

## SUMMER BOOKS

LIBRA

BY DON DeLILLO  
Viking, 486 pages, \$19.95 hardcover.

**U**NSEEN FORCES HAUNT THE WORK of Don DeLillo — whispered secrets, hidden destinies, parables that ripen into cabals. In his compelling new novel, *Libra*, DeLillo wades into the assassination of John F. Kennedy, that muddy watershed in our nation's psychic history and the happiest of wallows for men whose dreams run to conspiracy.

There is, of course, something fishy about writing a book for the 25th anniversary of a murder, but DeLillo's desire to make a sensation has not led him to dilute his disquieting visions. Although drawn from fact, *Libra* is as fastidiously unsettling as its purely fictional predecessors; indeed, coming in the wake of *The Names* and *White Noise* (DeLillo's finest and most lacerating work), this non-fiction novel shows its 51-year-old author to be in his creative prime.

Lee Oswald is DeLillo's mortal, gaily anti-hero, and the book takes its title from his zodiac sign, Libra (The Balance). One may sense an irony here, for the historical Oswald was notoriously unbalanced, a loser who careened out of control; yet *Libra* itself is carefully weighted, neatly balancing the personal, political and cosmic forces

he could almost taste it, like a toy you put in your mouth when you are little.

The passage is vintage DeLillo — clean, forceful, perhaps a shade too tasty in its simile about the iron. (DeLillo often overwrites but does so magnificently.) In one brief paragraph he captures Lee's disconnection from other people and his "kind of" vagueness, his painful search for peak experience and the blindness of his life journey. Here, and ever after, Lee goes smashing through the darkness, carried along by some force he doesn't understand — call it history, destiny or maybe simple bad luck. Whatever the name, his story rehearses one of DeLillo's favorite themes: that plots, real and fictional, have the tendency to move toward death.

herence within the historical murk: the blurry *Zapruder* film of the assassination, the daisy chain of corpses left in its trail, the 26-volume Warren Report which (Branch thinks) is "the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred." Endowed with years of historical perspective, Branch's speculations give DeLillo the chance to riff on some of his story's cultural meanings:

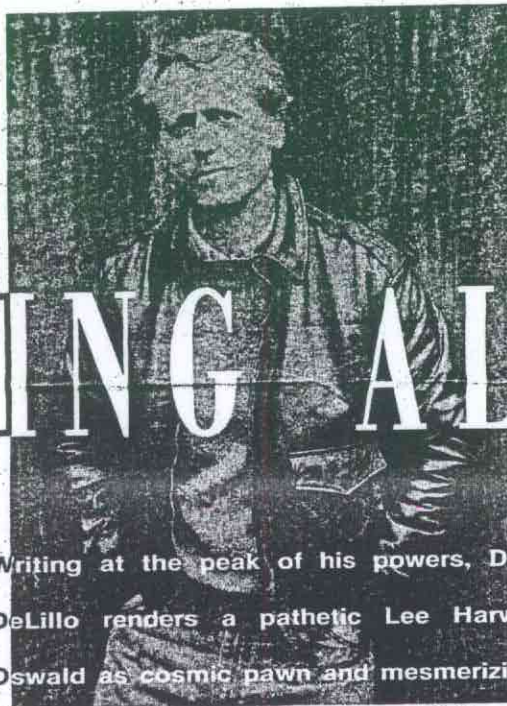
"AFTER OSWALD," BRANCH THINKS, "men in America are no longer required to lead lives of quiet desperation. You apply for a credit card, buy a handgun, travel through cities, suburbs and shopping malls, anonymous, anonymous, looking for a chance to take a shot at the first puffy

rigors of science (*Ramer's Star*), terrorism (*Players*) and technology (*White Noise*). Inspired by Thomas Pynchon, who (he claims) set the stakes for their literary generation, DeLillo possesses a ferocious sense of ambition — he tries to embrace everything from the silliest commercial jingles to the "white noise" of death.

Critics sometimes call DeLillo a novelist of ideas, but he might more accurately be termed a novelist of *discourses* — sporting, scientific, musical, academic. DeLillo characteristically burrows into a vocation or milieu, teasing out its metaphorical implications, scrutinizing its vocabulary for some special radiance, a symbolic phosphorescence. He is attracted, in particular, to those behaviors and messages that go beyond the usual channels of communication. He writes rapidly of a running back's uncatchable speed ("the mysterious black gift that thrills the millions"), a rock star's dedication to the musical ultimate ("Undreamed grammars float in my spittle," goes one lyric from *Great Jones Street*), a Mediterranean cult for whom ritual murder restores a primal relationship with Meaning.

