

# BOOK OF THE MONTH CLUB NEWS

OCTOBER

YOUR GUIDE TO THE RICHEST READING

1988



## LIBRA

BY DON DE LILLO

A political thriller that takes us into the mind  
of Lee Harvey Oswald



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## THE OCTOBER SELECTION



Photo: © Bob Jackson. Assembly by AVI Visual Productions.

BY  
DON  
DELILLO

*Report by Clifton Fadiman  
Member of the Book-of-the-Month Club Editorial Board*

Cover: letter from Wide World; Photo from Tony Spina; Assembly by AVI Visual Productions.



WS

1988

# A TALK WITH DON DELILLO

by Al Silverman



Don DeLillo

The magic intensity contained in all nine of Don DeLillo's novels, the sense of being on the edge of a crater waiting for a gust of wind to blow you in, is absent from the author himself. On the back of the jacket of his first book, *Americana*, you see a contemplative young man, thick dark hair, strong hairy arms, hands folded maybe self-consciously in thought. Eighteen years later, wearing naturally faded denim jacket and jeans, his hair now salt and pepper, DeLillo seems at least as contemplative, and not self-conscious at all. But in conversation about his work you sense restlessness. DeLillo does not like to be cornered. "I'm not interested in career building," he says. "That's why I don't teach, don't judge other fiction, don't review I just write."

In 1983 *Rolling Stone* magazine asked DeLillo to do a piece on assassins. He went to Dallas, Fort Worth, Miami, New Orleans. There he searched out the area where Lee Harvey Oswald tried to kill General Edwin Walker, a right-wing leader of the South's white supremacist movement. "In two shootings Lee covered the spectrum of contemporary violence. In the shooting of Walker he committed a political act. In shooting President Kennedy he committed an act rooted in fantasy and could be the forerunner of nonpolitical assassins like Hinckley, Bremer, Berkowitz."

DeLillo sometimes refers to Oswald as Lee because, he says, "I felt I understood him from the beginning. I understand outsiders and he's a model outsider. There was a fact, too, that he spent a year and a half in a part of the Bronx I knew so well, living six blocks from me." That was in 1953. Oswald was 13 and DeLillo 16.

Later DeLillo went to Fordham University in the Bronx, where, he once told an interviewer, "the Jesuits taught me to be a failed ascetic." He wrote advertising copy for a large New York agency and quit in 1963 after "the event," as DeLillo keeps calling the assassination, though he claims there was no connection. And he began to write. "I didn't become serious until halfway through my first novel when I realized I could be a novelist." His style, his unerring ear for language and for American themes have since won him a growing following. But *Libra* is his first novel taken from actual events. In a way he found it much more compelling to write.

"The fact that it's a real and tragic event, involving real people, provided me with additional energy," he says. He wrote mornings and afternoons, pored over the 26-volume Warren Report and read other books about the case in between. "For over three years my life was completely centered on the assassination and people involved in it. I was driven to work harder but not in a neurotic, obsessive way. An event rooted in fact is a little less self-involving. You're not always tunneling into your own consciousness."

"I don't think things have ever been the same in this country since," he says. "It opened a crack in this

society. Aside from visceral shock it introduced Americans to the idea of a psychic uncertainty that may be new to our experience, a prevailing sense of ambiguity over details and facts that comprise the evidence as we know it, the thing surrounded not only by mystery but a kind of suggestiveness. There's links within links."

As for the title of the book, DeLillo explains that *Libra* "is represented by scales. Oswald being a Libran could tilt to the left or the right. As a man of the political left," DeLillo says, "Oswald was being manipulated by forces on the right." And, DeLillo adds, there's "the notion of astrology as part of the force outside of history, which is the force of dreams, intuition, prayers, coincidences and alignment of the stars and planetary bodies."

To describe the odd disjunctions of Oswald's story, DeLillo's style shifted a bit from what he's used in other novels. For *Libra*, he says, "I was looking for a street rhythm, assigning these sentences to reflect a kind of inner life. To me this novel's sense of rhythm is a little more jagged and abrupt than others." He acknowledges that Joyce was his strongest early influence. But his most pervasive influences have been the moviemaking giants of the early 1960s—Bergman, Kurosawa, Antonioni, Godard.

It's a powerful technique, and places *Libra* in a great tradition. In *All the King's Men* Robert Penn Warren used Huey Long, the assassinated politician, as the focus of myth. In *Libra* DeLillo uses Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin, as his focus of myth. Myth mingles with reality and coalesces in a way that brings *Libra* closest to *All the King's Men* as the ultimate American political novel.

Al Silverman is chairman of Book-of-the-Month Club.



**W**ho was Lee Harvey Oswald? The historical record is incomplete: headlines that miss the man, endless investigations with no conclusions. Novelist Don DeLillo ventures beyond history into a world of plots, shadows and distortion. To read it is to move beyond events into nightmare, to be haunted and enthralled.

