



# **Ratner's Star**

*Don DeLillo*

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## **Ratner's Star** Don DeLillo

Billy Twillig has won the first Nobel Prize ever to be given in mathematics. Set in the near future, this book charts an innocent's education when Billy is sent to live in the company of 30 Nobel laureates and he is asked to decipher transmissions from outer space.

## **Ratner's Star Details**

Date : Published July 16th 1992 by Vintage (first published 1976)

ISBN : 9780099928409

Author : Don DeLillo

Format : Paperback 448 pages

Genre : Fiction, Science Fiction



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# From Reader Review Ratner's Star for online ebook

## Hadrian says

DeLillo has always been more of a novelist of ideas more than the basic linear event-event-event-conclusion linear plot style.

Here he experiments with mathematics, logic, and the meanings of language, and language as a means to shape the world. This is no bullshit and repetition of terminology - he's obviously done his homework - I see discussions of Higgs theory, the origins of language, and the intersection between the pursuit of science and the almost mystical devotions of mathematics/language. This is dense reading, but DeLillo's fantastic prose style still illuminates.

As an aside, I wonder how many contemporary authors have some sort of training in math/science? DFW did work on modal logic and Wittgenstein, and Cormac McCarthy edits physics books in his spare time at the Santa Fe institute.

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## Aaron says

My reactions to this novel can be put rather succinctly. If David Foster Wallace is indeed a fan of Don DeLillo, this is the novel he has stolen from most. If Don DeLillo is indeed a fan of Thomas Pynchon, this is the novel that Pynchon most directly inspired. But regardless of its influences or the work it later inspired, because those things are speculative, it is certainly true that this novel, DeLillo's fourth, is his first great novel.

The novel centers around child math prodigy Billy Terwilliger. At fourteen years old, Billy has already won a Nobel Peace Prize for his work with "zorgs" (as near as I can figure, DeLillo made this term up) and now lives a life of quiet seclusion at a mathematics academy for genius teenagers. He is called, somewhat against his will, to a remote laboratory (named Field Experiment Number One) to decipher a string of code believed to have come from a newly discovered planet coined Ratner's Star.

This is a wildly funny novel with sequences of surrealistic absurdity and populated with bizarre characters. There's Henrik Endor, who, before Billy, failed to break the code and now lives in a hole, spending his days digging and feeding on larvae. There's Orang Mohole, the acknowledged kingpin of alternate physics, who subsists on strange green pills and vicarious threesomes. There's Shazar Lazarus Ratner, a renowned astronomer turned mystic so diseased that he now lives in a plastic bubble so that oxygen cannot kill him. There's Elux Troxl, the entrepreneur, who, alongside his oddly-perverted sidekick Grbk, deals in leased computer time, chain letters, and bat guano. There's Cheops Feeley, who annually awards a prize to the mathematician whose new ideas holds the highest "madness content." There's also Chester Greylag Dent, ninety-two-years old and ending his days in a secret submarine somewhere off the shore of Europe.

It's hard saying what purpose this novel is intended to serve, what point DeLillo is trying to make. But it seems obvious that there is something to be said here about the stupidity of science, the differences between thinking analytically, thinking logically, and thinking superstitiously. And, despite its humor, there is an overwhelming sense of attempting to understand the complex emotional distance and sadness people feel when they truly are more brilliant than the people around them.

This is as close to a five star novel as I have read in a while. Distinctly DeLillo, it shows definite strides in the direction of becoming the novelist he will eventually become.

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### **LunaBel says**

I was not able to appreciate this one. It felt as if DeLillo was struggling between describing a teenager discovering sexuality and a genius kid who does nothing other than wandering the Center. Even though DeLillo was praised for his ability to investigate maths and physics, etc, I wasn't able to make sense of much of what was described.

