

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

Scripts, Plots and Codes

JOHN LEONARD

LIBRA. By Don DeLillo. Viking. 456 pp. \$19.95.

Don DeLillo's cold and brilliant novel begins with 13-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald and his mother—that American Medea, Marguerite—watching television in the Bronx. For “inward-spinning” Oswald, his mother is a television. Her voice falls “through a hole in the air.” She stays up late to compare test patterns.

Libra ends with a hole in the ground, and Marguerite apostrophizing: “They will search out environmental factors, that we moved from home to home. Judge, I have lived in many places but never filthy dirty, never not neat, never without the personal living touch, the decorator item. We have moved to be a family. This is the theme of my research.”

Between these solitudes, somebody else is doing the research. DeLillo, who's shy, has found himself a surrogate: Nicholas Branch, C.I.A. (retired), sits exactly like an author-god at a desktop computer in a glove-leather chair in a book-lined, fireproof room full of “theories that gleam like jade idols.” He follows “bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows.” He feels “a strangeness . . . that is almost holy. There is much here that is holy, an aberration in the heartland of the real.”

Branch is writing, at the agency's request, a secret history of Dallas—those “six point nine seconds of heat and light” on November 22, 1963. The agency has given him more than he needs to know. For instance:

The Curator sends the results of ballistics tests carried out on human skulls and goat carcasses, on blocks of gelatin mixed with horsemeat . . . bullet-shattered goat heads in close-up . . . a gelatin-tissue model “dressed” like the President. It is pure modernist sculpture, a block of gelatin layered in suit and shirt material with a strip of undershirt showing, bullet-smoked.

Equally modernist, of course, is the

John Leonard will be writing regularly on fiction for The Nation.

Warren Commission Report, “with its twenty-six accompanying volumes of testimony and exhibits, its millions of words”:

Branch thinks this is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred. . . . Everything belongs, everything adheres, the mutter of obscure witnesses, the photos of illegible documents and odd sad personal debris, things gathered up at a dying—old shoes, pajama tops, letters from Russia. . . . This is the Joycean Book of America, remember—the novel in which nothing is left out.

And what does the historian decide—after his access to goat heads and pajama tops; psychiatrists and K.G.B. defectors; confidential agency files and transcripts of the secret hearings of Congressional committees; wiretaps, polygraphs, Dictabelt recordings, post-operative X-rays, computer enhancements of the Zapruder film, Jack Ruby's mother's dental chart, microphotographs of three strands of Oswald's pubic hair (smooth, not knobby), F.B.I. reports on dreams . . . and the long roster of the conveniently dead?

Branch decides that “his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms.” To be sure, his own agency may be “protecting something very much like its identity,” but rogue elements of that agency have conspired in their small rooms to write an enormous fiction. They will mount an attempt on the President's life that's intended to be a “surgical” near-miss. They will leave a “paper-trail” that leads from this attempt to Fidel Castro's Cuba—their “moonlit fixation in the emerald sea.” They require somebody like an Oswald, a fall-guy figment, to point the way.

Libra deconstructs the official story, reimagines the dreary principals we know already from the pages of the Warren Report and the fevers of Jim Garrison. But it also peoples the parentheses of this shadow world with monsters of its own—agents disgraced at the Bay of Pigs; cowboy mercenaries shopping for a little war; Kennedy-hating Mafiosi, international remittance men, Batista swamp-rats; myths (salamanders out of Paracelsus) and freaks (geeks, androgynes). If his surrogate

Branch is a stay-at-home, DeLillo flies by night, and enters, an exorcist, into rooms and dreams. In each room he finds a secret and a coincidence, a loneliness and a connection, even a kind of theology: “the rapture of the fear of believing.”

Win Everett, for instance, is the agency author-god of the J.F.K. plot, for whom “secrets are an exalted state,” “a way of arresting motion, stopping the world so we can see ourselves in it.” In his small room, with Elmer's Glue-All and an X-acto knife, he invents the Oswald figment out of fake passports, false names, phony address books, doctored photographs; “scripts” him “out of ordinary pocket litter.” He has, if not misgivings, at least forebodings:

There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. A narrative plot no less than a conspiracy of armed men. The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death. A plot in fiction, he believed, is the way we localize the force of death outside the book, play it off, contain it. . . . He worried about the deathward logic of his plot.

But the agency is bound to forgive him: “What's more, they would admire the complexity of his plan. . . . It had art and memory. It had a sense of responsibility, of moral force. And it was a picture in the world of their own guilty wishes.”

