

# And quiet goes the Don

Don DeLillo started out as a parking attendant; now he is hailed as the author of the Great American Novel and labours days over one sentence. What does he think of his fame? 'I wince at the thought'

Don DeLillo has a reputation as a recluse, perhaps not on a par with J. D. Salinger, but not far off it. A few years ago he declared he was never going to do another interview. But today, as he points out matter-of-factly, though none too cheerfully: "Here I am."

Every bone in his body seems to say he would rather be somewhere else, anywhere else but here. He sits in a bare room in his agent's Manhattan office, looking as nondescript as possible. He is wearing a dark-blue flannel shirt and faded black jeans. His grey hair looks in need of a cut and he wears large, slightly tinted glasses that make it hard to read his expression. His lips are thin and he speaks in a soft, hesitant voice. Brought up in New York, his accent is firmly American despite his Italian parentage.

Our conversation is awkward. DeLillo, 67, does not like to talk about what he has written – nor much else for that matter. "The subject is wearying," he says with a sigh, referring to any discussion of his writing. "I can analyse it to the extent that I am able to. At a certain point I'll probably go mute."

Perhaps some of his wariness is due to the predominantly negative reviews of his latest novel, *Cosmopolis*, published this month in Britain. I ask him how he reacted to *The New York Times'* dismissal of his book.

"I don't know what they said, actually," he says, looking not at me but at some point over my shoulder.

They said it was "a major dud", I tell him. He scarcely bats an eyelid. "After all these years and all these reviews, it's not something I care to even think about for any extended period."

Not everyone has reviewed it negatively – *The Economist* described it as "a compelling read". Personally, I found *Cosmopolis* much more accessible than *Underworld*. DeLillo's most celebrated and complex novel, which addresses America's sense of identity during the Cold War and spans more than four decades. *Cosmopolis*, by contrast, covers only one day: it charts the journey of Eric Packer, a 28-year-old billionaire, who is crossing Manhattan in his marble-floored stretch limousine to get a haircut. Traffic is gridlocked due to a riot, a funeral cortège and the presence of the President in town. Packer, an asset manager, holds business meetings in his car and occasionally steps out to eat, have sex or murder someone.

Verisimilitude does not appear to concern DeLillo. "It's a man's life experienced in one compressed day, which tends to distort time in the novel... There's a feeling of time accelerated."

It is often said that DeLillo's characters are merely vessels for his ideas, an accusation that irritates him. "I don't think it's true at all. I never have ideas before I have characters, and that's the way it's always worked. I have a very visual sense of characters in places. My people are not just words, they are in rooms or in cars or in meadows, doing something and looking like something and being aware of the sun in their eyes or the moon fading in the distance. This physical aspect is crucial to the way I think in fiction."

But he agrees that he deliberately avoids exploring character in a conventional fashion. "There are many contemporary writers who are Victorian novelists at heart... Their work is conceptualised in rather antique terms – at least as I see it."

I ask DeLillo if he likes Packer, who comes across as

## Interview



Helena de Bertodano

an insufferable egotist: "I think he's very interesting. I don't think he's likeable or dislikeable, but I think he's a worthy character for a piece of fiction... A writer likes a character to the extent that he understands him. It doesn't matter what the man or woman does or says. If you feel you know the individual, then that – to use the commonplace language – is a form of liking the character."

Note that phrase "to use the commonplace language". DeLillo says it with distaste. He sets himself above the commonplace language, an arrogance, perhaps, but one that he can afford. He is, after all, judged to be one of America's greatest writers. His writing is, on occasion, lyrical. Here is Packer surveying the view from his window as dawn breaks:

"The noblest thing, a bridge across a river, with the sun beginning to roar behind it. He watched a hundred gulls trail a wobbling scow downriver."

DeLillo says he is fascinated by the shape of words. "I lived in Greece for a while, and I spent a lot of time looking at inscriptions on masonry and fallen monuments. I was beginning to notice letter shapes and I was learning Greek as a child learns the alphabet, and this somehow brought me to a clearer awareness of words on the

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page and the letters within words and how they can form a kind of balance almost, a poetry of shape... There's such a thing as the cut of letters. It's architectural. It's sculptural... That's why I still use an old manual typewriter. I would not have the same feeling if I were working on a computer."

He works from his home in Westchester County, New York state, where he lives with his wife Barbara Bennett, a landscape designer, whom he married in 1975. They do not have any children. "After breakfast I work for four hours or so, then take a break and work for a briefer period in the afternoon, essentially rewriting what I've done earlier." He does not mind if the house is not completely silent. "The world is not sealed off. One hears noises of all sorts and perhaps voices in the house, but that's not a problem."

