



The Elementary Particles

Michel Houellebecq, Frank Wynne (Translator)

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An international literary phenomenon, **The Elementary Particles** is a frighteningly original novel—part Marguerite Duras and part Bret Easton Ellis—that leaps headlong into the malaise of contemporary existence.

Bruno and Michel are half-brothers abandoned by their mother, an unabashed devotee of the drugged-out free-love world of the sixties. Bruno, the older, has become a raucously promiscuous hedonist himself, while Michel is an emotionally dead molecular biologist wholly immersed in the solitude of his work. Each is ultimately offered a final chance at genuine love, and what unfolds is a brilliantly caustic and unpredictable tale.

Translated from the French by Frank Wynne.

The Elementary Particles Details

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Author : Michel Houellebecq , Frank Wynne (Translator)

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„οοο..ο..ο~ο..ο.. ?????? Ροζουλ? Εωσφ?ρος ..ο~ο..ο~ο ..ο~οο ★..~..★ ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? Ταμετο?ρο Αμ says

(Η κριτικ? περι?χει εν?πνια ψιχ?α αποκαλ?ψεων πλοκ?ς).

Ο κλονισμ?ς των κλωνοποιημ?νων

•Θα μπορο?σαμε να πο?με ?τι συνολικ? 12 σωματ?δια αποτελο?ν τους βασικο?ς δομικο?ς λ?θους του σ?μπαντος, απ? τη γ?ννησ? του μ?χρι σ?μερα. ?χι ακριβ?ς! Η σ?γχρονη θεωρ?α που περιγρ?φει τον μικρ?κοσμο, η κβαντομηχανικ?, προβλ?πει (και ?χει αποδειχθε? πειραματικ?) την ?παρξη του αντισωματ?διου: σε κ?θε σωματ?διο αντιστοιχε? ?λλο ?να, με ?δια μ?ζα και αντ?θετο ηλεκτρικ? φορτ?ο. Ετσι ο συνολικ?ς αριθμ?ς των σωματιδ?ων διπλασι?ζεται•

Ο θηλυκ?ς

"ν?ος Ωρα?ος Κ?σμος" ε?ναι το ?ραμα του Ουελμπ?κ ως μια θαυμαστ? και τρομακτικ? ουτοπ?α.

Οι φυσικ?ς μεταλλ?ξεις που αλλ?ζουν τον κ?σμο μ?σα στη δι?ρκεια της ιστορ?ας φτ?νουν στο τρ?το μεταλλαγμ?νο κοινωνιολογικ? πρ?τυπο.

Εδ? επικρατε? ο ατομικισμ?ς και η υλιστικ? μ?ζερη κυριαρχ?α.

Πρ?πει να εξαλειφθε?ν απαραιτ?τως για να εξελιχθε? η ανθρ?πινη οντ?τητα προς την ευδαιμον?α και την τελει?τητα.

Μοναδικ? πλο η επιστημονικ? κορ?φωση της γενετικ?ς.

Θα πρ?πει να αποφασιστε? συνειδητ? απο το ανθρ?πινο γ?νος να αλλ?ξει ριζικ? και μη αναστρ?ψιμα τα ατομικ? συμφ?ροντα και το γνωστ? και "φυσικ?" τρ?πο αναπαραγωγ?ς.

?τσι, αυτοβο?λως ?λοι οι ?νθρωποι θα ε?ναι αδ?λφια... βιολογικ?, πανομοι?τυπα αδ?λφια και συναισθηματικ?..μ?νο η αγ?πη θα επικρατε? αν?μεσα τους. ?λοι ?διοι.

?λοι μεταλλαγμ?να τ?λειοι. ?λοι ?να γ?νος. ?λοι πραγματικ? ενοχοποιημ?νοι και τ?λεια κλονισμ?νοι ομοζυγωτικ? κλ?νοι.

Η επιστημονικ? εξ?λιξη φτ?νει στη θεοπο?ηση με εφιαλτικ? κατ?ληξη.

Πανοραμικ? κατεδαφ?ζεται ο δυτικ?ς πολιτισμ?ς. Εξαλε?φεται η θρησκευτικ? ηθικ? και τα κοινωνικ? πρ?τυπα.

Η ανδρικ? υπ?σταση δ?χεται τορπ?λες ηδονικο? εξευτελισμο?.

Καταγγ?λονται σαρκαστικ? και καυστικ? οι κοινων?ες των φιλελε?θερων οικονομι?ν και της αχαλ?νωτης σεξουαλικ?ς απελευθ?ρωσης ως καταστροφικ?ς για τον δυτικ? κ?σμο του 20ου αι?να.

Σ?μφωνα με τον μ?λλον τρομαγμ?νο και μοναχικ? ευα?σθητο συγγραφ?α αυτ?ς ο κ?σμος οφε?λει να αντικατασταθε? απο τις μελλοντικ?ς οντ?τητες

αφο? οι παρελθοντικο? ?νθρωποι που επ?φεραν τον εκμαυλισμ? των π?ντων πρ?πει να αντικατασταθε?ν απο τη μοριακ? βιολογ?α της εθελο?σιας αυτοκαταστροφικ?ς κ?θαρσης.

Ως τ?ρα, επικρ?τησε η σοσιαλιστικ? κοινων?α των ρατσιστ?v, των αντιοικο?γων, των λ?γων που απολαμβ?νουν τα πολλ? και των πολλ?v που αρκο?νται στα λ?γα.

Παραφυ?δες της γενι?ς του '68 οι μειον?τητες ?χουν ?ντονη ερωτικ? ζω? και αχαλ?νωτες ηθικ? και σωματικ? ηδον?ς και απολα?σεις. ?χουν εξουσ?α και απολαμβ?νουν τα αγαθ? ως κληρονομικ? χ?ρισμα.