He sounds like any old modernist at the keyboard of his masterwork, his terminal novel, his grand harmonium of randomness. Imagine his surprise on finding that there really is an Oswald, sitting there in a Speed Wash laundromat in Dallas at midnight, reading H.G. Wells's *Outline of History*. It's creepy. Dyslexic Lee, who grew up dreaming of Lenin and Trotsky, “men who lived in isolation . . . close to death through long winters in exile or prison, feeling history in the room, waiting for the moment when it would surge through the walls.” Ozzie the Rabbit in Tokyo: “Here the smallness had meaning. The paper windows and box rooms, these were clear-minded states, forms of well-being.” A Marine defector who cuts his wrist to stay in Russia; a wife abuser who receives “secret instructions” from “the whole busy air of transmission . . . through the night into his skin”; a Fair Play for Cuba mail-order assassin

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whose stated ambition it is "to be a short story writer on contemporary American themes"—he's spent his whole life converging on a plot that is itself just eight months old.

On learning of the real Oswald, Everett feels "displaced": "It produced a sensation of the eeriest panic, gave him a glimpse of the fiction he'd been devising, a fiction living prematurely in the world."

His co-conspirator, Parmenter, a member of "the Groton-Yale-OSS network of so-called gentlemen spies," is grateful to the agency for its understanding and its trust: "The deeper the ambiguity, the more we believe." During the overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 his radio station, "supposedly run by rebels from a jungle outpost in Guatemala," was really in Honduras. Disinformation—"rumors, false battle reports, meaningless codes, inflammatory speeches, orders to nonexistent rebels. It was like a class project in the structure of reality. Parmenter wrote some of the broadcasts himself, going for vivid imagery, fields of rotting bodies." A real Oswald makes him laugh: "It was all so funny. . . . Everyone was a spook or a dupe or asset, a double, courier, cutout or defector, or was related to one. We were all linked in a vast and rhythmic coincidence."

But the President dies of coincidence, and so does Oswald. Like Oswald, everybody is writing fiction "on contemporary American themes." One conspirator, T.J. Mackey, works with a private army of Cuban exiles: "Alpha was like a dream clinic. The Agency worked up a vision, then got Alpha to make it come true." Another, Wayne Elko, lives on Southwest Fourth Street in Miami: "Judo instructors, tugboat captains, homeless Cubans, ex-paratroopers like Wayne, mercenaries from wars nobody heard of, in West Africa or Malay. They were like guys straight out of Wayne's favorite movie, *Seven Samurai*, warriors without masters, willing to band together to save a village from marauders, to win back a country, only to see themselves betrayed in the end."

So much bad art. This is Joan Didion's territory, isn't it, paranoia and blank uneasiness? Just so, the Mafia boss Carmine Latta, with his wise-guy contempt for social orders not his own, seems to have wandered in from Saul Bellow's Chicago instead of New Orleans. With Didion, though, paranoia is personal, and so for Bellow is

contempt. DeLillo is loftier, in a room that hangs above the world. He's part camera, of course, with a savage eye on, say, pretty Marina with the "breezes in her head," or Ruby, whose desperate jauntiness breaks the heart:

If I don't get there in time, it's decreed I wasn't meant to do it. He drove through Dealey Plaza, slightly out of the way, to look at the wreaths again. He talked to Sheba about was she hungry, did she want her Alpo. He parked in a lot across the street from the Western Union Office. He opened the trunk, got out the dog food and a can opener and fixed the dog her meal, which he left on the front seat. He took two thousand dollars out of the moneybag and stuffed it in his pockets because this is how a club owner walks into a room. He put the gun in his right hip pocket. His name was stamped in gold inside his hat.

But language is DeLillo's plastique. He composes out of gnarled speech—funny, vulgar, gnomic—stunning cantatas for the damned to sing. *Libra* is as choral as it is cinematic. Marguerite's the scariest mother since *Faust*, and David Ferrie, with his homemade eyebrows, mohair toupee and the land mines in his kitchen, his expertise on cancer and astrology, seems to speak to us through the cavities in our teeth: "All my fears are primitive. It's the limbic system of the brain. I've got a million years of terror stored up there." For Ferrie, "astrology is the language of the night sky, of stary aspect and position, the truth at the end of human affairs." Oswald is a *Libra*, which means "scales": "You're a quirk of history," Ferrie says; "you're a coincidence." But we say coincidence when we don't know what to call it: "It goes deeper. . . . There's a hidden principle. Every process contains its own outcome." On learning of Kennedy's motorcade route, Ferrie's beside himself: "We didn't arrange your job in that building or set up the motorcade route. We don't have that kind of reach. . . . There's something else that's generating this event. A pattern outside experience. Something that jerks you out of the spin of history. I think you've had it backwards all the time. You wanted to enter history. Wrong approach, Leon. What you really want is out."

