MATTERS OF FACT AND FICTION

IN 'LIBRA,' NOVELIST DON DELILLO EXPLORES THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY

THE TRAIN RIDE from midtown Manhattan to the picture-book Westchester County suburb where novelist Don DeLillo lives offers a capsule view of virtually the entire spectrum of American life. After leaving Grand Central Station, the train comes up from underground at Ninety-sixth Street on Manhattan's East Side, rolls serenely through Harlem, then crosses the Harlem River and enters the devastated landscape of the South Bronx. ¶ The journey continues through the North Bronx, the working-class neighborhood where DeLillo, whose parents were Italian immigrants, grew up and attended college at Fordham University. Finally, the train passes into Westchester's leafy environs. ¶ At DeLillo's station, the author and his wife, Barbara Bennett, are waiting. The sun is blazing, and the August heat is crushing. Like the train trip, which links the quotidian splendor and the nightmarish underside of the American dream, the brutal weather seems appropriate. "This is the last comfortable moment you'll have for a while," DeLillo says with a smile as he gets into the car. "The car is air-conditioned, but the house isn't." ¶ One of the major voices in American fiction for nearly two decades, DeLillo, who is now fifty-one, rarely grants interviews. He lacks "the nec-

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRITAIN HILL

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

essary self-importance," as he puts it. "I'm just not a public man," he says. "I'd rather write my books in private and then send them out into the world to discover their own public life." But the publication of his ninth novel, *Libra* – a fictional account of the assassination of John Kennedy, told from the perspective of Lee Harvey Oswald – has prompted him to speak.

"*Libra* is easier to talk about than my previous books," DeLillo says. "The obvious reason is it's grounded in reality and there are real people to discuss. Even someone who hasn't read the book can respond at least in a limited way to any discussion of people like Lee Oswald or Jack Ruby. It is firmer material. I'm always reluctant to get into abstract discussions, which I admit my earlier novels tended to lean toward. I wrote them, but I don't necessarily enjoy talking about them."

Still, *Libra* – which is DeLillo's first best seller and a nominee for a 1988 National Book Award for fiction – is more of a culmination than a departure. DeLillo's first novel, *Americana*, which appeared in 1971, ends in Dealey Plaza, in Dallas, the site of the Kennedy assassination, and references to the slaying turn up in several of his other books. In 1983, DeLillo wrote a piece for ROLLING STONE about the impact of the assassination twenty years later. Titled "American Blood," that essay effectively serves as a précis for *Libra*.

Moreover, rather than advancing yet another "theory" of the assassination, *Libra* simply carries forward the themes of violence and conspiracy that have come to define DeLillo's fiction. "This is a work of the imagination," he writes in the author's note that concludes the book. "While drawing from the historical record, I've made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination." Instead, he hopes the novel will provide "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."

In *Libra*, DeLillo describes the murder of the president as "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century." But this cataclysm differs only in scale from the killings that shatter complacent, enclosed lives in the novels *Players* (1977), *Running Dog* (1978) and *The Names* (1982).

Similarly, the college-football player who is the main character in *End Zone* (1972) and the rock-star hero of *Great Jones Street* (1973) both achieve an alienation that rivals the emotional state DeLillo sees in Lee Harvey Oswald. Apocalyptic events profound in their impact and uncertain in their ultimate meaning shadow *Ratner's Star* (1976) and *White Noise* (1985), just as the assassination does the world of *Libra* – and our world, a quarter of a century after it occurred.

This interview takes place in DeLillo's back yard; afterward we'll head to a diner on the town square – a village center "like something out of the Fifties," DeLillo says approvingly – for a late lunch of burgers, fries and Cokes. In his yard, DeLillo sits on a lawn chair and sips iced tea. Fortunately, the yard is shady, and the sky clouds over a bit. Even so, the heat, the humidity, the lush green of the grounds and the eerie din of cicadas give the scene an almost tropical feel. DeLillo – wiry and intense, wearing jeans and a plaid shirt open at the collar, speaking with deliberate slowness in a gripping monotone – seems the image of a modern-day Kurtz, a literary explorer of the heart of darkness comfortably at home in the suburbs of America.

