

Mr. Jonathan Yardley
Washington Post
1150 15 St., NW
Washington, D.C. 20071

8/1/88

Dear Mr. Yardley,

From your review, DeLillo lies when he says he deals with "half-fact." He deals only with nonfacts.

Oswald can be made into a three-dimensional character from the records I've obtained under FOIA, in which DeLillo had no interest. He just made it up, except for part of his plot. That comes from a work of the French SDECE, originally 'L'Amérique Brule, changed to Farewell America. Honchô on that project was a character who took the name ~~Wesley~~ James Hepburn. Kirk Lane and Don Freed ripped this off in a movie they wrote.

It is common belief, as you say, that the conspiracy theories are of the left but in fact there were as many or more of the right, including by the Birchers, with whom there could not have been any Oswald association.

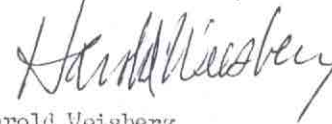
And rather than associating with Cuban refugees, he hated them and filed a complaint against them in New Orleans.

The FBI fabrication that Oswald was "red," adopted by the Warren Commission, is refuted by his writings that the Commission ignored but published. He called the American Communists exploiters and betrayers of the working class and the Russians "fat, stinking politicians."

If you ever hear of anyone who is interested in Oswald as a person, as I went over the FBI's records on him I made and filed separately copies of all his writings.

Your description is correct, this is nothing but exploitation by a commercializing author who was so unconcerned about ripping of the public mind he didn't even try to see what is available. He just made it up as he went.

Sincerely,



Harold Weisberg

Appointment In Dallas

Don Norman Gullyby
Post 7/31/88

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

DON DELILLO'S ninth book is presented as a work of fiction, but it is more accurately described as fanciful journalism: a retelling of the story of Lee Harvey Oswald in which, among other things, DeLillo has attempted to invent solutions to the many lacunae with which that story is riddled. It is a book to which readers are likely to be drawn both because DeLillo has now quite inexplicably acquired a substantial literary reputation and because Oswald's story—like those of Marilyn Monroe and James Dean and other 20th-century misfits—continues to fascinate us. But there is in truth precious little in *Libra* that illuminates and much that offends; it is, in the end, an act of exploitation.

No doubt *Libra* will be lavishly praised in those quarters where DeLillo's ostentatiously gloomy view of American life and culture is embraced. Like Robert Stone and Joan Didion and Russell Banks and others less prominent, DeLillo looks out from the comfortable vantage point of the literary hothouse and sees a country teeming with maniacal imperialists, right-wing zealots and unminged CIA operatives, and he populates his novels accordingly. For this he is applauded by those of like views, who manage to overlook his novels' many shortcomings as fiction so as to be able to celebrate the rectitude of their politics.

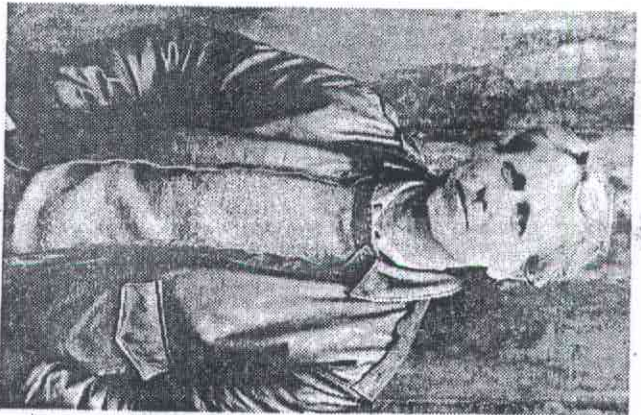
This politics is not, as it happens, my own, but that is neither here nor there; I would object every bit as strenuously to ideological fiction of the right or the middle as I do to that of the left. Fiction has a private address, as Eudora Welty once wrote, and when novelists attempt to mount soap-boxes they invariably twist fiction into mere polemic.

