

The Body Artist Short Guide

The Body Artist by Don DeLillo

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Characters

Lauren's artistic temperament and her particular interest in performance art causes her outlook within her daily life to be especially perceptive. She attunes herself to the experience of the everyday, looking for a greater understanding that she may apply to her art, but also gain a greater knowledge of her own personality and place in time and space. As a body artist, she strips herself as much as possible of her own physicality in order to take on the body shape and body movements of other people. By imitating others, and repeating their movements again and again, she is, in one way, able to slow down time, and explore each moment more fully. This process allows her to work toward an understanding of the connection between mind and body, and personality and corporeality. Her art requires her to translate time, identity and movement from their naturally ineffable state to something experienced and understood by her audience, and her success in doing this is a testament to her own powers of perception.

Her unique outlook allows her to take the discovery of a man in her house in stride, and realize the potential of the situation to help her work through Rey's death.

Her view of the relationship emphasizes the self-centeredness that grows out of her grief; she wishes to continue the relationship with Mr. Tuttle because it will help her work out her memories, thoughts, and feelings. This can easily be seen in her decision against her initial inclination to call local hospitals to find Mr. Tuttle's home and in her somewhat imperial gesture of naming him after a figure in her own past. When he begins reciting Rey's words, Lauren realizes the benefits that Mr. Tuttle offers and quickly begins to tape the conversations for her further use. Mr. Tuttle has no past and no future of his own, and thus can be thought of as a blank slate not unlike herself when she prepares for her show, and the ability to manipulate and recreate someone else proves to be a powerful tool in her conceptualization of time and memory. When Mr. Tuttle vanishes as easily as he arrived, Lauren is again alone, and DeLillo's purposely vague language seems to suggest the possibility that Mr. Tuttle was completely created by Lauren's imagination. The fact is that whether or not he was an actual physical presence does not matter, and indeed, the fact that it does not matter says much about DeLillo's ability to use the characters to explore the nature of isolation and loneliness as well as the nature of time.



Social Concerns

The Body Artist, Don DeLillo departs from the style and length he is known for as a result of the novel *Underworld*, his tour de force, and turns to the form of a novella, for an exploration into perceptions of time, identity constructions, and coping with death. The story begins in the kitchen of a resort house, where Rey Robles and his wife Lauren Hartke, the body artist of the title, are eating breakfast. Their words and movements overlap, not quite meshing, but playing out a certain choreography, revealing ease in a relationship between two people each comfortable in their own individuality. Following this chapter we learn through the format of Rey's obituary, that after breakfast, Rey had driven to the city and committed suicide in his first wife's bathroom.

When Lauren returns to the rented house to work and mourn Rey's death, she comes upon a stranger living in a spare bedroom in the house. Through their relationship, and then through her art, Lauren works through the grieving process, and she, like DeLillo's readers, gains a closer understanding of her own impressions of reality and time, and the process of dealing with loss and loneliness.

The plot is spare because the real concern of the book lies in Lauren's thoughts and experiences. The bulk of the story revolves around Lauren's attempts to understand the man living in her house and how she feels about their interactions, and in so doing understand her past life with Rey and how she can adjust to living without him. While she is dealing with her grief over his death, she is also getting ready to execute a performance piece in an upcoming show. Her preparations for it involve a ritualized process of stripping away, as she attempts to make her body a blank slate.

She bleaches her hair, depigments her skin as much as she can, scrubs and cuts and cleans and removes to rid herself of her own individual characteristics. This process is part of her aesthetic sensibility; for her work to be successful, the audience must not make the connection to the artist, but to the art and to what she is attempting to make them feel about time and space and identity. In her preparations for the piece and the choreography of it as well as in her daily life with the man in her house, whom she names Mr. Tuttle, she attempts to strip away the surface to get at the core underneath—at the time that makes up existence, the part of personality that is immutable, the humanity that might be uncovered, perhaps the memory that explains.

By using her relationship with Mr. Tuttle, she does this for herself, and through her performance, she does it for herself and for her audience.

The name of her piece, "Body Time", is significant, for it is time that the book concerns itself with most. Lauren claims that she wants the audience to experience time, and this, in part, is what DeLillo is doing with his own work. Throughout the novel, Lauren's perceptions are related slowly, explored leisurely, as she works them out, and her discovery of Mr. Tuttle furthers this process. He is also a kind of blank slate, possibly



mentally disabled, or psychologically hurt. She first finds him sitting on the edge of the bed in his underwear, and his mind seems to be just as bare and nondescript.