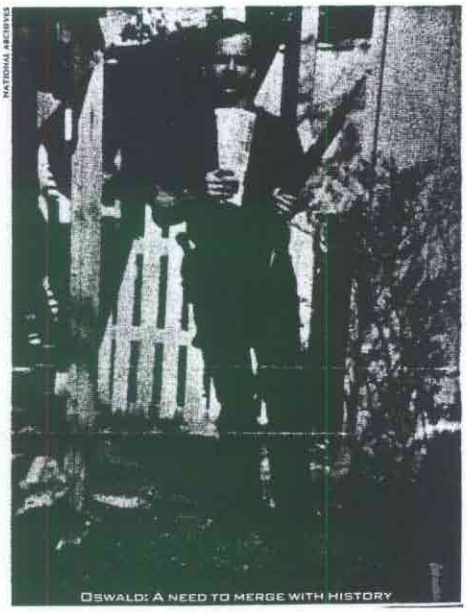
The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it hadn't happened?

Maybe it invented me. Certainly, when it happened, I was not a fully formed writer; I had only published some short stories in small quarterlies. As I was working on *Libra*, it occurred to me that a lot of tendencies in my first eight novels seemed to be collecting around the dark center of the assassination. So it's possible I wouldn't have become the kind of writer I am if it weren't for the assassination.

What kind of impact did the assassination have on you?

It had a strong impact, as it obviously did for everyone. As the years have flowed away from that point, I think we've all come to feel that what's been missing over these past twenty-five years is a sense of a manageable reality. Much of that feeling can be traced to that one moment in Dallas. We seem much more aware of elements like randomness and ambiguity and chaos since then.

A character in the novel describes the assassination as "an aberration in the heartland of the real." We still haven't reached any consensus on the specifics of the crime: the number of gunmen, the number of shots, the location of the shots, the number of wounds in the president's body – the list goes on and on. Beyond this confusion of data, people have developed a sense that history has been secretly manipulated. Documents lost and destroyed. Official records sealed for fifty or seventy-five years. A number of suggestive murders and suicides involving people who were connected to the events of November 22nd. So from the initial impact of the visceral shock, I think we've developed a much more deeply unsettled feeling about our grip on reality.


NATIONAL ARCHIVES

OSWALD: A NEED TO MERGE WITH HISTORY

You have been interested for a long time in the media, which certainly played a major role in the national experience of the assassination. Television had just made its impact on politics in the 1960 election, and then for the week following the murder, it seemed that everyone was watching television, seeing Jack Ruby's murder of Lee Harvey Oswald and then Kennedy's funeral. It's as if the power of the media in our culture hadn't been fully felt until that point.

It's strange that the power of television was utilized to its fullest, perhaps for the first time, as it pertained to a violent event. Not only a violent but, of course, an extraordinarily significant event. This has become part of our consciousness. We've developed almost a sense of performance as it applies to televised events. And I think some of the people who are essential to such events – particularly violent events and particularly people like Arthur Bremer and John Hinckley [the would-be assassins, respectively, of George Wallace and Ronald Reagan] – are simply carrying their performing selves out of the wings and into the theater. Such young men have a sense of the way in which their acts will be perceived by the rest of us, even as they commit the acts. So there is a deeply self-referring element in our lives that wasn't there before.

You refer to the assassination at various points in novels prior to 'Libra,' and of course, you wrote an essay about the assassination for this magazine in 1983. What finally made you feel that you had to pursue it as the subject of a novel?

I didn't start thinking about it as a major subject until the early part of this decade. When I did the 1983 piece in ROLLING STONE, I began to realize how enormously wide reaching the material was and how much more deeply I would have to search before I could begin to do justice to it.

