Zero K

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

We've been on a roll here in the vineyard. So far this year, the Writer has read 18 books<fn>Perhaps explaining the paucity of postings here!</fn>, many of them worthy of considered comment. But you're stuck with me. Alas. Here's the first of a series of chin-strokers inspired by the readings.

Let's start with the last one first. Don DeLillo's 16th novel hit the stores yesterday, but diligent groveling put a copy in my hands on Friday. This makes me almost as timely and important as Kakutani.<fn>No. But I am more trustworthy.</fn>

Opinion: This is the best DeLillo since *Underworld* in 1997. It ranks right up there with *White Noise* from 1985. At the age of 79, DeLillo continues to produce some of our most vital fiction.

He's always had a penchant for pondering mortality – and notions of immortality – and with *Zero K* he pretty much goes all in. Our hero, Jeffrey, is the semi-aimless son of a billionaire father who abandoned him at age 10 in the middle of a math homework problem. More or less reconciled as adults, Jeffrey steadfastly avoids any life choices that might fix him as "like" his father, who he only calls by his first name, Ross. The relationship is not without a certain level of affection and admiration – and approbation.

Ross has invested billions into creating a cryogenic preservation facility in the vast wilds of the mid-Asian desert, a place where the very rich can go to suspend themselves in hopes of being revived in a world where there is a cure for their ailment, which really mostly comes down to reversing the aging process. And where a select few choose to go to suspend themselves while still perfectly healthy with the idea that they will be revived in a world that is better, more rational, more complete.

The compound is claustrophobic and hallucinatory and really smacks of certain culti-ish mind control techniques. (The Heaven's Gate crew comes to mind.) It also doubles as an all-encompassing art installation, with every detail carefully programmed by the Stenmark twins, who I visualized as Kraftwerk-ish euro hipsters, very thin, translucent, and dressed in all-black skin tights. Even when their clothing is described otherwise, they always look like Dieter to me.

Welcome to Sprockets

There are multitudes of semi-lifelike mannequins stationed throughout. Days can pass without seeing another human. Video screens appear from nowhere with images of global devastation, poverty, war, plagues; the Earth, it seems, is no longer fit for living; better to suspend and come back at a happier moment.

Food, a bland gruel designed, it seems, to relieve one's

affection for life's simple pleasures, is generally taken in isolation, though occasionally another person appears at Jeffrey's mealtime, presumably at the behest of those running the show. Jeffrey's conversations with various residents and staff resemble the kinds of exchange you might endure with someone handing out Jack Chick cartoons or Scientology pamphlets. The lights are on, but it's unclear whether there is anybody home.

And then there are the endless hallways of doors leading – perhaps – to nowhere. Jeffrey decides to test the theory by knocking.

> *I did this six times and told myself one more door and this time the door opened and a man stood there in suit, tie and turban. I looked at him considering what I might say.*
>
> *"I must have the wrong door," I said.*
>
> *He gave me a hard look.*
>
> *"They're all the wrong door," he said.*

Much of this material reminded me of David Foster Wallace crossed with Philip K. Dick: funny, somewhat terrifying, with construction of language that somehow manages to evoke both feelings at once. Nobody builds a sentence with as much style and impact as DeLillo; in some of his books, the sheer scale of the language makes it seem as if "plot" is purely incidental. But not here.

Jeffrey is called to this secret compound to witness the suspension of his step-mother, who is dying. As the moment approaches, perfectly healthy father Ross decides he can't go on without her, declaring, "I'm going with her." What follows is examination of conceptions of life and death, what it means to be a human being, what our responsibilities are to ourselves, our loved ones, to others. And as we wait to

discover whether Ross goes gently into that dark night, Jeffrey finds ample time to examine himself, his choices and non-choices, his affable passivity, all of which adds up to "…the soporifics of normalcy, my days in middling drift."

Jeffrey suspects that his refusal to commit to, well, anything really, is his reaction against the standards of his father. He's perfectly "happy" with his drift, yet too smart to accept that contentment at face value. Maybe he should be doing something more. Maybe he is squandering…something.

> *"The long soft life is what I feel I'm settling into and the only question is how deadly it will turn out to be.*
>
> *"But do I believe this or am I searching for effect, a way to balance the ease of my everydayness?"*

And yet, he is fierce in his opposition to his healthy Father choosing to suspend himself while he still has much life to live. The idea that one could just choose to check out for a while repels him.

Jeffrey is fairly obsessed with language, with naming, with defining. "Cherish the language," he says. It is his shield:

> *This is what I do to defend myself against some spectacle of nature. Think of a word.*

The question of who, or what, will revive in the distant future is unclear. Will consciousness maintain itself? Will the suspended brain experience thought, loneliness? If there is a soul, and it ascends to heaven, what happens when the body is revived? Who are we?

> *Am I someone or is it just the words that make me think I'm someone?*

And so: the plot has its grip on you. Will he or won't he

whatever? But the heart of this is the way the two protagonists draw you into their point of view, leading the reader to wonder about his own beliefs and fears. What is this life for? Am I giving it all I can? What is success and failure? Is there an absolute standard for either, a simple test that can tell us whether we are living up to our potential, or casting it away by "suspending" ourselves or settling into the long, soft life?

We witness Jeffrey's struggle with these questions through his constant interrogation of meaning and definition. And even though he sometimes uses that way of thinking to avoid grappling with his emotions, in the end his obsessions circle back on him to force him to examine the uncomfortable.

> *Why was I doing this to myself?*
> *Because the mind keeps working, uncontrollably.*

The unceasing drive of mind, and what happens in the mind after going (gently or not) into the good night, creates one of the most awe-ful scenes in the book.

There's plenty here to make the reader uncomfortable, and plenty of very funny moments. The plot moves you along with more pace than most DeLillo novels.

But my favorite moment is the ending, which takes place on a crosstown bus in Manhattan. I held my breath for the last several paragraphs and sat motionless for several minutes after.<fn>Same thing happened to me at the climax of *Underworld.*</fn> There is no neatly wrapped payoff here, no tied-in-a-bow resolution. But the ending is glorious, the simplest pleasure expressed nearly incoherently, but with meaning crystal clear to anyone paying attention. Sunlight does not shine in any underworld. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.