

American Literary Realism in the 1980s

Part II: Don DeLillo, Frederick Busch and Rick DeMarinis

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Part I of this study discussed realism in the work of Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff.¹ This second part focusses on the recent fiction of the following three writers: Don DeLillo (b. 1937), Frederick Busch (b. 1941), and Rick DeMarinis (b. 1934).

The novelist Don DeLillo, who had worked as an advertising copy-writer for a large New York agency until 1963, is the author of ten novels. He brings to the realist tradition a cinematographic quality, which he has attributed to the influence of film directors Bergman, Kurosawa, Antonioni, and Goddard.

With the publication of his eighth novel, *White Noise*, he not only achieved wide recognition but received the 1984 American Book Award. However, his 1988 novel, *Libra*, has brought him to forefront of contemporary American fiction.

Libra is an inspired work of fiction and marks a departure for DeLillo in that his work had not been previously based on factual events. The events that lay behind this novel are the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and the life and death of his accused killer, Lee Harvey Oswald.

The idea for a novel about these persons and their acts may sound macabre and even presumptuous but, as DeLillo explained in his Afterword, this novel "makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete." For this reason, he contended, "readers may find refuge here . . . without being constrained by half-facts and possibilities."²

DeLillo has taken his title from Oswald's astrological sign of the balanced scales, which the author uses to depict the man as a precariously balanced figure. When one of the characters learns of Oswald's astrological sign, he says that Oswald is "Easily, easily, easily influenced. Poised to make the dangerous leap. Either way, balance is the key."³

The novel weaves a complex path through the labyrinth of Oswald's life, from an isolated boyhood characterized by frequent moves with his mother from one shabby apartment to another, be it in New Orleans, Fort Worth, or the Bronx. Owing to its arcane subject, the narrative progresses not chronologically nor even through the experience of one central character, but drifts, like Oswald did through his short life,

between events, individuals (real and imagined), and eras. *Libra* reminds one of a series of boxes within boxes.

When DeLillo returns to Oswald he does so with great intensity. In one representative section DeLillo takes us into Oswald's mind when, as a seventh-grader, he rode between the cars of a New York subway for the "funny thrill" it gave him: "the wheels touched off showers of blue-white sparks, tremendous hissing bursts, on the edge of no-control."⁴

DeLillo shifts the focus of the novel from the young Oswald in the mid-1950s to the near present, and follows the slow research being done by the author's persona, Nicholas Branch, who, at the CIA's request, is in his fifteenth year of assembling a "secret history" of the assassination from mountains of data. To this end, Branch had "abandoned his life to understand that moment in Dallas, the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century."⁵

The novel then moves back to April 17, 1963 when a disgruntled former CIA operative and veteran of the failed 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion reveals to his close associates his plan to reawaken the Kennedy Administration's desire of removing Castro from power. Striking on the need for "an electrifying event," they agree to stage "an attempt on the life of the President," and leave a trail pointing to the Cuban Intelligence Directorate. As the plan gathers momentum and more figures are drawn in, the original details blur. One of the principle plotters does not tell his contacts "who their target was or where the shooting would take place . . . The other thing he did not say was that they were supposed to miss."⁶

Along the way DeLillo repeatedly interrupts his narrative with flashbacks to Oswald's high school days and later, to his hitch with the Marines when he was stationed for a time at the secret U-2 facility in Atsugi. While in Japan Oswald developed a friendship with a young local radical that led to his contact with a Soviet agent in Tokyo. This, in turn, precipitated his defection to the Soviet Union in the Fall of 1959. The author traces Oswald's years in Minsk to his return to Texas with his Russian wife and four-month-old daughter, in June 1962, and beyond, in the inexorable countdown to November 22, 1963.

DeLillo piles on details, invents realistic dialogue and characters and then mixes them convincingly into the dark confluence of actual events. This results in a disturbing, thought-provoking work of fiction that, as a modern political myth, serves to free us from the burdens of the yet-unproved and perhaps unprovable, and compellingly creates, in DeLillo's term, "a refuge" from that "tide of speculation that widens with the years."⁷

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As has been the case with Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff, Frederick Busch is an academic: since 1966 he has taught at Colgate University in New York, where he is presently Fairchild Professor of Literature.

