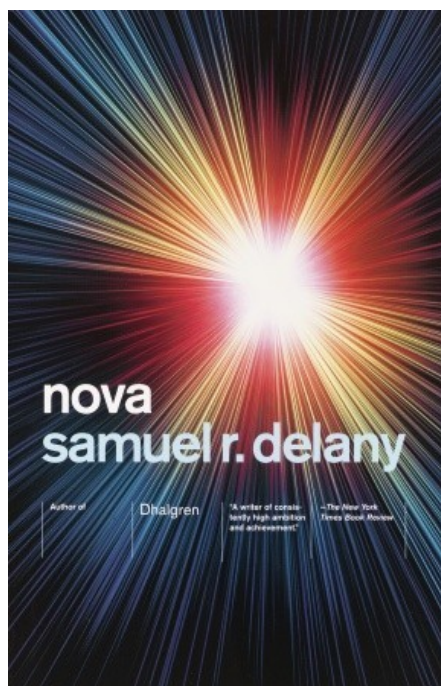




Nova

Samuel R. Delany

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Nova

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Nova Samuel R. Delany

These are [at least some of] the ways you can read NOVA: as a fast-action farflung interstellar adventure; as archetypal mystical/mythical allegory (in which the Tarot and the Grail both figure prominently); as modern myth told in the S-F idiom... the reader observes, recollects, or participates in a range of personal experience including violent pain and disfigurement, sensory deprivation and overload, man-machine communion, the drug experience, the creative experience - and inter-personal relationships which include incest and assassination, father-son, leader-follower, human-pet, and lots more!

The balance of galactic power in the 31st century revolves around Illyrion, the most precious energy source in the universe. The varied and exotic crew who sign up with Captain Lorq van Ray know their mission is dangerous, and they soon learn that they are involved in a deadly race with the charismatic but vicious leader of an opposing space federation. But they have no idea of Lorq's secret obsession: to gather Illyrion at the source by flying through the very heart of an imploding star.

Nova Details

Date : Published June 11th 2002 by Vintage (first published January 1st 1968)

ISBN : 9780375706707

Author : Samuel R. Delany

Format : Paperback 241 pages

Genre : Science Fiction, Fiction, Space, Space Opera

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From Reader Review Nova for online ebook

Lyn says

“NOVA!” – Queen sings – *Ahhh-Ahhhh!*

Reading this, I could not help thinking about the 1980 Mike Hodges film Flash Gordon starring Max von Sydow and Sam Jones. Many critics and reviewers have used the term “space opera” to label and describe Samuel Delaney’s imaginative Hugo nominated 1968 science fiction novel, and I think I will join those ranks.

Wikipedia defines “space opera” as follows:

Space opera is a sub genre of science fiction that often emphasizes romantic, often melodramatic adventure, set mainly or entirely in outer space, usually involving conflict between opponents possessing advanced abilities, weapons, and other technology.

I call Nova a space opera because of the dramatic, chamber-like setting of a science fiction story. While Delaney explains his science well and his novel contains all of the usual elements of the genre, it is similar to John Ford’s 1962 film The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance in that all or most of the action takes place in a closed setting, as if on a theater stage.

Comparing the novel to Flash Gordon and affixing the space opera label on the work may lead some readers to assign the novel to the campy or pulpy lower ranks of sci-fi mediocrity. This is far from the case. Delaney has crafted an adventure of far future cultural and socio-economic complexity and all wound together with a refreshingly original literary talent. It is readily clear that the author, a green but educated 25 at the time of submission, has a creative ability that generations of writers-to-be would give an artificial limb to possess.

Delaney’s science is cutting edge as well, and he anticipates the cyberpunk sub-genre (more than a decade early) while blending together a rich topography of classical, mythological and mystical constituents.

A must read for a true science fiction fan.

Maggie K says

wow-a very charismatic space captain somehow gets a crew to take on a near-suicide type mission that's both greed and vengeance oriented...and it is so believable you will think its possible to fly into a nova!

I find it so awe-inspiring that Delany stuffed all this into a 200 page book, but there you are. The most content per word book ever!

mark monday says

flawed but heroic space captain, on a mission that is part vengeance and part noble quest, assembles a disparate crew to fly through a nova. this is Samuel R. Delany so that synopsis just barely scratches the surface.

I'm going to copy & paste a post regarding this book that I just made in a group I moderate. hopefully the pasted post will eventually turn out to be notes for an actual review, but who knows, I'm whimsical. and lazy!

Delany's prose reminds me of a couple musicians I like, John Cage and John Zorn. Cage because they both create strange, shimmering beauty out of disparate parts that I wouldn't expect to find beautiful. Zorn because I usually have no idea what is going to come next, what one part will turn into, and what that will turn into next. the music analogy occurred to me fairly early because the futuristic music that the highly endearing character Mouse creates is central to the story.

is there hard science in this book? I am not a science guy, not remotely, and a lot of what Delany was describing flew right over my head. so much so that I couldn't tell if it was actual science or if it was Delany using science in a fantastical way.

one of the things I often notice when reading science fiction from earlier eras is how much these authors can pack into such a short number of pages. just a bit over 200 pages! and yet Delany successfully develops multiple characters, an entire future society, a revenge narrative, and much else in those pages. very, very impressive. such a small package but so much within.

loved the use of tarot cards. I think the only other science fiction I've read that had such heavy use was Piers Anthony's Tarot series. and now I'm a little embarrassed that I've mentioned Piers Anthony. but he had some good novels!

I'm a bit shaky on the Grail Quest within this novel. it appears central but at the same time its use was somewhat obscure to me. I have to think on that a little bit, maybe do some research.

one of the things I like about New Wave science fiction authors is just how literary they can get. I have no problem with straightforward 'genre prose' but I just really, really love the artistry of more experimental writers who don't handhold readers from point A to B and who treat their prose with a combination of playfulness and seriousness, like it's a fun challenge for them to write what they intend to be a fun challenge to read. reading Delany and others of his ilk is the opposite of a passive experience. it is the kind of a writing that hits many different parts of me at different times and in different ways. exciting prose!

