

COMMENTARY

SUMMARIES OF 10 NOVELS

Don DeLillo

(1936-)

Americana (1971)

“From the beginning DeLillo has been interested in bending traditional forms to his will and to the life of his culture. *Americana* (1971), his first novel, is a road book, picaresque in trajectory, the man on the road an exile from New York’s media world, with a movie camera in tow—a cool, ironic first-person narrator, like Jack Gladney in *White Noise*, who is nevertheless (again like Gladney) not really in control.

End Zone (1972)

End Zone (1972) plays off the genre of the sports novel, its first-person narrator a startling combination of football star and searching intellectual, taking courses in the theories and strategies of nuclear war, and who, like all of DeLillo’s narrators and many of his minor characters, moves, with seeming inevitability, from satire to primitive terror, from detached acerbic observation to rapturous lyric commitment, from the full glare of public space to the intense isolation and ascetic discipline of private space: a stripped-down small room, a man in the process of withdrawal, brooding, losing his mind. In the last pages of the novel the narrator/halfback of *End Zone* is carried off to the infirmary in a catatonic state, to be fed intravenously.

Great Jones Street (1973)

Great Jones Street (1973), a kind of sequel to *End Zone*, begins with another figure in the eye of publicity, a rock singer of megastar proportions, who suddenly and mysteriously drops off the tour in order to hole up in a badly run-down room in Greenwich Village, a hermitage soon violated by various figures on the make, representing businesses legitimate and otherwise, seeking to return the product to market and to turn even his acts of resistance, especially his acts of resistance, into a commodity.

Ratner’s Star (1976)

After the rush of three books in three years (the first a while in the making), there is a three-year gap, and then DeLillo’s most formally adventurous work (it wouldn’t do to call it a novel) appears in 1976. *Ratner’s Star*, a takeoff on science fiction, in its first two-thirds is Menippean satire via Lewis Carroll’s Alice books, a meditation on the modern scientific mind, its hunger for abstraction becoming under DeLillo’s gaze a direct route to madness and the self-revealing grotesqueness which demands the cartoon representation that he gives it. In its last third—an abrupt shift in generic gears—*Ratner’s Star* is a recollection of Joyce’s narrative methods in *Ulysses*, an exploration of the undergrounds of several consciousnesses, managed with the montage-like cuts of the filmmaker and sudden, deliberately unprepared shifts from third-person to first. The frequent descents into psychological interiors culminate in the last, apocalyptic pages of the book in an actual descent—an all-out race on a bicycle by the Nobel prize-winning teenage central character for an actual hole in the ground, the end of his terror-ridden race the catatonia that in DeLillo’s fiction appears culturally necessary. In *Ratner’s Star* he asks: ‘Are catatonic people setting a standard for the rest of us?’ And a few pages later one of his characters responds as if announcing the prime rule of contemporary existence: ‘The only way to survive is to curtail one’s perspective, to exist as close to one’s center as possible.’

Players (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978)

In the two novels that follow *Ratner’s Star*—*Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978)—DeLillo turns his formal attention to the thriller mode and the manipulations thereof. In keeping with the character of the

genre, these are swift, pared-down narratives that deploy topics of urgent contemporary political interest: terrorism and Wall Street in *Players*; government intelligence agencies, the Mafia, pornography dealers, hip journalists, and a U.S. senator in *Running Dog*, plotters all, all in search of an alleged orgiastic film made in the *Fuhrerbunker* in Hitler's last days, starring the man himself. Both books are easy to read, but neither has earned much of a readership, probably because DeLillo insists on cutting the ground from under thriller-novel expectations. Gripping plots do not eventuate in final revelations but in endings of no romance, with romance-seeking major characters sunk in boredom or private quests, all goals frustrated, subplots not tied up—endings as nonendings, putting readers exactly in the place of his frustrated characters, asking them to reconsider their experience, return to the beginning, with all excitement deliberately drained off by the writer, and to read again, this time for reasons other than thrills. Such reconsideration will reveal DeLillo at his most playful, particularly in *Running Dog*, producing in the margins of that book a form of literary capriccio, variations on the role of film in contemporary consciousness: as commodity, as form of entertainment, as medium of Eros, and as the form of self-representation that defines postmodernism. Film: the chief artistic innovation of the twentieth century as both mode of representing experience and as experience itself...film *as* consciousness.

