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Section F

Books

Fictionalizing JFK's assassination

LIBRA

Don DeLillo

Viking, 456 pp. \$19.95

Reviewed by
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In *White Noise* (1984), Don DeLillo's eighth novel, Jack Gladney, chairman of Hitler studies at a small liberal-arts college, lectures to his class in Advanced Nazism: "All plots tend to move deathward," Gladney tells them. "This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots. ... We edge nearer death every time we plot."

In *Libra*, Don DeLillo's ninth novel, Win Everett, an embittered CIA veteran, worries that the assassination team he has recruited to perform a "surgical miss" on John F. Kennedy will go too far:

"There is a tendency of plots to move toward death. He believed that the idea of death is woven into the nature of every plot. ... The tighter the plot of a story, the more likely it will come to death."

Plainly, there is a tendency of even brilliant novelists to move toward repetition. Repetition is woven into their nature — genre novelists, domestic novelists, "popular" novelists and, yes, top-of-the-line high-brows such as Don DeLillo.

So DeLillo fans can expect a few familiar themes rechartered in *Libra*, which imaginatively reconstructs the life of Lee Harvey Oswald. The psychology of losers has fascinated DeLillo since *End Zone* (1972), which traced a college running back bouncing from team to team. In more recent books, such as *Players* (1977), *Running Dog* (1978) and *The Names* (1982), terrorism and international business and government predominate. The CIA pops up regularly, as it does in *Libra*.

Yet at 51, this Bronx-born son of Italian Catholic immigrants hardly falls into anyone's category of "espionage novelist." Winner of the American Book Award for *White Noise* in 1985, DeLillo now ranks as one of his generation's distinguished novelists. *Libra* thus arises from literary and philosophical concerns, not the assassin's 25th anniversary. Back in 1983, DeLillo wrote a rare nonfiction article on the Kennedy assassination for *Rolling Stone*. In it, he asserted that the Nov. 22 tragedy "forced Americans into a world of randomness and ambiguity, a world totally modern in the way it shades into the century's 'emptiest' literature."

He added, "Powerful events breed their own network of inconsistencies. Loose ends, dead ends, small mysteries of time and space. Violence itself seems to cause a warp in the texture of things. There are jump cuts, blank spaces, an instant in which information leaps from one energy level to another. Dallas is a panorama of such things, a natural disaster in the heartland of the real, the comprehensible, the plausible."

"The lines that extend from that compressed event have shown such elaborate twists and convolutions that we are almost forced to question the basic suppositions we make about the world of light and shadow, solid objects and ordinary sounds, and to wonder further about our ability to



Lee Harvey Oswald posing with rifle and pistol in his Dallas back yard in April 1963.

measure such things ... to see things as they are ..."

To reflect that point of view in *Libra*, DeLillo creates an alter ego. Although most of *Libra* dramatizes Oswald's life, an up-to-the-minute character, Nicholas Branch, keeps interrupting the story. For 15 years, Branch, a retired CIA analyst, "has been on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy." Cramped in his office are "photo enhancements, floor plans, home movies, biographies, bibliographies, letters, rumors, mirages, dreams ..." The CIA curator also (See DeLILLO on 4-F)

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Don DeLillo probes truth's elusive nature, while reconstructing the life of Oswald.

DeLillo's fictional treatment of Oswald and the JFK slaying

DeLILLO, from 1-F sends him material "not seen by anyone outside the headquarters complex." Branch sometimes thinks that the whole project is a joke at his expense.

DeLillo's taste for self-reflective protagonists suggests that Branch is a kind of joke on the author. Doesn't Branch describe the Warren Commission report as "the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred"? In fact, Branch helps to focus the contradictions between DeLillo's tale, his own predicament and the real JFK assassination — contradictions that undermine *Libra's* success.

DeLillo's blow-by-blow of Oswald's life adopts a standard view of his personality and a standard theory of the assassination. In *Libra*, anti-Castro forces arrange the shooting so Castro will be blamed, thus spurring new attempts to win Cuba back. Oswald is their pawn.

He also is a mother-hating, neurotic, dyslexic, Marxist, wife-beating loser and megalomaniac who desperately wants to be a winner. When he can't get satisfaction from bureaucrats, he considers himself a "zero in the system." But after his deed, "Everybody knew who he was ..."

Technically, *Libra* dazzles. DeLillo's prose tenses into punchy, Hem-

ingway muscle. The writing also curves and twists into the resonant asides a master must toss off: "At 20 years old, all you know is that you're 20. Everything else is a mist that swirls around this fact."

Descriptions both crackle and persuade. Jack Karlinsky is a shadowy operative "in his 60s, an investment counselor who had no office, no business phone, no employees and no clients." Another CIA veteran boasts "the leanness and fitness of an older man who wants you to know he is determined to outlive you."

DeLillo's theme is the elusive nature of truth, a point ostensibly rammed home by the JFK case. Reflecting on CIA business, agency trouble-shooter Larry Parmenter "believes that nothing can be finally known that involves human motive and need. There is always another level, another secret ..."

Another spook, David Ferrie, complains, "There's always more to it. This is what history consists of. It's the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us." We're reminded of earlier DeLillo characters such as the terrorist in *Players*, who declares that "Behind every stark fact we encounter layers of ambiguity."

But while one can sympathize with DeLillo's search for fresh metaphors, JFK's assassination proves a poor choice. To be successful, a met-

aphor must pack more power figuratively than it does literally. So long as the Kennedy assassination remains raw and mysterious, with suffering victims (the family just recently asked Americans to stop treating the assassination date as a national memorial day), its brute reality undercuts metaphorical extension. The weakness of DeLillo's chapters on the shootings confirms this — skillfully written, they still fall flat in reciting a chronology we know by heart.

Further, contrary to DeLillo's 1983 contention, the assassination can't upset our grasp of basic suppositions. We all know it happened in one way or another — not in many different ways. The lack of a precise accounting stems from investigative incompetence or political expediency, not epistemology.

Like so many, Don DeLillo fell under the spell of an incident that few will ever shake. He's courageous to wrestle the spell with his own fictional magic. But he might wisely have listened to his alter ego's musings: "There is enough mystery in the facts as we know them, enough of conspiracy, coincidence, loose ends, dead ends, multiple interpretations. There is no need ... to invent the grand and masterful scheme, the plot that reaches flawlessly in a dozen directions."