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Totally Booked: Libra

Dylan Berman, News Editor

"Six point nine seconds of heat and light. Let's call a meeting to analyze the blur. Let's devote our lives to understanding this moment, separating the elements of each crowded second. We will build theories that gleam like jade idols, intriguing systems of assumption, four-faced, graceful. We will follow the bullet trajectories backward to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams," writes Don DeLillo, in his most acclaimed novel "Libra."

Who are these men moaning in their dreams, with lives that occupy the shadows of the JFK assassination? This is what "Libra" explores.

The book is part biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, from his childhood to his murder by Jack Ruby, and part spy story, following a group of CIA agents, disgruntled for ideological, personal and financial reasons by the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion and by JFK's softening position towards Fidel Castro. The agents concoct an initial conspiracy involving a shooter who will miss, but be framed as sent by the Cuban government, ensuring a full American invasion of Cuba in response. As they bring in Oswald to be their perfect lone gunman, one of the agents goes AWOL, and the conspiracy spirals on with a life of its own into the President's actual death.

DeLillo writes Oswald with detail and depth, taking him and other real historical figures and creating compelling internal worlds for them all.

DeLillo's Oswald is a man obsessed with grand narratives, capital H history, capital S struggle, a devout communist from a young age, seeking to change the world, to place himself in history. To play therapist, he seeks to escape his every day pain and failure in this higher narrative of struggle.

It's bold of DeLillo to take a true villain of American history and make the reader care about him, see his first love, his first marriage, his troubled childhood, his ideological passion, his time in the U.S. Navy locked in the brig or him dumping his trash in neighbors cans in the dark when his family couldn't afford the bills. JFK's shooting, which in the novel is actually done by a separate team of CIA gunmen on the infamous grassy knoll after Oswald misses, was one day in a difficult life.

DeLillo reimagines Oswald as a tragic and complex protagonist, against the role of mysterious antagonist he inhabits in the public eye. When DeLillo writes of Oswald's death, his funeral attended only by his parents, his wife, his new children, only a cold hearted reader isn't left feeling for him.

Functioning as a writer, not a historian, DeLillo creates an unsettling tension between Oswald's obsession with changing history as an autonomous individual and his constant puppeteering by various intelligence agencies. Whether it's Chinese agents farming him for information on the American U2 spy plane during his time in Tokyo, the KGB after he defects to the USSR, the FBI using him as an informant on pro Castro organizations in Miami, or rogue elements within the CIA putting him up to kill JFK, he is never free from some larger entities power games, often caught up in more than a few at once. "The point is how far back did it go," says Marguerite Oswald, his mother, in the final pages of the book. "When did they start watching him? Did he belong to them for life?"

DeLillo is a beautiful writer, and his prose is cutting, unsettling, alive. "It was dusk now, stormlight forming at the edges of low sailing clouds, dark and mobbed, and there was urgency, a wildness in the sky, everything electric," he says, writing the day of Oswald's funeral. David Ferrie, the conspirator personally closest to Oswald, waiting to fly him to Cuba after JFK's death (unaware of his

planned murder), feels the atmosphere of the day: "Something about the time of year depressed him deeply. Overcast skies and cutting wind, leaves falling, dusk falling, dark too soon, night flying down before you're ready. It's a terror. It's a bareness of the soul. He hears the rustle of nuns. Here comes winter in the bone," DeLillo writes. He conjures such a strong sense of atmosphere throughout the novel with few careful words, with strange repeated details and phrasing, haunting and odd juxtaposed images. To quote a review in *The New Yorker*, "his prose has a quality of demented lyricism."

The forces that move history, its strange coincidences and who drives it forward are all questions central to the novel. Ferrie, a memorable figure lurking on the outskirts of the conspiracy until its final phases, offers some of the novel's most interesting philosophical dialogues on these questions. He sees a meaning behind the strange and artful coincidences of history present throughout the novel, and present in the real life of Oswald.

"Think of two parallel lines,' [Ferrie] 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 forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny."

In *Libra*, DeLillo takes his talent as a writer clearly present in *Americana*, his first novel, and turns it towards a story much more complex, focused, and fast paced. He explores the JFK assassination and everything that led up to it with impressive imaginative power, writing a thrilling page turner as well as a powerful exploration of a defining moment in American history, and our continuous struggle to piece together a truth in the horror of it all.