

# Don DeLillo's Bum Luck

The novelist's low status in an age of cultural proliferation

By Nick Gillespie

In February, a literary event of no small significance occurred. Don DeLillo, arguably America's finest living novelist still in full control of his talents—and inarguably one of the most important and respected writers of the past 30 years—released his 12th work of fiction, a novella called *The Body Artist*. Though the critical response to *The Body Artist* has been less than uniformly positive, its sheer volume testifies to DeLillo's eminence. This is a book that has been written up everywhere that matters—*The New York Times* even saw fit to review it twice—and many places that don't.

Since his 1971 debut, *Americana*, DeLillo has gone from sometimes being dismissed as an epigone of Thomas Pynchon to being acclaimed (in the words of hard-to-please novelist Martin Amis) as “a writer of high intellect and harsh originality, equipped with extraordinary gifts of eye and ear—and of nose, palate and fingertips.”

Along the way, DeLillo has crafted an oeuvre that includes such highly regarded novels as 1972's *End Zone* (which hilariously links college football and nuclear war); 1985's *White Noise* (which follows the travails of a professor who creates the academic field of “Hitler Studies”); and 1988's *Libra* (which offers a detailed and compelling meditation on Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the role of accident and chance in history).

In 1997, he published *Underworld*, a massive, 827-page novel about the second half of the American Century and the end of the Cold War that was universally hailed a masterpiece. Amis again: “It isn't every day, or even every decade, that one sees the ascension of a great writer.”

DeLillo is, in short and in every way, what undergraduate literature courses dub a Major Author. Yet he is also an essentially invisible author, largely unread by and unknown to not simply the vast majority of Americans, but the vast majority of well-educated Americans, most of whom have never read one of his books and could not name even one of his many memorable characters.

His situation thus represents something of a mystery: In terms of literary merit and artful explication of an American experience—and in terms of relative sales—DeLillo is easily the equal or superior of a Hemingway or a Fitzgerald. Yet he occupies nothing like the cultural niche they filled. Indeed, he doesn't even rise to the level of presence achieved at times by such postwar authors as Norman Mailer or Gore Vidal.

What explains this? Part of it is surely DeLillo's own doing. While he has never obsessively shunned publicity à la J.D. Salinger or Thomas

Pynchon, he has rarely made himself available to the press or to critics; neither does he regularly publish reviews of or essays on contemporary writers, a tried and true way of boosting one's profile.

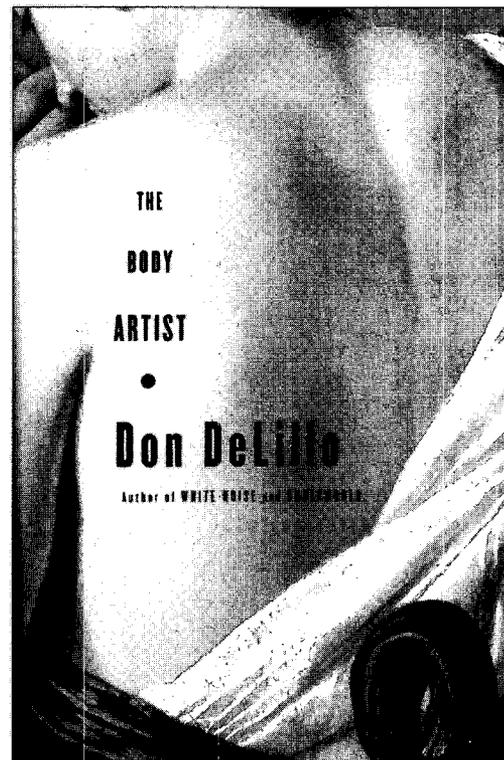
But a bigger part of the answer relates to the underlying dynamic of cultural proliferation and the vast outpouring in recent decades of art, music, literature, video, and other forms of creative expression. (See “All Culture, All the Time,” April 1999.) In a world of ever increasing cultural opportunities—a world in which over 60,000 new books and 8,000 works of fiction are published each year—it is harder than ever for any individual writer to matter much.