Αντ?θετα η πλειοψηφ?α ξεσπ?ει στην πορνογραφ?α, τη στ?ρηση, την αυτο?κανοπο?ηση και την υλικ? αν?χεια.

Βασικ? χαρακτηριστικ? ε?ναι κατανομ? της ηδον?ς.

Απο τη μια,η κουλτο?ρα της σεξουαλικ?ς απελευθ?ρωσης με προ??ντα χ?πικης φιλοσοφ?ας και φεμινισμο? οδηγε? σε κ?μπινγκ- παραθεριστικ? θ?ρετρα και "εναλλακτικ?ς" διακοπ?ς ?που επικρατε? το ιδε?δες "γ@ @@ @ε εαυτο?ς και αλλ?λους" χωρ?ς α?ριο.

Και απο την ??λη η ασεξουαλικ?τητα,ο αυνανισμ?ς και πορνογραφ?α ηθ?ν και μ?σων επιβ?ωσης. Εδ? βασιλε?ει η αυτο?κανοπο?ηση και ?ποιος αντ?ξει...

Και οι δυο παραπ?νω κατηγορ?ες κοινωνικ?ς μορφ?ς ε?ναι κατ? συν?πεια δυστυχισμ?νες.

Απομ?νωση.

?λλειψη επικοινων?ας. Μοναξι?.

Μιζ?ρια. Γερασμ?να ψυχικ? κορμι?. Ατομικισμ?ς. Ματαιοδοξ?α. Υλιστικ? εξ?ρτηση. ?λλειψη ελπ?δας. Γηρατει?. Θ?νατος.

Τα αδι?ξοδα του σ?γχρονου ανθρ?που θα τα λ?σει το ?ρομα του θηλυκ? ωρα?ου κ?σμου μ?σω των "στοιχειωδ?ν σωματιδ?ων" και τη ν?α εξελιγμ?νη γενετικ?.

Το "?τομο" γ?νεται θε?ς και αυτ? το βιβλ?ο π?ρα απο τον κυνισμ? και την εφιαλτικ? ρεαλιστικ? ωμ?τητα, ε?ναι σ?μφωνα με τον Ουελμπ?κ αφιερωμ?νο στον ?νθρωπο.

Καλ? αν?γνωση!

Πολλο?ς ασπασμο?ς!

Amrit Chima says

Gratuitous sex. For those who have read this book, it's not a surprising initial comment. The sex in *The Elementary Particles* is graphic, drawn-out, and explicit. Yet the novel has such an intellectual draw that even at its most seemingly uncalled for, I believe Houellebecq had a purpose for it. Through the suffering of two brothers—Bruno whose libido is painfully (and often shamefully) intense, and Michel who has virtually no interest in sex—Houellebecq depicts mankind's struggle with materialism and individualism. Our bodies, driven by animalistic desires that translate into religious or spiritual disgrace, only cause suffering. Thus through sex we humiliate and are humiliated. Moments of beauty and insight do exist, but they are rare and fleeting, and as a result, sad.

This viewpoint is only strengthened (and by degrees, humanity's suffering as well) by means of the cultural ideologies that have sprung from the US and spread globally. Materialism specifically—the chasm of need instilled within people who then feel inferior because of genes, the natural process of aging, economic position, etc.—has doomed us to depression, hate, and murder. *For society to function, for competition to*

continue, people have to want more and more, until desire fills their lives and finally devours them. No longer evolving, indeed humanity is devolving as a result: *...materialism was antithetical to humanism and would eventually destroy it.* And through our increasing needs and desires, we come to view ourselves as separate from each other, dislodged and unconnected spiritually, heightening our anguish.

Many reviewers claim that this work is highly misogynistic, however, Houellebecq clearly laments humanity's treatment of women. He juxtaposes the ridiculous, base, violent, and selfish nature of man's sexual urges and tendencies with the softness and exquisiteness of a woman's touch, both physical and emotional. Bruno only reaches some measure of happiness in life by means of a woman who shows him how to accept and respect his body and sexual needs without judgment, by introducing him to communities in which the sex act is honored. Without her he cannot sustain the joy of his being. Houellebecq also compares a man's inability to love with a woman's boundless and unselfish devotion. Michel, emotionally dead, is nonetheless able to recognize that love does in fact exist by means of a pure woman who loves him unconditionally. It is only through the women in the novel that sex, love, and spirituality are seen as one. To enjoy the act of sex, to love through it, is a purity men cannot seem to achieve on their own.

What on earth were men for, Michel wondered as he watched sunlight play across the curtains. In earlier times, when bears were more common, perhaps masculinity served a particular and irreplaceable function, but for centuries now men clearly served no useful purpose. For the most part they assuaged their boredom playing tennis, which was a lesser evil; but from time to time they felt the need to change history—which basically meant inciting revolutions or wars. Aside from the senseless suffering they caused, revolutions and wars destroyed the best of the past, forcing societies to rebuild from scratch. Without regular and continuous progress, human evolution took random, irregular and violent turns for which men—with the predilection for risk and danger, their repulsive egotism, their irresponsibility and their violent tendencies—were directly to blame. A world of women would be immeasurably superior, tracing a slower but unwavering progression, with no U-turns and no chaotic insecurity, toward a general happiness.

Unable to recognize our own divinity and perfection (an idea explored through notions of metaphysics), Houellebecq also states that man, as a species, is not equipped to cope with death. Mired in materialism and individualism, we view death only as an end, never a beginning, always a loss. Grief pulls us downward into that ever-widening chasm of need until we disappear. Sometimes we can feel the universe vibrate in nature—the water, trees, and sky. In these moments, nature is infinitely beautiful and graceful. But that iota of awareness plunges us into greater depression when it is lost. Buddhism teaches us that nothing is permanent, that the material world is always changing. The more we hold to our youth, to a strict sense of individualism, to life itself and the objects we accumulate, the more painful our existence.