Possibly a motivating element was the fact that Oswald and I lived within six or seven blocks of each other in the Bronx. I didn't know this until I did the research for the ROLLING STONE piece. He and his mother, Marguerite, traveled to New York in '52 or early '53, because her oldest son was stationed at Ellis Island with the Coast Guard. They got in the car and drove all the way to New York and eventually settled in the Bronx. Oswald lived very near the Bronx Zoo. I guess he was thirteen and I was sixteen at the time.

Did it seem odd that some reviews evaluated your theory of the assassination almost as if it were fact and not fiction?

Inevitably some people reviewed the assassination itself instead of a piece of work which is obviously fiction. My own feeling at the very beginning was that I had to do justice to historical likelihood. In other words, I chose what I consider the most obvious possibility: that the assassination was the work of anti-Castro elements. I could perhaps have written the same book with a completely different assassination scenario. I wanted to be obvious in this case because I didn't want novelistic invention to become the heart of the book. I wanted a clear historical center on which I could work my fictional variations.

Apart from the personal reason you mentioned, why did you choose to tell the story from Oswald's point of view?

I think I have an idea of what it's like to be an outsider in this society. Oswald was clearly an outsider, although he fought against his exclusion. I had a very haunting sense of what kind of life he led and what kind of person he was. I experienced it when I saw the

places where he lived in New Orleans and in Dallas and in Fort Worth. I had a very clear sense of a man living on the margins of society. He was the kind of person we think we know until we delve more deeply. Who would have expected someone like that to defect to the Soviet Union? He started reading socialist writing when he was fifteen, then, as soon as he became old enough, joined the marines. This element of self-contradiction seemed to exemplify his life. There seemed to be a pattern of self-argument.

When he returned from the Soviet Union, he devised a list of answers to possible questions he'd be asked by the authorities upon disembarking. One set of answers could be characterized as the replies of a simple tourist who just happened to have spent two and a half years at the heart of the Soviet Union and is delighted to be returning to his home country. The other set of answers was full of defiance and anger at the inequities of life in capitalist society. These mutually hostile elements seemed always to be part of Oswald's life.

It's almost as if Oswald embodied a postmodern notion of character in which the self isn't fixed and you assume or discard traits as the mood strikes you.

Someone who knew Oswald referred to him as an actor in real life, and I do think there is a sense in which he was watching himself perform. I tried to insert this element into *Libra* on a number of occasions.

I think that Oswald anticipates men like Hinckley and Bremer. His attempt to kill General Edwin Walker was a strictly political act: Walker was a right-wing figure, and Oswald was, of course, pro-Castro. But Oswald's attempt on Kennedy was more complicated. I think it was based on elements outside politics and, as someone in the novel says, outside history – things like dreams and coincidences and even the movement or the configuration of the stars, which is one reason the book is called *Libra*. The rage and frustration he had felt for twenty-four years, plus the enormous coincidence that the motorcade would be passing the building where he worked – these are the things that combined to drive Oswald toward attempting to kill the president.

You quote Oswald's statement about wanting to be a fiction writer, and you describe him as having lived a life in small rooms, which is a phrase similar to ones you've used to describe your life as a writer. Do you see Oswald as an author of some kind?

Well, he did make that statement in his application for the Albert Schweitzer College. He did say he wanted to be a writer. He wanted to write "short stories on contemporary American life" – and this, of course, is a striking remark coming from someone like him. There's no evidence that he ever wrote any fiction; none apparently has survived if he did. But I think the recurring motif in the book of men in small rooms refers to Oswald much more as an outsider than as a writer. I think he had a strong identification with people like Trotsky and Castro, who spent long periods in prison. I think he felt that with enough perseverance and enough determination these men would survive their incarcerations and eventually be swept by history right out of the room. Out of the room and out of the self. To merge with history is to escape the self. I think Oswald knew this. He said as much in a letter to his brother. It is the epigraph [to *Libra*]: "Happiness is taking part in the struggle, where there is no borderline between one's own personal world, and the world in general."

