

BOOKS

Appointment in Dallas

JFK's murder as fiction

Libra. By Don DeLillo. 456 pages. Viking. \$19.95.

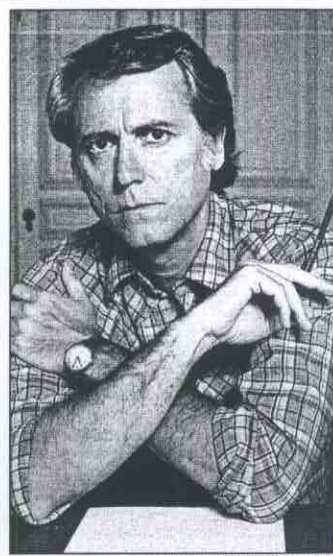
We need an electrifying event," says one of the conspirators in Don DeLillo's fictional re-creation of events leading up to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. "JFK is moving toward a settling of differences with Castro." The speaker is a disaffected CIA man, and the conversation takes place on April 17, 1963, the second anniversary of the Bay of Pigs. "If we want a second invasion... we have to move the Cuban matter past the edge of all these sweet maneuverings... We know Cuban intelligence has people in Miami. We want to set up an event that will make it appear they have struck at the heart of our government." His listener is a Bay of Pigs veteran who has taken part in failed CIA schemes to kill Castro with poisoned cigars. Says the veteran cynically, "We couldn't hit Castro. So let's hit Kennedy. I wonder if that's the hidden motive here." To which the deviser of the plot replies: "But we don't hit Kennedy. We miss him."

How the planned fake assassination attempt turns into a real one is the subject of the most ambitious novel DeLillo has written. A preoccupation with extreme events has been an element in his eight earlier books. Football at a world's-edge Texas college became a metaphor for nuclear war in his best early novel, "End Zone" (Penguin, \$6.95). A lethal chemical spill, euphemized in news bulletins as an "airborne toxic event," was the epic central happening in his prize-winning last novel, "White Noise" (Penguin, \$6.95). In one of his rare failures, "The Names" (Vintage, \$6.95), he was unable to convince us that an elaborate and mysterious conspiracy was taking place in the real world.

But in "Libra" he's chosen a subject that gives his dire imagination a firm grounding in catastrophic history. He boldly enters the minds of Lee Oswald, his wife, Marina, and Oswald's bizarre mother, Marguerite, inventing a convincing



NATIONAL ARCHIVES



BERNARD GOTTFRYD—NEWSWEEK

'We need an electrifying event': Oswald in Dallas, early 1963 (left), novelist DeLillo

interior voice for each of them. He is particularly successful in bringing to life the sweaty, pill-popping club owner Jack Ruby, who kills Oswald, in DeLillo's version of the story, to settle a \$40,000 debt to the mob. Ruby speaks the elevated formal lingo of the semiliterate. "I'm not a person who maintains a malice," he tells a stripper who asks about his background. "You should know my early life, Brenda, which I'm still obsessed. My mother, this is the God-honest truth, I swear to God. She spent thirty years of her life claiming there was a fishbone stuck in her throat."

DeLillo resurrects dimly remembered figures who were churned up in the Warren Commission investigations and the

publicity circus staged by New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison. To these historical characters he adds invented FBI and CIA operatives, Cuban exiles, Mafia chieftains who want their Havana casinos back—so plausibly that the blurred line between fiction and research drives one to library shelves for books on the assassination. Some of DeLillo's most outlandish characters turn out to be real. There's a memorable portrait of the right-wing paranoiac Gen. Edwin Walker ("The Red Chinese are massing below the California border. There are confirmed reports"), at whom Oswald took an unsuccessful shot seven months before Kennedy's visit to Dallas. ("We're heading into nut country

'A Precinct of Chaos and Ambiguity'

Highlights from a talk with Don DeLillo:

Lee Harvey Oswald and I lived very near each other in the Bronx for about a year. He was about 13; I was 16 then. I didn't know we lived so close together until about 1980, and I'm sure that discovery in some way was an incentive to get serious about this material.

Since the Kennedy assassination we've come to feel that a coherent reality is missing

in our lives, that we've entered a precinct of chaos and ambiguity. And there has developed in our minds a sense of the secret manipulation of history—documents lost or destroyed, official records sealed, a number of suggestive murders and suicides. We distrust things automatically, and automatically believe there's more than what they're telling us. I think this sense of a concealed reality is something new in the world, and it's now part of our psychic lives.

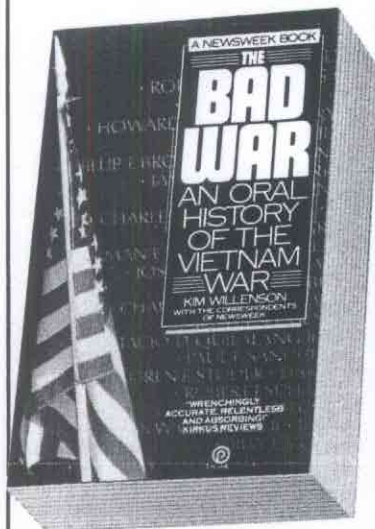
I asked myself what James Joyce would have written after "Finnegans Wake," and the answer was the Warren Report. It is, in a way, a modernist novel...

