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- 
- [Books](#)
  - [Movies](#)
  - [Art](#)
  - [Music](#)
  - [The Book Bench](#)
  - [Photo Booth](#)
  - [Peter Schjeldahl on Art](#)
  - [Tables for Two](#)
  - [Table of Contents](#)
  
  - [The New Yorker](#)
  - [Arts & Culture](#)

## BOOKS

### LAUREATE OF TERROR

*Don DeLillo's prophetic soul.*

by Martin Amis

NOVEMBER 21, 2011

When we say that we love a writer's work, we are always stretching the truth: what we really mean is that we love about half of it. Sometimes rather more than half, sometimes rather less. The vast presence of Joyce relies pretty well



entirely on "Ulysses," with a little help from "Dubliners." You could jettison Kafka's three attempts at full-length fiction (unfinished by him, and unfinished by us) without muffling the impact of his seismic originality. George Eliot gave us one readable book, which turned out to be the central Anglophone novel. Every page of Dickens contains a paragraph to warm to and a paragraph to veer back from. Coleridge wrote a total of two major poems (and collaborated on a third). Milton consists of "Paradise Lost." Even my favorite writer, William Shakespeare, who usually eludes all mortal limitations, succumbs to this law. Run your eye down the contents page and feel the slackness of your urge to reread the comedies ("As You Like It" is not as we like it); and who would voluntarily curl up with "King John" or "Henry VI, Part III"?

Proustians will claim that "In Search of Lost Time" is unimprovable throughout, despite all the agonizing longueurs. And Janeites will never admit that three of the six novels are comparative weaklings (I mean "Sense and Sensibility," "Mansfield Park," and "Persuasion"). Perhaps the only true exceptions to the fifty-fifty model are Homer and Harper Lee. Our subject, here, is literary evaluation, so of course everything I say is mere opinion, unverifiable and also unfalsifiable, which makes the ground shakier still. But I stubbornly suspect that only the cultist, or the academic, is capable of swallowing an author whole. Writers are peculiar, readers are particular: it is just the way we are. One helplessly reaches for Kant's dictum about the crooked timber of humanity, or for John Updike's suggestion to the effect that we are all of us "mixed blessings." Unlike the heroes and heroines of "Northanger Abbey," "Pride and Prejudice," and "Emma," readers and writers are not expressly designed to be perfect for each other.

I love the work of Don DeLillo. That is to say, I love "End Zone" (1972), "Running Dog" (1978), "White Noise" (1985), "Libra" (1988), "Mao II" (1991), and the first and last sections



Don DeLillo

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10

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of "Underworld" (1997). The arc of this luminous talent, as I see it, reached its apogee toward the close of the millennium, and then partly withdrew into enigma and opacity. What happens, then, when I read "Ratner's Star" (1976) or "The Names" (1982) or "Cosmopolis" (2003)? Novelists can be likened to omniscient tour guides—as they gloss and vivify the wonders of unfamiliar terrains, the marketplaces, the museums, the tearooms and wine cellars, the gardens, the houses of worship. Then, without warning, the suave cicerone becomes a garrulous rogue cabdriver, bearing you off on a series of sinister detours (out by the airport, and in the dead of night). The great writers can take us anywhere; but half the time they're taking us where we don't want to go.



“**T**he Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories” (Scribner; \$24), surprisingly, is DeLillo’s first collection. In the course of his career, he has published twenty shorter fictions, so there has already been a paring down. A halving, in fact, though the book, to my eye and ear, is a faithful alternation between first- and second-echelon work—between easy-chair DeLillo and hard-chair DeLillo. The stories come in order of composition, with dates, and in three sections, each of them flagged by a quietly resonant illustration (a view of the planet from outer space, a heavily restored classical fresco, a painting of a spectral cadaver).

As a package, the book feels both pointed and secretive, both airy and airtight. The arrangement holds the promise of a kind of unity, or a kind of cumulative artistic force; and the promise is honored. These nine pieces add up to something considerable, and form a vital addition to the corpus.