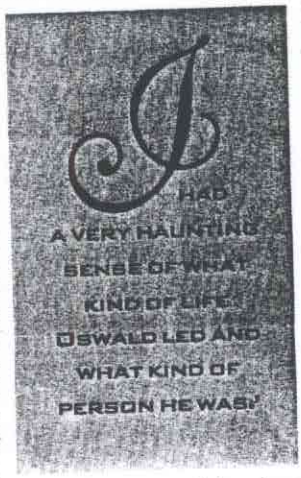
I think we can take Oswald's life as the attempt to find that place. But he never could. He never lost sight of the borderline. He never was able to merge with the world in general or with history in particular. His life in small rooms is the antithesis of the life America seems to promise its citizens: the life of consumer fulfillment.

You read the Warren Commission Report and traveled quite a bit. Did you do other research for 'Libra'?

I looked at films and listened to tapes. Hearing Oswald's voice and his mother's voice was extremely interesting. Particularly interesting was a tape of an appearance Oswald made on the radio in New Orleans in the summer of 1963. He sounds like a socialist candidate for office. He was extremely articulate and extremely clever in escaping difficult questions. Listening to this man and then reading the things he had earlier written in his so-called historic diary, which is enormously chaotic and almost childlike, again seemed to point to a man who was a living self-contradiction. Nothing I had earlier known about Oswald led me to think that he could sound so intelligent and articulate as he did on this radio program.

At one point you describe the Warren Commission Report, which is twenty-six volumes long, as the novel that James Joyce might have written if he had moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred.

I asked myself what Joyce could possibly do after *Finnegans Wake*, and this was the answer. It's an amazing document. The first fifteen volumes are devoted to testimony and the last eleven volumes to exhibits, and together we have a masterwork of trivia ranging from Jack Ruby's mother's dental records to photographs of knotted string. What was valuable to me most specifically was the testimony of dozens and dozens of people who talk not only about their connection to the assassination itself but about their jobs, their marriages, their children. This testimony provided an extraordinary window on life in the Fifties and Sixties and, beyond that, gave me a sense of people's speech patterns, whether they were private detectives from New Orleans or railroad workers from Fort Worth.



How long did it take to write 'Libra'?

A little over three years.

Given the complexity of the subject, was there any point that constituted a breakthrough for you?

Once I found Oswald's voice – and by voice I mean not just the way he spoke to people but his inner structure, his consciousness, the sound of his thinking – I began to feel that I was nearly home free. It's interesting that once you find the right rhythm for your sentences, you may be well on your way to finding the character himself. And once I came upon a kind of abrupt, broken rhythm both in dialogue and in narration, I felt this was the prose counterpart to not only Oswald's inner life but Jack Ruby's as well.

The title 'Libra' seems to reflect the concern in your novels with the occult and superstitions of various kinds. What fascinates you about those nonrational systems?

I think my work has always been informed by mystery; the final answer, if there is one at all, is outside the book. My books are open-ended. I would say that mystery in general rather than the occult is something that weaves in and out of my work. I can't tell you where it came from or what it leads to. Possibly it is the natural product of a Catholic upbringing.

Libra was Oswald's sign, and because Libra refers to the scales, it seemed appropriate to a man who harbored contradictions and who could tilt either way.

Did you select the photo of Oswald that's on the cover?

I asked Viking to consider using it, yes. It seems that picture would be one of the central artifacts of Oswald's life. He is holding a rifle, carrying a revolver at his hip and holding in his free hand copies of *The Militant* and *The Worker*, two left-wing journals he regularly read. He's dressed in black. He's almost the poor man's James Dean in that picture, and there's definitely an idea of the performing self. He told his wife that he wanted her to take this picture so that their daughter may one day know what kind of person her father was.

In the author's note at the end of 'Libra,' you say the novel might serve as a kind of refuge for readers. There is an implication that searching for a "solution" to the mysteries of the assassination, as the CIA historian Nicholas Branch does in the book, leads inevitably to a mental and spiritual dead end. What does fiction offer people that history denies to them?

