



The Marbled Swarm

Dennis Cooper

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The Marbled Swarm is Dennis Cooper's most haunting work to date. In secret passageways, hidden rooms, and the troubled mind of our narrator, a mystery perpetually takes shape—and the most compelling clue to its final nature is “the marbled swarm” itself, a complex amalgam of language passed down from father to son.

Cooper ensnares the reader in a world of appearances, where the trappings of high art, old money, and *haute cuisine* obscure an unspeakable system of coercion and surrender. And as the narrator stalks an elusive truth, traveling from the French countryside to Paris and back again, the reader will be seduced by a voice only Dennis Cooper could create.

The Marbled Swarm Details

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From Reader Review The Marbled Swarm for online ebook

Ben Manners says

The most horrific, offensive, depraved acts of (sexual) violence seem to wash over me and leave me unaffected when they're described so simply and matter of factly; drained of any emotion with no sense of impact or consequence for anyone involved. Not to mention the assumed willingness of the victims to engage in these extreme scenarios of BDSM – seemingly aware that they won't survive them – feels like a minor copout on the author's part (although I recognize and appreciate the darker interpretation that the victims' consent - their alacrity even - is only presumed, as part of the perpetrators' larger delusions). And I "get it": the cold, smug detachment of our first-person narrator (whomever, whatever, whenever he actually is or isn't) is part of the point. I'm just saying, as someone who feels comfortable saying he understands – and when executed creatively, respects – the mechanics of (for lack of a better term) "shock value", it doesn't shock or impress me when presented as a laundry list of "wouldn't it be fucked up if..." bullet-points scrawled out by a cluster of chuckling 8th graders at the back of a school bus.

Not to insinuate that the sensational gore of the few actual acts of violence described in this book, or the consistent tone of inhumanity, are all it has to offer.

I went into this, my first Dennis Cooper after years of hearing about him, with no misconceptions of what I was getting into regarding the nature of its content, or how hallucinatory and intentionally confusing this particular book was (according to many other GoodReads reviews) (and speaking of, that aforementioned "bloody octopus" line wasn't anywhere in The Marbled Swarm. I went back and checked – what's wrong with me? Most likely it's in another Cooper book. An understandable mistake seeing as that reviewer said he'd read 5 of Cooper's books in as many days, or something like that. Something to be said for pacing I guess).

Because I went in prepared I read this one carefully, and I won't say my interest wasn't held throughout. And of course as I neared the end, feeling that I at least had a grasp on the twisting contradicting narrative; that it didn't actually need to make sense; remembering that at a few points it had been suggested the we the readers were complicit and involved somehow in this world, and that our reading The Marbled Swarm was a natural side-effect of being under the spell of the titular mind-control technique (I guess), and all the while someone was watching us from behind a far wall — well after all that the last chapter just makes sure it all unravels and nobody reading knows their bloody ass from their shattered elbow.

But I was prepared for all that to some degree and look forward to reading other Dennis Cooper books, even re-reading this one at some point.

(I'd like to mention that both the line where a boy's facial features are compared to the finger holes of a bowling ball, as well as, to paraphrase, the part when it's said of whatshisface by our narrator that he "resembled my brother if my brother had been a dirt trail that snails traveled across" both made me literally LOL. So see, it's not *all* incest and brutal rape-murders.)

Neil Griffin says

To distill this review into one sentence, I suppose I could write Lolita and David Lynch have a baby in the dungeon of a chateau, who grows up being filmed by his father, who hides with his camera behind fake walls

that contain secret rooms and tunnels that eventually lead the boy to deviant cannibalism and and a gift for unwielding long stories within stories attached to houses within houses, which he narrates to a mirror with us on the other side.

Jacob says

Do you ever read a book and go, ew! Like out loud? Like you're reading it and you stop and say, ew. This book made me do that a lot and I kept following and saying, what the fuck is this? Then I got to the end and I put the book down and I looked around the room and I said, what did I just read? How did he do that? I felt as if the entire book had fucked with my brain and caused me to distrust the world around me, the books on my shelves, the walls of my house especially. Ornately styled and irritatingly narrated, visceral and grotesque, and totally elaborate in its structure. I mean, ew and wow, also.