A similar reality holds true for

artists, musicians, moviemakers, and the like: The same situation that gives people the power to make and consume more culture undermines the clout of creators. As literary critic Stanley Fish has noted, “Artistic freedom is purchased at the expense of artistic efficacy.” The result is a corresponding deflation in cultural power.

When it comes to literature, Mailer and Vidal are not simply old men, they represent old models of what it means to be an author, especially when it comes to leveraging literary fame into other areas. (On the strength of their literary success, for instance, both Mailer and Vidal ran for public office, and have acted—or at any rate appeared—in movies.)

In short, DeLillo has had the bum luck of being a great novelist when such a figure doesn't command the attention, respect, and awe it once did. At least in America, the age of the novelist as culture hero has largely passed. To his credit,



DeLillo does not seem particularly perturbed by his fate. "I've always liked being relatively obscure," he told an interviewer in 1991. "I feel that's where I belong, where my work belongs." His novel *Mao II*, which tracks the adventures of ultra-reclusive writer Bill Gray, is in part an exploration of the diminished expectations of the contemporary novelist.

Such a situation shouldn't be confused with the end of Literature, or with a barbarians-at-the-gate scenario. There are more novels (and volumes of poetry) in circulation than ever before, and more people read more books than ever before.

Indeed, one of the more interesting

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ironies of cultural proliferation is that artists can do quite well for themselves financially even if they no longer possess the sort of cultural capital they once did. It's worth underscoring that DeLillo is not simply a writer's writer or a critic's darling; his work also sells well. Since *White Noise*, DeLillo's books have been included in such high-volume venues as the Book of the Month Club, and they routinely chart on the bestseller lists.

By early March, *The Body Artist*, which revolves around a performance artist reflecting on her husband's suicide, had already cracked Amazon.com's top 1,000 and made the American Booksellers Association bestseller list for independent bookstores.

One can only assume its sales will continue to climb, even if its author's presence in American culture does not quite rise in equal measure. ♦

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Tower. In universities at least as much as anywhere else, vast floods of words pour forth to no useful end. Nothing would be lost if they had died aborning. However, internally or externally imposed measures to modulate that flow stifle the creativity sustained by free discourse. They transform universities into institutions that carry the name but lack the essence.

I know of no book that sets out as clearly and concisely as *Free Speech on Campus* the distinctive ethos of the university. This is not only an essay about speech but also one that practices it in exemplary style. For example, although Golding's foil is universally known as "political correctness," he never employs that term in these pages. Rather than pigeonholing by stereotype, he doggedly and intelligently sticks to the arguments. Howsoever his opponents may choose to travel, Golding consistently takes the high road. But precisely because the case presented here for freedom of speech is so strong, a further puzzle arises: Why is an attribute so critical to the effective functioning of the university today under frenzied assault by so many of its own? Why don't they realize they are fouling their own home? On this matter Golding is less forthcoming.

Some might suggest that those who attempt to suppress speech are bad people in thrall to a bad agenda. While that characterization no doubt holds for some of

the speech controllers, many are thoroughly decent people who happen to have placed themselves on the wrong side of this issue. Besides, universities have always housed the good, the bad, and the morally indifferent. What is it that renders these times especially apt for eruptions of censoriousness?

I suspect that this is largely a function of the changed nature of universities. Yes, they still function as citadels for the unrestrained life of the mind. But they have taken on other responsibilities. They serve as vocational schools, dispensers of remediation to those who escaped high school unable to read or calculate well, credentialing agencies, providers of rites of passage for those perched somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, places where governments and corporations can purchase applied research services, and impresarios of athletic and artistic entertainment to surrounding communities.

As higher education has been democratized and expanded to reach new clientele, these additional functions have grown to rival if not altogether eclipse the traditional understanding of the university as the site of uninhibited inquiry. Note that for many of these new activities, academic freedom is not only inessential but also positively detrimental; it just gets in the way of teaching and learning by rote. No

wonder, then, that the populist university is less committed to traditional academic values than was its ancestor. Golding has worked for many years at Duke, an elite university less given to assuming the character of a high school on steroids than some of its less prestigious brethren. Therefore he may have had fewer occasions to observe this phenomenon than those of us who teach at institutions where neither endowments nor SAT scores are gilt-edged.

