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Point Omega: A Novel



Synopsis

In the middle of a desert somewhere south of nowhere, to a forlorn house made of metal and clapboard, a secret war advisor has gone in search of space and time. Richard Elster, seventy-three, was a scholar an outsider when he was called to a meeting with government war planners. They asked Elster to conceptualize their efforts to form an intellectual framework for their troop deployments, counterinsurgency, orders for rendition. For two years he read their classified documents and attended secret meetings. He was to map the reality these men were trying to create. Bulk and swagger, he called it. At the end of his service, Elster retreats to the desert, where he is joined by a filmmaker intent on documenting his experience. Jim Finley wants to make a one-take film, Elster its single character. Just a man against a wall. The two men sit on the deck, drinking and talking. Finley makes the case for his film. Weeks go by. And then Elster's daughter Jessie visits an otherworldly woman from New York who dramatically alters the dynamic of the story. When a devastating event follows, all the men's talk, the accumulated meaning of conversation and connection, is thrown into question. What is left is loss, fierce and incomprehensible. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

If our descendants are reading serious fiction hundreds of years from now, they would do well to revisit the work of Don DeLillo to seek out insights into the temper of our times. In an impressive body of work created over some 40 years, DeLillo has demonstrated an uncanny ability to tap into

our collective psyche and explain us to ourselves. That talent surfaces again in his latest novel, a spare exploration of the mysteries of time and space. POINT OMEGA continues the pattern displayed in DeLillo's more recent works, interspersing substantial novels (his monumental UNDERWORLD the most noteworthy) with slighter and more enigmatic ones (THE BODY ARTIST, COSMOPOLIS). The new novel settles indisputably into the latter category. Set in 2006, most of DeLillo's brief story unfolds in the harsh and starkly beautiful California desert. There, an aging professor, a "defense intellectual" named Richard Elster, has retreated to a ramshackle house to reflect on his career and contemplate the folly of his tangential involvement in planning for the 2003 Iraq War: "We tried to create new realities overnight," he recalls with more than a trace of irony, "careful sets of words that resemble advertising slogans in memorability and repeatability. These were words that would yield pictures eventually and then become three-dimensional. The reality stands, it walks, it squats. Except when it doesn't." Describing his close encounter with that artificial world of "acronyms, projections, contingencies, methodologies," Elster confesses with disarming candor, "Violence freezes my blood.

This is a hard book to love. It's easy to respect the brilliant author whose thick works (e.g. Underworld) and thin works (e.g. Body Artist) have been seen as prophetic markers along the dark and twisted path of American paranoia, greed, and spectacle. But the humor is very dark, and the humanity is very thin in DeLillo's recent works. And this is where I start with Point Omega. Dehumanized with few laughs on display among the small-scale movements and moments of the novel. It's a long, long way from the fleshy, earthy, body functions of White Noise. But it's been a long journey for this country as well. The novel is set deep in the desert, the retreat of Richard Elster, a former academic and intellectual author of plans for the Iraq War (we can picture a neoconservative talking head, Paul Wolfowitz perhaps). He has slipped under corrugated steel to avoid the news and the traffic, and perhaps a conscience as well. A filmmaker is present to record the thoughts and philosophies of Elster warning that Iraq is just the beginning, the "whisper" of horrors to come. (Though it'll be a long time, I think, before we'll see an Iraq War version of Robert McNamara's hand-wringing Fog of War.) The prognosis isn't good, but can anyone expect otherwise from this book? I am impressed at the sparse writing, the intelligent discourse around the inertia of the setting. But I really would have liked to have had something to laugh about, something pleasurable, something to hang my hat on during a cold winter here in Minnesota. That wasn't in this book. And sure, it probably shouldn't be, but we read for pleasure, don't we? We want more than just a scathing look at our crimes and inevitable downfall, don't we? Maybe DeLillo is saying

that we don't deserve that from a novel now.

In this book, DeLillo sets the initial scene in museum in which the art work, "24 Hour Psycho" is being shown. The piece consists of a projection on a scrim of Hitchcock's film, "Psycho", in vastly slowed frame-by-frame style lasting 24 hours. DeLillo eloquently describes how the setting, presentation and altered time transform the film from its original form, creating an entirely different perceptual and conceptual experience. In the gallery, as a man experiences the piece, the reader is confronted with questions of the role of perspective, expectation and time on one's personal perception. In the process, DeLillo very effectively projects a sense of the disorientation and intellectual challenge provoked by the art piece. The next location is in the desert, where a film producer attempts to involve a academic war planner in a proposed documentary. A kind of symmetry occurs here, with the war planner's own concepts forming the basis of his individualized abstract notion of what war would be and what his role would be in planning it. The planner's abstract concept of military planning and government then parallels his difficulty in interacting and understanding his own daughter, and is no less personalized and disconnected from reality than that of the film producer and, for that matter, the man viewing 24-hour Psycho. DeLillo's presentation of the thoughts and perceptions of the man in the museum, the war planner, the film maker all focus on questions of perception and reality, and the characters are themselves disoriented and sometimes confused about what they are experiencing. Interestingly, the daughter is described but her thoughts and perceptions are never revealed. The narrative in this book is important but not foremost.

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