After she talks to him for a while, he begins to repeat conversations that Lauren and Rey had had days and weeks before he committed suicide. Lauren tapes the conversations that she and Mr. Tuttle have, and then listens to them again and again, trying to figure out what she meant then when she first spoke the words with Rey, and what she means now, with Mr. Tuttle.

He allows her to re-experience the time she spent with Rey and attune her senses more fully to both her past and present reality, which in turn, allows DeLillo to consider certain metaphysical questions, like the nature of time and memory.



Techniques

DeLillo's project looks much like Lauren's own, as he strips his novel of excess and frivolous language, just as she rids herself of the excesses and impurities of her own body. His language is more attuned to a philosophical exploration than his usual work; his bare, haunting prose reflects his shift from a cultural and historical query to a metaphysical one. His earlier novels use humor and wit and irony in their examination of American culture, and their scope of inquiry is much different. In *The Body Artist*, the humor and irony are gone, and we are left with thoughts and feelings alone. In what seems like an attempt to slow down time, or at least view isolated moments of it, DeLillo pulls together images and thoughts, often from Lauren's point of view, or something close to it. The narration is in third person, but the information and the way in which it is conveyed is so personal and so intrinsic to Lauren that it seems as if it were told in first person. It feels as if there is no marker that divides Lauren's thoughts from general descriptions, and the fusion between the two creates interiority that functions throughout the story. This perspective, moving in and out of one person's mind, gives DeLillo the freedom to examine one character's experience of time and yet deal with it in a somewhat universal way. With similar results, DeLillo employs rhetorical questions to a great extent, imitating both the kind of emotional exploration that individuals undergo when interpreting their own experience and the philosophical process that attempts to view questions from a distance, a kind of outside perspective.

This outside experience is directly shared in two chapters of the novel. The first is the section written in the form of Rey's obituary, and the second is the chapter in which the reader discovers more about Lauren through a magazine interview written by her friend Mariella Chapman. The styles of writing are fused together and seen from Lauren's point of view. In this way, DeLillo incorporates the other media into his story, and in the relation of necessary information and plot details that prevents the loss of the inferiority of the pages surrounding these two chapters, he suggests the way in which the multiple media which surround us are absorbed into the daily narrative of our lives. The difference between the form of the media and Lauren's experience is clear, but in a way, collapsed, which conveys like the rhetorical questions and certain perspective, expresses a unique vision of an individual's experience of time and space.

Themes

Through Lauren's unique profession as a body artist, DeLillo is able to explore the theme of identity construction. All of the characters in the novel participate in a conscious construction of their individuality, in terms of how they see themselves in general, and how they see themselves in relation to others. The obituary describes how Rey constructed himself as a film director, changing his name from Alejandro Alquezar to Rey Robles, a film character's name, when he became involved with the medium, and it was clear that that was what he was going to do for the rest of his life. Even very minor characters, such as Rey's first wife, Isabel Corrales, are not described but allowed to develop themselves through their own voice. Isabel, when talking to Lauren, sets herself up as the one who knew Rey, and as someone who has a great depth of understanding. In the same way, Mariella establishes her own identity in relation to Lauren's in her article about "Body Time," in which she divulges that they had gone to college together and continue to be friends. Lauren and Mr. Tuttle advance this theme most clearly, for they each, at some point in the story, are a blank slate onto which other personalities may be built.

Mr. Tuttle repeats things that both Lauren and Rey said, but for the most part, he takes on Rey's identity—Rey's voice, Rey's words, Rey's movements. Lauren interacts with him often as a kind of surrogate Rey, not believing that he was Rey, but not attempting to understand his own unique personality either. Lauren uses the constructedness of Mr. Tuttle's identity to understand her own better. Lauren does not befriend Mr. Tuttle because she is interested in him, but because she can, in a way, use him to examine her past and thus understand the nature of her own identity better. This is the same idea that she incorporates into her art, in which she undergoes certain rituals to make her body into a blank slate onto which she can write other people's identities. She does this to understand them better, but also to help those who see her perform understand their own better. She attempts to slow down time for them, in the same way that Mr. Tuttle was able to slow down time for her. All of this is to explore the way in which we experience reality, which allows one to examine the way in which personality is constructed and how one interacts with the world.

Lauren breaks down time into isolated movements for her audience, and DeLillo does the same for his readers. From the beginning, the unique choreography of daily life, like the breakfast Lauren and Rey share, or the way one notices a bird fly by, or the way someone checks her watch, is shared and examined, and is its own kind of performance piece.

Adaptations

An audio version of *The Body Artist*, read by Laurie Anderson, is available on cassette tape and CD, from Simon & Schuster Audio, and as a download at [Audible.com](https://www.audible.com).