Tina says

When reading/reviewing this novel, you need to ignore the "science" parts of science fiction, as this was published in 1968, before the moon landing, let alone feasible space mining or colonization. Yet, Delany's ideas are not so out there to be considered improbable (or at least distracting to the story). Illyrion is quite properly described not as a substance, but as a superheavy material - that is, something more akin to particles than something you can hold in your hand (worst explanation ever, but you get my point, I hope), and the concept of people having cybernetic implants in their bodies to allow them to operate machinery using their nerves was a fascinating concept. The story itself is very simple but I wish Delany would have expanded a little more on the characters. Mouse, Katin and Von Ray are fleshed out pretty nicely, but the others we don't learn enough about - especially Ruby. Price's motivations make sense (he's a psycho with an inferiority

complex) but Ruby... quite frankly, she's the most fascinating character in the novel, because she isn't given a perspective, and her motives/actions aren't clear. It's obvious she has some weird obsession with her brother, but why? And is she also attracted to Von Ray? And why? I'm convinced these lingering questions aren't an oversight on Delany's part, but intentional.

There is just so much packed into this tiny novel you could extrapolate on. Race relations, humans and their relationships with machines, politics, power, alienation (Katin, Mouse, and Von Ray are very strange men - loners and vagrants), and various others.

The book has a very distinct style - somewhere between post-modern and modernism, as if Delany wanted to experiment with the format (like in Dhalgren) but decided not to.

Either way, upon reflection, I enjoyed this book more in thinking about it than actually reading it (though it was a very quick and definitely interesting). I wish the characters were a little deeper though, as I said before, but Delaney's wordplay and concepts make this a great novel.

Some wonderful Delany lines:

"A moon's beauty is in variations of sameness."

"Katin tried to look reservedly doubtful. The expression was too complicated and came out blank."

Mitchell says

This novel might be off-putting to readers of current SF or fantasy novels. Its approach to prose and plot is very different from contemporary works, and I note that SF novels of the 50s and 60s often approached plot as an exploration of ideas. It's not that they weren't often entertaining and well structured. But novels by Delaney, Spinrad, Dick, LeGuin and many others seemed to develop their characters and setting and plots in the service of theme, developing and testing ideas, and extrapolating social changes from technological inventions or scientific discoveries. And once a hypothesis had been established and tried and evaluated, the novel would end. Often around the 250 page mark.

Today, the focus is on immersion into story and setting. Readers want long-term escapism for their money. So the prose is clear and simple, there is an emphasis on long changing relationships and fortunes of characters, and the page counts are massive, often stretching into a series of novels (trilogies? not a chance! why drop an established and successful brand) or "world" novels without end.

Delany not only allowed his prose to be difficult, he delighted in it. He loved to throw the reader into a new world with new rules and new meanings, while providing them with few road signs. He often described his love for work by authors who would challenge readers to put together hints and make inferences in order to make sense of this new creation. Long exposition and explanation would make it too easy and rob the reader of the joy of discovery, of making connections and leaps on their own, of inference, which is really the process of making love to literature. *Nova* weaves a tapestry of its influences and creates an organic whole.

Of course, Delany, Brunner, Pynchon, and Spinrad all had at least one magnum opus that pushed the page count well beyond the 500 page mark. But these were not SF soap operas following long character arcs. In each case, these were the authors' most challenging, experimental, and difficult works.

Ben Babcock says

Ah, classic space opera: futuristic setting, oddball characters with oddball philosophies, and ships and science well beyond what we ken. Unlike a good deal of space opera, *Nova* is not a doorstopper. It is more modest in length and in focus, though not in scope. The cast of characters is small, but the events have large repercussion. Captain Lorq von Ray certainly has much in common with Captain Ahab, and obsession is an important motif in *Nova*. I hesitate to compare it to *Moby-Dick*—not because I think such a comparison is invalid but because I read *Moby-Dick* once, a long time ago, and don't much remember it. Instead, I'm going to grab hold of that space opera vibe and run with it.

First, a caveat. The term *space opera* is so hopelessly imprecise that you might not agree with how I'm using it, and that's OK. Hopefully you still understand what I'm saying about this form, even if you don't agree with my label for it.

I have a special place in my heart for space opera above other forms of science fiction. I want to attribute this in part to *Dune*, which was one of the earliest science-fiction novels I read. Two problems. Firstly, *Dune* is more of a planetary romance than a space opera. Sure, it has huge spaceships that cover vast interstellar distances in the blink of an eye. But as the title implies, the book is much more about the planet than the space around it. Secondly, and more importantly, *Dune* is *not* the book that influenced my perception of space opera for all time; that distinction belongs to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

But this isn't a review of *h2g2*, and perhaps one day I'll write a review explaining why I consider it my formative space opera experience. For now, let's return to *Nova* and Samuel R. Delany's use of space opera. Delany has divided humanity into a tripartite society based loosely on constellation: Draco contains Earth and the richest planets in known space, and it's home to Red-shift Limited, the sole manufacturer of faster-than-light drives and company owned by Prince Red; the Pleiades Federation is the home of operations for the rival Von Rays, and its other rich families are the "new money" to Draco's "old;" finally there are the Outer Colonies, whose only attraction are the Illyrion mines, and whose population consists mostly of working class people. If you read this and start thinking, "class conflict," then you are on the right track.