Jeff Jackson says

Since this won't be released for a while, I don't want to say too much. Some quick thoughts: I'm a huge admirer of Dennis Cooper's work and *The Marbled Swarm* strikes me as a genuine masterpiece. Set in Parisian warehouse apartments and country chateaus, the novel is riddled with secret passages, doubles, cannibalism, and peepholes that reveal both more and less than they appear. Its labyrinthine structure is worthy of Robbe-Grillet and the puppetmaster narrator is an equal of *Pale Fire*'s Kinbote in terms of his corrosive wit and disturbing half revelations. The sentences themselves are also exquisitely wrought, each one seeming to simultaneously expose and obscure some element of the narrative.

This is Cooper's most baroque and demanding book. If you're new to his novels, I'd recommend reading *My Loose Thread* and/or *God Jr* before tackling this. Some goodwill and patience may be required to fully appreciate a novel that reshuffles itself with each chapter and delays its emotional wallop until the very last sentences. It's also a book that gives up its mysteries slowly and I look forward to reading it again before the year's out.

Regan says

The rating I've given may pique interest in this book, but caveats are incredibly necessary. If you are someone who needs to identify with the narrator or characters in a novel, *do not read this book*. If you are a reader who resents being intentionally manipulated by an author, *do not read this book*. If you are a reader who believes there is not a single thing of value in the works of Marquis de Sade, *do not read this book*. If you are a reader who cannot tolerate 48 pages of hints, redactions, circumlocutions, and subterfuge, again *do not read this book*. However if you happen to be a person who fantasizes about raping and killing young boys, or if you are a depressed Emo kid fantasizing about being raped and eaten Hannibal Lecter style, then....um...PLEASE read this book rather than act on your inclinations. I say that with a shudder that I'd contend shakes the very ground, but I also live in Oklahoma.

If you remain intrepid despite these warnings, you will find a book of fearfully obnoxious & utterly awesome, terrifying prose. At 48 pages you will be rewarded, if that's the word for a rather dubious honor. At the very least, then the title & the source of your frustration will be revealed.

I'd like to be clear, I do not think there is anything wrong with drawing lines with regards to narratives or perspectives you're willing to entertain. It is important that people draw these lines. For better or worse, I do not draw these kinds of lines, at least not all the time. While I'm an ethicist IRL, I don't believe art is beholden to morality, and so I sometimes read depraved things and (very) occasionally I am awed by them.

For example, Marquis de Sade awed me at a not-quite-young, but tender age; I was shocked that he could still shock after 200 some-odd years. I didn't think it possible that I could be shocked given the cultural morass in which I found myself 15 years ago (and still do to tell the truth). I thought I'd seen pretty much all of it. I hadn't.

If you are unfamiliar with MDS then please turn there first. I do not find it accidental that this rapefest of a novel is set in France. If you are familiar with MDS and *120 Days of Sodom*, Dennis Cooper's *The Marbled Swarm* is a close, but more spectacular (to choose as neutral of a word as possible) analogue.

But if you *are* familiar with *120 Days of Sodom*, you also probably know the scroll of the manuscript was lost (& found) during the storming of the Bastille in 1784. You also probably know that the descriptions of the most depraved acts (the last month) are mere sketches, never completed. Cooper's *The Marbled Swarm*, I believe, intends to flesh those scenes out in the most literal way imaginable.

Imagine first, Brett Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman, but then imagine him without the shitty comical taste in 80s music, and with a predilection for Emo preteens. Imagine the debauchest version of a droll Whit Stillman film. In other words, imagine that wealth is maximally & unapologetically corrupting.* Imagine that you believed (& didn't) in the ancient correspondence theory of truth whereby the existence of a thing--perhaps a lurid & carnivorous inner yearning--is enough to make it real, or as imaginatively vivid & fucked up as it must necessarily be to approximate your absolutely darkest and most perverse desires. To expose & also purge them through the glaring exposure. That's *The Marbled Swarm*.

P.S. If you are neither a Sadist nor an Emo preteen, & you are still interested in reading this novel, I advise you to set aside a day so as to spend as little time in this world as possible.