DeLillo was reportedly paid an advance of \$1.3 million for *Underworld* in America alone, and a further \$1 million for the film rights. He lives in what is said to be the most expensive residential area in America, but chose it, he tells me, only because it takes half an hour to travel into Manhattan. "I have to be part of New

York. Even if I'm not writing about the city, I feel a certain charge that does inform my work, even if it's indirectly."

Westchester is a world away from the tough streets of the Bronx, where DeLillo grew up. His parents were immigrants from the Abruzzi mountains in Italy, and his father worked as a payroll clerk at an insurance company. Although DeLillo was born an American, he grew up in an Italian community, which he feels gives him a sense of perspective on the country. "I am a first generation American and I still do have a sense of looking at the culture as if from the outside."

His childhood home was almost devoid of books. "I had no urge to write and I really didn't do very much reading. It was a radio culture, very oral. Of course there were movies and I read comic books, but I wasn't the kind of kid who read carefully or very seriously and none of the people I grew up with did either."

I ask him what he dreamt of doing. "Nothing," he says peremptorily. "I used to play ball in the street all the time, but I had no particular dream of any sort. I really didn't think of myself as a writer until I was well into my twenties, even though I'd published a few stories in small magazines."

It was while working as a parking attendant during his teenage years that DeLillo began to read avidly: during the hours spent invigilating vehicles he read James Joyce, Herman Melville and Ernest Hemingway, among others. He attended Fordham University, a Jesuit university in the Bronx, where he studied history, philosophy and theology, before getting a job in advertising.

When DeLillo began writing his first novel, *American*, in 1966, he was living in an unheated apartment with a refrigerator in the bedroom. Once the book was published, he was hailed as a writer who could articulate the confused identity of contemporary America, a talent he has been honing ever since.

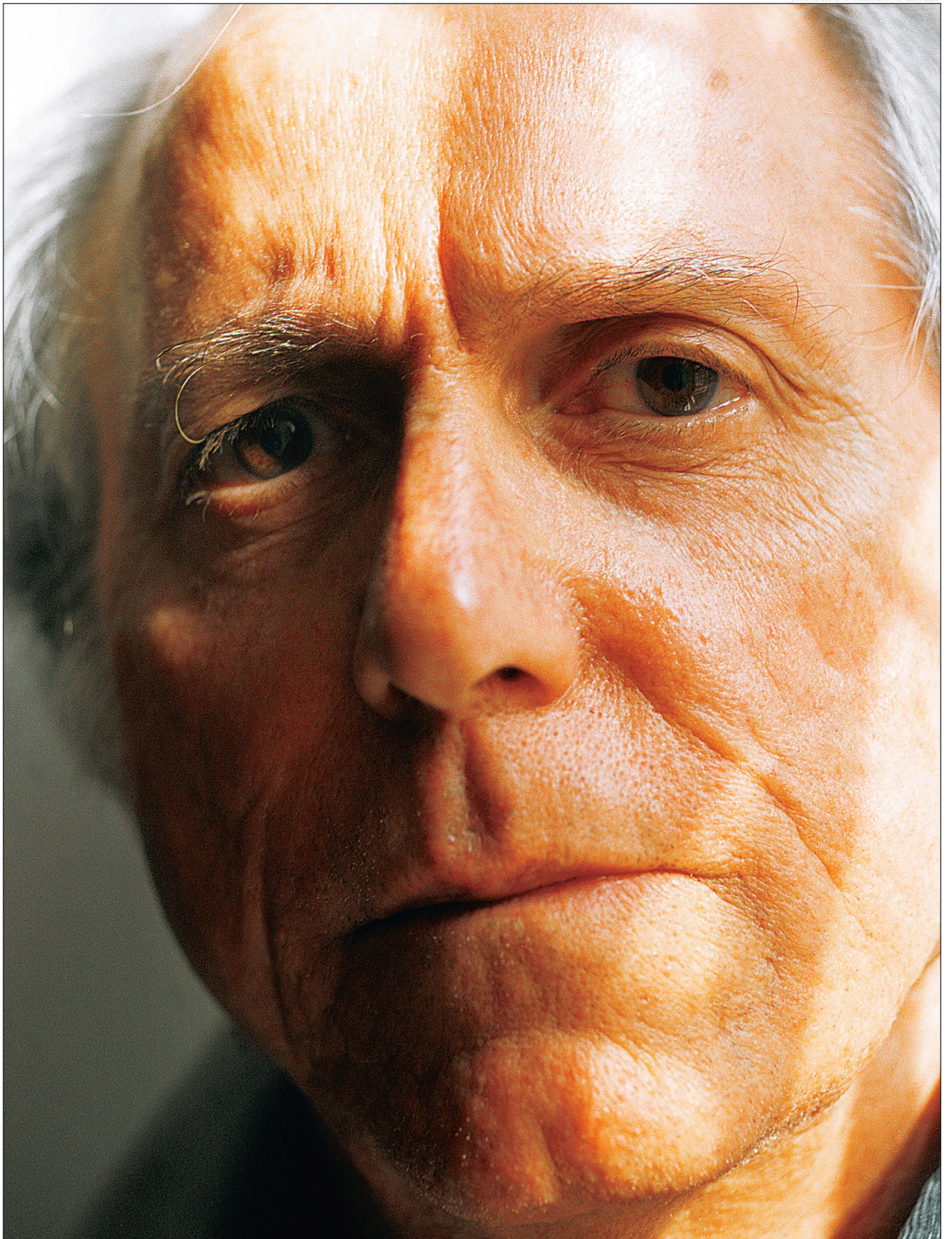
DeLillo says he has no reader in mind when he writes a novel. "I write for the page. That's the best way I can put it. Sometimes I like to think that some young man or woman in some small town somewhere is picking up one of my books in the library, but I don't write for a particular person at all."

