



Essay: *The Strange, Entertaining,  
and Sometimes Behind-the-Scenes  
Story of Cleo Birdwell and  
Don DeLillo* by Alan Smithee

from *Post Road 2*

Selected by Molly Jong-Fast, author of *Girl Maladjusted: True Stories from a Semi-Celebrity Childhood* and *Normal Girl*.

*This Alan Smithee is so insanely and disturbingly talented, he reminds me of the second coming of Christ (or the first coming for my people). – MJF.*

It's about a man who turns into a woman.... He's the former president of the United States. He's completed his two terms but he's still very popular and he's always speaking at important banquets. At the same time, he's beginning to turn into a woman. He's beginning to grow breasts and his genitals are shrinking. He wears a garter belt for the secret thrill it gives him. He's a WASP, the ex-president. But the new president is black. He's patterned after Sonny Liston. He's very hip and magical. He turns on every night and he's making it with all the wives and daughters of the southern senators and even with some of the senators themselves. It'll be over a thousand pages long. It's called *Coitus*

Interruptus. The theme is whatever you want it to be because appearance is all that matters, man. The whole country's going to puke blood when they read it.

– Don DeLillo, *Americana*

The action picks up in 1997, at the venerable 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. Don DeLillo, chief shaman of the Paranoid School of American Fiction, and one of the most influential writers of the last third of the century, has just completed his first public reading of what some will label his magnum opus, *Underworld*. As the reclusive author sits at a table, glad-handling with fans and autographing various first editions from his (then) eleven novel oeuvre, a man asks DeLillo to sign a hardback copy of *Amazons, An Intimate Memoir by the First Woman Ever to Play in the National Hockey League*.

Others in line are confused—with good reason. They associate DeLillo with *White Noise* and *Libra* and *Mao II*, tomes that have affected the culture and racked up big awards. *Amazons*? No one's heard of it. On top of which, looping script identifies its author not as DeLillo but someone named Cleo Birdwell.

DeLillo takes the book. Autographs the title page.

“It's a long story,” he says.

In truth, the Behind The Scenes tale of any pseudonym probably should be long, for by its very nature a pseudonym is a vehicle of mystery, an agent of secrets and deception. “When the name is itself secret, the power and influence are magnified,” wrote DeLillo, in his appropriately titled novel, *The Names*. “A secret name is a way of escaping the world. It is an opening into the self.” Two books later, in *Libra*, DeLillo's breathtaking

imagination of the life and times of Lee Harvey Oswald and the conditions surrounding John F. Kennedy's assassination, the author provided this insight: "History is the sum total of the things they're not telling us." In the same book, he also created, for the fictionalized Oswald, the now-famous mantra: "There is a world within the world." Is there any significance to the fact that DeLillo's first novel after taking a pseudonym was called *The Names*? That Lee Harvey Oswald was buried in a grave under the false name William Bobo? The poet declares that a rose by any other name might smell as sweet, yet a name is nothing if not a personal brand, an associative mantle which bears the cumulative weight of a life. And while under ideal circumstances, a book—in particular a novel—is a self-contained entity, while any successful piece of writing provides its own justification, acts as its own end and means, it is nonetheless natural that a reader has a certain interest in the life and mind behind the words. Certainly we can be excused for a degree of curiosity when one of our literary bigwigs takes up a mask for the purposes of a volume's creation. Whether the nom de plume is George Eliot, Vivian Calmbrood, Vee Sirin, or Catnab, Robert Markham, Chloe Anthony Wofford, A.N. Roquelaure, the Marquis of Douro, or The Real Slim Shady, *let alone* an appellation created by the Chief Shaman of The Paranoid School Of American Fiction, inarguably one of the two most influential writers of the last third of a century (donning a figurative bra and panties to write about *hockey* of all things), in such cases, it does not seem unreasonable to do some extensive and deconstructive line-readings, to solicit gossip and rummage through trash cans; for underneath the cold hard glass of those twin magnifying lenses that are history and fact, we trust and believe that all of the deceptions and secret worlds and silky

undergarments will give way, revealing a sliver of the logic between secret and motivation and circumstance, so that an appropriateness and symmetry emerges, and the connections between author and veil start to make sense, and in ways commonsensical and contextual, karmic and inevitable, somehow somehow somehow, this whole strange deal *works*.