He has been remarkably prolific these past two decades, and has written some thirteen books of fiction and two works of non-fiction. As a result, he has received the National Book Award for *Invisible Mending* (1984), and in 1986 received an award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

His collection of short stories, *Absent Friends*, (1989), Busch's twelfth book of fiction, is stunning and remarkably diverse.

The great variety of his subjects resists easy categories yet, if one thread can be said to run through *Absent Friends*, it is suggested by his epigraph, which he has taken from *A Tale of Two Cities*: every house "encloses its own secret . . . that every beating heart . . . is . . . a secret to the heart nearest it!" Those secrets of the heart, which lie at the core of great literature, are Frederick Busch's real subject.

Of the fourteen stories in *Absent Friends*, one with the least prepossessing of titles, "Ralph the Duck," may well be the volume's finest and is alone worth the price of the book.

Its unnamed narrator, who thinks of himself as "the oldest college student in America," is a 42-year-old campus security guard taking one course per term. For all the cynicism he tries to muster as he patrols the grounds of this "northeastern camp for the overindulged,"⁸ there is a great deal of tenderness in the man.

In contrast to the narrator stands his young, callow English professor. Despite his own sense of superiority, the professor finds himself envious of his older student's status as a Vietnam veteran. For his part, the narrator thinks of the other man simply as "that jackass with the smile" and, to humor him, plays along with the professor's suspicion that he had killed many people in the war: "You know, I could have sworn you did," [the professor] said. I nodded, and he nodded back. I'd made him happy."⁹

Twice the narrator is called out to rescue the same girl who has attempted suicide, and slowly it emerges that his frantic effort to see that the girl does not die is linked to his memories of his own long-dead daughter. Ralph the Duck turns out to have been a tale he apparently told his daughter. Busch weaves these elements of the grieving father, the professor and the dying coed into a gem of a story that would simply be maudlin if attempted by a lesser writer.

Among other stories is "Reruns," which concerns the reaction of a suburban husband who learns that his estranged wife has been taken hostage in Lebanon.

Another, "Dog Song," may be among the most disturbing, in its lengthy examination of a would-be suicide who can only gradually but incompletely fathom what has happened to him, as he lies in his hospital bed. At one point, as he stares at his nurse, Busch's description of her conveys the tone succinctly: "She had the voice of a 12-year-old girl and the teeth of someone long dead."¹⁰

Also included in this collection is "Name the Name," narrated by "the man in the unwashed dark blue truck who comes up the snow-sealed rural road" to teach

homebound children. As he says of himself, "I am the education [the school board] must send. . . . I am the chance."¹¹

One of his students is a 12-year-old girl who is seven months pregnant and so not permitted to attend school. He wearily thinks of when she will eventually return to school with her baby: "her trophy would be eleven years and eleven months away from a pregnancy leave and a visiting teacher like me."¹²

Another student is hospitalized in intensive care after a drug overdose. As he tries to explain that day's lesson, she falls asleep. "While she slept," Busch writes, "her chest shuddered and sweat poured up from her skin. And she wept. I swore—I swear—I could tell the difference between the perspiration and the tears."¹³

The teacher's care and insight are called upon most poignantly when he visits his last case of the day, a 16-year-old boy held in the county jail on charges of vandalism. Near the end we learn that this boy, whose "face was the same clenched thickening face of a boy I remembered as pretty,"¹⁴ is the teacher's son.

Throughout *Absent Friends* Frederick Busch compassionately examines the secrets of his characters who dwell in "those darkly clustered houses" that Dickens knew so well.

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Another writer whose work merits consideration is Rick DeMarinis, who teaches creative writing at the University of Texas in El Paso. He is the author of six books, including the novels *The Burning Woman of Far Cry* (1986) and *The Year of the Zinc Penny* (1989). In addition, his story, "Gent," was chosen for inclusion in John Updike's edition of the *Best American Short Stories: 1984*.