The Names (1982)

Again, after three books in three years (*Ratner's Star* a while in the making), there is—given his work habits—a considerable gap, this one of four years, a period during which DeLillo lived in Greece and wrote his politically most ambitious novel, *The Names* (1982), a book set in Greece and various Middle East locales. *The Names* is shaped by a form virtually invented and perfected by Henry James—the international novel—and tried occasionally and bravely by American writers since (Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald in *Tender Is the Night*). Almost never achieved in the form is the textural richness that marks James's major books, in which the American innocent is set down in the alien context of Europe. James Axton, first-person narrator of *The Names*, undergoes what Henry James's American innocent cannot avoid: a tragic education beginning with the knowledge of his alien contest and ending with knowledge of self, his own complicity, learning that what he thought and desired to be the horror of Old World otherness is more than matched by horrors belonging to American selfhood.

For sheer tonal thickness and range, DeLillo has not written before or since anything quite like *The Names*. Axton's narration is propelled as if by a voice of multiple personality: When in conversation with other Americans like himself, in the employ of the multinationals, he is all wit and sophistication; with his estranged wife, all irony and intimacy intertwined; with himself in meditation on landscape, the play of natural light, Athens, airports, Greek architecture, the hold places of Islam, the sights and especially the sounds of the Middle East—the sounds of the Arabic tongue—he gives us long and frequent stretches of prose poetry, a lyrical language so evocative that it overcomes the headlong push of narrative time with sensuous, ecstatic, plot-stopping reverie. Literally plot-stopping: displacing story, as if Axton needed to repress the plot that will eventually catch him up in his search for the meaning and the perpetrators of a series of cult murders. Axton's lyric poetry is an effort to escape from what fascinates as it closes in on him: a desire for the innocence that neither his work nor his culture will permit him—lyricism as a literate, connoisseur's form of catatonia—and his final understanding of the murderers is of a madness driven by similar lyric need: to stop history, to get out of a world made dense, diverse, and too present by polyglot pressures and modern technology...to become rooted again in order to live as close to our centers as possible.

White Noise (1985)

Three years after *The Names*, DeLillo published *White Noise*, a culminating book: a first-person narrator, ironical and lyrical; the electronic media, particularly television; futuristic drugs; the power of consumer culture to revolt and seduce; popular culture in various guises; plots, novelistic and conspiratorial; the dauntingly precocious child, first seen in *Ratner's Star* and then in *The Names*; shadowy networks of power and control; the poetic lure of modern jargons from science, sports, and Madison Avenue—all of these elements feed into *White Noise* in order to form the insidious environment of DeLillo's contemporary family, Jack and Babette Gladney and their children from several marriages. And many of these elements, in different combinations, now fixated with a purity never before glimpsed in his

writing—an obsession with obsession—are transmuted into the shape of his most popular and critically admired work to date: *Libra* (1988).

Libra (1988)

DeLillo's latest novel is a work reminiscent of the nonfiction novels of Truman Capote (*In Cold Blood*) and Norman Mailer (*The Executioner's Song*). *Libra* is also a recent variant of the novel of social fate, the so-called naturalist novel now rewritten inside the postmodern arena, in the society of the image: Lee Harvey Oswald and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, media born and baptized as triple-named assassin and victim. Like Emma in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Carrie in Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, Oswald and Kennedy are the playthings of the illusions that their cultures nurture and sustain, 'character' waiting to be 'image.' But they are more: In DeLillo's imagination of them, they are the founding characters of postmodern America. DeLillo's Oswald gives strange new meaning to advice given to Jack Gladney in his desperate hour: 'Kill to live'."

Frank Lentricchia, ed.
New Essays on White Noise
(Cambridge U 1991) 8-12

Americana (1971)

"David Bell, the protagonist of DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971), drops out of his job at a television network to make an autobiographical film scrutinizing Americans' worship of televised and advertised images. In one scene...a character in Bell's film calls television 'an electronic form of packaging,' a phrase that *White Noise* transmits in its recurrent litanies of brand names and broadcast voices.

End Zone (1972)

Another theme that *White Noise* shares with DeLillo's earlier novels is the social impact of technology, particularly its most devastating products—atomic weapons and poisonous waste. Gary Harkness, the narrator of *End Zone* (1972), discovers a disturbing fascination with the language and 'theology' of nuclear war. *End Zone* foreshadows *White Noise* both in its parody of disaster novels and in its protagonist's ambivalence about technology and its consequences.