Terrified of the idea of space, human beings curl up; they feel cold, they feel afraid. At best, they move in space and greet one another sadly. And yet this space is within them, it is nothing but their mental creation. In this space of which they are so afraid, human beings learn how to live and to die; in their mental space, separation, distance and suffering are born.

There is an aching, quiet beauty to Houellebecq's narrative that makes it difficult for me to disagree with

him. And though he does introduce a sort of twisted and intelligent hope by the end, it is not reassuring. Still, he is asking us to face truths about ourselves, about our history as a species that are critical to examine, but that we so often would rather overlook.

Chris_P says

The way Houellebecq combines science and sociology is amazingly intelligent and deliciously dizzying. Asexuality and sex addiction, the two offsprings of the sexual liberation of the 60s, are envisioned by the French author in a marriage whose fruit seems to be extremely... Nietzschean. I must admit I got completely carried away, while the trick he pulled in the epilogue had me looking for my mind cause yeah, I suddenly felt it missing.

Amazing stuff.

Scott says

Imagine a stylish French man, grumpily smoking a lung-shreddingly strong cigarette and repeating in his thick accent variations on the phrase 'Life, she is shit'.

That is this novel, and author Michel Houellebecq is a dishevelled version of that Frenchman.

If you've read *Whatever*, or *The possibility of an Island*, or indeed any of Houellebecq's work you know what a cheerless sourpuss he can be. His characters, inevitably middle aged Frenchmen, usually live lives of despair and ennui, (often mysogynistically) trying and failing to find joy in sex, money, success, etc., and it is so in *The Elementary Particles*.

There isn't much happiness to be found here. There are no Coelho moments of saccharine transcendence or reflection, no patronising rom-com redemptions. This steely grimness is to my reader's eye part of what makes this novel the great work that it is.

Houellebecq's varied and fascinating observations on the awfulness of everything come together in *The Elementary Particles* to make for a brutally powerful novel that genuinely blew me away, leaving me filled with new questions about the nature of our society and human relationships within it.

A sourpuss Houellebecq might be, but he is a damn talented sourpuss, and I rate this novel as one of the greatest of the late 20th Century, a book that I think will hold its own as a great work of its time and be read in future decades, much as we still read *The Outsider*, or *The Catcher in the Rye*.

This is a novel of ideas. Big ideas.

The aimlessness of modern middle class life. The constant hungering for youth that our teen-obsessed society conjures within us. The commodification of family, love and relationships that our post-sexual revolution, consumption oriented world has led to - *The Elementary Particles* takes aim at the ills of our society, and it's loaded for bear.

I could write about the characters - two brothers, one trying to feel something through a desperate pursuit of

sex, the other a coldly sexless intellectual. I could talk about the grimness of their lives as they strive to find meaning and their disappointments pile up into mountains whose shadows suck the sun from their days. But I won't, as in this story it is our society as whole that is the main character, a character who is screamed at, railed against and found to be the antithesis of so many things that make human beings happy.

If you can handle some pretty graphic sex combined with a story of nihilism, ennui and some hard examination of the consumerist wasteland that is modern Western society, then strap in for a damn fine novel.

Read this book. You'll either love it dearly, or hate it passionately, and probably have excellent reasons for your opinion either way.

Grayem82 says

Oh God. I'm about half way through this book, which I picked up on a whim after finishing the excellent *Blindness* by Jose Saramago. I needed something else to read until I got a copy of Dave Eggers' *What is the What*, and this had got a lot of raves.

So far, I'm as close to tossing this book away unfinished as I have ever been. I almost always finish books, but this is just a chore.

As offensive as parts of it are (yes, yes, I'm supposed to be offended, and I can see the ambiguity about whether the misogyny and racism expressed is the narrator's or the protagonist's - all very dull and adolescent, like a stand-up being *ironically* racist and sexist), it's mostly just DULL. The endless, repetitive style, which is completely unengaging and flat; the unemotional dialogue; the cynicism and satirisation of a culture which, as far as I know, doesn't exist any more, and if it does, exists only amongst a tiny few in wealthy upper-middle class society. How often do I have to sit through another pointless passage about tightening vaginas etc?

I would hesitate to say this book is pornographic, but like porn, it quickly becomes dull, mechanical, unemotional and slightly nausea-inducing.

Steven Godin says

Daringly original and yes, ludicrously filthy!, but for anyone that thinks this is just three hundred and eighty pages of Masturbating, blow-jobs and debauchery your missing the point, as there are far more serious things going on here than spanking the monkey! and alike. Michel Houellebecq has written a work of great intelligence and maturity that is nihilistic in nature and immensely sad but was always compulsive reading. Concerning French half-brothers Michel and Bruno where the only thing they have in common is the same mother and melancholia, for libertine Bruno is a sexually frustrated middle age individual who although ashamed of his body can't keep his hands of himself weather that be in public or private, while life for Michel has been a success to a point, a molecular biologist who is a clever idealist but has about as much sex drive as a castrated monk, with flashbacks from childhood to the teen years and then grown men we follow not only the two through a demoralising life filled with a strong sense of failure but also for relationships, culture and the destruction of contemporary society. And it's here that Houellebecq drives his message home

with a deep and meaningful account of the passage of change and ultimate pressures of finding a place to exist in modern times. Many will pass him off as a nihilist, racist, pervert and for the mistreatment of women, who has written a lewd and funny work for cheap thrills with the sole aim to offend, I am not having that one bit!. Very moving and more importantly really gets you thinking.

