Endzone Short Guide

Endzone by Don Delillo

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Characters

The narrator, Gary Harkness, is a talented football player who might be said to think too much for his own good. His father, who had been a good football player, but not a hero, had brought him up to follow certain simple maxims: "Suck in that gut and go harder"; and "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." As Gary observes, men who fail to be heroes have expectations: "Their sons must prove that the seed was not impoverished." Gary spends much of his time in flight from these expectations; he enters and leaves several prestigious universities, always on football scholarships. In this novel, he is playing out his eligibility at Logos College in west Texas. On the first page, he remarks, "football players are simple folk. . . .

the football player travels the straightest of lines. His thoughts are wholesomely commonplace, his actions uncomplicated by history, enigma, holocaust or dream." The rest of the novel, and the rest of the characters, demonstrate the irony of this statement by contradicting it in every detail.

Gary's coaches, fellow players, and classmates all represent variously comic types associated with college and/or football, but their comedy results often from the ways in which they contradict the expectations the reader would bring to their types.

(Many critics have observed the cartoon-like quality of DeLillo's characters.) Gary begins one chapter with the remark "Most lives are guided by cliches." The characters in his story rebut that view in amusing ways. His roommate, Anatole Bloomberg, is a massive football player who wets the bed most nights, and is fond of asking either/or questions in order to test the intelligence of his new acquaintances. Myna Corbett — fat, unattractive, eccentric, wealthy — enjoys picnics with Gary even though he represents much that is inimical to her proto-feminist view of the world. Bobby Luke, one of Gary's teammates and a master of sexist metonymy, limits his vocabulary to various slang terms for the female pudenda. His only other known statement is that he would be willing to run through a brick wall for his coach. As Gary observes, the coach hardly merits such commitment: "Creed had done plenty to command respect but little or nothing to merit loyalty, a much more emotional quality." In addition to Coach Creed, Gary spends time with Major Staley, the AFROTC officer, discussing military strategy — especially nuclear strategy — and playing curiously erotic simulation games involving questions of thrust and firepower.

The characters of Endzone both represent and contradict the many stereotypes associated with athletes and militarists. The comic force of the novel is directly related to the startling evasions of expectations these characters perform as they show themselves to be thoughtful, vulnerable, and informed in ways not customarily associated with such types; and yet they carry on in their assigned roles, acknowledging only to each other the gaps between the public expectations and the private selves.

Social Concerns/Themes

Endzone is about the ways in which various ideas of order function either to protect and enhance human life or, conversely, to protect and reinforce the collective impulses toward destruction and dissolution. The traditional linkage between the "character-building" quality of sports (the "playing fields of Eton" syndrome) and reinforcement of masculine power through military strategy and discipline (the military "will make a man" of him) is examined mercilessly in this disturbingly comic novel. While the novel is rich in subordinate themes — the role of athletics in higher education, the obsession with physical beauty in male-female relationships, the impact of both holocausts (Nazi and nuclear) on contemporary thought — the focus consistently returns to the context of the practice and the game, and the efforts of the players to make sense of what they are doing, as well as to comprehend the significance of winning, or losing. The analogies between their efforts and larger sociopolitical activities proliferate.

Techniques

Although Endzone is a first-person narrative, there is a curious impersonality about it, as though the narrator, Gary Harkness, is able to divorce himself from his own thoughts and present an "objective" view of the institutions, persons, and events he experiences. In this sense, the novel is more like a "research paper" than a cartoon — a product of one of those students who is always asking if it is all right to "put in my own opinion." The gap between Gary's own feelings, so far as readers know them, and his portrayal of the world around him is almost a paradigm of "alienation." The comic effects, however, come only as a result of this alienation. Readers rarely feel that Gary is ridiculing his teammates or friends; it is the very impersonality of his narrative voice that makes the incongruity of the behavior he describes so amusing. Gary is an appealing character (unlike many of DeLillo's other central characters), but the "innocence" of his gaze — like that of Candide — allows the other characters to come through with all possible satiric force.