Thus it is with DeLillo. He is a writer of skill, wit and ingenuity, but he employs these considerable gifts in the evanescent craft of pamphleteering rather than the durable art of fiction. Never has this been more so than in *Libra*, which by contrast with DeLillo's previous novels is notable for its lack of interesting prose, its deficiency of wit and—this, perhaps, most surprising of all—its failure of the imagination; in *Libra*, that is to say, DeLillo offers no pleasures or surprises to compensate for the tedious predictability of his politics.

Leaving aside for the moment the problems inherent in fictionalizing the actual, the greatest disappointment of *Libra* is that DeLillo does not come within shouting distance of making a plausible or interesting character out of Lee Harvey Oswald. This strange, unknown and perhaps unknowable man was the instigator of what DeLillo calls "the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century," yet here he is portrayed as little more than an anonymous American of "mixed history" who sees himself as "a zero in the system" and longs "to reach the point where he was no longer separated from the true struggles that went on around him."

Who longs, that is, to be a part of history and to separate himself from the crowd. But is that really the best, the most inventive, that DeLillo can come up with? The image of the assassin as loner and victim is by now a commonplace, in large measure because what we know of the actual Oswald has made it so. My hope had been that DeLillo somehow could get past the received wisdom into a new understanding of Oswald, but this he fails to do. Instead he gives us little more than a cliché—a man for whom we clearly are intended to feel sympathy, but who does nothing to earn it because he never is shaped into a flesh-and-blood character.

He is, rather, a cat's-paw, not merely for the disgruntled CIA operatives, Cuban exiles and right-wing crazies whom DeLillo



Don DeLillo

JOYCE RAVO

imagines—does this come as any surprise?—to have been the architects of the assassination, but also for DeLillo's own politics. Oswald killed John F. Kennedy, this book argues, not by his own volition but as the unwitting agent of forces too large and malign for him to identify or comprehend: first a small band of CIA men who hope that an unsuccessful attempt on Kennedy's life will be the "electrifying event" that stirs up renewed anti-Castro activity, and then a cabal of lunatics who plan to involve Oswald in an actual assassination.

HE IS A *Libra*, poised on the scales between "the positive Libran who has achieved self-mastery" and "the negative Libran who is, let's say, somewhat unsteady and impulsive." The question is which direction his "dangerous leap" will take him, but the answer, DeLillo would have us believe, is that his course is beyond his control: he will go in whichever direction "they," who "were running messages into his skin," choose to take

him. "They" of course, are the CIA and the FBI and the John Birch Society and the Cuban exiles and the Mafia and all the others whose invisible hands, fiction such as this insists, control not merely Lee Harvey Oswald and his ilk, but all of us.

Yes, what we have here is a conspiracy theory, though DeLillo does back far enough off it to suggest that "the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance." This conclusion is reached by Nicholas Branch, who is assembling a "secret history of the assassination" for the CIA and who senses that it is a history so permeated with blood and death and mystery that its true ramifications can only be speculated upon. But this, again, is neither surprising nor interesting, merely a slight variation upon what the paranoid left has feasted on for a quarter-century.

In the end DeLillo says, "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." In fact, though, *Libra* is merely another ripple in that tide, precisely because it so clearly is not "apart and complete" within the literature of the assassination. Rather, in the guise of fiction it offers only still more "half-facts," presented through the eyes and actions of a cast of characters not a single member of which ever comes to life—precisely because each character is not a person but a representation of one point or another on DeLillo's political compass.

But one of these characters does deserve mention. DeLillo has had what can most charitably be described as the presumption to introduce Marina Oswald into his "fiction." Conversations between her and Lee Harvey Oswald are fabricated therein, as are episodes—albeit circumspcctly described—in their marital life. Upon what authority DeLillo manufactured these scenes, apart from sheer chutzpah, I cannot imagine; the liberties he has taken with the dead range from the plausible to the unwittingly comical, but those he has taken with the living are beneath contempt. ■