Through the expository conversations between the Mouse and Katin, Delany explains how society has changed in the 1200 years that have elapsed between his time and theirs. I loved these parts of *Nova*, even when they seemed ancillary to the rest of the plot. Katin reminds me a little of myself, dismissive of the past yet simultaneously yearning for its philosophical renaissances. Katin can't quite believe that we twentieth-century folk were backward enough to doubt the accuracy of Tarot; he expresses his joy that the elimination of disease has made personal hygiene unnecessary (Delany neglects to address the problem of *smell*). As a student of history, he has taken the ultimate plunge of falling in love with an anachronistic literary form: the novel. Katin goes around making notes—he has over twelve thousand of them now—in preparation for his novel, which he has not yet begun for lack of a subject. It's good to see that despite other changes, there will always be writers who perpetually procrastinate in their writing. Despite his deferral of the task, Katin remains obsessed with the *idea* of writing a novel, of creating something from a dead art form. And this obsession drives him forward to observe and take notes, eventually bringing him to Lorq von Ray's ship.

Captain Lorq von Ray is obsessed with diving into the heart of a nova to harvest Illyrion. (I think Delany should have said a supernova, as they are not the same thing, but I'm not sure how well 1960s astrophysics differentiated between the two, so we'll let that slide.) This MacGuffin substance is a group of stable transuranic elements that, for reasons never explained, are the key to faster-than-light travel. Now, you can synthesize Illyrion, or you can mine it, but both of these operations are expensive and inefficient. Lorq is convinced he can come out—alive—with enough Illyrion to flood the market. Among other things, this would devastate Red-shift Limited.

Lorq's motives for upsetting the careful equilibrium between the Reds and the Von Rays become clear in a series of flashbacks, through which we see the enmity between Prince and Lorq develop. At first it seems like the incidents that incur Prince's ire are the result of misunderstandings. The two family patriarchs do their best to inculcate friendship between Lorq and Prince, but it doesn't take. And eventually it becomes clear that Prince is psychotic. While this spoils some of the tragedy for me, it adds an interesting dimension to the conflict.

Although Lorq and Prince have a personal enmity, their status as essentially modern aristocrats means this affects the fate of entire societies. If Lorq is successful, not only will he crush Prince's company; the Illyrion mines in the Outer Colonies will be obsolete over night. Millions of workers will be displaced. Prince—or more precisely, Ruby—asks Lorq how he can do such a thing, how he can damage the structure of society and create so much chaos. Lorq claims it is a matter of survival, that he has to strike before Prince does. But this is not a fairy tale, and Lorq is not Prince Charming, come to rescue the princess.

That princess, Ruby Red, intrigues me because she's such a weak character. She seems to have no will of her own, devoting herself instead to Prince and his schemes. As "the sister," she always had the potential to bring Lorq and Prince closer together or drive them apart. Owing to Prince's psychotic tendencies, it seems inevitable that it would be the latter; any time Lorq makes any kind of overture to Ruby, real or imagined, Prince goes berserk. But as far as we can see, Ruby never makes an attempt at reconciliation. She takes Prince's hate for Lorq and makes it her own, to the point where she would murder-suicide Lorq if she had the chance:

Your are not the only one with secrets, Lorq. Prince and I have ours. When you came up out of the burning rocks, yes, I thought Prince was dead. There was a hollow tooth in my jaw filled with strychnine. I wanted to give you a victory kiss. I would have, if Prince had not screamed.

Delany never explicitly codifies the relationship between Prince and Ruby Red, so the extent of their closeness is open to interpretation. I think it's significant, however, that whenever Lorq talks about the search for a nova as a race, he refers to his opponents as "Prince and Ruby Red." But when he talks about his enemy, his rival, the person he has to defeat, he only mentions "Prince." And in the end, not to spoil it, I think that having to surrender this distinction is what defeats him.

For a race, it seems like *Nova* spends an awful lot of time dallying before finally arriving at the finish line. Yet this might be an illusion caused by the brevity of the book—I think the build up to the climax at the nova is the right length; I just didn't expect it to end so abruptly. We just get an epilogue in which we learn the fates of Lorq and the rest of his expedition; Delany never deals with the larger ramifications of Lorq's plan.

And unlike a lot of space opera, *Nova* does not involve fantastic battles between massive armadas or invasions of entire solar systems. Instead, the entire book is a series of stories about individuals, each with a different obsession, whose paths converge and clash, with consequences beyond just the scope of their own lives. More than that, it's a presentation of a fascinating future, burgeoning with so many good seeds of ideas that would later mature and flourish in other books, both those by Delany and by future contributors to science fiction.

Alas, because of this wealth of ideas, *Nova* never delves into any of them with much depth. Nevertheless, I think I have not covered all that *Nova* has to offer a reader, and I am not entirely happy with how I have discussed what I did cover. True to my conception of space opera, Delany has taken an adventuresome quest and married it to an intensely personal conflict between two larger-than-life characters, Lorq von Ray and Prince Red. The result is a gem of a novel—and like most gems, this one has its share of flaws. But that is

OK, and I still like it all the same.

Tudor Ciocarlie says

Wow! Nova is one of the greatest pieces of art that I've encountered in my life!

Adam says

Bizarre psychedelic jewel of novel that sometimes reads like prose poetry. Allusions to Bester, Holy Grail, Moby Dick, tarot, City of the Dreadful Night add to the enjoyment all with interesting thoughts on film and music, the future of the novel, humanity and technology, work and other weird thoughts. This book has an especially chilling finale alleviated by the humorous last line and an unsuspected conclusion. First Delaney I've made it through but maybe this will give the urge to tackle more (I failed my first attempts at Dhalgren and Einstein Intersection)

Mike says

Nova does not cease telling you how clever it is. It does this with plenty of the goobledigook that can mar any narrative, sci-fi or not. First: the neologisms meant to indicate that the writer really thought through his futuristic world ("sensory-syrinx" and "psychorama" are among the plenty). These are meant to broadcast the legitimacy of his imagined world and that, yes, he took care to note that language evolves with the times. Yet the dialogue and language otherwise has timeless problems: stilted exposition, weirdly clunky, or just plain stale talk no matter how grandiose the stage. Second are assumptions about structure that are disregarded for the sake of caprice: in this case, ending the novel in the middle of a sentence in the most groaner-y fashion possible. It should not have been a surprise considering chapters begin and end in the middle of a conversation for no discernible motive other than to force a cliffhanger when one doesn't appear naturally. But it was one of those non-surprises that still yielded an "oh, come on" out loud from yours truly. Third is the author-surrogate character, the always-unwelcome Katin, a neurotic soapbox of half-baked truths about a half-baked reality. Half-baked truths about the current reality are unpalatable; imagine hearing fallacious arguments spouted at length about the state of existence in an already intangible other-world.