Paul Bryant says

A lot of this book consists of a tirade of hatred against the author's dear mama. Now finally, the 83 year old hippy herself has emerged from her retreat with all guns blazing. Hilarious article about the whole rancid argument here

<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departmen...>

Sample quote

"If it hadn't been my son, I wouldn't read that kind of crap, I would put it down straight away, because if there's one thing I detest in the world it's pornography. That book is pure pornography, it's repugnant, it's crap. I don't understand its success at all, that just shows the decadance of France." In her own book, she speculates that he writes about sex because he doesn't get enough. "What's this moronic literature?! Houellebecq is someone who's never done anything, who's never really desired anything, who never wanted to look at others. And that arrogance of taking yourself as superior ... Stupid little bastard. Yes, Houellebecq's a stupid little bastard, whether he's my son or not."

Lorenzo Berardi says

This book brought me to laughter. And this is not a compliment, but actually quite the opposite. Every character here is monodimensional and unrealistic, while the story itself is ridiculous.

Blame me if you like, but after the tenth masturbation scene filled up with philosophical rubbish and Andre Gide quotes I've felt a big nausea coming up. And this malaise stayed with me till the end of the novel.

There are many novelists who have their own obsession for sex and some of them are consistently good such as Philip Roth and Ian McEwan; Michel Houellebecq, in my humble opinion, is not.

PS: Review corrected and re-edited in September 2014.

MJ Nicholls says

The *longueur* of French academic life. The pain of being 40 and unfuckable. Something about quantum physics. It's all here in this eggheady gloom festival.

sarah says

Okay, I decided I would take a go at actually justifying my rating for this book, rather than just make half-hearted apologies at my preference for a so-absurdly misogynistic and, let's be frank, pornographic novel.

First of all, I like Houellebecq's unrelenting pessimism. It's far beyond nihilism - so more destructive and negative, so more emphatic in its rejection of bourgeois norms, of religion, culture, capitalism. This book (as well as the other Houellebecq I read, *Platform*) captures the bleak purposeless of modern life better than almost anything I can think of. As a recent college grad who for the first time in her life finds herself waking at 7:30 am each morning so she can go plug herself in to the grinding mechanics of capitalism; someone whose weekends consist of the churn of drunk-hungover-drunk-hungover, who struggles to find meaning in music, beauty, sex, religion, whatever -- I can relate to this. The emotionally unavailable scientist. The absolutely pathetic, lonely, sex-addicted failure. The petty, worthless little bureaucrat in *Platform*. I'm not, you know, depressed or anything, but I can share at least in some part their view of the world as bleak, lonely, and irredeemable except through very brief moments of relieved pain via drinking and sex.

Secondly, the book is darkly funny. Not amateurish darkly funny, because, I mean, this book is dark. The things in it that are funny are the things that have to do with the inevitability of death, the pointlessness of life, the drive for sex that is unsatisfied in pathetic, heartbreakingly inadequate losers -- are you cracking up yet? If not, you might not get it. The humor is subtle, and when I first read this book (in the original French), I missed a lot of the humor. But the humor is there - the question is whether or not the reader is capable of appreciating it. One of those laugh-if-you-don't-want-to-cry things.

Thirdly -- okay, yes, the book is misogynistic, maybe kind of racist, certainly anti-religion -- but at least Houellebecq is fair. His hatred with modern society is pretty blindly applied. The men in this book aren't exactly great upstanding characters, either, you know?

So, there you go : like I said, don't go telling the feminist sisterhood or my mom that I enjoyed this book. But if you're looking for some dark, high-brow pornography, and you have a strong stomach, this might be a good choice for you.

Rhonda says

This book is a stunning surprise to me as I was properly prepared to dislike it before I picked it up. Although I was determined to finish the book, I was not prepared for what a wonderful book this is. This book is a consummate sociological description and commentary of the second half of the twentieth century's social revolution in western culture. The psychology isn't too bad either.

Because it is a work of fiction, I interpret it as a grand sociological critique, with some fictional leeway, of course. It is, nevertheless, a remarkably keen and bitter excoriation of how western civilization managed to turn itself on its ear and embrace its own self-destruction. Further, Houellebecq gives an heuristic account of where Western civilization goes in the fictional future. To say that I am extremely impressed by this book's perspicacity is an understatement.

This is not a quick read nor is it a pleasure book for the casual reader, perhaps looking for social commentary with which quickly to agree. There are many topics which are integral to the argument of this book. Hence when Houellebecq mentions Aldous and Julian Huxley, Plato, Nietzsche, Kant, the Bhagavad-Gita and the Tao Te Ching, these are not casual comments; if you don't know what or who these are, especially in relation to the time periods being discussed, it's important that you stop and find out.

Nevertheless, the writing is quite beautiful in many places, even though it tends to jump to other characters at different time periods without warning. However, when you relax and allow Houellebecq to drive the boat, you begin to see the genius in his methods. One must read very carefully to understand the depth of the message being delivered, demonstrated by the short passage below:

In contemporary Western society, death is like white noise to a man in good health; it fills his mind when his dreams and plans fade. With age, the noise becomes increasingly insistent, like a dull roar with the occasional screech. In another age the sound meant waiting for the kingdom of God; it is now an anticipation of death. Such is life.

Houellebecq intersperses his sociological accounts and observations throughout the book. It is very easy to overlook them if one is just trying to get to the end. The reader must often stop reading and learn the lesson he is trying to convey before continuing.

As another example, below, the modern world takes on a very dark shadow throughout the book, but nowhere like when he first describes abortion issues. A relatively innocent girl has had sex with a lothario during what she believes is a period of freedom of expression and finds herself pregnant.

By the time she returned to her hotel, Annabelle was distraught. She would have the abortion the following day and stay overnight at the hotel before going home; that was what she had decided. Every night for three weeks she had slept in David's tent. The first time it had been painful, but afterward she enjoyed it. She had never thought that sexual pleasure could be that overpowering. But she felt no particular affection for the guy; she knew he would quickly find someone else, was probably with someone now.

