

The dizzying mystery of JFK's assassin

Libra
By Don DeLillo
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By Bruce Allen
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Of all the novelists who've emerged during the '70s and '80s, it may be Don DeLillo whose works best qualify for inclusion in a time capsule. His detailed (even learned) explorations of contemporary American experience focus on the disciplines and techniques that define our culture. He has dissected the worlds of advertising (*American*), college football (*End Zone*), rock music (*Great Jones Street*), and astrophysics and theoretical mathematics (*Ratner's Star*).

More recently, DeLillo has concerned himself with the unsettling presence all around us of that which threatens our daytime complacency: terrorism in *Players* and *Running Dog*; international intrigue and espionage in *The Names*; and, in the award-winning *White Noise*, information overload and manipulation of public response by various media.

Now in *Libra*, his richest and perhaps best novel, DeLillo has turned to the ultimate assault on our postwar society's sense of security: the assassination of President Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald. What he has



DON DELILLO: 'Libra' weaves fact and fiction into a fascinating novel about Lee Harvey Oswald and JFK's assassination.

By Joyce David

produced is a historical novel that might as justly be called a meditation on the reality of the president's murder and on the idea of Oswald.

The plot has three major strands. It follows Oswald's life chronologically, first with his infuriating mother Marguerite in a succession of rooming houses; then during his Marine

plots — and plot-filled back-grounds — of a group of CIA operatives disgusted by the Bay of Pigs incident and convinced that an "electrifying event" is required to mobilize both American paranoia about Castro's Cuba and opposition to international communism.

Their leader, the chillingly rendered Win Everett, conceives a plan: to fake a failed assassination of the president, and throw suspicion onto the Cuban Secret Service. Then, unbeknownst to his colleagues, Everett devises an even more intricate scheme . . .

There are the musings and recollections of Nicholas Branch, a retired CIA analyst "hired on contract to write the secret history" of the assassination and its aftermath. This satiric eminence is our contact with the syndrome of possibility and speculation that has burgeoned in the years since 1963 — the larger-world's view of those events that we're witness-ingly close up, in the novel's CIA and Oswald stories.

This mirroring structure powerfully emphasizes DeLillo's point that despite the profusion of motive and collusion and explanation, what remains is a mystery. This is clearest in Oswald himself (a Libran, whose scales may tip either

REVIEW

way) who seems a man without a core, a reactor fascinated with himself, and with others' impressions of him (even his wife realizes that she sees him "from a slight distance . . . He was never really there").

Libra's unique achievement is its detailed and complex depiction of the lives (including the inner lives), of its many fictional creations, and of real people about whom we've assumed we know a great deal: Marina Oswald's fateful love for her husband and fear of what he may have become; his mother's whiny, convoluted self-justifications; Jack Ruby's eccentric combination of patriotism and degeneracy; Oswald's own "inward-spinning self" — an idealism run lethally amok. As fully as these and many others are created, they also remain, in a dramatic sense, satisfyingly unconventional and inexplicable.

The nerve-tingling construction gives every scene immediacy and consequence, though we know the outcome, we're impatient to learn how these widespread parts will cohere. *Libra* operates at a dizzyingly high level of intensity throughout: it's that true fictional parity — a novel of admirable depth and relevance that's also a terrific page-turner.

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