Three stories focus on, or at any rate include, erotic encounters, and two of them run into the additional hazards that beset this sphere. Unless sexuality is the master theme of a narrative (as in "Lolita," say, or "Portnoy's Complaint"), it will always feel like a departure or a parenthesis. In "Creation," the earliest story (1979), the protagonist uses the chaos of inter-island Caribbean travel to engineer an adulterous fling with another stranded passenger. The frustration, the suspension in place and time ("We'll get the two o'clock flight, or the five, depending on our status. The important thing right now is to clarify our status"), and the sensuality of the landscape supposedly conspire to make the episode seem inevitable; but the reader's naïve and

no doubt vulgar curiosity (what for? and then what?) goes ungratified. The story feels bleached of past and future, of context and consequence.

I long ago assented to DeLillo's unspoken premise—that fiction exaggerates the ever-weakening power of motive in human dealings. Yes, it does; but there's a reason for that. Motive tends to provide coherence, and fiction needs things that cohere. "The Starveling" (2011, and the most recent story) gives us a middle-aged retiree named Leo Zhelezniak. Beginning at around nine in the morning, Leo spends all day, every day, in the cinemas of New York. Why? His ex-wife, Flory, with whom he cohabits, likes to speculate:

He was an ascetic, she said. This was one theory. She found something saintly and crazed in his undertaking, an element of self-denial, an element of penance. . . .

Or he was a man escaping his past. . . . Was he at the movies to see a movie, she said, or maybe more narrowly, more essentially, simply to be at the movies?

He thought about this.

Readers may like to ponder that question in tandem with another (while bearing in mind that Leo once took a course in philosophy): "If we're not here to know what a thing is, then what is it?"

Next, and again for no clear reason, Leo starts taking an obsessive interest in another obsessive *cinéaste*, another haunter of Quads and Empires (she is pale, gaunt, faceless, and young). He follows her from theatre to theatre, follows her home, follows her, finally, into a multiplex toilet (the Ladies'), where he unburdens himself of an erratic, free-floating five-hundred-word monologue—and then she flees. Now DeLillo, in "The Starveling" (this is Leo's name for his quarry), avowedly abjures all cause and effect ("There was nothing to know"; "There was nothing to trust but the blank mind"), and enters the void of the motiveless. Most readers, I think, will find this region arid, and inherently inartistic. All it can give us is a rendering of the functionally insane—insanity being the sworn foe of the coherent.

"Baader-Meinhof" (2002), the third negotiation of the sexual theme, is, by contrast, an alarming success. "She knew there was someone else in the room," it begins. The young woman is in a Manhattan gallery, transfixed by "a cycle of fifteen canvases"—paintings of the dead Andreas, the dead Ulrike. The "someone else" is an unnamed young man. They start to talk. They go to a snack bar:

She drank her apple juice and looked at the crowds moving past, at faces that seemed completely knowable for half a second or so, then were forgotten forever in far less time than that.

Suddenly, they are in her apartment, and the veneer of normality is soon losing its glow. "I sense you're not ready," he says, "and I don't want to do something too soon. But, you know, we're here." A page later, he is "all around her." "[He] looked at her so levelly, with such measuring effect, that she barely recognized him"—and we are back on Seventh Avenue with the illusorily "knowable" faces of the passersby, back in the gallery with those murderous free spirits Baader and Meinhof, and we remember the girl saying that the paintings made her feel "how helpless a person can be."

DeLillo is the laureate of terror, of modern or postmodern terror, and the way it hovers and shimmers in our subliminal minds. As Eric Hobsbawm has said, terrorism is a new kind of urban pollution, and the pollutant is an insidious and chronic disquiet. Such is the air DeLillo breathes. And so strong is this identification that we feel slightly dislocated when, in "The Ivory Acrobat" (1988), he confronts a form of terror that is "natural" and therefore ancient and innocent: the earthquake. Set in Athens during a time of tremors, and told, with great inwardness, from a woman's point of view ("Something had basically changed. The world was narrowed down to inside and outside"), the story is expertly realized; but it is not pressingly DeLilloan. "Now that Terror has become local, how do we live?" the old nun, Sister Edgar, asks in "The Angel Esmeralda" (first published in 1994 and later incorporated into "Underworld")—and we feel we are back in the right neighborhood. "What is Terror now? Some noise on the pavement very near, a thief with a paring knife or the stammer of casual rounds from a passing car."