At a dinner party that same evening, Laurent [abortion doctor:] talked enthusiastically about Annabelle's case. *This was precisely what they had been fighting for, he remarked, to ensure that a seventeen year old girl... "and a pretty girl, too," he almost added... did not have her life destroyed by a holiday romance.*

One can only surmise that the inability to be struck by this portrayal indicates that one is too deeply inured in our present societal cancer to understand the significance of our social engineering experiments and what they have reaped. Yet this is hardly a case of a single issue, but of an avalanche of issues out of control. He observes:

As a teenager, Michel believed that suffering conferred dignity on a person. Now he had to admit that he had been wrong. What conferred dignity on people was television.

Although one might argue with his conclusions, the writer makes a stunning case, albeit depending upon several fictional characters. Still one must understand the social implications of the age somewhat well before discarding the arguments:

A subtle but definitive change had occurred in Western Society during 1974 and 1975, Bruno thought to

himself...During those years when he was desperately trying to fit in, Western society had tipped toward something dark and dangerous. In the summer of 1976, it was already apparent that all of it would end badly. Physical violence, the most perfect manifestation of individuation, was about to reappear.

The writing is stunning in its ability to not only portray great beauty and ugliness, often at the same time, but also evoke deep thought and self examination, however uncomfortable. While I learned a tremendous amount about male sexual behavior I really didn't want to know, I was also forced to examine female behavior in certain guises of modernity. Some of it is easy to recognize, even when unpleasant, but there are other issues which require us to hang our heads at the plausibility that this is even human behavior. This I find one of H's great conclusions is given in the following quote:

Over the years, he had developed a cynical hard-bitten typically masculine view of life. The universe was a battle zone, teeming and bestial, the whole thing enclosed within a hard, fixed landscape...clearly perceptible, but inaccessible: the landscape of the moral law. It was written, however, that love contains and perfects this law. Christiane looked at him tenderly, attentively; her eyes were a little tired.

Of course there are some incredibly funny passages which sometimes go over one's head. In this book, it helps to be somewhat well grounded in biology as one of the main characters, Michel (sic,) is a molecular biologist. In the scene below, Michel attends his half brother, Bruno's wedding. He is much taken by pastor's words during the ceremony concerning the marriage of two to become one flesh.

Later Michel went up to the priest as he was packing away the tools of the trade. "I was very interested in what you were saying earlier..." The man of God smiled urbanely, then Michel began to talk about the Aspect experiments and the EPR paradox: how two particles, once united, are forever and inseparable whole, "which seems pretty much in keeping with what you were saying about one flesh." The priest's smile froze slightly. "What I'm trying to say, "Michel went on enthusiastically, "is that from an ontological point of view, the pair can be assigned a single vector in Hilbert space. Do you see what I mean?" "Of course, of course..." murmured the servant of Christ, looking around. "Excuse me," he said abruptly and turned to the father of the bride.

One doesn't have to understand the paradox of Hilbert space to find this hilarious, but it does help. H is constantly throwing in little zingers throughout the book.

While he begins the book talking about his main character, Michel and then adding his half brother Bruno (the perverted guy) as well as related and associated characters, the real key to this book is about biology. In fact, the title doesn't even make sense until one has made a deep commitment to walk the path and wade through the ugliness and intellectual difficulties which prevail. Nevertheless, one cannot help but laugh at how the whole story develops and finally ends. While this isn't for the faint of heart, this book does ask the reasonable question about the decisions we have made as a society. Perhaps it even suggests what we should do as a solution.

Nickolas the Kid says

Ο Ουελμπεκ στο συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο καταπι?νεται σχεδ?v με ?λους και με ?λα...

Την εξ?λιξη του ανθρ?πινου ε?δους, τον ?ρωτα, την αγ?πη, την μοναξ?;, την "ελευθερ?α" και π?ει λ?γοντας.

Η γραφ? του ε?ναι απλ? και τα πολλ? και σχετικ? μικρ? κεφ?λαια κ?νουν ε?κολη την αν?γνωση και την καταν?ηση του κειμ?νου.

Επ?σης υπ?ρχουν πολλ?ς αναφορ?ς σε ?ργα ?λλων συγγραφ?ων/στοχαστ?v ?πως του Ν?τσε και του Χ?ξλευ,

Σε γενικ? γραμμ?ς ο συγγραφ?ας προσεγγ?ζει ε?στοχα πολλ? απ? τα παραπ?νω θ?ματα χωρ?ς να λε?πει το χιο?μορ και ο αυτοσαρκασμ?ς.

Προσωπικ? θεωρ? ?τι ο Ουελμπ?κ β?ζει τον εαυτ? του κ?που αν?μεσα απ? τα δυο αδ?λφια.

Αν?μεσα απ? ?ναν αν?ραστο επιστ?μονα και ?ναν μ?λλον κακομο?ρη ?βουλο καθηγητ?, ο οπο?ος ε?ναι εθισμ?νος στην πορνογραφ?α και τον αγορα?ο ?ρωτα.

Προσωπικ? δεν μπ?ρεσα να συμβαδ?σω με καν?ναν απ? τους χαρακτ?ρες του βιβλ?ου. Υπ?ρχαν στιγμ?ς που βαρ?θηκα κι?λας με τις συνεχε?ς και σχετικ? ανο?σιες σεξουαλικ?ς περιγραφ?ς του συγγραφ?α...

Μου ?ρεσε πολ? β?βαια ο τρ?πος με τον οπο?ο ?χτισε ο Ουελμπ?κ την σχ?ση των δ?ο αδελφ?ν με τους γονε?ς τους αλλ? και τους συγγενε?ς τους!

Το βιβλ?ο εν τ?λει δεν ε?ναι κακ?.