- Like how Victorian mores deemed it a crime against church and God for a woman to publish writings; ergo, any decent reading of the bountifully pleasurable, multitextured, and nuanced masterpiece *Middlemarch* cannot leave a reasonable person surprised at the determination of its author, Mary Ann Evans, who first took the male appellation of George Eliot so that her voice might be heard in a local newspaper column. (Try to imagine, sweet reader, the cosmic awe and relief Eliot/Evans must have felt, after so many years of secret identity, when she opened that now-famous letter from Henry James. Written in appreciation of the *Middlemarch*, it began: “Dearest madam”.)

- Or how, as Vladimir Nabokov’s literary powers and acumen grew during the author’s twenties and thirties, one of the many ways his penchant for mirrors, doppelgangers, and games manifest itself was through alternate identities: Catnab, M. Ageyev, Vladimir Sirin, and the anagram Vivian Calmbrood, were all guises under which the genteel lepidopterist wrote poetry, translations, short dramas, a novel (*Novel with Cocaine*), and—most often—veiled attacks on those who had dared attack his own writings.

- Even the commonsensical stance of genre novelists Stephen King and Anne Rice has a certain neatness. On the one hand, the Waldenbooks superstars felt a need to branch out beyond the styles and interests which had made them famous. On the other, commercial guidelines all but demand they maintain and protect whatever, ahem, integrity their brand names had to offer. What better answer than noms de guerre (Richard Bachman and A.N. Roquelaure, respectively)?

- Then there's the whole David Foster Wallace/porn thing.<sup>1</sup>

Maybe the answer comes from DeLillo himself, given in a 1988 interview with Anthony DeCurtis for *Rolling Stone*:

Q: The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it hadn't happened?

A: Maybe it invented me.

Fall, 1980. *Amazons, An Intimate Memoir by the First Woman Ever to Play in the National Hockey League* (ISBN# 0-03-055426-8) is published by Holt Reinhart and

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<sup>1</sup> *The September 1998 issue of Premiere magazine featured a lengthy reportage from the 1998 Adult Video News Award ceremonies in Las Vegas. With brilliant language, observations alternately erudite, hilarious, and self-indulgent, plus enough footnotes to choke a friggin horse, "Neither Adult Nor Entertainment" bore all the signature imprints of that whitest-hot of bandana-boys David Foster Wallace. Meanwhile, the by-line went to two nobodies: Willem R. deGroot and Matt Rund. While it is probable that Foster Wallace—who has never officially or publically acknowledged authorship of the piece—took the fake names in the cheesy spirit of porn itself, just as plausible is that DFW wanted to maintain a degree of authorial anonymity which, given his popularity at the time, otherwise would have been impossible.*

Winston in simultaneous American and Canadian editions. On the memoir's back cover, author Cleo Birdwell appears as a delicate, supermodel-y member of the fairer sex. Her flowing blonde hair covers the first and last letters of her hockey jersey, turning Rangers, the nickname of New York City's hockey team, into the French word for angel.

Birdwell, a twenty-three-year-old from Beaver, Ohio, claims to have worked her way up through six seasons of minor league stick, and chronicles her inaugural season playing for the Rangers, wherein she became both star and target. "Everyone said I made a blazing entry into the NHL," reads the book's third paragraph. "They wrote about my honey blonde hair flying in the breeze, my silver skate blades flashing, my milky blue eyes, my taut ass and firm breasts, the downy white bruises on my milky white thighs."