The neighborhood is the South Bronx, where Sister Edgar and her young colleague, Sister Gracie, are going about their good works. They visit the diabetic amputee, the epileptic, the "woman in a wheelchair who wore a FUCK NEW YORK T-shirt"; they move among congenitally addicted babies, among "junkies who roamed at night in dead men's Reeboks," among "foragers and gatherers, can-redeemers, the people who yawed through subway cars with paper cups." Every time a child dies in the projects (a frequent occurrence), "graffiti writers spray-painted a memorial angel" on a dedicated tenement wall, pink for girls, blue for boys, giving age, name, and cause of death: "TB, AIDS, beatings . . . left in dumpster, forgot in car, left in Glad bag Xmas Eve."

"I wish they'd stop already with the angels," says Sister Gracie, who is something like the voice of reason. ("It's not surreal," she shouts at the tour bus with a sign above the windshield that reads "SOUTH BRONX SURREAL." "It's real, it's real. You're making it surreal by coming here. Your bus is surreal. You're surreal.") But Sister Edgar is more susceptible. Later, when a twelve-year-old, Esmeralda, is raped and thrown off a roof, her image "miraculously" appears on a nearby "billboard floating in the gloom," and Edgar goes to join the crowds that gather and

stare at what is actually nothing more than an ad for Minute Maid orange juice. DeLillo fractionally overloads his title story with some high-style editorializing ("And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind?"). We don't need the big voice. All we need is Gracie's "The poor need visions, okay?" and Edgar's rejoinder, "You say the poor. But who else would saints appear to? Do saints and angels appear to bank presidents? Eat your carrots."

"The Runner" (1988) gives us a seven-page snapshot of another act of local terror: a little boy is snatched from a city park, in daylight, while his frozen mother looks on. Our witness to the abduction, a young man out on his evening jog, is approached by a middle-aged woman, her head tilted "in the hopeful way of a tourist who wishes to ask directions":

She said pleasantly, "Did you see what happened? . . . The father gets out and takes the little boy. . . . Don't we see it all the time? He's unemployed, he uses drugs. . . . The mother gets a court order. He has to stay away from the child. . . . There are cases they walk in and start shooting. Common-law husbands."

Still jogging on the spot, the young man demurs:

"You can't be sure, can you? . . . All right, we're looking at a woman in a terrible stricken state," he said. "But I don't see a common-law husband, I don't see a separation, and I don't see a court order."

As it happens, the runner is right ("It was a stranger," a policeman later confirms). But he doesn't disabuse the spooked woman, allowing her to cleave to her consoling fiction. "It was definitely the father," he tells her as he finishes his run. "You had it just about totally right."

This is a recurrent itch in DeLillo—the need to flesh out and piece together the half-glimpsed lives of others. In "Midnight in Dostoevsky" (2009), two solemn young pedants, Todd and Robby, slouch around a wintry upstate campus. On one of their ponderous rambles, they see a middle-aged woman unloading grocery bags onto a baby stroller:

"What's her name?"

"Isabel," I said.

"Be serious. We're serious people. What's her name?"

"Okay, what's her name?"

"Her name is Mary Frances. Listen to me," he whispered. "*Mar-y Fran-ces*. Never just Mary."

"Okay, maybe."

"Where the hell do you get Isabel?"

He showed mock concern, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"I don't know. Isabel's her sister. They're identical twins. Isabel's the alcoholic twin. But you're missing the central questions."

"No, I'm not. Where's the baby that goes with the stroller? Whose baby is it?" he said. "What's the baby's name?"

Their restless fantasies come to center on "the hooded man," an elderly gentleman in an anorak ("He doesn't have the bearing of a Russian. . . . Think about Romania, Bulgaria. Better yet, Albania"), and his supposed connection to their logic professor, Ilgauskas (a virile mystagogue given to whole-sentence pronouncements like "The causal nexus" and "The atomic fact"). The phrase "midnight in Dostoevsky," we're told, comes from a poem, and is probably intended to conjure some epiphany of willed despair. Yet DeLillo's story ends in one of his more sumptuous registers, sad, warm, and buoyant.

Such a register sustains the even more enchanting "Human Moments in World War III" (1983). A "mission specialist" and his young sidekick, Vollmer (one of DeLillo's comically intimidating nerds, like Heinrich in "White Noise"), are up in Tomahawk II, orbiting the earth and gathering intelligence, tricked out with their suction clogs, modal keys, sense frequencers, and quantum burns. The specialist is monitoring data on his mission console when a voice breaks in, "a voice that carried with it a strange and unspecifiable poignancy." He checks in with his flight-dynamics and conceptual-paradigm officers at Colorado Command (and we ask ourselves—has there ever been a more distinctive exponent of dialogue than Don DeLillo?):

"We have a deviate, Tomahawk."