Great Jones Street (1973)

The glut of images and glamour of celebrity displayed in *White Noise*'s tabloids take center state in *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *Mao II*. Like Gladney, both Bucky Wunderlick, the earlier novel's rock star protagonist, and *Mao II*'s novelist Bill Gray seek what Wunderlick calls a 'moral form to master commerce'—a means of discovering authenticity in a world crowded with images and commodities. Like Bell, these characters withdraw into cocoons where they script private narratives or pursue semisacred quests, only to find their efforts transformed into just another spectacle or consumer item.

Ratner's Star (1976)

Similarly, *Ratner's Star* (1976) blends mathematics and Menippean satire to mount a scathing critique of scientific authority, exposing it as an elaborate form of magic that neither consoles nor contains the fear of mortality it conceals. In these earlier novels, as in *White Noise*, science engenders a deep and dangerous alienation from nature. DeLillo has returned to these themes in his most recent novel, *Underworld* (1997), which meditates on the intertwined relationship between waste and weapons.

Players (1977)

DeLillo's next three novels, *Players* (1977), *Running Dog* (1978), and *The Names* (1982), offer variations on the terrorist thriller, in which bewildered protagonists seek solace in cathartic violence. *Players* adumbrates *White Noise* not only in its superbly rendered dialogue and its depiction of the sedative effects of television, but also in its sharp portrayal of contemporary marriage. Like Jack Gladney, Lyle and

Pammy Wynant, the bored protagonists of *Players*, are at once tranquilized and terrorized by the institutions with which they are inextricably involved.

Running Dog (1978)

The swift, cinematic *Running Dog* marks DeLillo's first analysis of what Gladney calls the 'continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny.' Much of that appeal, according to *Running Dog*, issues from the insinuation of filmed images into every crevice of our lives. If in *White Noise* television is a ubiquitous voice droning at the edges of consciousness, in *Running Dog* the omnipresence of cameras transforms all behavior into acting, disabling characters from discriminating between real things and images.

The Names (1982)

The Names, then novel about American expatriates that immediately precedes *White Noise*, explicitly investigated for the first time what had always been DeLillo's implicit subject: the nature and value of language itself. Although the plot outline resembles those of DeLillo's earlier novels, *The Names* leaves us with DeLillo's first hopeful denouement, as narrator James Axton recognizes in his son's exhilaratingly mangled prose a source of redemption that prefigures Jack Gladney's discovery of 'splendid transcendence' in the utterances of his children.

White Noise (1985)

White Noise thus brings together many of DeLillo's obsessions: the deleterious effects of capitalism, the power of electronic images, the tyrannical authority and dangerous byproducts of science, the unholy alliance of consumerism and violence, and the quest for sacredness in a secularized world. Like all of his fiction, it displays his virtuous command of language and, particularly, his ventriloquistic capacity to mimic the argots of various cultural forms. In it he amplifies the noises around us and permits us to hear again how these sounds shape our own voices and beliefs.

Libra (1988)

DeLillo's subsequent novels have equaled the critical and commercial triumph of *White Noise*. *Libra* (1988), brilliantly synthesizing a fictional biography of Lee Harvey Oswald with a plausible account of a conspiracy to kill President John F. Kennedy, earned nearly as many critical plaudits and even more commercial success than *White Noise*. Although distinct in both theme and structure, it shares with *White Noise* a self-reflexive consideration of our need for plots.

Underworld (1997)

Underworld, a monumental chronicle of America since 1951, unfolding mostly in reverse, is DeLillo's universally acclaimed and best-selling work so far. While most of DeLillo's works have been compact, even terse, *Underworld* covers a vast canvas with dozens of characters. One of its protagonists, the haunted 'waste analyst' Nick Shay, recalls Gladney in his obsession with the detritus of consumer culture and his attraction to violence and the demonic. Although *Underworld* is at once broader and more personal than DeLillo's earlier novels—drawing for the first time upon his background as an Italian American reared in the Bronx—it expands again on the relationship between 'American magic and dread,' analyzing the myriad theologies through which Americans seek to reclaim transcendence in a world of fearsome technologies and fulsome messages."

Mark Osteen, ed.

White Noise: Text and Criticism
(Penguin/Viking Critical Library 1998) x-xii

Ratner's Star (1976)

"*Ratner's Star* stands as DeLillo's contemporary version of Book III of Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, bearing the same relationship to post-Einsteinian science as Swift's satire did to Baconian science."

Michael Valdez Moses
“Lust Removed from Nature”
New Essays on White Noise
(Cambridge U 1991) 69

Michael Hollister (2015)