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- Television
- Theater
- GOSSIP
- LIFESTYLE
- NEWS
- POST OPINION
- REAL ESTATE
- SPORTS
- STORY INDEX
- STYLE
- TRAVEL

By **BRUNO MADDOX**

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-  Print
-  Reprint

February 13, 2005 -- The noted Italian strategist Niccolo Machiavelli recommended keeping one's friends close and one's enemies even closer.

In practice, this can be a hassle: There you and your buddies are, trying to watch the game, and there's this bastard with a pointy beard sitting with you on the couch, screaming curses on your descendants and trying to tip poison into your beer from his large, bejeweled signet ring.

Fortunately, we have what Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan have termed "The Underminer": best friend and worst enemy in one convenient package.

The Underminer is that old college or high school associate who flies into a fit of air-kissing joy whenever he sees you, then lathers you with carefully crafted compliments designed to inform you of his own success and your own inadequacies, and generally leaves you feeling hollow and wretched.

Written entirely in second-person singular from one particular Underminer to his or her victim (the multiply gendered authors take great pains not to give away the sex of either figure), the book is a sequence of brutal monologues tracing the pair's diverging trajectories.

For those of us who attended college and now live New York, the material is painfully well-observed.

But what really separates the Underminer from the pack - in the daily expanding genre of Loser Lit - is the writing, which is very good, and the care Albo and Heffernan take never to let the project get repetitive or lose its universal resonance.

It's that rare one-joke novel about young people in New York that knows it's a one-joke novel about young people in New York, and by that alone manages to be a great deal more.

"The Underminer: The Best Friend Who Casually Destroys your Life"

by Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan

3 Stars

Bloomsbury, \$19.95

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