Εμ?να ?μως με ?φησε αδι?φορο και χωρ?ς ιδια?τερους προβληματισμο?ς.

2,5/5...

Jeffrey Keeten says

This is the second Houellebecq novel that I have read. Usually when I talk about why I like novels it usually has to do with the great characters that I identified with or the amazing plot or the entertaining action.

Houellebecq provides none of these things. In fact, while I was reading this book, my daughter asked me what the book was about and I went uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

His characters are unhappy and dysfunctional. Houellebecq's books create controversy to the point that he has ended up in court defending himself and his motivations. He explores the sexual lives of his characters sometimes in great detail. He writes passages that could be construed as racist. Houellebecq does make me uncomfortable at times, but I believe good literature is supposed to make us flinch. His characters are analytical about their lives to the point that even moments of joy are destroyed before the character can even experience the happiness. I generally lose patience with books about epically unhappy people.

So why do I like reading Houellebecq novels?

Houellebecq is intellectual and smart and I like his analysis of what motivates people. Love is merely a chemical reaction. To think I'm being manipulated by chemical reactions instead of something larger, nebulous, mythical, and romantic does take some of the sparkle off the apple. It is interesting though from time to time to step back and look at what motivates me without an emotional element attached. I do make better decisions when I take enough time to let the impulsive first rush of thoughts subside and look at the issue with a certain amount of dispassionate distance. All that aside I certainly never want to look at everything from such an intellectual perspective that all the juice is sucked out of my life. I don't want to be

the guy poking a stick at my own life through the bars of a cage. I think that is really why I like reading Houellebecq's books because he reminds me actually of how much I like my life, and even though I can make improvements mostly with more informed decisions; I don't want to spend the bulk of my life over examining my life to the point that I quit living my life. That in my opinion is a form of intellectual suicide.

Jim Elkins says

When the Middle Class Aspires to Cold Nihilism

Well, it seems there is hardly any point in contributing an other review, when so many people think "The Elementary Particles" ("Atomised" in the UK) is a "powerful," "unflinching" book. But it brought Houellebecq into the public eye and set the stage for his later books, so it's worth reconsidering.

I think it's weak: weaker than all of the models he attempts to emulate.

If you want genuine existential disorientation, read Sartre.

If you want intransigent, pithecoid hatred of the human condition, read Celine.

If you want a book that actually doesn't flinch in regarding death, try "Everyman."

If you want a protracted imaginative ventroliquism of motionless despair (like Michel's in this book), read "The Unnameable."

If you want raw, repetitive, compulsive, unsatisfying sexual excess, read de Sade. (Or Cathy Acker.)

If you want the thrill of a science-fiction ending in which humans are regarded as wonderful but primitive things of a happily discarded past, watch "Star Trek."

Houellebecq's book is a pastiche of those authors, along with pinches of Sollers, Camus, and Artaud, and many sidelong (and nervous) glances at Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, whom he can't quite bring himself to openly emulate, presumably because then he couldn't continue to be interested in middle-class values. The philosophizing asides are replete with clichés, and the supposedly astonishing scientific passages are cobbled from popular magazines. If you find this novel shocking, you might consider just how immersed in the "endless middle classes" you really are: this kind of café existentialism is a trope of the middle class.

It's not difficult to imagine Houellebecq's ideal reader: for such a person, this book is invigorating challenging, rude, honest, and brutal. It's ambitious because he isn't just "shooting rabbits," as the delightful blurb on the back of the UK edition puts it. He's after "big game." And that means the book is larded with observations about the decades from the 1940s to the present, their movies, lifestyles, music, politics, sex, and economics. The ideal reader would find these to be both nostalgic and informative, like interruptions from a public television documentary. They are intended to give the book scope, make it more like Hugo, Buddenbrooks, or "Giant" than an ordinary family story. Mailer, Amis, and many others have tried the same strategy.

But if you're not convinced by the intrusion of a voice from television documentaries, if you're not shocked by stories about snuff films, boys molesting other boys, or characters endlessly jerking off (I wonder how many orgasms there are in the book: one per page?), if you're not surprised that people are at root damaged, selfish, sexually-driven cowards, then this book won't be illuminating or expressive.

Houellebecq could write a strong novel, if he would allow himself to write the excoriating racist screeds that he attributes to one of his two principal characters. (I think he has written that kind of prose -- in fact I bet that the excerpts in this book are from his own early manuscripts.) A "strong novel" in this sense is not "Submission," which again hedges its positions and toys with extreme views that it can't quite bring itself to openly embrace.

Manny says

You can interpret this book in several different ways. A lot of people view it as a depressing, hate-filled rant, filled with a really startling amount of unpleasant sex. I'm not saying that that's necessarily incorrect. In fact, my immediate association was with the fictitious books that Moreland invents in one of the Anthony Powell novels: "Seated One Day at my Organ", by the author of "One Hundred Disagreeable Sexual Experiences". But I think there are more interesting ways of reading *Les Particules*, which show that it's not as pointless as it first appears.