Infectious, intelligent, and butter-smooth, *Amazons'* light narrative is held up by the framework of a hockey season's timeline: Birdwell signs a contract to play for the Rangers, travels with and stars on the team, and then after the playoffs, the fun ends—a progression that happens moment-to-moment, almost in matters of happenstance and chance, with the author tagging along as an after-thought, as if to see where things will take her.

Things kept happening. It was hard for me to find a shape for them. It is still hard. Events and people kept crowding the page. It is like a two-dimensional Japanese subway.

I thought this would be a little book of meditations. All along I'd planned to use Wadi Assad's slim volumes as guides and inspirations. I didn't exactly want to

be pithy. I know I don't have the discipline for that. But now and then I'd like to develop a theme or find a shape for events. I didn't think major thematic material would be this hard to turn up.

When I was ten, I never went anywhere in Badger without my copy of *The American Girl Book of Sports Stories*. My mother used to ask me to find a theme in every story, and with a little prodding I could do it. Those stories had themes, every one last one of them. The events were shaped.

That was Badger. This was Philadelphia, and the Spectrum was full of white-eyed, shining savages.

Along our happenstance wanderings, the reader meets Birdwell's agent, Floss Penrose, whose existence depends on playing strip Monopoly with tennis player Archie Brewster ("It is like incest," explains Penrose, "but better."); Madison Square Garden president James Kiaross ("Tell you the truth, Birdwell, I hate hockey."); Rangers general manager Sanders Meade (Yale, class of '67, rendered impotent by mentioning the name of a certain well-endowed hockey player, as well as any mention of Watergate, Vietnam, and/or the Iran hostages); and the closest thing Cleo has to a boyfriend—one-time hockey player Shaver Stevens, who suffers from a disease called Flying Dutchman, where he intermittently breaks into small annoying mannerisms, checking the bottoms of his shoes and doing deep-knee bends.

Cleo wears white skates and speaks Latin. Her brother is a porn star. The hockey team's radio play-by-play announcer is plagued by a swimming-pool-shaped kidney.

Cleo has sex with the tennis player. With the Flying Dutchman disease guy. With the Rangers French-speaking coach. She would have sex with the general manager, except she mentions Watergate and he loses his erection. Everyone mildly associated with the hockey team carries self-help books by the guru Wadi Assad. Cleo bangs just about all of them, the men anyhow. Feeling a certain Seventies vibe yet? How about when we report that her building's doorman is named Washington Post? That the New York Rangers are purchased by Saudi Arabians? (They demand Cleo wear a veil while playing hockey. She answers: "In the team colors, or strictly black? Is my veil washed with the other players' uniforms or is it sent out to a Moslem laundry? Do I have a home veil and a road veil? How do I communicate with my teammates in the heat of battle? Muffled shouts? Eye blinks?") In point of fact, the immediate instinct is to categorize *Amazons* as a satire of or a very funny reflection on the lives and styles of swingin' America at the end of the Disco Decade. Similarly, as Cleo shows herself to be a bright, strong, and beautiful woman, who possesses no sexual hang-ups and bangs whomever she feels like banging, it should be no shock if more than a few fuzzy-lipped women's studies professors claims *Amazons* as something of a feminist tract. Your correspondent begs to differ. On both points.

While *Amazons* contains many fine yuks and trenchant observations, the Seventies humor is basically referential, and the book possesses no grand or overriding concerns, be it with the Seventies or anything else, thus the categorization of *Amazons* as serious satire is erroneous. Moreover, with all due respect to the goddess of the moon and her followers, your correspondent insists, nay, *demands* that any possible appropriation of

*Amazons* by feminists be given a big fat middle finger, and does this by citing the good book itself, page 335: “A penis erect can be impressive. It has the force of legend and myth. An engorged, murky thing. It loses its playfulness, erect. There is sometimes a purpling along the seams. It is a little beastly if the truth be known. But women accept it as a force of nature and myth that it is. I don’t think we want to change the basic principle.”

