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Don DeLillo at his home in New York.

Don DeLillo, Caught in History's Trap

The 'Libra' Author, Striving to Balance Meaning and Randomness in the Assassination of JFK

By Jim Naughton
Washington Post Staff Writer

BRONXVILLE, N.Y.—The backyard is green in the sun, bordered by small pines and climbing plants, a lush small space invaded by light. Don DeLillo carries two low-backed lawn chairs into a tiny triangle of shade and sets them beside a metal table. He is an urban dweller by temperament, but the New York City real estate market and his wife's yen for a garden persuaded him to buy a home in this quiet Westchester County suburb six years ago. The morning reverberates with hammer blows as work continues on the DeLillos' new porch. Thirty-five years ago in the Bronx he lived in the same neighborhood as a 13-year-old truant named Lee Oswald. They never met.

"I studied patterns of coincidence," Ferrie said to Lee. "Coincidence is a science waiting to be discovered. How patterns emerge

outside the bounds of cause and effect."

DeLillo, not yet a novelist, was in a bank the morning that Oswald introduced himself to the world. "I overheard a teller say that the president had just been shot in Dallas," he says. *How strangely easy to have a say over men and events.* Twenty-five years later he still counts himself among the haunted.

"I think that what's been missing since the assassination is a sense of coherent reality," DeLillo says. "We seem to have entered a world of randomness, confusion, even chaos. We're not agreed on the number of gunmen, the number of shots, the time span between shots, the number of wounds on the president's body, the size and shape of the wounds."

"And, beyond this, I think we have developed a sense of the secret manipulation of history: documents lost or destroyed, official records sealed for 50 or 75 years, a number of ex-

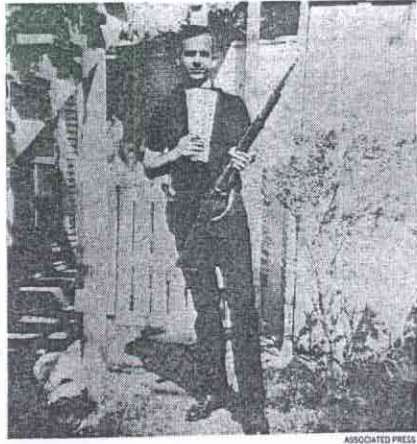
tremely suggestive murders and suicides."

DeLillo plunges readers into this miasma in "Libra," the ninth and most ambitious of his richly praised novels. The book is a meditation on Oswald's inner life, on the nature of secrets and conspiracies, on the jolting power of coincidence and the limits of human perception.

The 53-year-old novelist recrosses his lawn, ducks into a darkened kitchen and emerges with two glasses of ice water. He wears khaki pants and a quiet plaid shirt, the fashions of a man who wishes not to call attention to himself. Large, brown-rimmed glasses soften his features, making him seem gentler than the person who peers from his book jackets, but no less grave. That impression is reinforced by a soft, steady voice and an aversion to chatting about his personal life.

"You might say there is a sense in which fiction rescues history from

See DELILLO, C2, Col. 1



Lee Harvey Oswald in his backyard in Dallas in April 1963.

Author Don DeLillo

DELLILLO, from C1

his conclusions," DeLillo says, settling into a chair and arranging himself so that he is not quite facing the person to whom he speaks.

"Not only in the superficial way in which a novelist can fill in blank spaces, but in a deeper way that involves the sense of theme and symmetry that a piece of fiction has. The sense of balance that so often escapes us in ordinary experience, we can find in fiction. Is this a consolation? Well, theoretically it is."

In "Libra," DeLillo has filled in the blank spaces with a plot concocted by three CIA veterans embittered by their failure at the Bay of Pigs. Desperate for a way to revive the anti-Castro movement, they plan an unsuccessful attempt on the president's life, an attempt that will be traceable to the Cuban intelligence community. But one of the trio, bent on revenge, changes a single detail: *Plato carry their own legs.* He neglects to tell his shooters to miss. *There is a tendency of Plato to move toward death.*

DeLillo's alter ego in the novel is Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA analyst who for 15 years has been working on the agency's secret history of the assassination. Through Branch's tortured self-searching, DeLillo finds the story of Oswald to the story of the plot on the president's life.

