

SHOOTING FOR THE BIG TIME

M I C H A E L L . S H U M A N

Offed: A Novel

By Gary D. Rhodes

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NICHOLAS BRANCH, THE CIA ARCHIVIST in Don DeLillo's 1988 novel *Libra*, has access to every extant trace of evidence preserved from the Kennedy assassination and is obsessed with making a definitive statement of the events in Dallas so many decades ago. Branch reviews assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's cancelled checks, tax returns, and forensic analyses of his hair, along with the dental charts of Jack Ruby's mother and photographs of knotted string that just may provide the filament necessary to bind together a meticulously-ordered mound of evidence surrounding seven seconds in Dallas on November 22nd, 1963. "After Oswald," DeLillo writes, "men in America are no longer required to lead lives of quiet desperation. You apply for a credit card, buy a handgun, travel through cities, suburbs and shopping malls, anonymous, anonymous, looking for a chance to take a shot at the first puffy empty famous face, just to let people know there is someone out there who reads the papers" (181).

The complex and mentally-wobbly narrator of Gary D. Rhodes' novel *Offed*, Birch Barr, shares the same archival compulsion with DeLillo's Branch, a seedling of the same ancestral tree of Oswald obsession, if you will, but confined to commercial publications lined up, according to size, on his custom-made bookshelves. Barr already understands DeLillo's pre-

scription for curing quiet desperation and has the innate appetite for fame that seems endemic in our new century. "See," he muses, "the way I figured it, and I did give this quite a bit of thought, if you want to be famous and you have no talent, you're best to go shooting at people. Maybe that sounds a tad extreme, but it really is the quickest way to get talked about in today's world" (15). Barr approaches his task methodically if a bit impulsively, choosing as his first victim the desk clerk at the Hotel Congress in Tucson, a rag-tag place Barr considers significant because John Dillinger once visited as a guest. In addition to his 9mm weapon and an upside-down, quick draw shoulder holster resembling the one worn by Steve McQueen in the 1968 film *Bullitt*, Barr brings along, on his misguided missions, a daily dosage of Prozac and the few extra pounds he has gained since he turned thirty-three.

Serious media attention comes when Barr, looking for an easy mark in the Will Rogers Airport in Oklahoma City, whacks The Fat Man, a sharp-dressed dude who turns out to be Brewster Jameson, a long-time leftist radical and full-throated champion of pinko causes. Robert Lynch, the histrionic host of the arch-conservative television show *Wise Up, America!*, proclaims the assassin a hero, and Barr's ascension to fame is assured. "This great man who eliminated Brewster Jameson has heard the call to arms," Lynch says at the end of Episode 1,059 of his incendiary show. "Brewster Jameson was an enemy of the people, and this hero . . . followed the hallowed path of our forefathers and eliminated an enemy of the people. This hero is truly a great man, and wherever he is today, I wish him . . . Godspeed" (43). Barr, his identity still unknown to the public, adopts the alias of "the Artist" and thus becomes both compulsive archiver of assassination lore and political assassin himself, combining DeLillo's Nicholas Branch and Lee Harvey Oswald in one neurotic, oddball body.

Investigations into the psychology of fame tell us, usually in discipline-oriented language supporting tedious case studies, what we already know: that fame, among other benefits, is a way to enhance our sense of self-worth. "People's strivings for symbolic immortality," writes Jeff Greenberg and his four collaborators in a study published in the academic journal *Self and Identity*, "are intimately connected to motivation for self-esteem. Consequently, we do not think striving for self-worth and fame can ever be fully disentangled, and fame is likely one path people use to attempt to enhance self-worth" (6). Barr is uniquely poised to require a booster shot for confidence, and his self-recognition of personality flaws often is startling. He ad-