So, after considering it a while, I'd say that this is basically a book about sexual frustration. Bruno, the main character, has an extremely active libido, but is unfortunately not at all attractive; he's fat, ugly and lacks charm. He spends his days in a constant agony of unfulfilled desire. I recently read Hamsun's *Hunger*; the poor guy in Hamsun is broke and hungry, and no matter what he tries to think about he always comes back to money and food within a few minutes. Hamsun's very brave about showing how degrading this is for him. Bruno's plight is similar. He's not getting any sex, and that's all HE can think about. And in fact it's not unreasonable to argue that Houellebecq is being brave too in describing just how humiliating that is for him. The author could put it in general terms, or he could indirectly suggest it, but a detailed description of how Bruno masturbates over his algebra notes while watching girls on the train drives it home far more effectively:

Il prenait l'autorail de Crécy-la-Chapelle. Chaque fois que c'était possible (et c'était presque toujours possible), il s'installait en face d'une jeune fille seule. La plupart avaient les jambes croisées, une chemisier transparent, ou autre chose. Il ne s'installait vraiment en face, plutôt en diagonale, mais souvent sur la même banquette, à moins de deux mètres. Il bandait déjà en apercevant les longs cheveux, blonds ou bruns; en choisissant une place, en circulant entre les rangées, la douleur s'avivait dans son slip. Au moment de s'asseoir, il avait déjà sortit un mouchoir de sa poche. Il suffisait d'ouvrir un classeur, de le poser sur ses cuisses; en quelques coups c'était fait. Parfois, quand la fille décroissait les jambes au moment où il sortait sa bite, il n'avait même pas besoin de se toucher; il se libérait d'un jet en apercevant la petite culotte. La mouchoir était une sécurité, en général il éjaculait sur les pages du classeur: sur les équations de second degré, sur les schémas d'insectes, sur la production de charbon de l'URSS. La fille poursuivait la lecture de son magazine.

But why does Bruno feel this terrible, and what does it say about our society? Houellebecq has some interesting observations about how free-market economics have entered into people's personal lives; having also read Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* in the near past, this resonated rather well. In the economic sphere, Klein argues persuasively that the logical long-term result is a world where Dick Cheney and his

immediate circle of friends own almost everything, and a good 40% of the world owns nothing. In the sexual sphere, the corresponding long-term result is a world where no one really wants to fuck anybody except Scarlett Johansson or Megan Fox (depending on whether they prefer blondes or brunettes), and will not even consider fucking anyone who isn't young and thin.

Bruno exemplifies this horrible state of being; thwarted sexual desire has turned his life into a living hell, and Houellebecq is psychologically credible in showing how it progressively destroys him, making him hate everyone and everything. One interesting angle is that the book contrasts the materialistic world-view that has him in its jaws against the traditional Christian world-view. It's probably not an accident that, when Bruno does in the end meet a woman who truly loves him, she's called Christiane. Here's another example of how the graphic descriptions of sex are not as gratuitous as they first appear. Bruno has just spent a very happy week with Christiane, but must leave:

Bruno avait déjà plié sa tente et rangé ses affaires dans la voiture; il passa sa dernière nuit dans la caravane. Au matin, il essaya de pénétrer Christiane, mais cette fois il échoua, il se sentit ému et nerveux. "Joue sur moi" dit-elle. Elle étala le sperme sur son visage et sur ses seins. "Viens me voir" dit-elle encore une fois au moment où il passait la porte. Il promit de venir.

In a *Brigade Mondaine* novel, this would just be pornographic. Here, it comes across as a rather moving scene. I felt very sorry for poor Christiane; it was already clear that things couldn't possibly work out well.

The part of the novel I found least engaging was the thread that followed Michel, Bruno's half-brother. Instead of experiencing life as one long torment of desire, Michel hardly feels desire at all. He becomes a biophysicist, and eventually finds a way to create an immortal race of asexual beings, which duly replace humanity. I wasn't very convinced by any of this, partly because Houellebecq seems to be unaware that biologists have spent a lot of time wondering about why it is that sexual reproduction is a good idea. It's an interesting story, and deserves to be treated with more respect. I don't think, however, that we need to discuss whether Michel's idea makes scientific sense; I don't believe Houellebecq is *seriously* saying that we should find a way to evolve away from sex, any more than Brecht in *The Tutor* is seriously suggesting auto-castration as a solution. He's just saying that the pain that sex and love cause people is such that you're willing to consider an extreme solution in order to escape from it.

Unfortunately, Houellebecq has loaded up with scientific buzzwords, but doesn't seem to have any deep understanding, and I found the quantum mechanics much more irritating than the pornography. For example, I suppose that all the references to the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen *gedankenexperiment* are intended to suggest that Bruno and Michel are inextricably bound together, quantum-entangled in fact; their mother is the source, Bruno and Michel are the two electrons. But if you insist on a quantum-mechanical metaphor, a particle/anti-particle pair seems both more obvious and easier to understand; invoking EPR is basically just too fucking clever. Which is a reasonable criticism of the whole book in fact.

I discovered yesterday evening that *Les Particules* is listed in *1001 Books To Read Before You Die*. Well... I suppose I agree. Though I'm also warning you that it could significantly advance the date of your demise.

Hadrian says

I wish I was able to write a more detailed reaction to this novel, but I feel nothing. Not in the sense of 'poetic existential despair' nothing, but total non-commitment.

These cynical rants against humanity are really all the same, aren't they? Occasionally you find one with at least some stylistic flair and originality, like Céline's, but here I see failed edgy attempts to shock with bad sex, loneliness, and a touch of misogyny.

So fucking what? I'd go read Reddit comments if I wanted to read that. I do not. That's all.

Joshua Nomen-Mutatio says

Wow. What an incredible book. The Epilogue makes a huge difference in how one might view it on the whole. It certainly did for me. I was getting so depressed by the end that I almost chucked it aside around the 90% mark because I felt a panic attack coming on. But I took a deep breath and I switched up my reading soundtrack and I pushed on and am very glad that I did. The Epilogue *really* clarifies so much that precedes it. Leading up to that point it is basically 100% bleak, and I mean truly, truly bleak--though extremely interesting and entertaining every step of the way.

There's a fair amount of gross sexual stuff along the way as well, but it's always presented in a detached, rather ungleeful way, and as such it has a point beyond mere shock and/or titillation that fully justifies its presence. To say this book is just about sexual frustration is to hugely miss the point. This is a BIG PICTURE book but carried out through a tightly crafted narrative mainly surrounding two brothers birthed from a massively dysfunctional genetic pool with one shared parent: a terminally miserable, often nauseatingly sexually deviant literature professor named Bruno and a largely emotionless but harmless microbiologist in deep almost inhuman isolation named Michel.