DeLillo uses complex historical records—he seems to have read them all—but reality is extended, many incidents and characters are invented, and the author boldly lowers us into the depths of the minds of Oswald, his mother, Marguerite, his wife, Marina, Jack Ruby, Gary Powers, the enigmatic George de Mohrenschildt, General Walker, a clutch of CIA agents, a roomful of anti-Castro conspirators, gunmen and thugs, half-remembered or imagined figures living out a national nightmare, “men and women who moan in their dreams.”

DeLillo captures exactly the look of this strange underworld and the sound of its voices. Here are two of the conspirators, David Ferrie and the grand mafioso of New Orleans, Carmine Latta, talking:

“I want to tell you a little thing you should always remember. If somebody’s giving you trouble, again, again, again, somebody with ambitions, somebody with a greed for territory, the first thing you consider is go right to the top.”

“In other words you take action at the highest level.”

“That’s where they’re letting it get out of hand.”

“In other words you bypass.”

“You clean out the number-one position.”

“In other words you arrange it so there’s a new man at the top who gets the message and makes a change in policy.”

“You cut off the head, the tail doesn’t wag.”

Could it be true that two groups of interlinked CIA men, ex-CIA men, anti-Castro adventurers and kooky rightists wanted to mount a failed assassination of the president that would appear to implicate Castro? Is it true or untrue that this conspiracy involved manipulating a leftist patsy, Oswald, to take the rap? Or was there still a second conspiracy, the object being a *real* assassination? Did two people shoot Kennedy?

We will never know. This is not a thesis book. DeLillo is trying to reconstruct one of many possibilities, to fathom the disarrayed minds of men who meet in small rooms, who believe, as Oswald did, that it is their business to draw the curves of history. Here, fiercely imagined, is Oswald in Tokyo, Oswald in Mexico, Oswald in Texas.

The power of this fact-fiction rests on its hauntingly convincing reconstruction of Oswald’s distracted, alienated soul (a Libran is “a man who harbors contradictions”), his nondescript, pointless career, the cancerous growth of his image of himself as a historical character. It rests, too, on its power to confront us with one face of our own time, a time of betrayal, terror and violence, where the lines that separate normal conduct from criminal thought and action waver, blur, merge.

*Libra* is DeLillo’s ninth novel. The preceding one, *White Noise*, won the American Book Award. In 1984 he received the award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Literature. With *Libra*, he moves to the center stage of American literature and our collective experience.

Clifton Fadiman’s revised and enhanced edition of *The Lifetime Reading Plan* has just been published.

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brilliant work  
of compelling fiction”  
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## IN THE CLUB

Dear Member,  
Books become Main Selections of Book-of-the-Month Club for a variety of reasons: an author's reputation, a fascination with the subject matter and, most importantly, the level of passion the Editorial Board and our editors feel after reading a book.

This month's Selection, *Libra* by Don DeLillo, is a prime example. I hadn't read his previous novels, so when this new manuscript came in last December, in addition to assigning it to the known DeLillo fans, I took a copy to read myself. I was hooked. From the very beginning *Libra* unfolds as a haunting thriller about the assassination of JFK and the people behind it. It's got the driving plot of *The Day of the Jackal*, with writing that's as well crafted as Toni Morrison's.

Having been out of the office for a few days before the meeting at which *Libra* was chosen as a Main Selection, I was thrilled to find that my feelings were shared. Reactions around the table included comments like "terrific ... casts a spell ... the writing holds you ..." from DeLillo fans and foes alike.

We're hoping that this latest novel from DeLillo gets the critical acclaim that all the others have, but we hope too that it will bring him a wider audience that will share what has been an all-too-well-kept secret. Needless to say, we think you'll like it.

*Robert Riger*

Robert Riger  
Managing Director

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*Noted critics and authors, the members of the Editorial Board recommend the Main Selection each month.*

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## EDITOR'S CHOICE



Illustration: Richard Clifton-Day

James Joyce considered the day he met Nora Barnacle the most important day of his life. He never forgot his first glimpse of her striding along a Dublin street. "The way she moved, arms swinging, was enough to win him." I have another image of Nora. She is sitting alone in a park in Trieste. Joyce has business to conduct, and she waits for him. Ireland is behind her. She has cut all ties with home to be with him. Nora will share a lifetime of exile with Joyce. They will have a family. But that day

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## — NORA — The Real Life of Molly Bloom by Brenda Maddox

in Trieste she doesn't know this. She knows only that she is totally dependent on him in a city where she is a stranger and doesn't speak the language. So she waits, fending off workers and sailors from the port nearby. She must have trembled but she held her head high, all the while fearing that he might not come back for her. Nora would be many things to Joyce: wife, mistress, muse. He would put her voice into every one of his great women characters. Still, it is the young Nora, passionate, trusting, proud, whom I find irresistible. Nora is the center of this biography. But Joyce was the center of Nora's world, and it is their life together that makes this book so fascinating. People sometimes wondered how Joyce could have married her. She was

barely educated. She didn't read books. But Joyce knew why and : do I: "Her image had passed into soul for ever."

*Phyllis Robinson*

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