**T**his cannot be the whole story, however, because it fails to account for the fact that speech is under duress not only at pseudo-universities and near-universities but especially at such bastions of academic excellence as Harvard, Berkeley, and, yes, Duke. Why should they have proven to be even more susceptible than the lesser lights to intrusions by the censors?

The explanation, I believe, has much to do with higher education taking on political and social tasks that compromise academic neutrality. The elite schools have been leaders in this trend. No longer content to improve society through the slow process of nurturing individual minds in the classroom and laboratory, they have turned instead to wholesale political engineering. Are racism and sexism continuing stains on the social fabric despite longstanding efforts to weaken through education the hold of prejudice? Then perhaps the urgency of the situation justifies enforced sensitivity sessions and official sanctions against those who express themselves in ways contrary to what the enlightened have declared to be social imperatives.

Nor is it merely coincidental that as affirmative action has waxed, defense of academic freedom has waned. In the past universities, like other institutions, were insufficiently open to women and people of color. Now they attempt to atone by actively recruiting students and faculty from traditionally under-represented groups. Centers and departments dedicated to Black/Women's/Gay-and-Lesbian Studies are established in which holding correct political attitudes is as important as excellence in scholarship. Corners are cut to achieve desired ends, most especially racially based quotas for admissions and

hiring. Although these are rarely publicized or even acknowledged by university administrators, the existence of differential standards and favored viewpoints is hardly a secret on campuses. That knowledge breeds cynicism and resentment among some and insecure defensiveness on the part of others.

As noted previously, universities are not dispensers of comfort and equanimity even when they function as they are meant to do, and taking on these extraneous missions exacerbates tensions. In order to keep the lid on their rapidly boiling pot, administrators decree from above the civility that their own policies have put at risk. Whatever peace is achieved is artificial and temporary. Above the surface or beneath it, the cycle of acrimony and

resentment continues. The world hasn't been rendered pure after all, and that corner of it covered in ivy has sacrificed its birthright.

Unfortunately there are none so stubborn as those inspired by idealistic visions. We probably have some time to wait until universities abandon exercises in self-mutilation and instead rededicate themselves to free inquiry. The highest compliment I can give *Free Speech on Campus* is to say that it may shorten that wait by a little. ♦

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## Inside Outsiders

**Three media mavericks come to terms with success**

By Steve Kurtz

**M**att Drudge, Larry Elder, and Bill O'Reilly are all media figures who sell their politics through a mix of news and entertainment. While they may have different beliefs, one thing unites them: They define themselves defiantly as outsiders. Thumbing their noses at the "mainstream media," they claim to give you the truth you can't get elsewhere.

These "outsiders" have now published books at about the same time; all of their titles have spent weeks on *The New York Times'* nonfiction bestseller list. In fact, *The O'Reilly Factor* even reached the very top of that list. If the Establishment is trying to stifle their voices, it's doing a pretty bad job.

Which raises the question: Just what is this mainstream anyway? Who defines it? O'Reilly has his own nightly TV program, Elder has a drive-time talk radio show in a big market, and Drudge has his news Web site, all easily accessible and all with big audiences. With more and more choices out there, and a greater variety of viewpoints represented, it's tough to decide what's in the mainstream and what's

at the fringe.

Years ago, the story goes, there were fewer media options. You had only three TV networks and they told you what the news was. If *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* worked at it, they could

**Drudge Manifesto, by Matt Drudge with Julia Phillips, New York: New American Library, 247 pages, \$22.95**

**The Ten Things You Can't Say in America, by Larry Elder, New York: St. Martin's Press, 354 pages, \$23.95**

**The O'Reilly Factor: The Good, the Bad, and the Completely Ridiculous in American Life, by Bill O'Reilly, New York: Broadway Books, 214 pages, \$23.00**

bring down a president. This version of things is obviously too simple: There have always been numerous alternative sources of information, and numerous media cultures and subcultures. Still, it's clearly the case that media barons have less power to monopolize information and analysis than