Let's see, what else: as a plot it's relatively paper-thin. It's, at base, a "space opera" as they call it. And the odor of triteness that comes with the territory is pungent, indeed: both the antagonist and protagonists are meant to look sympathetic not because of their actions, but because they are both marked by physical deformity. The seeds of their rivalry germinate in a childhood "traumatic event" that defines the rest of their lives. A man loves his rival's sister, or so one thinks. There's even a set of twins that finish each others' sentences. The protagonist and his rivals are identically maniacal. The book is melodramatic not just in its template, but in its "weighty" themes.

There are ways *Nova* is just dangling philosophical ideas from a form as tried-and-true as it can get, and in the meantime uses the form to speculate about a future universe. This means characters relay background information to one another at length. This means the writer-surrogate gets to opine at length about whatever topic fits the author's whims. And sometimes it does feel like it is "whatever topic." The various subjects

covered don't cohere all that well, even with the nova metaphor of a major self-collapse leaving something behind to salvage and re-build from. Basically, when the book isn't shoehorning Delaney's viewpoints into every open nook-and-cranny, it is marching along the narrowest and thinnest of narrative arcs. *Moby-Dick* this is not. I am confounded by the comparison.

The sad thing is those viewpoints aren't very enlightening or provocative. Some just feel over-confident and inapplicable. There's a debate between fiction and music, music being "of the moment" and fiction being "of the past." There's a flourish about how future civilizations combat the problem of worker alienation that is fairly clever, but ultimately too romantic and hollow. So, truly, *Nova* is an unsuccessful balancing act between high-minded and unsuccessful ideas, and a broad-minded and unsuccessful plot-romance-template. Sure, *The Brothers Karamazov* was, in essence, a courtroom drama interspersed with Christian philosophy. But it was more, wasn't it? It was so much more. That mixture of form and invention leaves one with more than the sum of its parts sometimes. (This is something fiction and music can have in common.) Other times, it leaves one with less than. *Nova* is one of those times.

Nikki says

I've meant to read this for so long, because it's a total classic and everyone seemed to expect me to love Delany's work. Although the writing is clever, the way some of the characters speak (verb last) just got infuriating, and I don't think any of the characters are really there to be liked. As for the grail story narrative that's supposed to be there, well; knowing the grail story as well as I do (clue: very well, thanks to Cardiff University's medieval lit tutors) it didn't really feel like a grail story. *Moby Dick*, perhaps; that's a comparison that does feel apt.

There are some gorgeous bits of prose and intriguing ideas, and I did want to read it all and find out how things turned out, but... it just didn't blow me away. Possibly the fault lies in me, since Delany is a classic SF writer; I've still got *Babel-17* to read, and we'll see if I like that better.

Reviewed for The Bibliophibian.

Punk says

SF. Space miners! Space ships! Weird syntax! Sadly, it's the weird syntax that stuck with me after reading this.

Most of the action is set in the year 3172, in a universe where most of the galaxy is colonized by humans. In the Pleiades Federation, natives speak a dialect that always puts the verb at the end of the sentence. It gave us a lot of dialogue like: "I if his advisory meeting over is will see." The entire time I was reading I was wondering what kind of a culture puts its verbs last, and I'm disappointed in Delany for making this a prominent part of the book and making no move to explain it. Especially when his *Babel-17* was all about language.

So, two stars for disappointment, though if you don't care about alien languages and enjoy space travel and a rag-tag crew of space miners banding together to...mine space, then this is at least a three.

Mark says

Finished a reread of Samuel R. Delany's **Nova** for my reading group. I'll post a longer review later, but for now...

Nova is considered by some critics as the last of Delany's early period, "lesser" novels. I think it is the first of his masterpieces insofar as he fully embraces what will become a trademark in the next several---*Dhalgren*, *Trouble On Triton*, and all the Neveryon books, ending with *Stars In My Pocket Like Grains Of Sand*, namely the full use of metafiction. Many mainstream literary novelists employed it in roughly the same time period---Barth, Pynchon, Gaddis, Fowles, even Vonnegut, and certain Atwood, Murdoch, Peirce, and Lessing---but one rarely encountered it in science fiction. Certainly it was never used to such effect until much later. In **Nova** we find it's first full deployment.

On the surface, this is a space opera-style adventure, a feud between two great families across the galaxy, high politics and finance, and a race for a treasure. It has all the classic tropes---an independently-owned starship, a motley crew, wild and vividly described planets, and at times nail-biting pacing---but it also steps back from itself to comment on what is happening in terms of history and myth, mostly via the character of Katin, a more or less aimless young man with an immense store of academic training and a finely-honed sense of process who has been taking notes for years on a novel he intends to write, which in this far flung time is a lost art. He joins the crew of the *Roc* almost by accident and quickly becomes invested in their quest as much for the relationships he makes among the varied members of the crew as for all the resonances he sees in the captain's self-imposed quest. It is a grail quest, it is a hunt for a white whale, it is spy-craft, and it is fate all rolled into one mission to an exploding star. Delany offers up the points of mythic resonance throughout for anyone who cares to find out more, tying the adventure to literary and cultural archetypes spanning millennia.

This raises the novel well above the level of simple adventure. Hints as to the nature of the crew---who is Jason, who is Argos, who is Medea, who is Ahab?---are sprinkled throughout.

As well, this book gives us a foretaste of the kind of evocative language Delany will hone in the next several novels.

