

# A Pilgrim's Regress In Dallas, November '63

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By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

It's obvious even before the story begins that *Libra* must be Lee Harvey Oswald, President John F. Kennedy's assassin. There he is on the dust jacket of Don DeLillo's ambitious new novel (his ninth), in the famous backyard photograph, dressed in black and holding his rifle and his revolutionary magazines. And there he is in the novel's opening pages, in "the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city . . . They went so fast sometimes he thought they were on the edge of no-control. The noise was pitched to a level of pain he absorbed as a personal test."

And it's apparent soon after the story starts how the plot of "*Libra*" is going to work. As the omniscient narrator jumps around in time, we learn that shortly after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, unhappy Central Intelligence Agency men begin working on ways that Fidel Castro and Cuba can be made the targets of official American hostility once again.

"We need an electrifying event," their leader, Win Everett, tells a small gathering of the conspirators. "We want to set up an attempt on the life of the President. We plan every step, design every incident leading up to the event. We put together a team, leave a dim trail. The evidence is ambiguous. But it points to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate . . . We script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter. Shots ring out, the country is shocked, aroused. . . ."

"But we don't hit Kennedy. We miss him," Win says."

So there's not really that much suspense to "*Libra*" — only the puzzles of how Oswald will link up with the C.I.A. plan, to what extent Jack Ruby will become involved, whether there will be another assassin on the grassy knoll, and why J.F.K. will be killed instead of spared.

Instead, the novel is like the acting-out of some ritual, an anti-passion play, a pilgrim's regress, a station of the cross-hairs: Oswald in the Bronx, Oswald in Moscow, Oswald in Dallas, Oswald in the window of the Texas School Book Depository. "Everything was slow and clear. He got down on one knee, placed his left elbow on the stacked cartons and rested the gun barrel on the edge of the carton on the sill. He sighted on the back of the President's head."

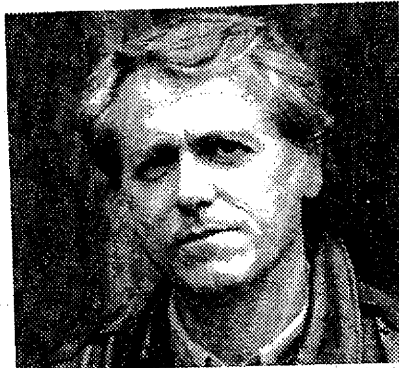
Why then, lacking great surprise or tension, does the novel eventually work so powerfully, starting slowly, almost tediously, but gathering momentum like thunder from a far horizon that finally splits the sky?

Part of the answer is in the details: Oswald's Soviet interrogator explaining how Hemingway's writing style always makes him hungry; Marina Oswald astounded at seeing herself on television in a store window; Jack Ruby driving his white Olds around Dallas, "bottles and jars" rolling

## **Libra**

By Don DeLillo.

456 pages. Viking, \$19.95.



Joyce Ravid

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Two threads help to knit them together. One of them is the character of Oswald, specific enough to accommodate all psychologies — the dyslexic truant, the fatherless son, the alienated defector, the castrated husband — yet general enough to stand for all who dream of merging with history. "After Oswald," a historian in the novel named Nicholas Branch observes, "men in America are no longer required to lead lives of quiet desperation. You apply for a credit card, buy a handgun, travel through cities, suburbs and shopping malls, anonymous, anonymous, looking for a chance to take a shot at the first puffy empty famous face, just to let people know there is someone out there who reads the papers."

What Lee Harvey Oswald will do — and why — hangs in the balance throughout the space-time of Mr. DeLillo's book, which is why Clay Shaw identifies him as a Libran, the Scales, and says: "Easily, easily, easily influenced. Poised to make the dangerous leap. Either way, balance is the key."

The other thread is the conspiracy theory. The historian Branch, "a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination," sits in "the room of theories, the room of growing old," meditating on "the death rate among those who were connected in some way to the events of November 22," on all the accumulating evidence that he has come to think of as "the Joycean book of America ... the novel in which nothing is left out."

What he concludes is: "If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme." But in fact, "the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalences and fixed will and what the weather was like."

Are we meant to take all this literally? In an eloquent concluding author's note, Mr. DeLillo writes that "Libra" is "a work of the imagination" that to some may seem "one more gloom in a chronicle of unknowing." But, he adds, "because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here — a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years."

We do. We most gratefully do.

"across the floor of the car"; Oswald in prison, after he has shot the President, hearing his name on the radios and televisions. "Lee Harvey Oswald. It sounded extremely strange. He didn't recognize himself in the full intonation of the name ... No one called him by that name. Now it was everywhere."

Another part of the answer is in the seamlessness between the known and the unknown, between the actual record and what Mr. DeLillo has invented. In the foreground are all the facts that those who lived through that traumatic ordeal know as well as their autobiographies, from the roses that lay on the car seat between Jack and Jackie, to the whining non sequiturs of Marguerite Oswald, Lee's mother. In the background lie every rumor, shadowy figure and crackpot theory, from Jack Ruby's mob connections to Judith Exner and Clay Shaw to the proposition that there were many Oswalds. All together they add up, at least to an imaginative whole.

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