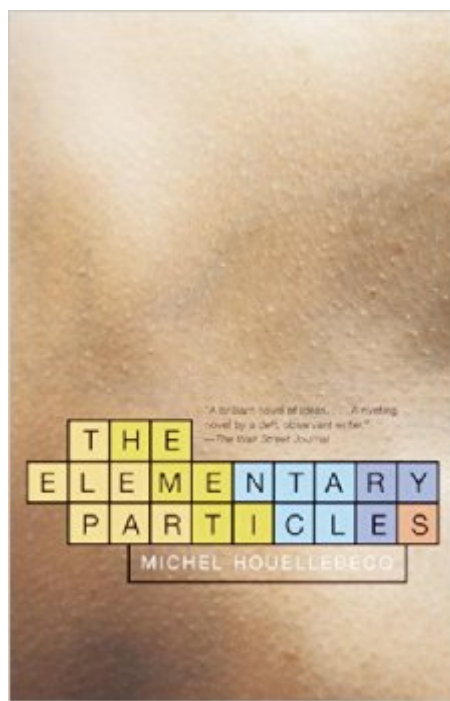


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The Elementary Particles



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (142 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

When I read the shrill reviews from the uptight liberals at the New York Times, I knew this book had to be good. I was right. *The Elementary Particles* is the story of two half-brothers in post-1960s France. When their hippy mother runs off to a New Age community in California, the two boys are sent to live with different sets of grandparents. The boys grow up in a world infected by the ideas of the 1960s revolution. The highest values are American ones: radical individualism, sexual liberation, and self-expression. The bonds holding people together have been eroded as France is mercilessly (and tragically) Americanized. Every facet of life has been reduced to crude, radical competition. The law of the jungle prevails. The two brothers react to this sad new world in interesting ways. Bruno -- a teacher, failed writer, and chronic masturbator -- embarks on a life of endless searching for love but becomes obsessed with pornography, sex clubs, cyber sex, and nudist holiday camps;

he molests one of his female students. Michel, a scientist, withdraws from the world, unable to love; he devotes all his time to biology and genetics research. Their superficially different reactions bely the fact that they suffer from the same modern disease which manifests itself in an inability to love, self-absorption, and an absence of meaningful social interactions. There is no larger community in this world; just a bunch of atomized human beings -- elementary particles -- that occasionally bump into one another for sex. They are adrift in a decadent West unaware of its own rapid decline. Bruno and Michel ultimately choose similar ways to deal with their sad fate. This book is a timely indictment of the social, sexual, economic, and technological upheavals in the West since the 1960s.

First, a quote from Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy," the spirit of which I'd swear animates this novel..."...An old legend has it that King Midas hunted a long time in the woods for the wise Silenus, companion of Dionysos, without being able to catch him. When he had finally caught him the king asked him what he considered man's greatest good. The daemon remained sullen and uncommunicative until finally, forced by the king, he broke into a shrill laugh and spoke: "Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest boon not to hear? What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best is to die soon."Ok- here's the deal. Either you go in for the bleak, unredemptive, unflinching view of humanity and existence, or you don't. I loved this book. It cut me to the bone and I was glad for it. Houellebecq takes apart our desires, our dreams, our age, all our petty cultural trappings- and exposes them for the broken props that they are. Even The sci-fi bookends of the novel didn't grate too badly, though it ended abruptly.Houellebecq presents a worldview that only a scabrous, self-hating continental intellectual could craft so well. And thank Doug for that! This is a nihilistic work of highest caliber, a descendant of Celine (though H's misanthropy and nihilism aren't the same strain of gleeful, musical hate as Celine's), Hamsun and Huysmans. So be warned, all is not roses and puppy dogs. Humanity, nature, the world in which we live are reviled in a variety of insights, characters and plotlines, none of which end happily.

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