Like James Axel in *The Names*, who stalks those same cultists in hopes of finding a higher, hidden order, DeLillo is pursuing the metaphor that will not only unlock America (which is ultimately epiphenomenal) but that might redeem "the world full of abandoned meanings" (as it is labeled in *White Noise*). Which is to say that DeLillo, at bottom, is a religious writer living in an age of shattered gods.

JOYCE NAVID



# ACTING ALONE

that created those "six point nine seconds of heat and light" on that gray day in Dallas.

DeLillo traces Oswald's life from his miserable childhood with his mother, a mad madonna of self-justification, through the short, sad adulthood of a self-described "zero in the system." Cursed with a longing for self-annihilation, Lee Oswald spends his 24 years seeking an impossible deliverance. He fancies himself a Communist, joins the Marines, defects to the Soviet Union (where he meets his wife, Marina), returns to the States, starts fantasizing about a life in Castro's Cuba and finally achieves infamy as both a killer and a dier. His destiny is evoked by *Libra*'s opening paragraph, set during Lee's childhood in the Bronx:

This was the year he rode the subway to the ends of the city, two hundred miles of track. He liked to stand at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The train smashed through the dark. People stood on local platforms staring nowhere, a look they'd been practicing for years. He kind of wondered, speeding past, who they really were. His body fluttered in the fastest stretches. They went so fast sometimes he thought they were on the edge of no-control. The noise was pitched to a level of pain he absorbed as a personal test. Another crazy-as-carve. There was so much iron in the sound of those curves

Writing at the peak of his powers, Don DeLillo renders a pathetic Lee Harvey Oswald as cosmic pawn and mesmerizing literary foil. **BY JOHN POWERS**

*Libra*'s master plotters are disaffected CIA agents whose anger about the Bay of Pigs debacle allies them with a off-kilter crew of anti-Castro Cubans, nutso right-wingers and vengeful Mafiosi, all brushed with a sense of apocalypse to rival Lee Oswald's. They all want to get Kennedy. DeLillo maps the convoluted scheming that, through "a quirk of history," makes Oswald the conspirators' chosen gunman, the benighted point man in a plot that people are seeking to unravel to this day.

One such sleuth is Nicholas Branch, a fictional CIA man who is writing a "secret history" of the assassination for the Company. Like all the book's characters, Branch is a storyteller, one seeking co-

empty famous face, just to let people know there is someone out there who reads the papers."

Don DeLillo obviously reads the papers every day. His work pulses with topical themes, pop-culture savvy, the whole neon rush of Americana, which (not coincidentally) is the title of his first novel. If ever a book predicted a career, it was that one, in which the hero leaves his job in TV to make a "great seeking leap into the depths of America." DeLillo leapt with him in *Americana*, and has been leaping ever since, into the hot-tub of our national obsessions, be they the pleasures of football (*End Zone*), rock & roll (*Great Jones Street*) and pornography (*Running Dog*), or the

In his strongest work, he displays an unsurpassed gift for tuning into the eerie intimations of Something Beyond that surge through everyday commerce and pop culture, the mysterious psychic frequencies that emanate from food processors, public service announcements, the flimsy plastic bags over supermarket fruit bins.

DeLillo's fascination with the ineffable, the nameless, the out of control may well be a compensatory offshoot of his own daunting formal control. Cool and often schematic, he can be an unmercifully detached writer blessed with a genius for the striking sentence. Roll him out of bed at 3 a.m. and (one imagines) he would immediately start penning trenchant aperçus, jagged sentence fragments, strutting metaphors and snappy, stylized dialogue (which in *Libra* sounds a bit like Elmore Leonard's). Though DeLillo switches narrative attack from book to book — few writers are more honorable in their daring — his prose remains recognizably his own, as hard and bright as diamonds.

Jewelry, however, isn't always called for, and DeLillo's style can fall into mannerism (he's hooked on jarring one-sentence paragraphs: "Natures spelled backwards," the TV said.); his flashiness can work against his desire to stir our deepest feelings. When Jack Ruby blasts Oswald, the reader should feel the shot emotionally.