As metafiction, Delany's novels are master classes on how science fiction is constructed and why the subtext connects so strongly to what on the surface appears to be a mere entertainment. He is as interested in how culture works as in what his characters go through. Nothing in a Delany novel happens in isolation from all of history and myth.

Leo Robertson says

For those of you unfamiliar with Delany, let me explain to you what it's like reading one of his novels. (And Delany is a clever PLUS, so I think there should be way more raving about him than there is- I don't quite hear enough!)

Here's the blurb they give you:

"The balance of galactic power in the 31st century revolves around Illyrion, the most precious energy source in the universe. The varied and exotic crew who sign up with Captain Lorq van Ray know their mission is

dangerous, and they soon learn that they are involved in a deadly race with the charismatic but vicious leader of an opposing space federation. But they have no idea of Lorq's secret obsession: to gather Illyrion at source by flying through the very heart of an imploding star."

So you're like, 'Oh! 240 pgs of ragtag interstellar fun! I'm in!' But you start to read and you're like:

- pg 1-50: intro to characters and recruitment for dangerous race with Lorq van Ray
- pgs 51-220: 'Of course, if we consider the 25th century's extrapolation of interdimensional sociocultural hegemony, Heidegger is, in retrospect, the 20th century's most important thinker. If- and it goes without saying- we couple this idea with Marx's Scientific Dialectics... the physicochemical structure Illyrion is better understood if we conduct a thought experiment to consider the properties of a substance not yet available on the 21st century's periodic table of elements...'
- pgs 220-240: 'Holy fuck: that van Ray guy's trying to gather Illyrion at source by flying through the very heart of an imploding star!'

So you can see why I like it! Delany delves beyond shallow-novel dilettantism to make fearsome polymathic connections between disciplines. (And clearly his intellectual exuberance is infectious!) In fact, I'm convinced if this novel was really written in the 31st century, you'd barely have to change a goddamn thing- which is a ridiculous statement to make, but such is the power of Delany's sci-fi :)

Given my little primer on Delany above, there's way too much to capture in a single reading, and that's why I'm delighted to be following this one up with Dhalgren, which I WTF-ed over years ago (it's sci-fi Ulysses.) But much like any WTF dense piece of showboater (Camus, Joyce, Pynchon, Gass, DFW, Gibson?), the first reading is the breathless anxious "Will I even get through this?" investment that allows for the second reading's reaping of gold.

So I see this is a 2015 version of this novel! And Delany's first three novels were recently reissued in a single compendium, so almost all his stuff is back in print, I believe. Let SF Masterworks know they've done the right thing and buy a paperback of this asap! (If indeed that does signal publishers- who ever knows :D) Because Delany's words thrive on a printed page and you'll judge yourself less for all the flicking back and forth :P

sologdin says

Nutshell: always already dashing petit bourgeois outsider seeks to break interstellar monopoly of Old Money aristocrat via innovative stellar semiotics.

Text is kickass in its presentation of celestial objects and outer space, "where night means forever and morning's a recollection" (18). Space itself: "the vermillion rush, in which hung the charred stars" (90). Each star is similarly "a furnace where the very worlds of empire are smelted" (86). One planet's inhabitants speak with a dicked-up Yodaesque syntax, which is mostly annoying, but does have its corollary moments of awesome: "Into the blasting sun, plunge?" (94).

Primary objective of protagonist and his seven samurai sub-protagonists is a fictive heavy element, 'illyrion,' found in the centers of stars, accessible during a nova, say—"the whole continuum in the area of a nova is space that has been twisted away" (21). Sufficient illyrion "to keep this moon's core molten is measured in grams" (26); protagonist accordingly proposes to capture seven tons of the stuff (id.).

This is set in an interstellar society, which retains its proto-fascistic losers who complain about "moral degeneration of the young" (40-41), that "economic, political, and technological change have shattered all

cultural tradition” (41), that “there’s no reservoir of national, or world solidarity, even on Earth” (id.), and instead “pseudo-interplanetary society” replaced “any real tradition,” a “tangle of decadence, scheming, corruption” (id.).

These losers respond with despair to interstellar society’s basic proposition that

given any product, half of it may be grown on one world, the other half mined a thousand light-years away. On Earth, seventeen out of the hundreds of possible elements make up ninety percent of the planet. Take any other world, and you’ll find a different dozen making up ninety to ninety-nine percent. (79)

This monologue leads up to the point that interstellar society is contingent fundamentally on transit so expensive that only “national governments on Earth, or corporations” “could afford the initial cost” (80). This leads to one sector of interstellar society having been “extended by the vastly monied classes of Earth,” whereas another sector “was populated by a comparatively middle-class movement” and a third sector, the newest, “comes from the lowest economic strata of the galaxy” (83). Protagonist is one of the principal nouveau riche greasers at the head of the ‘middle-class’ sector, and much of the conflict of the novel arises out of a silly set of childhood confrontations with antagonist from the ‘vast monied classes.’

Though the puerile sections are of little moment to the overall setting, the present moment conflict between them has world-historical significance, as though SRD were boiling down class struggle between an aristocracy and a bourgeoisie to these two principals. Protagonist reveals himself to be a ludic nihilist (is that a class-bound ideology?), which we shall recall is the upjumped cousin of lumpenized antisocial nihilism:

the worlds we’ve been through haven’t really fit us for meanings. If I survive, then a world, a hundred worlds, a way of life survives. If [antagonist] survives... [...] Still, perhaps it is a game. They keep telling us we live in a meaningless society, that there is no solidity to our lives. Worlds are tottering about us now, and still I only want to play. (152)

This candor reveals protagonist to be not only a ludic nihilist, but likewise a bearer of Sloterdijk’s enlightened false consciousness: “the character I thought obsessed by purpose reveals his obsession is only a habit; his habits are gratuitously meaningless, while those actions I construed as gratuitous reveal a most demonic purpose” (166). Protagonist even informs antagonist that “the reason I must fight you is I think I can win” (183). So, he’s, like, supergross--and yet still better than antagonist, who’s merely an Old Right aristocrat.