Branch feels overwhelmed by the massive data he has to deal with. He feels the path is changing as he writes. He despairs of being able to complete a coherent account of this extraordinarily complex event. I think the fiction writer tries to redeem this despair. Stories can be a consolation – at least in theory. The novelist can try to leap across the barrier of fact, and the reader is willing to take that leap with him as long as there's a kind of redemptive truth waiting on the other side, a sense that we've arrived at a resolution.

I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the sometimes superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it – correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don't encounter elsewhere.

From a certain vantage point, your books can almost be taken as a systematic look at various aspects of American life: the Kennedy assassination, rock music in 'Great Jones Street,' science and mathematics in 'Ratner's Star,' football in 'End Zone.' Do you proceed in that methodical a fashion?

No, not at all. That notion breaks down rather easily if you analyze it. *Americana* is not about any one area of our experience. *End Zone* wasn't about football. It's a fairly elusive novel. It seems to me to be about extreme places and extreme states of mind, more than anything else. Certainly there is very little about rock music in *Great Jones Street*, although the hero is a musician. The interesting thing about that particular character is that he seems to be at a crossroad between murder and suicide. For me, that defines the period between 1965 and 1975, say, and I thought it was best exemplified in a rock-music star. *Ratner's Star* is not about mathematics as such. I've never attempted to embark on a systematic exploration of American experience. I take the ideas as they come.

On the other hand, some specific American realities have a draw for you.

Certainly there are themes that recur. Perhaps a sense of secret patterns in our lives. A sense of ambiguity. Certainly the violence of contemporary life is a motif. I see contemporary violence as a kind of sardonic response to the promise of consumer fulfillment in America. Again we come back to these men in small rooms who can't get out and who have to organize their desperation and their loneliness, who have to give it a destiny and who often end up doing this through violent means. I see this desperation against the backdrop of brightly colored packages and products and consumer happiness and every promise that American life makes day by day and minute by minute everywhere we go.

In 'The Names,' which is principally set in Greece, you speak about the way Americans abroad especially seem to feel the imminence of violence.

I do believe that Americans living abroad feel a self-consciousness that they don't feel when they are at home. They become students of themselves. They see themselves as the people around them see them, as Americans with a capital *A*. Because being American is a sensitive thing in so many parts of the world, the American response to violence, to terror, in places like the Middle East and Greece is often a response tinged with inevitability, almost with apology. We're just waiting for it to happen to us. It becomes part of a sophisticated form of humor that people exchange almost as a matter of course. The humor of political dread.

Humor plays an important role in your novels. Do you see it as providing relief from the grimness of some of your subjects?

I don't think the humor is intended to counteract the fear. It's almost *part* of it. We ourselves may almost instantaneously use humor to offset a particular moment of discomfort or fear, but this reflex is so deeply woven into the original fear that they almost become the same thing.

Your first novel, 'Americana,' was published when you were about thirty-five, which is rather late. Did you think of yourself as a writer before that?

Americana took a long time to write because I had to keep interrupting it to earn a living, which I was doing at that time by writing freelance, mostly advertising material. It also took a long time because I didn't know what I was doing. I was about two years into the novel when I realized I was a writer – not because I thought the novel would even be published but because sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph I was beginning to see that I had abilities I hadn't demonstrated in earlier work.

I think I started work on *End Zone* just weeks after I finished *Americana*. The long-drawn-out, somewhat aimless experience of writing *Americana* was immediately replaced by a quick burst of carefully directed activity. I did *End Zone* in about one-fourth the time it had taken me to write *Americana*.

Movies frequently come up in your work. When did they become significant for you?

I began to understand the force that movies could have emotionally and intellectually in what I consider the great era of the European films: Godard, Antonioni, Fellini, Bergman. And American directors as well – Kubrick and Howard Hawks and others.

What did you find inspirational about those directors?