Indeed. Taking into account Cleo’s intelligence, looks, carnal appetite, and her respect for the force of nature and myth that is an erect penis, it should be fairly obvious that Ms. Birdwell is nothing so much as the product of *male* imagination, some sort of fantasized *ubergal*—a gentler, smarter cousin to Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg’s *Candy*. Likewise, even without the anecdote that worked as this essay’s lead, any adroit bibliophile should be able to mark her the product of one specific male imagination. The passion for the perfect line, the clean and swift economy of text, the rapid-fire pace of those commas and quips, and the extended set pieces and slapstick-ish conversations...we recognize these. And other similarities abound. Most importantly, recognizable as an autograph or thumbprint is the *author’s style and process*.

Admittedly, this sounds fairly esoteric and presumptuous; which is why the following example is offered. In *Amazons*, a television talk-show doctor famed for his belief that “We don’t really know what disease is,” convinces Shaver Stevens that the best chance to beat Flying Dutchman’s disease involves undergoing five months of suspended animation in something called a Kramer cube. But once Stevens is inside the cube, Cleo does not want to let him out. (“He looks so haunted,” she says, admiringly.) Moreover, her agent,

Floss Penrose, decides that she wants her own guy in a Kramer cube. Who cannot see the embryonic similarity between Shaver's limbo and the fully-evolved Beckett-inspired monster which, in four years, will envelope *Libra's* FBI agent Nicholas Branch; assigned to a basement office, Branch catalogues and archives information on the Kennedy assassination (blacked out and edited files, descriptions of eyewitness *dreams* following the assassination, reports whose key information was purposefully being kept from him by his superiors, a conflicting and contrary and just plain overwhelming avalanche of facts and fictions)? How about the similarities between Branch and professor of Hitler studies Jack Gladney, who at the end of *White Noise* is infected with the fallout of the radioactive cloud and lives each day while death spreads inside of him, with no idea how much damage has been done, how much time he has left? Nor let us forget novelist Bill Gray from *Mao II*, in his study, alone, left to perpetually edit and revise his already perfect manuscript.

And then we've got Murray Jay Siskind.

Yes, Murray. You know him—at least if you are any sort of DeLillo fan or contemporary bibliophile you do (if you're not: hi mom & dad). For Murray's role in *White Noise*, the Siskind name holds a place in all of our hearts. At that novel's College-on-the-Hill, Siskind, an ex-sportswriter and visiting professor waxes rhapsodic on the sign announcing the most photographed barn in America, and also participates in a tete-a-tete with Jack Gladney concerning the similarities between Elvis and Hitler, a pair of scenes which are now often cited in essays and reprinted in postmodern anthologies and generally get mentioned as ground zero points in the earthquake of self-consciousness

which has consumed and shaken our culture, so much so that we're all sick of irony and self-consciousness, yet still cannot help being ironic and self-conscious. However, dearest reader, did you know that five years before he was a supporting character in *White Noise*, Murray was a supporting character in *Amazons*? Well guess what. *White Noise*'s visiting professor and ex-sportswriter was a sportswriter—he covered Cleo on the Rangers, and lugged around an eight-hundred page manuscript-in-progress (subject: the Mafia's control and manipulation of the snow-mobile industry). In fact, in *Amazons*' most hilarious and poignant scene, Cleo and Murray have sex, and our heroine uses descriptions of the Christmas rituals in her hometown to arouse him, and the same interest in Americana and popular culture which will so excite Mur in *White Noise* erupt in a different sort of way.

Talk about your worlds within worlds.

The straight deal: As the 1970's came to a close, DeLillo was the author of five novels, including the minor wonder *Great Jones Street*, and a play (*The Day Room*). He was about to enter an eleven-year run where he would publish, in succession, *The Names*, *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Mao II*, books whose individual and collective effect would cement his place in the annals of American Letters. Be it coincidence, sheer dumb luck, or part of some greater cosmic force, while those major works were either still in progress or bubbling on the back-burner of DeLillo's subconscious, he finished and sold *Amazons*.