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

What a bunch of meaningless gibberish. And all this so Billy can eat worms (literally not figuratively) in the end? I guess DeLillo was attempting to pull a Pynchon here but seems to fail miserably. I could wade through 100s of pages of Proustian interior dialog and description, 100s of pages of how-to-run-a-dysfunctional-tennis-academy-or-drug-rehab-center in Wallace or 100s of pages of Pynchonian voyages across anarchic, dystopian spaces in Germany or Mexico but this drivel about math and logic with spectacularly uninteresting, overly described and curiously underdeveloped characters (particularly the completely devoid of emotion with a more 8 year old sexuality or lack thereof than a 14 year old) was boring and inane. I felt I wasted two good days of reading time rather than the feeble attempt to confuse and impress with pseudo-science and pseudo-math in the first part (and here Pynchon is far superior in *Mason&Dixon*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, and *Against the Day* with far more intriguing apartés about math and science) and the (poor imitation of) Rothian sexual abandon in the second half. What was DeLillo really trying to accomplish with this book?

Well, that's it, after impressing me with *Underworld*, *Libra*, *Mao II* and *White Noise*, he has completely turned me off with *Players*, *Falling Man*, *Zero K* (Christ that was bad) and now *Ratner's Star*, I am done and scratching him definitively off my Nobel- or Pulitzer-deserving list over to the has-been or wanna-be category reserved for 4th places or "I don't wanna be a one termer!" (anyone else remember that Bush I SNL segment?) column.

If you really love reading good challenging and enlightening literature, don't look for it in *Ratner's Star*.

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### **Christopher says**

Hard to talk about this one. For now, I'll just quote *Tree Man II*: "All in fi nite sets are in fi nite but some are more in fi nite than others."

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## Regan says

*Ratner's Star* is a profound(ly funny) work of metaphysical fiction. It is metaphysical in both the Ancient (Pythagorean/Parmenidean)sense, and the Modern (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) sense.

It is an enormously ambitious novel that presents and resides in the age-old tension between reason and faith, truth and superstition, science and art, pure math and formal logic, mind and body, being and becoming, everything and nothing. Abstractly speaking--as the precocious young mathematician that serves as our protagonist would prefer--this all points to both the *necessity* and the *problem* of the One and the Zero; oppositional binaries that purportedly cannot be resolved without the destruction of the other. And yet here we are, constructing technology that runs on binary code, incorporating the opposition in every aspect of our lives. If we are to believe Horkheimer and Adorno, the history of the human species is just this: the dialectical process of scientific disenchantment and mythical re-enchantment, perpetuating itself ad infinitum. If I had to guess, I'd suspect DeLillo agrees with their conclusion.

The history of Pythagoreanism provides a helpful topology for understanding the tension or “dilemma” of the novel. Iamblichus (3-4th C.) tells us in *On the Pythagorean Way of Life* that followers of the mathematical-genius-cum-mystical-sage split in two after his death in the late 4th C. BCE. One discipleship, the *mathematikoi* professed to deal only with Truth. They pursued Pythagoras' mathematical insights, and sought to expand his work on ratios and the table of opposites. The other group, the *akousmatikoi* (literally “the ones eager to hear”--the root of our word acoustic and all it implies), were not recognized by the *mathematikoi* as genuine Pythagoreans. The *akousmatikoi* were circumspectly treated as a superstitious, mystical and undisciplined cult. This split, in a very fundamental sense, marks the beginning of the dialectic of Enlightenment: it is the beginning of the rejection of mysticism or myth in favor of scientific-mathematical truth.

But it is worth noting that Pythagoras *himself* fell on neither side of this divide, but believed that both myth (read: spirituality) and mathematics informed and depended upon one another. Pythagoras understood that human life--how we live and how we should live--is not decipherable nor discoverable via pure mathematics. Perhaps, on Adorno and Horkheimer's reading, Pythagoras was the last real Mensch: he daringly lived well in the opposition *before* the opposition, and for that reason is rightly venerated.

I'd suggest DeLillo, or at least the younger DeLillo that wrote *Ratner's Star*, was fully aware of Pythagoras's mensch-ness, and wrote a (literary/untrue) novel about (mathematics/truth) to explore the tension and how to resolve it.

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## BlackOxford says

### Avoiding Cosmic Fake News

Every community of human beings has its own way of thinking about things, its rules for connecting words and experiences. These rules constitute the community's epistemology. Epistemology determines who to believe, what is valid and true, and ‘what counts’ in the language of the community - astronomy and simulation are ‘in’ among scientists, for example, and astrology and augury are out. To some degree a community's epistemology depends on its technology - including its language - and the range of what can be detected and named by it. How events are recorded by technology often determines what is considered as a

fact, a fiction, a random noise, or nothing at all.