Literary Precedents

While the athletic and military elements in Endzone might seem to focus its satire, the larger issues place it in a line of political and epistemological speculation stretching from Petronius through Swift, Voltaire, and Sterne to Nabokov and Kundera. Efforts to link DeLillo with Pynchon, Barth, and Gaddis are reasonable, but tend to obscure his unique perspective on the "current topic of interest" — a topic he invariably dissolves and absolves of importance in his vat of irony. (Indeed, he seems to have an uncanny ability to predict the coming "topic," whether it be drug abuse, terrorism, or environmental pollution. But then, the topics are never the important parts of his fictions.)

Related Titles

In Running Dog (1978), survivalism, terrorism, and pornography are tiresomely current concerns in American society. The "responsibility of the press" for everything from teenage pregnancy to international hijackings is a related topic, and suspicion of more or less secret government activities (whether by public figures acting covertly or by ostensibly covert agencies acting in public arenas) is close behind.

In Running Dog, DeLillo combines each of these in a narrative that moves relentlessly and coldly toward the silence of meaningless death. The character of Mudger, a cross between a Green Beret, a C.I.A. spook, and the godfather of whatever subcultural hit squad one might care to name, embodies the characteristics of the totally self-centered and selfish super-patriot who has moved so far in that direction that he comes across as selfless and disembodied, unconcerned with any institution and totally absorbed in his own hobbies. He is, in other words, the United States government in its international role during the past forty years and into the foreseeable future. The smalltime and insignificant activities of those who surround him serve, ironically, to reveal the pointless character of his ideology and power. He can get what he wants by sacrificing lives and expending absurd amounts of capital, but what he wants is not worth having, and what he gets — in this case, the severed head of Glen Selvy — will only putrefy. The title of this novel refers directly to the name of a formerly left-wing publication that has evolved into a muckraking version of People.

The original publication had presumably been analytical and committed to a Maoist political line, but its 1970s avatar has become little more than a gossip sheet catering to the tastes of the 1960s' radicals. This is consistent with the general degradation of political life portrayed in the novel. Pervasive cynicism is only natural in a climate of pervasive corruption.

Every character in Running Dog is interested, for reasons best known to him- or herself, in a film that supposedly was shot in Hitler's bunker during the final days before the mass suicide.

Everyone assumes it is a film of a sexual orgy, thus clearly identifying the characters as persons of the late 1960s, or early 1970s. The film, when finally screened, turns out to be a rather innocuous (though painful) home movie of an effort to entertain some children at Christmas: Hitler, himself, plays Charlie Chaplin playing Hitler. By the time the film is shown at Mr. Lightborne's gallery (he is a dealer in pornography) there have been several deaths and various public calamities as the result of competition for possession of this film.

Moll Robbins is an investigative reporter for Running Dog, a "radical" publication that is rather like a cross between Mother Jones and Rolling Stone.

She pursues hints about the involvement of Senator Percival in the purchase of expensive pornographic materials. Her pursuit is only partially of the Senator, however, since she is at least interested in the senator's agent, Glen Selvy.

Glen Selvy is a well-trained killer who is involved in a complicated double (or triple) agentry relationship with both the Senator and a shadowy paramilitary group run by Earl Mudger and called Radical Matrix. As Senator Percival says, "What you have in Mudger . . . is the combination of business drives and lusts and impulses with police techniques, with ultrasophisticated skills of detection, surveillance, extortion, terror and the rest of it."

Selvy, however, does not fully understand this, though he is trained in at least the physical aspects of the drives and impulses Percival describes.

As often happens in DeLillo novels, an initially simple transaction becomes increasingly complicated and threatening until the tightening web of circumstances immobilizes at least one (though usually more than one) character and ends in death. That the death is meaningless because its cause is trivial drains the narrative of any potential tragic impact. In the world of Running Dog, every human being is expendable.

When "acceptable risk" is an acceptable category, human life is irrelevant.

Running Dog has much in common with the hardboiled detective fiction of James M. Cain or Dashiell Hammett and with the spy thrillers of Graham Greene and John le Carre. The narrative is understated, even laconic, and the violence, though grotesque and intense, seems all of a piece with the rest of the story. Probably the closest literary analogue to the novel is Robert Stone's Dog Soldiers, which also deals with contraband, flight, and survival, though Stone is not nearly so comic in his treatment of these materials as is DeLillo.

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