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# Reanimating Oswald, Ruby et al. in a Novel On the Assassination

By HERBERT MITGANG

If the central character in a novel is named Lee Harvey Oswald, and the book jacket bears a shadowy photograph of President Kennedy's assassin with a rifle in his hand, should a reader assume he is at the literary crossroads of fact and fiction that has come to be known as the "nonfiction novel?"

No, replied Don DeLillo, author of "Libra," during a recent interview at the offices of Viking, his publisher. Mr. DeLillo observed that in other books blending fact and fictional techniques, like Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" and Norman Mailer's "Armies of the Night," all the people are drawn from real life and no fictional characters are introduced. In "Libra" (the title derives from Oswald's astrological sign), both real and totally fictional people are presented.

There are about 125 "characters" in the book, Mr. DeLillo said of his ninth novel, some making only cameo appearances, others essential for the author's idea of what occurred during the assassination, which remains at the heart of his narrative.

"But I'd rather not tell how many are real and how many are fictional," Mr. DeLillo said. "That might cause some readers to play a game of identification instead of reading the book for what it is — a novel."

## The Ending Is Real: Death

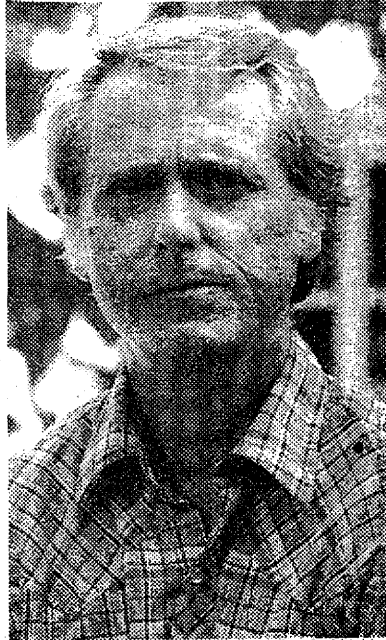
As a novel, however, the story does lead up to the death of President Kennedy and the characters include Oswald's mother, Marguerite; his wife, Marina; Jacqueline Kennedy; Gov. John B. Connally Jr.; Gen. Edwin A. Walker, and Jack Ruby.

Suddenly, almost a quarter of a century after the assassination, the reader is back in Dallas on that day in November, Oswald's 6.5-millimeter Mannlicher-Carcano carbine is poised at the sixth-floor window of the Texas School Book Depository, and the Presidential motorcade is moving slowly through Dealey Plaza.

Mr. DeLillo has provided an "Author's Note," which the reader does not encounter at the beginning of the book but only after having turned the last page. Even in a story in which the ending is known, no author likes to explain away too much.

In part, the afterword says:

"This is a work of the imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination. I've altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters. But because this book makes no claim to lit-



The New York Times/Ray Stubblebine

Don DeLillo, author of "Libra."

eral 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."

## Examining the American Dream

The 51-year-old author, who grew up in the Bronx and graduated from Fordham University, where he studied theology, philosophy and communications, now lives with his family in Westchester County. He has been examining the American nature and the American dream from the beginning; his first novel, which came out in 1971, was "Americana." That was about advertising; his other novels have looked at the rock music scene, football, science, terrorism and expatriates.

His last novel, "White Noise," featured the chairman of the Department of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill in a town he called Blacksmith. He believes there are college courses similar to his fictional one.

"While I was working on 'White Noise,'" Mr. DeLillo said, "I decided to interrupt the novel and write a non-fiction piece on the assassination for Rolling Stone. Then I began to think seriously about 'Libra' three and a half years ago. I decided to make a major attack. Several things drew me to the subject. There are references to the assassination in three of my novels. Oswald is mentioned in 'Players' and 'Running Dog.' And

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'Americana' actually ends in Dealey Plaza."

He found an even more personal reason — something of a coincidence — in his background and Oswald's.

## In the Same Bronx Neighborhood

"I knew from the beginning that Oswald had spent some time in New York City," the author said. "He and I lived only six or seven blocks from each other. That gave me a kind of particularized nudge, perhaps the last element that spurred me to begin the novel. I know that neighborhood very well. It's near the Bronx Zoo. Sometimes the area is called Tremont; sometimes Southern Boulevard; sometimes Fordham. Oswald used to play hockey from school. His first brush with the law came when a truant officer collected him at the Bronx Zoo. He lived on 179th Street and I lived on 182d, slightly to the east. He was there roughly from January 1953 to the end of that year. I don't think I ever saw him."

"Libra," Mr. DeLillo said, turned out to be the hardest of his novels to write. "The novel is a meat-eating form," the author said. "It devours everything."

To keep up with the vast amount of material on the assassination, Mr. DeLillo said, he doubled his usual working sessions, reading at night and writing in the mornings and afternoons.

From the beginning, Oswald is the

## The book about the assassination mixes fictional and real characters.

centerpiece of the novel: the anthero. "I admired Kennedy but had no special feeling for him," the author said. "But Oswald — the Libra sign seemed so appropriate for him, the notion that a man could tip either way, that there is a force that moves outside the mainstream, like intuition. His astrological sign seemed to be a part of his destiny. The world of Libra is not the modern or technologically brilliant world that characters in my other novels try to confront. This is a different kind of novel, a terminus of human feelings. It takes place at the far end of the map."

The main source of his information was the Government Printing Office's 26 volumes of interviews and appendices in the Warren Commission Report, which he obtained from a secondhand book dealer. The interviews in it gave him a sense of time and place on such peripheral issues as what a trainman did in Dallas in 1963.

The most valuable part of his re-

search, he said, was spent in Dallas and New Orleans, where Oswald also stayed for a while. "Three of the places where Oswald lived in Dallas are still standing — a rooming house and two other houses," he said. "It was very haunting to see them and the one in New Orleans."

Mr. DeLillo conducted no interviews for the novel. But he did visit Dealey Plaza and watch the tourists who daily stand and point toward the sixth-floor window at the Texas School Book Depository, then down toward the freeway, simulating the shots. "Their movements were almost balletlike, like tai chi," he said. "The building is being renovated. They're making a museum on the sixth floor so I couldn't go up there. But I have many photographs of the place. I also saw the various films and amateur footage that was taken that day."

Without going into specific details of "Libra," the novel maintains that there was a conspiracy. "I purposely chose the most obvious theory," the author said, "because I wanted to do justice to historical likelihood. Let me just add that an anti-Castro group seemed more likely than any other group."

"The Kennedy assassination is a permanent grief for many Americans," Mr. DeLillo said. "A novel or play tries to redeem some of the unanswered questions and dissatisfactions of the past. There is certainly invention in the book but, at the same time, I've made no attempt to evade the facts — as we know them."

"I knew when I began 'Libra' that there would be a certain humbling for me because the real people are so extraordinary," the author said. "I couldn't possibly create fictional characters to compete with Oswald or Marina or Jack Ruby. So I didn't try. But fiction can counteract some of the ambiguity and try to rescue history from its confusions. Stories are a consolation; fiction can be a balm."