Well, they seem to fracture reality. They find mystery in commonplace moments. They find humor in even the gravest political acts. They seem to find an art and a seriousness which I think was completely unexpected and which had once been the province of literature alone. So that a popular art was suddenly seen as a serious art. And this was interesting and inspiring.

Both 'The Names' and 'Ratner's Star' are pretty exacting texts. Is the difficulty of those books part of a commitment you feel you need to demand from readers?

From this perspective I can see that the reader would have to earn his way into *Ratner's Star*, but this was not something I'd been trying to do. It seems to me that *Ratner's Star* is a book which is almost all structure. The structure of the book *is* the book. The characters are intentionally flattened and cartoon-like. I was trying to build a novel which was not only *about* mathematics to some extent but which itself would become a piece of mathematics. It would be a book which embodied pattern and order and harmony, which is one of the traditional goals of pure mathematics.

In *The Names*, I spent a lot of time searching for the kind of sun-cut precision I found in Greek light and in the Greek landscape. I wanted a prose which would have the clarity and the accuracy which the natural environment at its best in that part of the world seems to inspire in our own senses. I mean, there were periods in Greece when I tasted and saw and heard with much more sharpness and clarity than I'd ever done before or since. And I wanted to discover a sentence, a way of writing sentences that would be the prose counterpart to that clarity – that sensuous clarity of the Aegean experience. Those were my conscious goals in those two books.

In 'The Names' and some of your other books, language itself seems to be one of your subjects. That self-referential quality parallels a lot of theoretical work being done in philosophy and literary criticism these days. Do you read much writing of that kind?

No, I don't. It is just my sense that we live in a kind of circular or near-circular system and that there are an in-

creasing number of rings which keep intersecting at some point, whether you're using a plastic card to draw money out of your account at an automatic-teller machine or thinking about the movement of planetary bodies. I mean, these systems all seem to interact to me. But I view all this in the most general terms, and I have no idea what kind of scientific studies are taking place. The secrets within systems, I suppose, are things that have informed my work. But they're almost secrets of consciousness, or ways in which consciousness is replicated in the natural world.

There also seems to be a fascination with euphemism and jargon in your books; for example, the poisonous cloud of gas that creates an environmental disaster in 'White Noise' is repeatedly referred to as the "airborne toxic event."

It's a language that almost holds off reality while at the same time trying to fit it into a formal pattern. The interesting thing about jargon is that if it lives long enough, it stops being jargon and becomes part of natural speech, and we all find ourselves using it. I think we might all be disposed to use phrases like *time frame*, which, when it was first used during the Watergate investigation, had an almost evil aura to it.

I don't think of language in a theoretical way. I approach it at street level. That is, I listen carefully to the way people speak. And I find that the closer a writer comes to portraying actual speech, the more stylized it seems on the page, so that the reader may well conclude that this is a formal experiment in dialogue instead of a simple transcription, which it actually is. When I started writing *Players*, my idea was to fill the novel with the kind of intimate, casual, off-the-cuff speech between close friends or husbands and wives. This was the whole point of the book as far as I was concerned. But somehow I got sidetracked almost immediately and found myself describing a murder on the floor of the stock exchange, and of course from that point the book took a completely different direction. Nevertheless, in *Players*, I think there is still a sense of speech as it actually falls from the lips of people. And I did that again in *Libra*. In this case I wasn't translating spoken speech as much as the printed speech of people who testified before the Warren Commission. Marguerite Oswald has an extremely unique way of speaking, and I didn't have to invent this at all. I simply had to read it and then remake it, rehear it for the purposes of the particular passage I was writing.

Often your characters are criticized for being unrealistic – children who speak like adults or, as in 'Ratner's Star,' characters whose consciousnesses seem at points to blur one into the other. How do you view your characters?

Probably, *Libra* is the exception to my work in that I tried a little harder to connect motivation with action. This is because there is an official record of – if not motivation, at least of action on the part of so many of the characters in the book. So it had to make a certain amount of sense, and what sense was missing I tried to supply. For example, why did Oswald shoot President Kennedy? I don't think anyone knows, but in the book I've attempted to fill in that gap, although not at all in a specific way.