[I]f I had taken him all these years to learn that his subject is not politics or violent crime but men in small rooms. Is he one of them now? Frustrated, at last, self-satisfying, looking for a connection, a way to break out.

"I think Nicholas Branch has reached the point he has because he is so haunted by the story itself and by the people who are part of it," DeLillo says. "I think he is almost immobilized by sadness, compassion, regret and by the overwhelming sense that he is never going to be able to do justice to the enormity of this story."

But Nicholas Branch is in too deep to let go. And so, as his research continued, was DeLillo.

"Once you have read in the case I think you do become trapped forever," he says. "In fact I'm sure you do. This is certainly the most deeply haunting experience of my life, working on this book."

In the sense of unresolvability combined with the deep significance of the assassination, in the sense that what happened has continued to elude us.

Some years ago DeLillo had a brief conversation with Thomas Pynchon, the reclusive novelist to whose work his own is often compared. In their fiction, each is fascinated by the institutionalization of evil, the ascendance of humanity and the hovering specter of death.

"We were trying to decide whether it was the Penguins or the Platters who recorded 'Earth Angel,'" DeLillo says. "We decided it was the Penguins, but that the Platters may have covered it."

He leans back slightly in his chair, hands behind his head and smiles a small, but genuine smile. "The Penguins are pretty obscure," he says. Not to mention pretty correct.

In his eight previous novels DeLillo has fashioned a bleak, sometimes comic view of American life by letting his sinister imagination play over the headlines of the day. "Bad Zone" is peopled by college football players who meditate on nuclear holocaust and the state of their damaged souls. In "Running Dog" outlaw intelligence agents pursue the tapes of Hitler's last cry, "The Nameless" concerns a group of terrorists driven to murder by what seems an alphabetical imperative. The narrator of "White Noise" is polluted by "an airborne toxic event."

DeLillo, says The New York Review of Books, is the "chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction." This is intended as a compliment.

In 1983 he wrote an article about JFK's assassination for "Rolling Stone." "That's when I realized how wide-reaching the material was and how much more deeply it would have to search to do justice to it," said as it turns out, justly becomes a novel.

DeLillo began researching "Libra" Commission Report that he'd purchased from a used-book dealer.

"I gave me a bit of insight into the particular of the lives of people who testified," he says. "What is it like to work in a train yard in Dallas in 1963? What is it like to be a waitress, a prostitute, a private detective? And all of this comes flowing forth on the terms, verboseness, with regional speech patterns, gossip, rumor and in Lee's modest Marguerite Oswald's case, all sorts of bizarre spolia theories intact."

DeLillo did few interviews, more with anyone portraged in the book. "I thought it would inhibit me," he says. But he did travel to Dallas, Fort Worth and New Orleans, to see where Oswald had lived. He was particularly struck by the house on Neely Street in Dallas where Oswald posed for the now-famous picture with his Mannlicher rifle and some Marxist newspapers draped behind him.

"It is an old leaning-antiquated building," DeLillo says. "It's got a porch made of cement blocks. I think, and it struck me as being exactly the place where he lived and where he planned his escape from all of the small rooms. *There is a sword within the world.*

There are references to Oswald in several of DeLillo's earlier works. "American," his first novel, casts in DeLillo Plaza where the assassination took place. "Something which I totally forgot for years," he says.

In choosing to examine the event more fully he has stirred a controversy in the quarters. Jonathan Yardley, his book critic for The Washington Post, called the book a work of "explanation," and said that in fictionizing the lives of living people, DeLillo placed his book "beneath contempt."

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"Think of two parallel lines," he said. "One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it does possess a connection. It puts a mark on the face of his destiny."

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DeLillo On 'Libra'

DELLILO, FROM C2

the government but of what we call The Corporation in a generic sense," he says. "This is part of the reason why I don't do readings, teach, attend workshops, panel discussions or go on USA tours. My feeling about writers and governments is that writers ought to be naturally opposed to government."