An example of how alien interstellar society might appear:

There was a thousand-year period from about fifteen hundred to twenty-five hundred, when people spent an incredible amount of time and energy keeping things clean. It ended when the last communicable disease finally became not only curable but impossible. There used to be an incredibility called ‘the common cold’ that even in the twenty-fifth century you could be fairly sure of having at least once a year. I suppose back then there was some excuse for the fetish: there seemed to have been some correlation between dirt and disease. But after contagion became an obsolescent concern, sanitation became equally obsolescent. (123)

Interstellar society also relies upon “a revolution in the concept of work” (195), arising out of the invention of “neural plugs,” whereby people plug their brain directly into machines to operate them: “All major industrial work began to be broken down into jobs that could be machined ‘directly’ by man.” This purportedly “returned humanity to the working man. Under this system, much of the endemic mental illness caused by feelings of alienation left society” (196). The conclusion is that this society has allegedly abolished Marxist ‘alienation’ caused by diremptions in the process of production, maybe (this is as yet still

a class society based on private property, exploitation of wage labor, and suchlike, though).

Manifestly a precursor to Rothfuss (insofar as one sub-protagonist is an orphaned gypsy lutist of sorts) and to *The Matrix* to the extent that people are plugged directly into machines. Metatextualist component in another sub-protagonist who is “writing a novel” and records notes on his travels for the book, amounting to “some hundred thousand words of notes” (15). Novelist contends that “novels were primarily about relationships. [...] Their potentiality lay in that they belied the loneliness of the people who read them, people essentially hypnotized by the machinations of their own consciousness” (159).

Something conceptually very interesting in “there are expressions that happen on the outside of the face; there are expressions that happen on the inside, with only quivers on the lips and eyelids” (93), a semiotics of face that we find most importantly later in R. Scott Bakker. One character notes that “on the ruptured features it was hard to *read* subtleties in [protagonist’s] emotions” (96) (emphasis added). Someone else’s “expression inside was a quick smile” (100).

You for a few seconds only [antagonist’s] face have seen. In the face the lines of a man’s fate mapped are. [...] From the crack across mine, you where those lines my fate can tell will touch? (id.)

Similarly, dude notes “the smile the captain had not yet allowed on his face” (175). There is a cool concordance here—just as there are internal and external signifiers for persons, both of which can be read by the trained interlocutor, so too the star has its own semiotics, both internal and external: “Because the make-up of a star doesn’t change in a nova, you can’t detect the build-up over any distance with spectranalysis or anything like that” (88).

Much is therefore made of the astrophysics of the nova, which are noted to be “implosions, not explosions” (86); the ultimate explanation for this is kinda cool (not gonna spoil it). This is important because protagonist wishes to pass to the center of a star while nova is *in flagrante delicto* in order to harvest his *unobtainium*; he had already done as much by accident when “our ship was funneled directly through the center of the sun—and out the other side” (89). Novel reveals astrophysicist opinion to be lacking consensus on the question:

After a thousand years of study [!!!], from close up and far away, it’s a bit unnerving how much we don’t know about what happens in the center of the most calamitous of stellar catastrophes [!]. The make-up of the star stays the same, only the organization of the matter within the star is disrupted by a process that is still not quite understood. It could be an effect of tidal harmonics. It could even be a prank of Maxwell’s demon. (95)

So, after 1,000 years of study, the results of astrophysics is to note that the signifier changes but the underlying signified is self-identical (that’s synonymy, I think).

Because it’s a Delany book, it can be labor intensive at times, though not so much as *Babel*, *Einstein*, or heavens forfend, *Dhalgren*. Contains however the normal SRD fixation on some body of mythological content, here, working with the Tarot and Arthurian *sangraal*. Authorial alter ego asks in this connection:

I haven’t seen anybody read the Tarot since I was in school. [...] I suppose at one time you could have called me quite an amateur aficionado of the *Book of Toth* [sic] as they were incorrectly labeled in the seventeenth century. I would say rather [...] the *Book of the Grail*? (100)

(Am uncertain what the ‘Book of the Grail’ means; there’s a few allegedly lost things out there by that name, but it’s apparently not the name of any standard Arthurian text.) Author’s alter ego explains that “the cards

don't actually predict anything. They simply propagate an educated commentary on present situations" (101), which is innocuous enough. But:

the seventy-eight cards of the Tarot present symbols and mythological images that have recurred and reverberated through forty-five centuries of human history. Someone who understands these symbols can construct a dialogue about a given situation. There's nothing superstitious about it. *The Book of Changes*, even *Chaldean Astrology* only become superstitious when they are abused, employed to direct rather than guide and suggest. (id.)

Uh, okay? It gets worse: "If somebody had told me I'd be working in the same crew, today, in the thirty-first century, with somebody who could honestly be skeptical about the Tarot, I don't think I would have believed it" (110). Dude will "doubt if such fossilized ideas could have come from anywhere else but Earth" (id.); he "wouldn't be surprised if in some upper Mongolian desert town there isn't someone who still thinks Earth floats on a dish on the back of an elephant who stands on a serpent coiled on a turtle swimming in the sea of forever" (id.); indeed, this setting is so inverted that alter ego will carp "here you are, flying this star-freighter, a product of thirty-first century technology, and at the same time your head full of a petrified ideas a thousand years out of date" (id.). Alter ego can therefore proclaim that the thesis that the Tarot was faked by gypsies is "a very romantic notion" (111): "the idea that all those symbols, filtered down through five thousand years of mythology, are basically meaningless and have no bearing on man's mind and actions [NB: idealist collective subject as per similar juvenile ideas in Ayn Rand], strikes a little bell of nihilism ringing" (id.). I suppose the basis of accusing Tarot skepticism of nihilism must be a hasty and unwarranted vulgar jungianism. Ugh.