*In the interest of full & utterly disturbing disclosure, I began this review whilst still reading and I chose the "Imagine" trope without knowing that it would eventually surface in the novel's repertoire of devices to lure the reader.

Richard Chiem says

i have never read anything like this before. one of my favorite novels.

Josh Friedlander says

It wouldn't be correct to say I detested this book: that's the reaction that the author is going for, whereas in fact I was too bored to muster any type of strong feeling at all. Mistaking the use of cannibalism, kiddy rape and incest for some type of cooler-than-thou nihilist credo, and sophomoric pretension for eloquence (the titular "marbled swarm"), this book is something like a French rewrite of *Less Than Zero* - except stripped of the wit, intelligence, self-awareness and satirical vigor that made that book so worth reading.

I feel uncool posting this, because all of my hip writerly friends think this book is the shit...but, well, yeah.

Nate D says

The Marbled Swarm is a performance of gruesome virtuosity, a blood-gilded house of cards that geometrically collapses down to a single card containing the superimposed forms of all that preceded it, at last finding itself reduced, pure and tragic, a simplicity it so desperately attempted to obscure with endless card tricks -- mysteries within mysteries, horrific acts minutely detailed, the ultimate veneer of language itself -- attempted to obscure out of nothing so much as failed self-preservation instincts.

Reading this was a conflicting experience: pressing hard along the art/trash lines that post-modernism has gleefully attempted to erase, this is poetic, artful, densely layered and impeccably refined, yet also often willfully irredeemable and repugnant. And I don't say that lightly, I don't shock so easily anymore. Early on, we watch our protagonist's uncomfortable blackly funny attentions towards the young son of an aristocratic family whose supposedly haunted house he hopes to buy. But, he assures us, in the beginnings of the direct conversation that composes the entire book, he's not the ordinary predator we suspect. It's true, he's much worse, and will show us. But even then this isn't any sort of confessions-of-a-monster that it might be. As I said, it's a performance, our narrator spinning his complicated sentences in unexpected directions expressly for our amusement, entertainment, and revulsion, assuming our existence to such an extent that readership becomes a dialogue, or a game for two players. The utterly unique voice drives the entire text, binds together the dead ends, and incongruities, and eventually even invests the proceedings with unexpected ... well, to say more would be too much. But suffice to say that this narrator is one of the most fascinating I've encountered. If I hadn't just read *Island People*, there'd be nothing close in recent memory, but in some ways these two are complimentary parts of a similar literary genius, hiding itself within its stories, within its very words.

You who've read this far with any care and feel you know me to the point to which you've been empowered will have gleaned what I would like you to assume I felt when told my recent life had been the colophon of someone else's trail of bread crumbs.

Another note: many have reflected on the Robbe-Grillet-ness of parts of this, most obviously the text itself in one of its internal proxies, and in Cooper's direct thanks to Catherine Robbe-Grillet, but besides the more surface correspondences -- the uncertainties, secret rooms, the aestheticized horrors -- lies, perhaps, a truer similarity: Cooper, here, has concerned himself, on one level, with one of the great recurring Alain Robbe-Grillet themes: the act of writing itself.

Lou Last says

Cooper here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z14KH...>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cw_1n...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sGnzV...> & <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d67yS...>

Daniel says

I just bought Dennis Cooper's *Closer* on my Kindle and I am already terrified that someone is going to look at my Kindle and start reading it and see that it is not only pornographic, but pornographic in the most disturbing sense possible. I am fully convinced that e-Readers were invented for the sole purpose of being able to hide all your erotica from your friends.

Dennis Cooper scares me, yet *The Marbled Swarm* was still one of the most interesting novels I've read this year. *The Marbled Swarm* refers to the narrator's manner of speaking. It's a style that is both intricate and convoluted, but the most interesting thing about this *Marbled Swarm* is how it is also reflected in the plot itself: the plot continually stops, regresses, or goes off on a permanent tangent. The language is formal, and this formality is represented by a stunning lack of emotion in the narrator. Cannibalism, incest, rape, and abuse are revisited again and again as the plot circles around and around, attempting to avoid the whole point of the novel entirely. The events are terrifying and, in some ways, darkly funny. Yet it is an emotionless journey for the narrator, until the time comes when the heart of the novel cannot be avoided any longer.