Independent and anonymous sources have confirmed that DeLillo's original intent had been to publish *Amazons* as his own fiction; only Knopf, his publishing house at the time did not want the novel. An editor at Holt Reinhart Winston then agreed to publish

the book pseudonymously, an act which got DeLillo paid, did not affect his contract and relationship with Knopf, and also made for good yuks. We do not know the extent and proportions to which DeLillo, his agent, and the good people at Holt Reinhart Winston were involved in what happened next, nor do we care to speculate how much of a role each played, or whether DeLillo was the joke's instigator, the point man, or simply an amused bystander. What we can say is this: once borne, the idea gained both momentum and participant. For it was not before the considerable weight of the publishing house was fully behind the joke, and uncorrected advance proofs of *Amazons* went out to reviewers with the following notation: "Unfortunately the author will not be able to tour because she will be leading the Rangers in their pursuit of the 1980-1981 Stanley Cup." Soon after, a Miss Cleo Birdwell appeared on the floor of the 1980 American Booksellers Association's convention in Chicago. Hired out of the Charlize Theron/Cameron Diaz School of Leggy Blonde Models, she not only entertained perspective booksellers and retailers, but also handed out glossies reproduced from the book's back cover—promotional photos of herself, seductively attired in full pads and a Rangers' jersey.

The hoax was effectively outed on September 16, 1980. "Cleo Birdwell has a way with the incongruous," wrote New York Times book reviewer Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "which doesn't come as a surprise once you've learned that her name is the nom de plume for the novelist Don DeLillo." One month later, in *The Nation*, J.D. O'Hara provided back-up: "Intuition reports that there are only two men alive capable of writing this book in English, and one of them didn't. So it must be work of that terrific Athenian-American novelist Don DeLillo." Both reviews all but glowed: "One wants to read the

whole novel to friends, even on the telephone, collect,” declared O’Hara. “Order by the case. Christmas is coming.” Yet glowing reviews and a funny and publicized hoax were not enough to keep *Amazons* on our literary and cultural scene. The fictional memoir had no second printing. It was reissued in paperback years later, through a small press, but both editions are long out of print. Rarely is *Amazons* mentioned as part of the Don DeLillo stable, or for any other reason. I had a conversation with a professor of writing from a major eastern university expressly for this subject. Professor’s eyes clouded. He nodded slightly. “Oh right.... Something about hockey. What was it again?”

When one considers that most MFA grads have read, at best, three of DeLillo’s works (mainlined and memorized *White Noise*, a gallant attempt at *Underworld*, purchased and maybe tracked *Mao II* or *Great Jones Street*), it seems somewhat appropriate that *Amazons* has been relegated to the obscure netherspaces of the internet. Birdwell and DeLillo are hyperlinked on web pages specializing in out-of-print editions and rare books; searching four such pages uncovered nineteen available copies (at prices ranging from \$40-150), as well as—on Amazon.com—*three* customer reviews; although in truth, those didn’t help so much, seeing that two reviewers professed the belief that Birdwell was indeed a woman, and one went so far as to recommend *Amazons* “to any adult females interested in playing professional hockey.”

And here your correspondent would like to say something.

It is my humble belief that a difference exists between the writers Cleo Birdwell and Don DeLillo. I propose that this difference is significant. It is important. Cleo Birdwell may be quire charming when she ends consecutive chapters with sex scenes, and then

promises to find some other way to end a chapter. Her author photo is hot as hell. But I am not convinced that the narrator's search for direction and structure necessarily flies as a larger thematic search for direction and structure. Ultimately, *Amazons* is a hilarious string of gags, a quick and fun read; a fine, if minor novel.

By comparison, consider the oft-repeated tale of *Underworld's* genesis.