The American coming-of-age novel has a long tradition, with a variety of young protagonists, such as Twain's Huck Finn, Sherwood Anderson's George Willard, Hemingway's Nick Adams, and Salinger's Holden Caulfield. To that list we can now add Rick DeMarinis' Trygve Napoli.

The Year of the Zinc Penny, DeMarinis's latest novel and eighth work of fiction, is set in Los Angeles in 1943, the year the U. S. government, in an effort to conserve raw material vital to the war effort, began minting pennies out of zinc rather than copper.

Trygve Napoli had been living with his taciturn Norwegian grandparents in Montana since he was six years old, when his mother left him there after her divorce. Life on the high plains had not been easy, and even the terrain itself offered the sensitive boy scant comfort: "The horizon was so far away you were convinced you could see the curvature of the earth on a clear day. It was like seeing a horrendous truth underlying what had been a comfortable deception."¹⁵

When Trygve became ten his mother abruptly returned to bring him to live with her in L. A. He soon finds himself in a wholly different world from the quiet life of Montana: now he had a new stepfather, as well as an aunt with a surly

fifteen-year-old son, all living in the same cramped apartment. He also becomes aware that beyond all this lay yet another world, one which was at war.

The war, in fact, plays an almost obsessively large part in the boy's life in that it colors his fantasies and daydreams. Repeatedly he imagines himself in various heroic scenarios, rescuing refugees in Europe, flying a Dauntless Dive Bomber across the Pacific to fight Mitsubishi Zeroes, or downing several Messerschmitt fighters over Germany, before being shot down. DeMarinis, who himself was approximately Trygve's age in 1943, captures the era vividly.

During the year the novel covers, Trygve turns eleven and begins to experience the predictable pubescent stirrings. More importantly, however, he begins the slow process of leaving childhood when he finds he must face a number of harsh realities, including the loss of a close friend, and the deaths of a relative and of another child.

Rick DeMarinis deftly balances the bittersweet with the humorous, and involves the reader in Trygve's life. He further enlivens his narrative with a poet's touch, so graceful and evocative is his sense of language.

Consider the night Trygve is listening to a war-time broadcast from overseas on his two-tube shortwave radio, when a meteor shower occurs, causing static: "And in between those meteor raids, I'd listen for hours, without a moment of boredom, to the constant cosmic hiss. The universe was a noisy place, blasting our world with constant messages in its indecipherable codes."¹⁶

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The tradition of American realists "to take the measure of the country itself,"¹⁷ as Leo Braudy put it, is still as vibrant in the contemporary American fiction of Carver, Wolff, DeLillo, Busch, and DeMarinis, as it was for the generation of writers exemplified by John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, and Ernest Hemingway, who began their careers immediately after World War I.

Whether the realist author takes as his tack either the differences that are pervasive in American society, or the stability of that society, he will construct his fictional world "from a pattern of observed detail that can only be called realist."¹⁸

NOTES

1. Francis J. Bosha, "American Literary Realism in the 1980s": Part I, *The Journal of Kawamura Gakuen Woman's University*, Vol.2 (1991)
2. Don DeLillo. "Author's Note," *Libra* (New York: Viking, 1988), p. 458.
3. *Libra*, p. 315.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 181.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 458.
8. Frederick Busch, "Ralph the Duck," in *Absent Friends* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p. 69.

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9. Ibid., p. 75.
10. Busch, "Dog Song," in *Absent Friends*, p. 174.
11. Busch, "Name the Name," in *Absent Friends*, pp. 247–248.
12. Ibid., p. 250.
13. Ibid., pp. 252–253.
14. Ibid., p. 257.
15. Rick DeMarinis, *The Year of the Zinc Penny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), p. 11.
16. DeMarinis, p. 145.
17. Leo Braudy. "Realists, Naturalists, and Novelists of Manners," in *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, ed. Daniel Hoffman (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 86.
18. Ibid.