mits that his high school classmates avoided him, tells us about his attention deficit disorder, and admits he pursued a college degree in Communications merely to postpone adulthood. He's troubled by acne well into his late thirties, and his emotional support animal is a pet rock named Frog. He worries fitfully about the minutia of daily life, making self-imposed rules of propriety and definitions that appear capricious or arbitrary at best. He will randomly kill strangers in the street, but tries not to fib. He tosses a few of his favorite Kennedy assassination books simply because they do not fit into his size-bound organizational scheme. He intentionally attempts to limit his knowledge and experience. "I have always tried so hard to know everything about the stuff that matters," he says, "and to ignore all the rest. The human brain can only hold so much, so I want to organize mine just right" (63). Barr is happy to devote his severely-rationed neurons to researching the Kennedy assassination, and when Lynch points him toward New Orleans and the annual gathering of a liberal policy institute, he does his research into think tanks so thoroughly that he uses not only Wikipedia but other resources he finds on his own, "including real books printed on real paper" (63). He finally sets his sights on Michael Gerber, a conference attendee and U.S. representative from Wisconsin—or maybe New Jersey, Barr isn't quite sure—certified by Robert's TV station as "the most liberal politician in Congress" (65).

Barr shoots for the kind of fame derived from contemptable or criminal acts rather than good works, another available although less-common method of achieving fame documented in textbooks. He celebrates old time criminals because they achieved a topsy-turvy kind of fame that, like a Nobel Prize novelist or celebrated poet, conveys a form of cultural immortality. "Bank robbing is a very different line of work than serial killing," he says, thinking of John Dillinger, "but I have oodles of respect for it. Those guys weren't wusses. And all these years later, they're still famous. That's immortality for you" (19). But Barr will accept fame in any form, including the wonky bookish type if available. When he is bushwhacked by the Ambushers, two camera-toting freelance reporters who discover his identity from an informant, he designates himself as a "Repeat Life Snuffer"—a euphemism for "serial killer"—not for political correctness but for achieving another benchmark of fame and word-based immortality. "I want to hang my own hat on a new term," he says, "to get credited with inventing something. Maybe even get into *Bartlett's Quotations*" (87).

Barr's public adulation, amplified by the media and especially by Robert Lynch's caustic, rough-and-tumble TV show, ultimately propels him into the big time even without coining an iconic quotation. He has an accountant, an agent, and a publicist who manage his excursions into developing a stand-up comedy routine, appearing in an action movie, and recording a record album titled *Jump the Gun*, all based upon his experiences offing political progressives derided by conservative media outlets and ridiculed by a sizable portion of the public. Rhodes recounts, through Barr's ascent to national prominence, a topsy-turvy world resembling a Medieval morality play tipped on its end, with Good-Deeds and Discretion giving way to Death as a means of achieving wealth and worldly comfort. Barr gains an unstable, hybristophilic wife named Sadie May—an apparent escort accompanying Gerber when the Artist pulls the trigger—and all goes well . . . until it doesn't.

Lynch, in a whiplash turnaround typical of profit-driven media, takes credit for Barr's popularity just before inciting his viewers to become shooters themselves. "Wise Up, America!," he shouts at the camera, his comfortable bedroom slippers unseen by his followers in TV Land. "You don't need The Artist to take care of your business for you. You can do things for yourself. . . . These people in Washington are invading your homes, and your very minds. They have to be dispelled. . . . Together, all of us independent-minded folks can do this. We can take our country back" (145–146).

When an upstart killer nicknamed Pandro kills the Minority Whip of the U.S. Senate, a copycat whack that mimics the Artist's characteristic modus operandi, the wannabe begins to eclipse Barr's popularity and the public appearance bookings begin to wither. Barr, once again relying upon cobbled-together rules that define his idiosyncratic world, complains that basic guidelines of the killing game have been violated. "To be a serial killer," he tells Sadie, "you have to have three. *Three*. And that idiot just has one" (154). Sympathetic Chet, Barr's longtime friend and casual adviser who preserves Barr's secret identity as the Artist and remains in the shadows during much of the novel, plays upon Barr's innate fear of being a wuss and motivates him to begin a rebranding project, leading to the Artist 2.0. Grace, Barr's publicist, hires "an attorney, two writers, a graphic artist, a filmmaker, a sculptor, and a slew of internet gurus," and Barr begins the recovery process so common in today's media-saturated world, where Vanilla Ice and Pee-

wee Herman can return to popularity again and again . . . until they can't (227).