Despite all that, alter ego is an interesting cat, who believes that he needs "an awareness of my time's conception of history" in order to write his novel, which is a fairly Benjaminian approach (cf. the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' especially No. VI, VII, & IX). History begins with the ancient Greeks as "the study of whatever had happened during their own lives" (116), and became in the hands of Anna Komnena "the study of those events of man's actions that had been documented" (id.); a thousand years thereafter, it morphed again into "a series of cyclic rises and falls as one civilization overtook another" (id.), with events outside the cycle as "unimportant." It may be "difficult for us today to appreciate the differences between Spengler and Toynbee, though from all accounts their approaches were considered polar in their day" (id.). Dude's theory of history is revealed, after several deferrals, as "a great net, spreading among the stars, through time" (126), which is kinda philistine as a figuration, but may have some applicability when diffusion is dependent upon interstellar transit. A "great web that spreads across the galaxy," "the matrix in which history happens" (155). Each person is a "junction" and each event "like a ripple" (id.).

The effect of this doctrine:

The United States was a product of that whole communication explosion, movements of people, movements of information, the development of movies, radio, and television that standardized speech and the framework of thought—not thought itself, however—which meant that person A could understand not only person B, but person W, X and W as well. People, information, and ideas move across the galaxy much faster today than they moved across the United States in 1950. You and I were born a third of a galaxy apart [...] Still, you and I are much closer in information structure than a Cornishman and Welshman a thousand years ago. (137-38)

Recommended for those who make a last stand for cultural autonomy and all that, readers unable to distinguish between laughter and rage, and persons who between you and your flaming sun will come.

Liviu Szoke says

O poveste care se citește u?or, în ciuda pasajelor cu ordinea cuvintelor inversat?. O idee interesant?, cea cu c?l?toria în interiorul novelor pentru extragerea illyrionului, p?cat c? este l?sat? cam deoparte pân? spre final, punându-se în schimb accentul pe conflictul celor dou? familii rivale care conduc practic întreaga galaxie. Ce m-a nemul?umit: cam pu?in parc? a evoluat lumea din anul 1968, când a ap?rut cartea lui Samuel R. Delany, ?i anul 3172, când se petrece ac?iunea. Acuma, eu în?eleg c? autorul nu a gândit-o ca pe un hard-SF doldora de specula?ii ?tiin?ifice despre ce va descoperi omenirea în 1200 de ani, dar s? vin? numai cu ni?te racorduri montate la încheieturile mâinilor pentru a se lega de diverse componente ale navelor spa?iale pentru a le face mai u?or de pilotat ?i cu un instrument muzical n?stru?nic, mi se pare totu?i cam pu?in. Are totu?i un merit: reprezint? probabil declicul care s-a produs ?aptesprezece ani mai târziu, când William Gibson a lansat „Neuromantul”, ducând la alt nivel leg?tura om-ma?in? pe care a imaginat-o aici Samuel R. Delany. A?tept „Triton” (despre care am citit zeci de rânduri în superba „Printre ceilal?i” a lui Jo Walton) sau „Dhalgren”, grelele scrise de Delany. Mai multe, pe FanSF: <https://wp.me/pz4D9-2H8>.

Simona Stoica says

Recenzia complet?: <http://bit.ly/2gw0k8c>

„Presupun c? singura modalitate de a m? proteja de blesteme ar fi s? abandonez cartea înainte de scrierea ultimului capitol.”

În 1968, Samuel R. Delany publica romanul Nova. În 2017, eu m? plimbam cu un geamantan ?i cu o list? kilometric? la Bookfest, u?or ame?it? din pricina miilor de c?r?i care î?i „scuturau” copertele când îmi surprindeau privirea, doar-doar aveam s? le iau cu mine acas?. Îmi amintesc cum turnul de romane primit de la Grupul Editorial Art amenin?a s? se pr?bu?easc?, îns? asta nu m-a împiedicat s? strecor un SF între dou? romane fantasy. Motivul? Coperta.

A fost dragoste... chiar ?i la a doua vedere. Coperta e hipnotizant?, seduc?toare. Vârtejuri, haos, spirale ?i întuneric. Promisiunea unei c?l?torii printre stele, pân? la marginea nop?ii. ?i un grup de personaje cum nu mi-a mai fost dat s? întâlnesc, fiin?e cu haruri neobi?nuite, atrase într-un joc periculos, pe via?? ?i pe moarte, f?r? s? fie obligate, constrânse sau ademenite de marele premiu.

Nu cred c? exist? un motiv întemeiat pentru care am evitat s? citesc SF-uri, cel pu?in în ultima perioad?, dar abia când am terminat de citit Nova mi-am dat seama cât de mult mi-a lipsit acest gen literar. În plus, cum a? fi putut refuza un space opera cu misfits ?i o curs? contra-cronometru pentru ob?inerea celui mai pre?ios element din galaxie, illyrionul?

Griffin Alexander says

This is Delany at the height of his genre-writing game, after he momentarily returned from his obfuscatory break-out with the very strange The Einstein Intersection. This is a fun read, truly a space opera of interfamilial feuds and political power in a proto-cyberpunk cyborgish future. Other reviewers seem to find the dialogue stilted (it's genre, so it is largely expository--this isn't Gaddis, and the people complaining

wouldn't like it even if it were), but it works fine for me. Is it campy? Yes, but Delany gets it, so any groans over a predictable turn of phrase or plotting should come with the acknowledgment that you probably know what you are getting into picking a '60s pulp novel out of the SF section.

Being the commercial genre-book it is, it's one of the best I've read, and its worlds feel palpable. I would gladly read other books occupying this same galactic/technological arrangement, and I think that bespeaks its strength in both ideas and execution. Here we have a discourse on the advancement and integration of technology/labor and the potential disruptions of intergalactic economy through elimination of the scarcity of an essential resource. The ideas here are just as strong as *Babel-17*, they just need more unpacking--though there is a great deal of exposition upon the galactic arrangement of labor/power/politics/history, the critical lens is not as spelled out as in *Babel-17*, and so I think has lost fans over the need for them to bring their own discourses to the text in order to yield up and engage with the deeply ideological work that Delany is getting at in his compelling storytelling. If you like Delany anywhere in his work (though there is no sex here) read this. I had it on my shelf for over two years and I don't know now why I waited so long.