But, thinks Ferrie, "there's more to it. There's always more to it. This is what history consists of. It's the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us."

I'm inclined to believe him. I'm not a

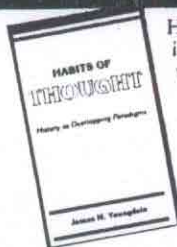
buff anymore; the assassination hurt my head. Maybe there was a second gunman on the grassy knoll. Maybe Ruby did owe money and a favor to the mob. Certainly the shadow world is full of rogues. We read about the novels they have written every day in the funny papers.

DeLillo, though, is an agnostic about reality itself. With its command of the facts and the fantasies, its slide-rule convergence, its cantatas and its hyperspace, *Libra's* plausible. But it's also art, the peculiar art he's been perfecting since the antihero of *Americana* abandoned the Vietnam War on television in New York for another war in the American interior. Since, in *End Zone*, football became a metaphor for Armageddon. Since, in *Great Jones Street*, a grotesque rock and roll amalgam of Jagger and Dylan hid out in the East Village from the thought police and the terror he'd himself sown in "the erotic dreams of the republic." Since, in *Ratner's Star*, the superstitions of astrophysics were deployed in a galaxy of time running out and space exploded. In *Players*, terrorists want to blow up the stock exchange, with some deracinated yuppie help. In *Running Dog*, secret agents, pornographers, Buddhists and Hitler all end up in Dallas. In *The Names*, a "risk analyst" for a company insuring multinational corporations against accidents of history goes to Athens, Ankara and Beirut to find out he's really working for the C.I.A., in the service of "new kinds of death." In *White Noise*, Nazis make a comeback in middle America in the cognitive dissonance at the heart of the consumer culture, where our universities are indistinguishable from our shopping malls, and we lie to ourselves in euphemisms on the TV set and in our dreams, and one of the ex-wives of a professor of Hitler Studies is a part-time spook: "She reviewed fiction for the CIA, mainly long serious novels with coded structures."

At the ends of these DeLillo novels, there was nothing left but relative densities of language. He was limbering up for the big dread.

With the White Knight gone, there is no coherence, no community, no faith, no accountability, merely hum. In a faithless culture, death is the ultimate kick. In a random cosmos (those accidental stars, that coincidental static) we need a new *black magic*, a theology of secrets. Against anarchism, nihilism, terrorism, why not an occult of the intelligence agency, the latest in gnostic

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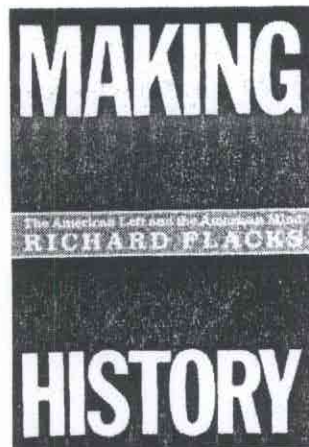
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heresies? Against meaninglessness: conspiracy. It's all modernism; Beckett and Borges and Nabokov: alienation of the self, by the self, against the self. James Jesus Angleton, like Parmenter a Yalie, was a poet and futurist before he was a spook. This storied counterintelligence Nabokovian published a literary magazine in the 1930s, *Furioso*, full of difficult modernists, including an Ezra Pound whose enthusiasm for Mussolini was apparently contagious. T.S. Eliot was his buddy and Thomas Mann came to lunch, and by the time Angleton had acceded at the agency to the very cerebellum of his "wilderness of mirrors," his labyrinth of "moles," he was known variously as The Poet, Gray Ghost, Mother and The Fisherman. If he could imagine it, they must be doing it. Naturally, everywhere, he saw "doubles." This is Conrad, and Kafka, and *The Wasteland*.

Oswald, of course, is the Underground Man.

In Asia and the Middle East, in Latin America and in Dallas, they are writing our novel, and they are insane. □

FILMS.

