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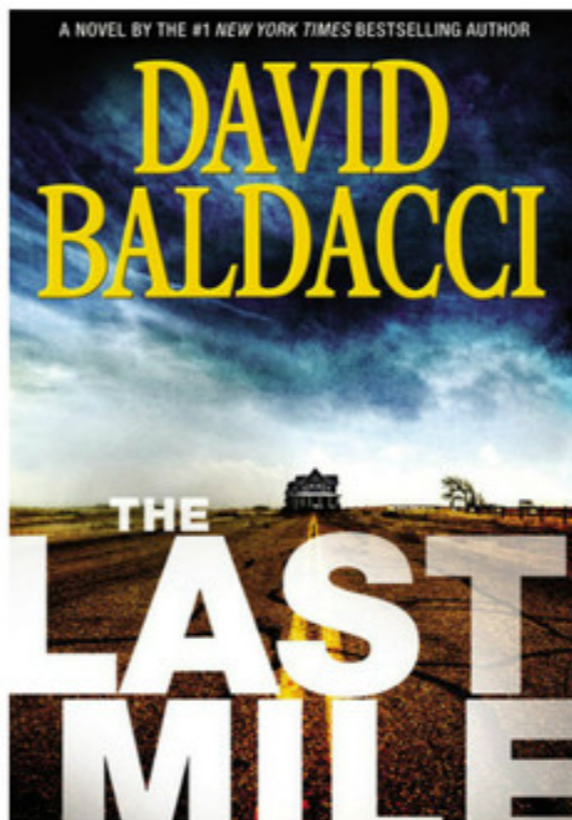
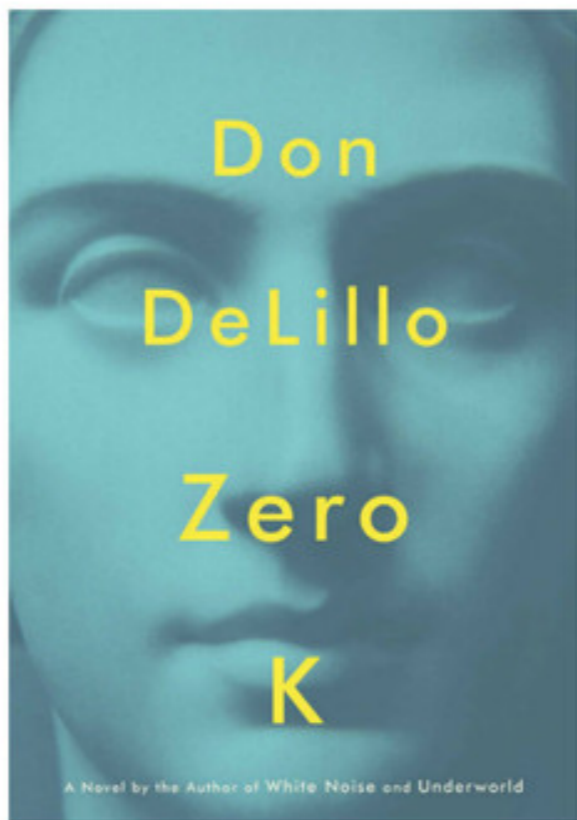
Best-seller buddies: DeLillo and Baldacci

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Zero K by Don DeLillo and The Last Mile by David Baldacci Simon and Schuster, Hachette Book Group, used with permission

The Last Mile by David Baldacci, Zero K by Don DeLillo

Rating: ★★★★★

No, nowhere has it been suggested that Don DeLillo and David Baldacci are buddies. Nor that they even know or read one another. They would seem to be the alpha and omega of novelists, Baldacci a perennial mega-selling author of over two dozen commercial thrillers, DeLillo a perennial name in the Nobel Prize for Literature discussion and a cerebral author of literary thrillers (if I can stretch the genre to include "The Names," "White Noise," "Libra," and "Mao II.")

Yet how striking that both are on The New York Times Book Review fiction best-seller list at the moment. It is one of those accidents that make book publishing so expansive, so quirky. Only in a universe filled with millions of readers and who-knows-how-many novelists can Baldacci's "The Last Mile" and DeLillo's "Zero K" inhabit the same relatively small solar system.

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Both are page-turners. Baldacci's, undoubtedly, is written to be binge-read. And "The Last Mile" happens to be a terrific read. It's better than "Memory Man," the first book in the series featuring Amos Decker. Amos is a construct. A former standout college football player, he got clocked within an inch of his life in his first game as a pro. He awoke with his mind rewired so he has a perfect memory AND has synesthesia, the ability to "see" numbers events in specific colors. To accept these combined brain changes is called suspension of disbelief - admittedly a Golden Gate-sized suspension.

However, the story of Amos on an FBI team investigating a case involving a Texas death row inmate (also a college football star) and a long-ago despicable Jim Crow-south incident is, like the best of this genre, compelling.

Just as compelling, on another level entirely, is DeLillo's latest novel about a cryogenic facility buried in the wasteland of a Central Asian former Soviet republic where bodies are frozen and stored until brought back to life in the future. Sci-fi? Sort of. But remember the Ted Williams case?

"Zero K" is also a terrific read.

DeLillo undoubtedly does not care if his readers binge or slow-read. "Zero K" is a profound effort from a brilliant prophet who thinks deeply – and often before anyone else - about issues such as terror, risk, environmentalism, consumerism and death.

Here DeLillo explores the end of life, the connection between living and dead, the anomie of daily life in cities.

His protagonist, Jeffrey Lockhart, is the son of billionaire Ross Lockhart (mull over that surname) who has financed the remote facility. Ross arrives there to deposit his dying wife Artis. In one chapter, we read Artis's thoughts, apparently from her icy underground vault:

Time. I feel it in me everywhere. But I don't know what it is.

The only time I know is what I feel. It is all now. But I don't know what that means.

Read Baldacci, but don't shy away from DeLillo. Read DeLillo, but don't disparage Baldacci. With fiction available by the truckload (or Amazon warehouse) eclectic readers might be as tickled as I am to see two such wildly different writers buddying up on the best-seller charts with strong new entries in their bodies of work.

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