DeLillo's novels are filled with destructive, corrupted systems, but there is no sense that his outsiders are innocent.

"I think people long to be part of the systems," he says. "I think people seek a conspiratorial order in their lives even if there is a sinister element involved. I think the daydream of the average person is to be inducted into the secret organization."

That's what history consists of. It's the sum total of the things they aren't telling us.

Secrecy is as essential as privacy, it seems, the stories told in the sanctuary of the self.

"It seems to me that secrecy is one of those things in life which does not change from childhood to old age," he says. "The same sense of pleasure and the same sense of conflict inform the keeping of secrets. Once you begin to share secrets, you tend to lose some element of identity."

Writing, of course, is an enterprise shrouded in secrecy. When DeLillo speaks of his beginnings as a writer, he evokes a situation similar in some ways to that of Lee Oswald in "Libra."

"I was learning to write and I was doing so under classic conditions," he says. "That is, struggling to earn a living, existing in one room, watching the manuscript build week by week, having a secret sense of being about to enter the world with something that I hoped was extraordinary."

What a sense of destiny he had, locked in the miniature room, creating a design, a network of connections. It was a second existence, the private world floating out of three dimensions.

He is aware of this similarity, says it was useful.

"It's just another coincidence perhaps that the two key figures, Ruby and Oswald, seemed to me the people, the real people I understood most easily," he says. "Oswald perhaps because he was a classic outsider. A classic outsider who happened to fight against exclusion. Ruby maybe because I knew men like that. Men who hung around the local poolroom, bookmakers and that sort of thing when I was growing up."

The photographer has him seated in one of the low-backed chairs in the middle of the barn. "Now let's try for one with a smile," she says.

DeLillo's lips curve almost imperceptibly at the corners.

"A little more."

He manages what might liberally be referred to as a grin.

"I came all the way up in a traffic jam from Manhattan," the photographer says.

"This is as much as you're getting," he replies and chuckles without widening the smile.

DeLillo and his wife Barbara live quietly here. The couple, who have no children, are friendly with writers Gordon Lish, William Gaddis and William Gass. Like Gaddis and Gass, DeLillo enjoys an ardent but somewhat limited following. "Libra," with its compelling subject and strong reviews, may change that. Some reviewers are calling it his breakthrough book.

The novelist says he is not usually concerned about how a book is received, but this time it's different.

"I think it concerns me more in regard to this book than any other simply because this is based on such a significant and tragic event," he says. "In this case I think I have a larger responsibility. It clearly was a challenge to be equal to the event itself. And I think this is ultimately how the book should be judged: Is it a novel that does justice to its subject?"

When the photography is over and the tape recorder turned off DeLillo stretches out in his chair and seems genuinely relaxed for the first time in several hours.

He speaks briefly about "the compassion racket" in the publishing industry, implies that compassionate characters, whether well-drawn or not, have had something of an undeserved vogue. "That's as much as I should say about that," he adds. "I'd have to start naming names."

As a young man, the novelist attended Fordham University, along, he says, with other sons of New York City's ethnic, Catholic working class. DeLillo says he met some brilliant Jesuits, but was disappointed at the quality of his education. "I kept trying to think of myself as Stephen Dedalus," he says, but the setting wasn't quite right.

DeLillo has written two short stories since completing "Libra," but says he doesn't yet know which his next novel will be about. In the past his work has often had a prophetic quality to it. He created renegade CIA men in "Running Dog" shortly before Edwin Wilson sold arms to Libya. The toxic event in "White Noise" was in galley form when the Union Carbide disaster engulfed Bhopal. The Iran-contra scandal broke while he was conjuring the runaway intelligence plot in "Libra."

He does not consider himself a prophet.

"I never expect to change society or even to alert society to the need for change," he says. "I try to show what's there and I don't take that additional step of suggesting that what's there needs to be remedied, at least not consciously. I am taking the world as my subject. . . . but there's certainly no sense of a way out in my work."

And with that he leads the way to the front of the house where the photographer produces a map and DeLillo offers directions to the next plane home.