

Book Review: The El

By Theodore C. Van Alst Jr.

Thanks to NetGalley and the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group for this advance reader's copy, in exchange for an honest review. "The El" has an expected publication date of August 12, 2025.

From the opening pages, I could tell "The El" wasn't for me. But I plugged on, for a little while, at least. But even though the semi-autobiographical novel from Theodore C. Van Alst Jr. is only 192 pages long, I couldn't get beyond the first 40.

The story follows a group of teenage gang members, primarily Teddy, as they trek across Chicago for a huge meeting as rival gangs attempt to join forces across racial lines. What could go wrong?

The book, for starters – at least in my opinion. I was completely unable to identify with the characters – the two prominent ones being Teddy, who is living with his father after being kicked out of his mother's house because of his gang activity (smart woman), and Mikey. It might have helped if I understood what they were saying.

"There's some hillbillies left over there too, so don't sweat it. You ain't a Polack. Just play it cool. Tell 'em your ma's from Tennessee. Ain't no way they'll take you for a G/L."

"I ain't gonna be mad about it, Sinbad. Hit it, bro."

You get the point.

The setting for the book is Chicago, 1979. The book's promo calls it "a love letter to another time, to a city, and to a group of friends trying to find their place and make their way in a world that doesn't want them." I didn't get that feeling at all.

I grew up in The Bronx, in NYC, and rode 'The El' (elevated subway trains) routinely. I thought I might get something nostalgic from this novel.

Not even close.

As you might have guessed by now, zero stars for “The El.” Unless you’re into gangs, racial tensions, guns and violence, I’d advise staying away. Far away. There’s no reason to ride *this* train.