Key Questions

The Body Artist is a slim volume, but it attempts to cover broad topics, such as perceptions of time, the process of memory and coping with death. These three areas all concern intensely personal situations, so discussions might draw on personal experience as well as DeLillo's text. DeLillo has tackled big issues before, but none of his significant works thus far use the intimate approach that DeLillo employs in this novella.

1. DeLillo includes two chapters that depart stylistically from the narration and take the form of an obituary and a news or magazine article. What is the significance of the two different forms? What does including them affect the way we read that information? Why do you think DeLillo would choose to do this?

2. DeLillo, through Mariella's article, spends a fair amount of time placing Lauren within the context of other performance artists. Why? How does that affect your understanding of her performance? Also, the article is the only place in which a full description of Lauren's performance is given. Why do you think he does this? Does that affect the significance of her performance? The way we interpret it?

3. Consider the scene in the kitchen that starts the novel. What do you think DeLillo is doing in this scene? How do you think he is trying to convey time?

Do you think he is successful? Can you imagine experiencing time in this way?

4. Often when a story is told from the first person perspective, or the protagonist's thoughts are constantly shared with the reader, it leads the reader to identify with the protagonist. Do you think this is what DeLillo was trying to accomplish? Was he successful? Do you identify with Lauren?

5. How would you characterize the relationship between Lauren and Mr. Turtle?

How does it work to enhance the themes of the novel? Do you think this was an effective way to approach these themes?

6. The Body Artist is not written as a journal or diary, but does suggest the form in its interiority and personal nature.

Have you ever, or do you now keep a journal? Why do you keep it? Does it share any similarities with The Body Artist?

7. Look at White Noise, which is another novel by DeLillo that involves a character coming to terms with death. How do the novels compare? Is DeLillo's style different between the two books?

If so, how does that affect the way we think about the way he approaches the idea of death? How does the difference in tone affect the way you read and interpret the books?

Literary Precedents

In interviews, it is common for DeLillo to mention that he has been influenced more by European films, Abstract Expressionism, and jazz than any particular authors or literary style. His emphasis on jazz, which played a major role in his development as a person as well as an artist, seems to be especially relevant for *The Body Artist*. In the novel, the narrator's observations and Lauren's thoughts are like a piece of jazz— words intertwine, interact, and test each other's limits. Jazz is the music that plays with time, and jazz's manipulations of time seem similar to DeLillo's own imaginings and expressions of it throughout the story.

DeLillo's novel, with its emphasis on the profound experience of the everyday, seems to fit well within a grouping that includes John Cheever and Raymond Carver. The former's focus on suburban settings and everyday life shares the idea of a kind of personal catastrophe within a prosaic setting; the latter's emphasis on isolation and loneliness and the use of nothingness to explore life and living seems to express an especially rewarding connection. Likewise, DeLillo is often categorized as a postmodernist writer, and most of his earlier works fit easily into this classification. *The Body Artist* fits as well, considering its emphasis on identity construction and the way in which Mr. Tuttle simulates the conversations between Lauren and Rey, but the vague, ethereal language employed in this novel departs somewhat from the typically ironic, forward style of others. Postmodernist writers, like Thomas Pynchon and John Barthelme cover similar issues, but in a style that echoes DeLillo's earlier work more clearly than *The Body Artist*.

Related Titles

Don DeLillo has published a wide range of work, including eleven other novels, two plays and a number of short stories and essays. He is best known for the massive novel *Underworld*, published in 1997, which explores, after a simple beginning of a story of a baseball game, history, war, and technology and its effects on America and Americans. *The Body Artist's* spare descriptions and emphasis on the philosophical rather than the historical or cultural drastically separates it from *Underworld* and much of DeLillo's other work. Like *Underworld*, much of his other novels explore America and its culture and history, unlike *The Body Artist*, which restricts itself to an exploration of one woman's impressions of reality. *White Noise* (1985) is somewhat similar to *The Body Artist*, as it deals primarily with its protagonist's relationships with his wife and coworkers and his own fears of death. That novel centers on a University professor and his family and their experience with an unknown, noxious cloud that invades their community. While similar in its exploration of the protagonist's personality and his thoughts about death and his place in his family, it does so in a humorous way and does not reach the level of interiority that *The Body Artist* achieves, with its clear focus on Lauren's thoughts. As DeLillo himself mentions in an interview, many of his novels tell the story of an individual adrift, lost in a vast sea or facing some superstructure that threatens his or her very being. While clearly true for novels like *Underworld* and *White Noise*, the same might be said, albeit in a more abstract way, about *The Body Artist*. Lauren is adrift in her own experiences, attempting to find an approach to understanding the nature of time and the specter of death.



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