Some kind of Modernist stream-of-consciousness twaddle, can't somebody else –? No? She sighed, and resigned herself to this book like no book she'd ever had to whip into publication shape before. She wasn't going to thank her boss, and she certainly wasn't going to thank Will at the next Bloomsbury authors and editors social ... Sighs are repeated around the room as people take their seats. The few people who've turned up glare at James as Louise calls the meeting to order: Welcome to Book Club she announces. We're all here to discuss James's nomination of *Umbrella* — (*Ella ella eh eh eh*). James shifts uncomfortably in his chair — he's already heard the opinions of the people in the room, the ones who didn't want to try it hadn't bothered to come. Luckily the only three people to turn up have spread themselves evenly around the too-large room. Nobody has to share the blame by sitting too close. Robert was the first one to bail – life is too short to read books he wasn't enjoying. He said. Just one star, binned, and he opted to read *World War Z* instead. Derivative it may be, but reading it doesn't hurt. Louise followed soon after. Throwing it under the much more light-hearted bus of *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. Attention turns to James. The only one in the room crazy enough to still be reading it. He claims he's loving it ... but then the accusations weigh in — a quick attempt to remind the group that Colin picked it from the pile, not him, is met with smiles but no escape: Colin couldn't even be bothered to turn up let alone finish the book — he would say that wouldn't he: it was his choice. He couldn't possibly slate a book that he foisted upon the group. But he really was enjoying it he said. Yes, he could appreciate that it's a hard read ... that the lack of breaks makes it a challenge to follow at times ... the lack of dialogue marks, the often jarring italicised emphasis, but ... but, once you read it as the stream it was written as and accept that some of it will inevitably flow over you on the first reading then it almost becomes fun. He's not fooling anyone though. His defence convinces nobody and a brief bit of maths results in the lowest average score for a Book Club discussion since it reformed. The unexpected second order of business is announced, and after a brief show of hands James is overruled two-to-one: the first rule of Book Club is that James doesn't get to nominate any more fucking Will Self books!

Sarah Goodwin says

DNF after about ten percent of pretentious babble.

Using some of my issues with this book, I have compiled the following checklist:

HOW TO MAKE YOUR NOVEL MORE PRETENTIOUS

1. Use a thesaurus on every word. Better yet, use hyphens and run together words to create new, meaningless balderwank (see I can do it too).
2. French est du rigour. So your main character is English? No matter, they should still spout French, Latin, mandarin and ancient atlantean. Your loyal readers, if they are suitably high brow will scuttle away to look up the meaning of every utterance.
3. Paragraphs. Page breaks and indents are for thick people who need space to digest your words instead of letting them flow over them like silky grey matter. Let the winding scroll of your wordy magnum opus fly free!
4. The world is your amorphous oyster! Fill your novel with stream of consciousness, unsignposted scene changes and impenetrable description. Flick quickly from the mossy agate eyes of a lover to the mossy agates of a mine in Chili, to the agate moss of a sculptor in the Philippines circa 1870, no need to provide clues as to the location, timing and relevance of events and scenes, your reader will soak your intentions from the page.
5. One flew over the cawing changelings twig bound hutch. Words are like musical notes, use them in any way that sounds good. Don't use nouns to pin down concrete sentences into well constructed prose, just let the adjectives roam.

'The oscillating bag of bones, staring into it's own pebbled forelegs, scuttled like a crab' *not a quote.

Who knows what it means? Who the hell even cares?

6. Use....so.....many....ellipses....it....adds.....drama....even....if....your.....characters.....sound....like.....their.....inner.....monologues.....are.....being.....narrated.....by.....an.....asthmatic.

7. Finally, if you still think any meaning can be gleaned from your work, thus making it entertaining and thus, possibly not as great a work of literary nonsense as it could possibly be. Start randomly italicising words, or putting them in bold. For no real reason, but God, it looks meaningful.

Now that I'm done being facetious, it remains to say only, do not buy this book if you are looking for something that in anyway corresponds to the idea that a book is a sheaf of papers with words on them that create a consistent narrative that can be read and understood by the human brain.

If you're looking for an exercise in pretentious cryptography, look no further.

Sophia says

There are three main narrative strands in *Umbrella*. The first follows Zack Busner, a psychiatrist working in the 1970s at the huge Friern Mental Hospital near the Alexandra Palace in London. He becomes fascinated by the brain disease encephalitis lethargica, and by one particular elderly patient who suffers from the condition. Audrey Death was admitted to Friern when she was struck down by this disease in 1918. She is semi-catatonic, able to walk but plagued by tics which overwhelm any natural movement, and incapable of normal speech. Busner is convinced that somewhere trapped inside her body, Audrey's consciousness, and that of other sufferers of encephalitis lethargica, remains intact.

The second strand follows Audrey from her childhood through to the onset of her disease. This was my favourite part of the story and Will Self's descriptions of life in Victorian London were wonderful. We also spend time with Audrey's brothers; Stan, a sensitive young man whom we follow to the trenches in France and Albert, a highly intelligent but cold and calculating over-achiever. The third strand of the story is set in the present day with Busner now an old man, living alone and haunted by his memories of Friern, which has now closed down and been converted into luxury flats.