He admits, guardedly, that he does enjoy writing. "There are times of pleasure which writers don't like to talk about because it's as though we are breaking an implied bond."

More typically, the process of writing is a struggle. "It's absolutely never easy. It took me many days to write the first sentence [of *Underworld*]. I remember the experience quite clearly, and the number of pages I was piling up for that one sentence. It was so deeply considered that I lost all track of whether it was any good or not."

The sentence that launches the 827-page book is: "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful."

Published in 1997, *Underworld* is considered a prime candidate for the label of Great American Novel. DeLillo is dismissive: "The term doesn't exist in the United States – I only ever hear it from people who aren't American. But I can understand why it exists – it's the sense of space here; there's an implied challenge in the landscape and in the experience as well."



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it happened, but I didn't go back to work for some time. I was not prepared to sit down and work on a piece of fiction."

He seems more at ease talking about September 11 and the war with Iraq than about his own writing. He believes that the war has already had a profound impact on the American psyche. "I think the curious psychological subtext of the war in Iraq was to return America to its sense of the future, a feeling that had been damaged by the events of September 11."

I ask him what he means by this. "We're using our technological imperative in order to win a struggle that concerns the past and the future. This is not something that's at all overt, but I think the element exists at some level of our exertions against terrorists and the Iraq situation as well. We want to live in the future."

I'm still not totally sure what he means. This is the thing about DeLillo: he says and writes things that have the ring of profundity but leave the reader or listener (at least this one) perplexed. You can sometimes see why he has earned the title of America's greatest unread author.

He agrees that he likes to challenge his readers. "It's important to me to do it. It's not a mark of a writer's seriousness necessarily. It's really a personal drive to attempt certain kinds of fiction that aren't so easily consumable."

I ask DeLillo which writers he admires, a question that prompts him to retreat into his shell. "I don't want to make a list, I'm sorry, I just won't do it." I tell him I don't want him to make a list either, I just wondered if anyone stood out. "Many of them stand out. But I'm really reluctant to name them because I'll only leave people out."

Nor will he be drawn on the widespread perception that English-language fiction is in the hands of American writers today, while British writers lag behind. "I don't really want to become involved in this matter, honestly, but I don't think it's true. I know it's not true, as a matter of fact."

Likewise, he does not want to divulge whether he is working on anything at the moment: "I'd rather not say what

I'm doing now." There are so many subjects DeLillo does not want to address – and they are often so unexpected – that conversation with him feels like charting a ship through a sea of hidden icebergs.

DeLillo says that fame has had little impact on his life. He shrugs. "You can say

that I'm *wincing* at the thought." Does he find fame distasteful? "It's not distasteful. It's something that is happening elsewhere... I don't think in terms of success, honestly I do not. Did Ernest Hemingway walk around thinking, 'I'm Ernest Hemingway'? I don't think he did, as famous as he was. He was a

struggling writer trying to get through another book, just like everyone else. And the rest is a curious phenomenon that accrues around a particular individual."

He may be approaching his seventies, but DeLillo has no plans to diminish his output – at least of the written word. "If the ideas stopped, then I would

stop. But as long as there are ideas, there will be words to try to express them." As for the spoken word, DeLillo has had enough: "We've run out of conversation, haven't we?" he says hopefully.

■ *Cosmopolis* by Don DeLillo (Picador) is available for £14.99 plus £2.25 p&p. To order call Telegraph Books Direct on 0870 155 7222.