In short, it's *The Story of the Eye* for the 21st century. (Which I had no problem sharing with all my friends. I was too enthralled by my own deviousness.) This novel is hard to simplify and dismiss it as a gross-out novel, because there is some real pain here. Cooper is too intelligent to let himself be reduced so easily. I don't want to call it a masterwork, but it's damn brilliant.

A says

I love Dennis Cooper more than his characters love underage rough trade psychopath nymphet boytoys with daddy issues. But one thing Dennis Cooper is not is subtle. Sophisticated, yes; layered with meaning, absolutely -- but understated, no way. In fact, I would argue that his greatest talent is his ability to be the opposite of subtle: it's his unrelenting repulsiveness that so powerfully drives his work to ever crueler, ever more captivating heights.

Which is to say that I hated this book. I mean, really? The ferocious and brilliant author of the violently enjoyable *The Sluts* decides to pen a subtle, understated, meandering novel about a subtle, understated, meandering way of speaking, all of it a subtle, understated, meandering pastiche of the limp mid-century nouveau roman style? Yo, Dennis, Imma let you finish, but Paul Auster is the best Robbe-Grillet rip-off artist of all time. Of all time! And guess what, man: **EVERYONE HATES PAUL AUSTER.**

Listen, I know Cooper's whole shtick is that he fucks with the reader's every last conception, but he fucked this one up in completely the wrong way. About 1/3 of the way through this mercifully brief novel the reader learns that if he feels confusion while reading, that is the intended response. For me, the issue with this clever conceit is that, while I didn't understand one lick of what was going on, more importantly, I also didn't give a flying fuck. It was just one empty and lifeless red herring-filled set piece after another, peopled with ciphers who made me yawn with boredom as they were disemboweled through their anuses or devoured bite by bite down to their toenails. I really hope this is just a one-off for Cooper and not a new pathway for his work, knocked out of a side wall like a secret passage in a crumbling *chateau*. I want the old sick and twisted

Dennis back, and fast.

Tosh says

A very beautifully layered novel that one can almost taste the narrative. Considering it deals with cannibalism among other things this may not be your type of flavor - but it is an essential read by one of the great English language writers alive. What strikes me about the novel for me personally is the jaded aristocratic voice that runs through it. All of Dennis Cooper's novels have a strong visual sense - and usually with the minimal language. "The Marbled Swarm" is different because the text is so dense and beautifully spread out - that its just a joy to go over the sentences over and over again. It has its own music, and the images that come from the "music" is both funny and highly poetic.

A lot of people will probably react to the violence and sex, but to me in the hands of M. Cooper its a beautiful instrument that plays a haunting melody. In about six months i am going to re-read this book - not only for the pleasure of the text, but also to dig into the narrative that is as twisted as the secret tunnels that are featured in this novel.

Emma Sea says

The book has me at a loss. Layers of story, inside an unreliable narrative, opening out into language, hidden within a secret, artificial tongue that is never used. The book exceeds my ability to comprehend or appreciate it, making any rating I may make pointless.

James says

I just finished this.

Voyeurism, incest, molestation, pedophilia, child rape, murder, cannibalism...just another day at the office for Dennis Cooper.

If you've read his earlier works--for instance, the George Miles cycle--the disturbing themes should come as no surprise, but here his writing style is quite different. Whereas in his earlier works the style was flat, laconic, and minimalistic, here it is wordy and intentionally convoluted.

I think in the earlier books his characters didn't know how to communicate, and as a result spoke vaguely. Here, as befits a child of the Internet age, the narrator doesn't know how to communicate, and so speaks in a blathering torrent of words--practically a word salad--albeit one designed to hide, confuse, obfuscate, and trick.

The plot is a Mobius strip. If you can get through the book and say definitively what was real and what was an elaborate lie, you're a better man than I am, Gunga Din. I'm still not entirely clear as to the ending, and I suspect that might be Cooper's whole point.

brian says

part genius; part indecipherable.

a guy with a giant dong assrapes some kid for so long the kid's intestines fly out of his anus resembling 'a bloody octopus'. i wish dennis cooper was my boyfriend.