It all sounds quite simple and clear cut when I write it down in like this, but of course it isn't - Will Self doesn't really do simple. He dispenses with chapters and even paragraphs and the whole thing just runs on and on in a Joycean stream-of-consciousness. He switches between the different time periods and viewpoints without warning, splicing them together - often in a single sentence - in a way that reminded me of a DJ mixing tracks. Of course this gives the reader the very practical problem of having no natural breaks where you can go and make a cup of tea or indeed make any room in your life for anything but *Umbrella*. Will Self demands your complete attention for as long as it takes and I felt totally engulfed by this novel, finally emerging after two days in a kind of stupor. Not that I'm complaining, but if you'd like to read this too then you need to be prepared to set aside some serious time.

Self writes about the sad, the angry, the sordid and the nasty, laying bare the innermost self of each character with no flatteries or allowances made. His use of metaphor is just astonishing, he revels in obscure words and phrases, but his mind whirrs at such speed that I could read this book a hundred times and never quite catch it all. Possibly the most important "character" in *Umbrella* is the hospital itself, cold and brooding, a nightmare place that reeks of despair and pain. There's little of the humour you'll find in other Self novels, but that's quite appropriate with such dark subject matter.

Umbrella made me feel as though I was just hanging on by my fingernails as the Will Self express roared along. His vocabulary is, of course, amazing, and my dictionary didn't leave my side as I scabbled along trying to understand every little thing and failing miserably. Self is so unashamedly literary he makes me feel dull and stupid in comparison, which is unsettling but not necessarily a bad thing once in a while. In fact, it's quite refreshing to find an author who just doesn't care about making a novel that will be accessible or have mass appeal. He writes what he wants to write and if you can't keep up, tough!

There are people who will hate *Umbrella* - members of the anti Will Self brigade who find him pretentious and verbose. I can understand this viewpoint but I can't agree. I genuinely think his mind works on another level to that of most people, and I had a mental picture of him writing this in his garret, fingers flying across the keyboard as they tried to keep up with his brain. If you are prepared to put some effort in, *Umbrella* is hugely rewarding, and I definitely think it fulfils the criteria this year's Booker judges set of revealing more on subsequent readings. Is it a masterpiece? Well, I don't feel in the least bit qualified to judge something like that, but I really think it might be.

Antonomasia says

Excellent book; one star off only because I found the story (i.e. Audrey's story) very draining. Combines avant-garde structure with the highly evocative and emotionally involving, great sense of historical place/time - including working class characters less frequently found in historical fiction, and a political focus which is genuinely about its time - not contrived to please the contemporary reader - yet also of interest to modern sensibilities, a bawdy humour too rarely found with those politics, and seriously sharp pop-cultural references that span the English / London twentieth century.

IMO best read when you are alert enough that the mind can process the book almost subconsciously, whilst the conscious approach is letting it wash over you. (For me, such things aren't always possible, so I get how this novel could seem very hard work for some. My three different year tags show it took a few goes before I hit the right time to read the whole book.)

In the spoiler tag is a load of guff I wrote in 2012 and which, although I'm not overly fond of it now, a few people liked.

(view spoiler)

Geoff says

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Umbrella tells the simultaneous stories (-well okay this is *not* the simultaneity that one finds in the *Wake* for instance, which, as far as I know, might be the only way to really really do simultaneity in prose, and that is definitely not what is happening here - what is happening here is more like narrative enjambment, or collage, or a kind of radical undifferentiation of plot lines/perspective-) of Dr. Zack Busner, a charmingly sympathetic character loosely based on Oliver Sacks, who is given to us in multiple timelines - describing his experiences dealing with post-encephalitis lethargica patients in the bewildering, dream- or nightmare-like labyrinthine wards and corridors of Friern Hospital (formerly Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum - in this book a highly developed character all on its own) - along with a twinned narrative of the elderly Busner dealing with the pains of being old and alone in a changing world that seems to be expelling him bit by bit, revisiting the places and memories of his time with "awakened" patient Audrey Death - one of the encephalitic slumberers

caught in suspended animation for decades. In a tripleted or trebled narrative current we are shown the life stories of the Death (or Dearth, or De' Ath, or Deeth - names can be slippery things!) family and their disparate destinies throughout WWI and before/beyond. Each of these timelines/narratives holds equal space-time in the novel, and each one seamlessly glides in and out of the other in unbroken chains of vigorous prosoy. The real star here is Self himSelf - this is a bravura performance of writing. Self consciously (!) apes the modernist style developed by Joyce and taken up by Woolf et al. (the first words in the book are Busner humming to himself "*I'm an ape man, I'm an ape-ape man...*" Self knows precisely what he is doing here - the timeline of the book covers almost exactly the epoch where modernism reigned in literature) but tweaks it or messes with it enough to not come off as some irritating xerox. The fractures in narrative time, the little burping wormholes that open up and close like a chewing maw, the hyperkinetic fidgety use of italics (which come to make sense after awhile, as manic internals or asides, or simply a mirror of the ticcing disorders of Busner's patients) makes *Umbrella* a terribly energetic read - I say go with the flow, and let it wash over you, stand under the wave of Self's enviable vocabulary and range and depth of verbiage and wordsmithery and absolute absence of cliché. It is certainly one of the most unique and most invigorating "historical novels" you'll ever read... And oh yes umbrellas, the physical objects, make countless cameos, and become a kind of quiet symbolic iteration of... well... something perhaps we all eventually realize we have overlooked or lost? But it has to do with that epigraph from Joyce "*A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella.*" So yes, read this Ulyssean spawn! This is my first Self, and with it he has quickly entered into that pantheon of Writers I Will Read Whatever The Fuck They Write. It's terribly exciting to discover an entire body of work from an author you have full confidence in! And the simple fact that books like *Umbrella* are being written, published, and nominated for awards in this day and age should be heartening for us readers, one and all!