"We copy. There's a voice."

"We have gross oscillation here."

"There's some interference. I have gone redundant but I'm not sure it's helping."

"We are clearing an outframe to locate source."

"Thank you, Colorado."

"It is probably just selective noise. You are negative red on the step-function quad."

"It was a voice," I told them.

"We have just received an affirm on selective noise. . . . We will correct, Tomahawk. In the meantime, advise you to stay redundant."

The voice, in contrast to Colorado's metallic pidgin, is a melange of repartee, laughter, and song, with a "quality of purest, sweetest sadness": "Somehow we are picking up signals from radio programs of forty, fifty, sixty years ago." Meanwhile, there is the blue planet, tenderly rendered, with its "sediment plumes and kelp beds," "lava flows and cold-core eddies," "storm-spiraled, sea-bright, breathing heat and haze and color." And meanwhile, "Vollmer drifts across the wardroom upside down, eating an almond crunch." Occasionally, the two astronauts put aside their pulse markers and systems checklists, and reach for something more intimate:

[Vollmer] talks about northern Minnesota as he removes the objects in his personal-preference kit, placing them on an adjacent Velcro surface. . . . I have a 1901 silver dollar in my personal-preference kit. . . . Vollmer has graduation pictures, bottle caps, small stones from his back yard. I don't know whether he chose these items himself or whether they were pressed on him by parents who feared that his life in space would be lacking in human moments.

In common with his extraordinary ear for jargon (not least the jargon of everyday life), DeLillo's predictive powers have been much remarked. To take one graphic instance, it is clear that he never regarded the World Trade Center as a pair of buildings: to him they were always a pair of bull's-eyes. In the novel "Players" (1977), Pammy Wynant works in the W.T.C. for a grief-management firm: "The towers didn't seem permanent. They remained concepts, no less transient for all their bulk than some routine distortion of light." This is certainly very striking—though we may wonder if the quoted lines shine the brighter *as prose* because they happened to come true. DeLillo said long ago that the mood of the future would be determined not by writers but by terrorists; and those who mocked him for this forecast must have felt even worse than the rest of us did on September 12, 2001.

Although the story "Hammer and Sickle" was published in 2010, by which time the fraying of Western economies was far advanced, DeLillo is already sensing the vague insurrectionary stirrings that are a phenomenon of the past couple of months. I would nevertheless submit that it is his general receptivity to the rhythms and atmospheres of the future that we should value, rather than the slightly carny business of confirmable outcomes. And here DeLillo's angle of indirection is inimitably acute. Jerold Bradway is in a correctional facility for financial felons—in other words, part of a whole prisonful of Bernie Madoffs. Each weekday, the flabby culprits gather in the common rooms to watch a market report on a cable channel. The presenters are two little girls. "Did it seem crazy, a market report for kids?" Indeed—and the more so when we learn that the girls are Jerold's daughters, Kate, twelve, and Laurie, ten:

"The word is Dubai . . . Dubai," Laurie said.

"The cost of insuring Dubai's debt against default has increased one, two, three, four times."

"Do we know what that means?"

"It means the Dow Jones Industrial Average is down, down, down."

"Deutsche Bank."

"Down."

"London—the FTSE One Hundred Index."

"Down."

"Amsterdam—the ING Group."

"Down."

"The Hang Seng in Hong Kong."

"Crude oil. Islamic bonds."

"Down, down, down."

"The word is Dubai."

"Say it."

"Dubai," Kate said.

And we are invited to look even further ahead: these, after all, are the reproving voices of



our swindled children.

In the end, "Hammer and Sickle" errs on the side of overexcitement (at about the point where the girls' duologues start to rhyme); but overexcitement is something that the DeLillo faithful will be exhilarated to see. Creative gaiety, a sense of fun and play, has been too firmly suppressed by the almost morbid tentativeness of his most recent novels and novellas. Literature seeks to give "instruction and delight": Dryden's tag, formulated three and a half centuries ago, has worn pretty well. We reflect, all the same, that whereas instruction doesn't always delight, delight always instructs. Very broadly, we read fiction to have a good time—though this is not to deny that the gods have equipped DeLillo with the antennae of a visionary. There is right field, and there is left field. He comes from third field—aslant, athwart. And I love "The Angel Esmeralda: Nine Stories." ♦

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