When technology becomes developed enough to be used to investigate both the very small as well as the very large - as in quantum or astrophysics - it divorces human perception from direct contact with events. Our immediate experience is of the technology not events. Epistemology then becomes about the technology as much as the events it records. Can the technology be trusted? Is what we perceive through it real? Could it be that what we experience in the very small and very large is simply ourselves, that the technology is actually a mirror reflecting an image of the people who created it?

The community investigating Ratner's Star, Field Experiment Number One, resembles that of organisations like the Santa Fe Institute, or the Rand Corporation and other so-called 'think tanks' and 'skunk works' in which highly educated people of various academic stripes consider issues of deep import. At least they presume the issues addressed are important because their collective epistemology says they are. They have faith in their technology - in the case of Field Experiment Number One, a new type of synthesis-telescopic array and an enormously powerful computer, the Space Brain - to deliver the scientific facts upon which the community can deliberate.

Most members of this community are savants in some abstruse field of inquiry... and they are clearly mad. Some may be genetically deficient and 'on the spectrum'. Others are suffering from the stress induced by the difficult problems they are asked to address. But mostly they are mad because of the ultimate futility of their work. After all, every problem they solve creates new problems at an exponential rate - an epistemological paradox implying that scientific progress increases uncertainty about the world. It's enough to drive any serious scientist crazy.

Billy, the fourteen year old protagonist and maths genius, meets community members in a series of down-the-rabbit-hole, Alice in Wonderland encounters while he literally explores the depths of Field Experiment Number One. It is clear that the epistemology of the place is rather more flexible than that of conventional academia. The staff includes thirty-two Nobel prize-winners in diverse fields. But beyond this are also 'alternative physicists', aboriginal dreamers, a name-shaman and the occasional visiting Kabbala-reading rabbi, among others. No member of any of these 'disciplines' pays much attention to the epistemological opinions of the others. The result is a sort of liberality of method within a group of decided dogmatists. What constitutes 'science' is a matter of formal but unresolved debate within the community. So truth floats like pollen in the wind, fertilising a variety of considered conclusions.

Billy's job is to make some sense of a message apparently received from a planetary satellite of Ratner's Star. As a mathematician, Billy could care less about epistemology. He has no interest in how the binary-coded message got to him or what processes intervened between the distant solar system and the gigantic Space Brain maintained by the community. His data is only the readable version of the purported message which has been produced by Space Brain.

All Billy cares about is identifying any pattern contained in the message, its mathematical significance. Whether the numbers it contains have names other than the ones he knows, is an absurd irrelevance; only their general relationship with each other matters. Numbers, he believes, define each other entirely and give each other their unique identities. Their ultimate source and their connections to anything else in the universe is a metaphysical issue outside his area of interest.

Billy is still young enough to learn however. And he does. He hears and remembers the detail of all the advice he receives no matter how trivial or looney. He encounters the full range of scientific, philosophical and religious opinion face to face, as it were, and at its grittiest from very smart people. And some of the

grittiest grit is provided by the eponymous Ratner himself who has turned from scientist to mystic during his life-long search for knowledge. His near-death bed testimony, given to the community's assembled Nobel laureates through Billy's intermediation, is unambiguous: *en-sof*, the "*G-dash-D*" with no name, the origin and end which is beyond language and number, is that for which they all have been looking. No one, including Billy, pays much attention to the old bat.

Billy's learning appears to inhibit his enthusiasm for the project. He loses interest, gets depressed, sleeps a great deal, thinks about sex in a decidedly adolescent way, and avoids intellectual activity whenever possible. He is maturing. That is, he is going mad as well. But he receives a sort of therapy from an unexpected source, a hack journalist who turns to fiction-writing in order to avoid the "*danger of the threat of belief*," a phrase which seems to sum up the whole of DeLillo's novel. Belief, that is to say fixity of opinion about how words connect to experience, is as much a problem for scientists as it is for religious fanatics. Or, for that matter, as much as it is for an obsessive person who calls her obsession love.