Vderevlean says

2.5 - 3 stele.

Îmi doream mult s? îmi plac? pentru c? auzisem multe despre acest space-opera, precursor al curentului cyberpunk. Îns? lectura a dezv?luit un Delany incapabil s? în?eleag? viitorul. Suntem undeva în secolul 32, 3172 mai precis, de?i ac?iunea prinde câteva momente diferite în timp, ?i civiliza?ia uman? s-a r?spândit în spa?iu. Coloniile externe, evident, sunt în competi?ie cu sistemul de alian?e tradi?ionale, care ?in de planeta mam?: P?mântul. Illyrionul, substan?a care permite deplasarea între diverse planete, e un produs greu de sintetizat artificial ?i foarte rar întâlnit în spa?iu. Unele cantit??i mai mari se produc în timpul exploziei unei nave. ?i iat? întreaga intrig? a romanului. Mai avem dou? familii-corpora?ii care lupt? pentru suprema?ie ?i pentru acest illyrion.

Multe pove?ti, încerc?ri de filosofie ?i antropologie, îns? toate trimiterile relevante sunt f?cute c?tre o perioad? istoric? de pân? la finalul anilor 2000, de parc? în urm?torii 1000 ?i ceva de ani nimic important nu s-a întâmplat. Deranjant, iar??i, e prezentul romanului: civiliza?iile, tehnica, cultura, totul pare prea pu?in avansat pentru acel secol 32.

Într-adev?r, avem oameni cabla?i la calculatoarele navelor, îns? pu?in, foarte pu?in. Intriga e simpl?, cu multe pauze în care ni se ?in lec?ii despre istoria ?i cultura omenirii. Deci nu e romanul pe care îl speram s?-l descop?r.

Stuart says

Nova: A New-Wave Grail Quest space opera from the 1960s

Originally posted at Fantasy Literature

Nova is Samuel "Chip" Delany's 1968 space opera with mythic/Grail Quest overtones. It is packed with different themes, subtexts, allegorical and cultural references, and literary experiments, and the young author (just 25 years old) is clearly a very talented, intelligent, and passionate writer.

But I didn't enjoy it, sadly. While I thought *Babel-17* was a very fast-paced, vivid and engaging space opera that centered on language and identity, this book felt very turgid and forced. Why, you ask? Well, the author

was determined to mold the story along the lines of a Grail Quest, Moby Dick, and Jason and the Argonauts, with the goal being a race to retrieve the super material Illyrion from the heart of a recently-exploded nova, in order to swing the balance of power in the universe between feuding aristocratic families. So events in the story have to conform to this format, and none of the actions of the characters rang true to me.

Obsession, greed, revenge, vying for supremacy - I can understand those emotions. But the actions of the characters, both the principals and supporting cast, don't seem to make much sense. If this rag-tag group of misfits was really determined to retrieve this material, why the heck did Delany structure the story the way he did? The first 10-15% of the book has Captain Lorq Von Ray gathering together his crew, and then for the next 50% of the book there is an overlong flashback of Lorq's childhood and encounters with the rival Red family and his nemesis Prince Red and his beautiful but submissive sister.

It's good to build the backstory for why the characters have such animosity for each other, but this section goes on far too long. There is also a detailed side-story about a young gypsy musician named Mouse, a windbag intellectual named Katin who wants to try the long-lost art of writing a novel, a drawn-out episode involving Tarot cards and how scientific they are, and a seemingly-aimless pit-stop on a planet that results in a major confrontation that ends inconclusively. By the time the mission to find the nova gets underway, we're already 70% through the book! Finally in the last 10% of the book the long-awaited encounter with the nova develops into a thoroughly unbelievable standoff between the main characters. This part made no sense to me whatsoever.

Though the writing quality and language are consistently strong like Babel-17, I feel like this was wasted since the story's pacing was so interminable and the mythic undertones just didn't resonate with me. I've always felt that realistic character motivations and world-building are far more appealing than stories that try hard to be symbolic and archetypal. Even within the book this dynamic is debated between the impulsive, emotional Mouse and the dry, intellectual Katin. Unfortunately, it seems that Katin has had a greater influence on the story than Mouse, and I never trust a book where a character is writing a novel that doesn't yet have a subject. You can see where that is headed a mile away.

There are certainly some fascinating cyborg aspects of the book that have clearly been influential on the Cyberpunk movement, since characters have implants (plugs) that allow them to directly interface with sockets and operate all types of machinery. Neuromancer, anyone? Even in Babel-17, I liked the fact that there was a huge databank of stored personalities that could be revived as disincorporates.

But as should be clear now, though Delany can spin off lots of neat SF ideas, his real interests lie much more in the literary direction. Speaking of which, his 1968 Hugo Award winner *The Einstein Intersection* is probably the most overtly allegorical of all his books, but at least it is short, which cannot be said of his massive (and reportedly unreadable) magnum opus *Dhalgren*.

Nate D says

This was fun. Samuel R. Delany is a talented writer with a lot of ideas and a good sense of character and social context. He's certainly not reaching here like he did in his masterpiece, *Dhalgren*, and a lot of this boils down to a drama cast in archetypes: bold, vaguely Ahab-esque captain, back from previous failed expedition plans next. Semi-amoral rival with a beautiful sister. Street-smart orphan who tries to live in the present without introspection. Etc. Except Delaney manages to make most of these central roles pretty compelling and well-fleshed out nonetheless. And in this case the melodrama plays out over a trip to fly through the center of an exploding star (via some very dubious, very exciting physics).