JAMES LARDNER

Married to the Mob Fatal Attraction (revisited)

M*arried to the Mob* imagines the sufferings of the young, attractive, restless wife of a minor mobster. Angela Demarco and her husband, Frankie (The Cucumber), live in an immaculate ranch house filled with spanking-new furniture and all the latest appliances, which Frankie brings home regularly—in factory cartons, without receipts. Their son Joey is 12 or thereabouts, and his idea of recreation (when his mother isn't watching) is three-card monte, with his classmates and neighbors as his victims. Angela's own leisure opportunities consist of card-playing dinners with the other wives from the organized crime family of Tony (The Tiger) Russo, Frankie's boss. Lately, though, she has been turning these invitations down on this pretext or that—to the consternation of her husband who, like any organization man with prospects, expects his wife to play her part.

"All the other wives get along with each other," Frankie complains.

Frankie is a philanderer—hence his nickname. But that's not why Angela wants out of the marriage. "Look at this place!" she hollers at him. "Everything we wear, everything we eat, everything we own fell off a truck! Everything has blood on it!"

Frankie is bewildered. A wife criticizing her husband for being a good provider? It must be the wrong time of the month.

Movie mobsters have been growing tamer—more like corporate executives—for decades, and *Married to the Mob* reduces them for comic effect to suburban twits, utterly devoted to sex and money, the sort who populate the fictions of Richard Yates or John Updike. Angela's grievances, with minor alterations, could be those of any independent-spirited woman who got married, too young, to a man of limited horizons in a dubious line of work. Her husband might as well be a budding arbitrator, or a real estate lawyer; and Alec Baldwin, as Frankie, doesn't play up the thuggish side of the character. He's just another suburban male who takes his wife for granted. The movie opens with Frankie and an associate executing a hit on the 8:10 commuter train from Mineola, New York—a setting in which Frankie seems quite at home.

Married to the Mob was dreamed up by Barry Strugatz and Mark Burns, two screenwriters whose gainful employment, until now, has been as a film editor and a location scout, respectively. Their script found its way to Orion Pictures, which shipped it along to the director Jonathan Demme—a choice possibly inspired by the fact that his last feature film, *Something Wild*, was also a comedy with a protagonist escaping (albeit involuntarily) from the strictures of a small-minded, middle-class existence.

One of the few live wires of the American film industry of the 1980s, Demme obviously enjoyed the challenge of composing a vision of suburban life among the organized crime set. He has one of the wives in an ersatz leopard-skin outfit, and another with a punk hairdo that makes her look like Mr. Spock of *Star Trek*. And we think: Why not? Why shouldn't mobsters' wives have evolved, aesthetically, since the 1950s? The movie displays just as much care in its choice of settings (including a mob eatery called the King's Roost and a motel called the Fantasia) and soundtrack (an original score by David Byrne supplemented by Rosemary Clooney's

rendering of "Mambo Italiano," plus an eclectic assortment of songs of more recent vintage). And, as usual, Demme has hunted down an odd but extremely pleasing company of actors, not one of whom has been asked to repeat something he or she has done before.

Michelle Pfeiffer, as Angela—Demme's great casting coup this time around—is delightful as well as beautiful. With her Long Island accent and perfected coiffed hairdo, she makes you believe that this is a woman who really could have wound up with Frankie The Cucumber and, at the same time, that she could be profoundly unhappy about it. Her mere presence in the mob milieu is both poignant and funny. In one early scene, Angela is cornered at the supermarket by a group of the other mob wives, each pushing her own cart, and they proceed to run her cart off the road in order to make her submit to a lecture from Tony The Tiger's formidable wife, Connie. (Tony has been making advances toward Angela. Connie warns her to keep her hands off Tony.) Objectively, there isn't much to this scene, but largely because of the rude contrast between Pfeiffer and the formidable Mercedes Ruehl, as Connie, it crackles with effortless humor. As long as the movie remains in suburbia, in fact—and as long as it remains centered on Angela and her family and friends—it's a howl.

In short order, however, Frankie is dead, Angela has picked up and moved to Manhattan—to the Lower East Side—and the quiet conflict between her and her circumstances has been replaced by a not-so-quiet conflict pitting the mob against a cut-up of an F.B.I. man played by Matthew Modine. There is something tired and reflexive about the way the script makes Angela the focus of the government's efforts to nab Tony. There is something a little lame, too, about the way Demme uses the downtown and the punk world as a background for Angela's redemption. In tone, the movie becomes a retreat of *Desperately Seeking Susan* and various other American New-Wave comedies of the eighties.

How does an inspired beginning fade into a humdrum middle and end (it happens often enough)? According to a press handout, *Married to the Mob* originated in the screenwriters' impulse to think up a story with a "strong woman" as the central character. Some inner demon must have told them, though, that