The book covers so many subjects that I'm sort of dumbfounded and slow to begin relaying them all. Existential, cultural, scientific, philosophical, historical, etc. Consciousness, genetics, sex, death, physics, religion, cruelty, love, parenthood, childhood, adulthood, happiness, suffering, etc.

Despite the often searing and pitiless slings and arrows thrown at humanity, I think it is also a book that is deeply sympathetic to the desperate flailing, the absurd flaws, and the open wounds of humanity, self-inflicted and otherwise. Its final sentence is a straight up *dedication* to humankind, despite its many detailed failures and sufferings and defects, and despite the claim that a new and improved species must take its place.

I was holding a solid four star rating of this in my head until the final leg of the journey, around Section Three and the Epilogue. So if any readers who take my opinions as any sort of guide end up having trouble with it along the way, I implore them to press on.

Greg says

"It's a curious idea to reproduce when you don't even like life."

It's rare to come across a book filled with so pure of hate. At first I thought maybe it's was just some good old fashioned misogyny, with maybe a little bit of nationalism and Arab hating thrown in, but then something curious happened, the whole of society got thrown into the hate-fest that is this book. Hippies? Hate them a lot. Italians? Yep, really hate them, we don't say why we just do. Nature? Fuck it!! Sex? Love it but hate it. French Intellectuals? Oh really fuck those guys, especially Deleuze, but make it clear we don't like any of those guys from the 60's. 1968? Hahahaha, fucking assholes. Children? Masterbation fodder, or else just more fucking people. Growing old? Really hate it. People lying to themselves that they aren't old? Hate them so much too. Hate hate hate hate.

It might not sound possible but this book might possibly hate everything, the author / narrator doesn't even seem to place himself in any kind of position where it seems like he would be saying 'oh look at all of these poor shits!! If only there were more people like me in the world, a race of me's!! And I'll call them super-men!!!' Nope, there is nothing Nietzschean here, rather it's all sort of the most pessimistic Kant imaginable. One were the ethics are based on total shit as an imperative.

But through all of this hate and the depressing feelings of the total waste of life we all are, and the simple fact that no one is going to be happy, it will elude us and the desire for happiness will only make us miserable; this book ends up being an interesting, and enjoyable read.

Fabian says

Extraordinary, outstanding, absolutely not-to-be-missed*!

* "The Elementary Particles" holds you captive like only the best of 'em can. Think-- a long, cold autumn afternoon sipping coffee and reading "Never Let Me Go." Think-- Dan Brown# poolside. All of these experiences that could conceivably last one blissful, insatiable sitting (the novels that are not considered novellas, that is)-- this is one of 'em. The artistry is like a painting, the reading is like some immersive exercise that blends sex with study of molecular biology in new and intelligent ways. The two brothers are separated entities who belong to the same sphere of humanity. It is elegant & very very smart. Mr. Houellebecq, sir: I am your devoted FAN (I drag my gory knees on the ground, en route to the basilica of French Modern Literature-- a palace of gleaming rubies that reaches toward the bright summer sky)!!!

This type of novel, this quality of work, inspires me to even mention Dan Brown. I mean, yeah... Dan Brown. I make reference to him with a smile--a vibrant optimism afforded only by the likes of wizards like Houellebecq!

Jessica says

Years ago, I went out on a few dates with a French guy. He was rich and good looking (though, of course, way too short), and he seemed pretty smart but I never could bring myself to kiss him. He had this typically Gallic extreme snottiness that I found amusing, even endearing, but even as I enjoyed this I suspected that his disdain for everything non-French might indicate something a bit too dark for me. At a certain point I decided that he wasn't a regular charming misanthrope: I discerned that he hated Muslims, black people, and homosexuals even more than he hated everyone else, and so I didn't go out with him again.

That French guy was a big fan of Michel Houellebecq.

At the time, I wondered for a moment why I find generalized misanthropy acceptable -- even kind of charming -- but felt more specifically targeted hatreds were completely repellent. I mean of course I understand why I think that, but how rational is it? Why is hating fewer people not okay, while hating everyone is fine?

Again, of course I understand why that's the case, but it is a little funny... Anyway, this train of thought doesn't have much to do with this book, except that maybe it does relate to the French and the way that they think about people. But I don't know much about them as a culture, and therefore won't generalize here.

I was so into the first half of *The Elementary Particles* that it made me feel terrible in that amazing hedonistic I-hate-myself-for-loving-you way that top-shelf Martin Amis brings on. This book has a lot in common with St. Aubyn's The Patrick Melrose Novels (which I never got around to reviewing properly) both in that it's about the extraordinarily fucked-up children of wealthy Europeans, and that it degenerates somewhat into overly expository and transparently philosophical fake monologues later on in the book. In other words, I was obsessively entranced by the first half, and the second half was just okay.

My favorite thing about *The Elementary Particles* was the way that it would constantly pull back from the story of its characters to tie their experiences to generalized historical and biological trends. This is what fiction is, and how it works, and I love seeing it spelled out like that. This book is about two half brothers with a terrible mom, and tries to describe and comment on massive transformations in human life and experience. For the most part, I think it did do a pretty good job, though I'm not sure I agree with its arguments and conclusions.

Again, I really loved the first half of this book, though I didn't think the second half was as good. I'd be embarrassed to recommend it to most people, based on its graphic sexual content and bleak view of human relations, though if I were honest I'd admit I think he's got a lot right.

I think, based on this book, that Houellebecq wrestles with a lot of the questions most significant to the time we're upon. He does this wrestling in a way that might not be palatable to all, and while I find this compelling I haven't yet decided if I'll go out with him again.