I think there's a possibility that if there were other people involved [in the assassination] that someone will one day talk. I certainly don't expect it to happen, but if there are answers they're out there somewhere in the air, just waiting to fall on us like acid rain.

"Bravo!

The cast of characters is epic, the story tragic, the emotions bring us back in time to a place we're still trying to get out of."

—OLIVER STONE, Academy Award-winning writer/director of *Platoon*



**By Kim Willenson
with the Correspondents
of Newsweek**

The voices in this book tell it like it was. How we got into Vietnam. What we did there, and what it did to us. Why and how we got out. And what it has meant both to the U.S. and to Vietnam since. This book is not history as set down by historians. It is history as lived by those who made it: Senator Fulbright, George S. Patton III, Joan Baez, Walter Cronkite, GIs, CIA agents, media reporters, POWs, South Vietnamese ex-generals, and boat people.

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PLUME

T H E A R T S

now," the president says to his wife during their ride from the airport on Nov. 22.)

DeLillo's fictional premise is that a right-wing conspiracy intended to create a paper trail of suspects and that Oswald walked into a prepared pattern. "What were they looking for?" Oswald asks on finding that his apartment has been searched. He gets his answer from David Ferrie, a homosexual former airline pilot who wears a wig and pasted-on eyebrows to disguise the effects of a rare skin disease that left him hairless. Ferrie, who actually existed, responds: "Signs that you exist. Evidence that Lee Oswald matches the cardboard cutout they've been shaping all along. You're a quirk of history. You're a coincidence. They devise a plan, you fit it perfectly."

In an Author's Note at the end, DeLillo emphasizes that he's written a work of fiction that proposes no solution to the multifarious conspiracy theories about the assassination. Within the novel, he's invented a CIA historian, Nicholas Branch, to speak for him: "If we're on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme ... everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us." Instead, Branch concludes, the conspiracy was "a rambling affair that succeeded in short term due mainly to chance." One of DeLillo's characters describes coincidence as a science waiting to be discovered.

'Hard gleam': His novel is at its best in mundane, fragmented conversations recorded by a master of the inarticulate. Two strippers in one of Jack Ruby's clubs debate the relative sex appeal of the Kennedy brothers. "Bobby is the one who could make me crazy. He has got this little hard gleam," says one. "He could drive me into wah wah land ... he's got this little meanness in the eye but he doesn't really know it like?" Her friend counters: "Give me his brother any day. Jack would be better in bed. I like a lover with some shoulder to him. I stay away from these rabbit types."

A mafioso reminisces about his glory days in Batista's Cuba: "The casino was golden walls. I mean beautiful. We had beautiful chandeliers, women in diamonds and mink stoles ... what's it called, brocade, the f—drapes." The pathetic, eccentric Marguerite Oswald garrulously addresses "your honor," an imaginary magistrate in the court of history, about her son's school years in New York's Bronx: "Lee purely loved animals so the zoo was a blessing but they sent him downtown to a building where the nut doctors pick at him twenty-four hours a day. Youth House. Puerto Ricans by the galore." Out of these squalid materials, DeLillo has made an overwhelming novel.

WALTER CLEMONS



NANCY CRAMPTON

The seedy, tweedy literati: Spark

Domestic Terrorism

A Far Cry From Kensington. By Muriel Spark. 189 pages. Houghton Mifflin. \$17.95.

In "Memento Mori," Muriel Spark's wonderful 1958 novel, each member of a geriatric set receives a crank call with the message "Remember, you must die." This may be the paradigmatic Spark predicament: her characters define themselves by their individual reactions to a common provocation, which often as not is an act of domestic terrorism with a whiff of the supernatural about it. Undercutting the angst, meanwhile, is the comic vision conveyed in Spark's understated prose style: "Some of the geriatrics were still eating or doing various things with their slice of cake." The same blend of mild satire, moral crisis and eccentric humor distinguishes "A Far Cry From Kensington," Spark's charming new novel—her 15th since "Memento Mori," 18th in all.

Many readers were disappointed with "The Only Problem" (1984), Spark's fictional treatment of the philosophical problem of evil. "Kensington," less ponderous, happily reads like a spinoff of the obliquely autobiographical "Loitering With Intent" (1981), Spark's best recent book. Both are set among the seedy, tweedy literati of London in the decade following World War II. The year in "Kensington" is 1954, a crucial one in Spark's own life; she converted to Roman Catholicism that year and later began to write her first novel.

Our heroine is Mrs. Hawkins, a prematurely obese war widow, who will slim