Rhodes' novel, originally published in 2017 by Pulp Hero Press, projects into the 2021 post-Capitol siege news cycle as a warning about the public's vulnerability to misleading and outright false statements presented as "alternative facts" and perpetuated by a complex intersection of media driven by profit and the audience's need for sensationalism. The danger of Lynch's call-to-arms, presented about mid-way in the novel, is amped-up by Barr's organized march, near the final chapter, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., a festive event featuring six hours of music by Top Forty bands and a troupe of politicians, including a Governor of Minnesota who had started her career doing voiceover work for cartoons. Six of the novel's thirty-five chapters appear in an omniscient narrative voice while the majority of action is spoken by Barr, and some readers may feel that the two voices are not distinct enough to warrant such a narrative structure. In fact, the similarity of the two voices—a casual slacker-based vernacular free from the constraint of political correctness or modern-day niceties—add to Rhodes' notion that everyone in contemporary society, church-goer and serial killer alike, has become disengaged from the precision of speech and articulate thought necessary to sustain a democratic government. Barr, a straight-arrow reactionary, sustains his corkscrew logic and quasi-articulate speech while despising other aspects of modernity, listening to old Joe Cocker and Asia tapes and praising *El Caminos* as he decries the taste of modern-day orange juice, cameras without flashcubes, and the soundless, unsatisfying station tuning of knobless TVs. "I chose because I had no choice," he proclaims, a phrase that bookends the novel's action and telegraphs not only Barr's feeling of agita and entrapment in an unrecognizable society but his essential moral abdication as well. He may just as suitably adopt the class-leveling aphorism of Wayne's old man from DeLillo's *Libra*, a credo similarly detached from ethical consequence or personal responsibility: "God made big people. And God made little people. But Colt made the .45 to even things up" (379).

Squeamish readers will be gratified to find that, for a novel about a fame-seeking, gun-toting serial killer, there is very little blood onboard. Barr adopts a bullet in the back-of-the-side-of-the-head as his signature method—a mark authenticating the author of the kill and one apparently required of self-respecting serial shooters everywhere—but curiously

Rhodes, a film scholar specializing in horror movies, never dwells on gratuitous splatter. Instead he gives us humor that goes beyond even the intrinsic chuckles generated by the satirical nature of the novel's exaggerated-but-not-really events. Barr laughs at Oklahoma City's Will Rogers Airport, noting it supports no international flights and improbably is named after a celebrity who died in an airplane crash. His entire presence in the novel recalls Nicholas Cage's guffaw-provoking portrayal of the mentally-numb H.I. McDunnough in the Cohen Brothers 1987 film *Raising Arizona* (or, perhaps, any Nicholas Cage character from any film). And something is natively funny—I don't know why—about finding Joe Cocker, Asia, Charles Bronson, Bugs Bunny, and Lemmy of Motörhead referenced in the pages of a single serial-killer novel. Such is the casual, come-as-you-are nature of both protagonist and narrative that we somehow cruise along with the often troubling sense that this is our life, and our world, for real and we may as well laugh about it.

Barr drags himself through big time success until he eventually accepts an invitation to the White House Correspondents' Dinner, where he is awarded a "Medal of Freedom, or of Honor, or some such thing" from a starstruck President who asks for his autograph (187). He later is described by the aging Vice President, who welcomes him to the White House, as "a man out of time," a phrase that characterizes the Artist's nostalgia for mid-twentieth century customs and artifacts but also implies that Barr's time as a popular, norm-defying public hero is close to an end (241). The detached veep speculates on a Presidential Pardon for Barr's political atrocities and encourages him to find more sensible employment. "It'll be easier for [the President] to give you the pardon if you get into some other line of work, pronto," he says. "Announce your retirement from politics on the Google, or whatever the kids use now" (244). The reader may well imagine Birch Barr, later, finding a job as President of the United States and perhaps being another member of that select set of Americans who could, really, stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody without losing any fans, and perhaps even increasing their zealous numbers, exponentially, into a norm-shattering movement.

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