There's no short answer to the question. You either find yourself entering a character's life and consciousness or you don't, and in much modern fiction I don't think you are required to, either as a writer or a reader. Many modern characters have a flattened existence – purposely – and many modern characters exist precisely nowhere. There isn't a strong sense of place in much modern writing. Again, this is where I differ from what we could call the mainstream. I do feel a need and a drive to paint a kind of thick surface around my characters. I think all my novels have a strong sense of place.

But in contemporary writing in general, there's a strong sense that the world of Beckett and Kafka has redescended on contemporary America, because characters seem to live in a theoretical environment rather than in a real one. I haven't felt that I'm part of that. I've always had a grounding in the real world, whatever esoteric flights I might indulge in from time to time.

There seems to be a fondness in your writing, particularly in 'White Noise,' for what might be described as the trappings of suburban middle-class existence, to the point where one character in that book describes the supermarket as a sacred place.

I would call it a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments. In *White Noise* in particular, I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness. Sometimes this radiance can be almost frightening. Other times it can be almost holy or sacred. Is it really there? Well, yes. You know, I don't believe as Murray Jay Siskind does in *White Noise* that the supermarket is a form of Tibetan lamasery. But there is something there that we tend to miss.

Imagine someone from the third world who has never set foot in a place like that suddenly transported to an A&P in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. Wouldn't he be elated or frightened? Wouldn't he sense that something transcending is about to happen to him in the midst of all this brightness? So I think that's something that has been in the background of my work: a sense of something extraordinary hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision.

Hitler and the Holocaust have repeatedly been addressed in your books. In 'Running Dog,' a pornographic movie allegedly filmed in Hitler's bunker determines a good deal of the novel's plot. In 'White [Cont. on 164]

[Cont. from 121] *Noise,' university professor Jack Gladney attempts to calm his obsessive fear of death through his work in the Department of Hitler Studies.*

In his case, Gladney finds a perverse form of protection. The damage caused by Hitler was so enormous that Gladney feels he can disappear inside it and that his own puny dread will be overwhelmed by the vastness, the monstrosity of Hitler himself. He feels that Hitler is not only bigger than life, as we say of many famous figures, but bigger than death. Our sense of fear – we avoid it because we feel it so deeply, so there is an intense conflict at work. I brought this conflict to the surface in the shape of Jack Gladney.

I think it is something we all feel, something we almost never talk about, something that is *almost* there. I tried to relate it in *White Noise* to this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch. This extraordinary wonder of things is somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions.

There's something of an apocalyptic feel about your books, an intimation that our world is moving toward greater randomness and dissolution, or maybe even cataclysm. Do you see this process as irreversible?

It could change tomorrow. This is the shape my books take because this is the reality I see. This reality has become part of all our lives over the past twenty-five years. I don't know how we can deny it.

I don't think *Libra* is a paranoid book at all. I think it's a clearsighted, reasonable piece of work which takes into account the enormous paranoia which has ensued from the assassination. I can say the same thing about some of my other books. They're *about* movements or feelings in the air and in the culture around us, without necessarily being *part* of the particular movement. I mean, what I sense is suspicion and distrust and fear, and so, of course, these things inform my books. It's my idea of myself as a writer – perhaps mistaken – that I enter these worlds as a completely rational person who is simply taking what he senses all around him and using it as material.

You've spoken of the redemptive quality of fiction. Do you see your books as offering an alternative to the dark reality you detect?

Well, strictly in theory, art is one of the consolation prizes we receive for having lived in a difficult and sometimes chaotic world. We seek pattern in art that eludes us in natural experience. This isn't to say that art has to be comforting; obviously, it can be deeply disturbing. But nothing in *Libra* can begin to approach the level of disquiet and dread characterized by the assassination itself. ■