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**DeLillo**

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After all, DeLillo has spent 400 pages making us care about this small, dreamy man. But his description of Oswald's reaction — "He began his fall through the world of hurt" — is distractingly eloquent. It calls attention to itself just at the moment we should be locked on the character; it produces intellectual admiration rather than passionate involvement. DeLillo's inability to stop shining betrays, I think, an emotional guardedness that limits his work. Despite the swagger and variety of his prose, despite the genuinely dreadful themes he addresses, his novels sound just a bit monotone. They feel emotionally tinny.

DeLillo is not (as they say in soccer) a good finisher. Although he sets up wonderful situations — seducing one with conspiracies and metaphysical quests — his novels seldom deliver a satisfying pay-off. (Closer to realism than Pynchon, he's compelled to show what's in Lot 49.) Some, such as *End Zone* and *Players*, suffer from too much clarity. There's something dead about them, as if their stories had been quick-frozen so that DeLillo could describe them with perfect accuracy. At the other extreme, his work runs to the vague and portentous, as if dread were searching for a fitting object and the novel just can't produce it.

The touchstone here is *The Names*, the great ambitious failure at the heart of

DeLillo's career, a novel that promises the awful thrill of religious transcendence only to back away from holy terror in the most evasive of "literary" endings. Ostensibly a journey into blood-knowledge, the story stays utterly, exhaustingly *mental*. If DeLillo's work is frustrating despite its undeniable brilliance, the reason is this simple: He's not quite able to get out of his own clever head (a problem a lot of us have).

IN LEE OSWALD, DeLILLO HAS FOUND A subject to help fill in his narrative blind spots. Not only does his story guarantee an unforgettable climax — everybody over 35 will take notice at a chapter called "November 22" — but Oswald is himself

so pathetic that his tale will move almost anyone. It is, quite simply, a great story, one that calls for a novelist's gifts. Indeed, two decades ago, Norman Mailer proposed a literary commission to look into the Kennedy assassination, arguing that "the solution to President Kennedy's murder will not come from legal or government commissions, but from minds deeply grounded first and last in the mysteries of hypotheses, uncorrupted logic, tragedy and metaphor."

*Libra's* triumph lies in its humanizing evocation of Lee Oswald who, although dyslexic, impoverished and violent toward his wife, proves a surprisingly engaging hero. DeLillo wisely makes no attempt to explain him away psychologically but shows how he's driven by his soul's aimless striving. From his opening subway ride to his dying reverie, Oswald's whole life takes the form of a search for transcendence, an attempt to "merge with history . . . and escape the dark night of the isolated self." It is an escape attempt marked by shifting identities (he sees himself as Leon Trotsky, a U2 pilot, a fellow Marine named Hidell), fraught with dashed hopes (Oswald always feels his life is *about* to make sense), riddled with self-deceptions. Even after the assassination — famous at last, merged with history — DeLillo's forlorn hero remains estranged from the world and from himself: The press reports keep calling him Lee Harvey Oswald, including his middle name as no one ever has before; at the hour of his glory, Oswald's name sounds unfamiliar to his own eager ears.

In his restless search to make his life mean, Lee Oswald comes much closer to our own "normalcy" than we want to believe. Few of us pass our days so desperately, of course, yet DeLillo gives Oswald's dreams and foibles a familiar, personal resonance. Oswald's story is fat with meaning — so fat that we're tempted to project our own fantasies upon it.

It's not surprising that some of *Libra's* most moving moments concern Nicholas Branch, whose job it is to find the truth behind the whole sad story. Sitting alone in his office (a solitary like Oswald, like DeLillo), he is surrounded by stacks of material, factual records that compose "a ruined city of trivia where people feel real pain." Branch knows the assassination's most terrible secret: the absence of a guiding intelligence. Although we want to believe that "a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme," the truth is "that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like." That is, things happen but they don't mean — events lack the radiant inner logic that most of us crave.

And here, DeLillo suggests, is where fiction comes in: It confers on events a saving logic. "It takes stories to fill out a life," says Oswald's mother Marguerite, an inveterate prattler who this time speaks truly. It *does* take stories to fill out a life, to carry her son's life from barren factuality to poignant human significance. DeLillo himself seconds this idea in his closing "Author's Note," when he calls *Libra* a "refuge" from the emptiness and despair that accompany our search for literal truths, our speculations as to ultimate meanings.

Refuge — it may seem a modest offering in a world of toppled idols and gutted meanings, but DeLillo is too honest, and bleak, an artist to promise anything more. ■

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