DeLillo was spinning through old *New York Times* microfiche when he came upon a 1951 front page with neighboring headlines. One announced the first Russian testing of a nuclear bomb. The other: Bobby Thompson's famous 'Shot Heard' 'Round The World' home-run.

"You suddenly hit upon something and you realize this is the path you were meant to take," DeLillo told *Melody Maker* in 1988 (an interview conducted for the release of *Libra*). "You'd be a fool if you didn't follow it. Perhaps it's like solving a difficult question in pure mathematics. There must be a moment when the solution is so simple and evident that you wonder why you hadn't come upon it before. When you do come upon it, you know it in the deepest part of your being. It carries its own logic."

For your contemplation and approval, it is here submitted that Don DeLillo runs neck and neck with Thomas Pynchon in the race for Writer of Our Age and Place in no small part because of the narrative juxtapositions and creative tensions which shape and inform his novels, providing their scope and scale. In *End Zone* it was football and nuclear weapons. In *Great Jones Street*, rock and roll and urban nihilism. *The Names* saw a triangulation between language, how Americans view themselves in foreign lands, and how people of foreign lands view Americans. *Mao II* directly links writing and terrorism.

And then there's the masterworks: *White Noise*, where DeLillo did nothing so much as mold a novel around the connection between conspicuous consumption, commercial popular culture, and the contemporary American fear of death; *Libra*, where he literally traced the moment in history when all the fringe and bizarre strands along the edges combined and unraveled the American flag; and, finally, *Underworld*, where he simultaneously tackled *all* of these things.

Here's DeLillo, from a 1993 interview with Adam Begley:

It's no accident that my first novel was called *Americana*. This was a private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture, America was and is the immigrant's dream and as the sun of two immigrants I was attracted by the sense of possibility that had drawn my grandparents and parents.

Since the first sentence of his first novel—"Then we came to the end of another dull and lurid year,"—DeLillo's subject has been nothing less than the myth of America The Beautiful, not only the pathos of our country in the wake of World War II as it shoulders the burden and mantle of Leader of the Free World, but the very sense of possibility which has become inherent with this burden, and the full circle of dreams and disappointments and ramifications that such burdens and possibilities bring—at both the societal, and the individual levels. He has provided the reader with large and sweeping arcs, as well as the characters who must exist underneath such a shelter and shadow, not

only the internal pressures which come with being part of the biggest, baddest, planet-saving nation is incapable of saving itself. Feeding into and emerging from this foreboding and heavy, yet still glittering air, hope is tinged with dread, humorous lines gain gravity and become more than jokes, allowing us to read on, captive, a bit too familiar with the sense of contentment, creeping dread, and self-hatred which grows and spreads through the last half of Twentieth Century America, finally transforming irony from underground black humor into a national currency; cynicism into the prevalent assumptions. The *Great Jones Street* rock star who answers every hippyish exit line of “peace” by saying “war.” The hilarious and somewhat sad and frightening question—and answer—sessions among *White Noise* professors of pop culture (“Did you ever spit in your soda bottle so you wouldn’t have to share your drink with other kids?” “How old were you when you first realized your father was a jerk?” “Do you ever close your eyes while you’re driving on a highway?”). Think of the narrator in *The Names* and his reasons for refusing to visit the Parthenon: “It looms. It’s so powerful there. It almost forces us to ignore it. Or at least to resist it. We have our self-importance. We also have our inadequacy. The former is a desperate invention of the latter.” And also think of *Mao II*, the novelist Bill Grey’s comments to the men who would kidnap him: “Do you know why I believe in the novel? It’s a democratic shout. Anyone can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street.... Some nameless drudge, some desperado with barely a nurtured dream can sit down and find his voice and luck out and do it. Something so angelic it makes your jaw hang open.”

We get the whole scope. The view from above as provided by a dark angel. In response our jaws can only hang open, allowing forth the rivers of blood.

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