The truth isn't 'out there' as they say in the *X Files*; it's not even 'in here' as some psychotherapeutic types have it. The truth is something that's shared. Like all narrative, it's communal property or it doesn't exist. And, also like all narrative, it is both eternal as it is passed along, and temporary as it is surpassed by other more pressing or compelling narrative. Truth isn't static; it moves. It is propelled by literature at every stage of its existence. Reading and writing is therefore an excellent way to say sane, especially if the writing is as elegant and varied as that provided by DeLillo.

Postscript: it seems to me that *Ratner's Star* is the fictional equivalent of a decidedly philosophical work: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/3...> I think the fiction is far more effective. Another novel with a similar theme by C.S. Forster, written over a century ago: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...> Stanislaw Lem also an almost identical theme 25 years prior to DeLillo: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

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## David says

Man, woman or child:

Do not be alarmed. *Ratner's Star* is complete bullshit. Your assessment within the first few pages will prove to be correct. This is a powerful study on the the excesses, the triumphs and failures of the human mind. Bruce Allen from the Chicago Tribune sums it up best. *Ratner's Star* is a *prodigious satire on those pioneers who journey beyond the frontiers of knowledge and end up more ignorant than they were when they set forth*.

Billy, our Nobel Prize winning mathematical genius, is but a mere pup catapulted into an arena of world renown crazies and fellow mathematicians on a scary hyper-genius level. A radio signal is captured from the outer reaches of space (presumed to be shot off from or around Ratner's Star, which may or may not be binary, which may or may not even be real). Billy's impossible role is to decode the message itself among other mental hybrids.

What we know about Billy, what we *need* to know, is that Billy is essentially a non-character just like every other person or thing he meets in the story; he didn't speak out loud until he was three years old, etc. doesn't matter in the end. Billy is an outsider, and takes over as a proxy for the reader's inquisitive mind. And what he witnesses on every page is fevered with eccentrics that blur the line between genius and insanity. They are contained and straight-jacketed by their own ploys to outdo one another; is it no wonder that the title of the

book is in the possessive case? *Mathematics made sense*, bi-level coding, the mysteries of the Space Brain, Field Experiment Number One, the strange elusive semblance of the self when staring up at the mirroring black sky. This is the lost chapter of *Infinite Jest* written two decades before *Infinite Jest* with all the hilarity and absurdity, all of its special effects and technical wizardry kept intact.

*“Consider the fact that, relative to their respective diameters, the average distance between stars is roughly the same as the average distance between atomic particles in interstellar space. Is this mere ‘coincidence’?”* One of many questions not offered to us as a challenge, but as a matter of reverence to the very real existing unknown out there. Even our current powers of scientific deduction will look at such a profound question with another question; every answer once began as a theory inside someone's head; everything is susceptible to a transformation, whether remarkable or deranged; *“Why sad?” Bill said. “The birth of a baby equals the death of a fetus. This experience recreates itself throughout our lives.”* Billy asks a relatively mundane question like where the bathroom is, and is given a two page expose on seemingly unrelated topics, breaking news hits that Ratner's Star is in fact a binary star, oh, wait, it isn't, then several paragraphs later the mutant responds, *“Upstairs and to the left.”*

*Little Billy Twillig stepped aboard a Sony 747 bound for a distant land. This much is known for certain* are the opening lines to the book. DeLillo does his part keeping us in the know that we're under the derangement of bullshit. Even when there is no resounding purpose other than to bludgeon you over the head with the fact that what you're reading is characterless and pointless. This is the slick meditation of a mathematical know-it-all recounting Pi just to show you that he can. The book as a whole does not exist. Readers decide if it has to.

*But “We’re talking around it. We’re making sounds to comfort ourselves. We’re trying to peel skin off a rock. But this, according to Mainwaring, quoting Mohole, is simply what we do to keep from going mad.”*

Just when the book becomes fascinating, when we delve deeper into the mystery of the message sent to them from space, a character goes on a psycho babble rampage, and they dismiss the importance of said mystery outright. They're right, though. There exists no mystery in plot here. You are to be entertained by the wild imaginative things people say and then move on. The Post-Modern jibber-jabber exists to tell you that the Post-Modern jibber-jabber exists. Its purpose is to enlighten you on how to unravel your very own ego via a Socratic mantra. *The important thing is the language, not the machine.* In this way, DeLillo has created a means of bombarding you with so much bullshit, it elevates you to a level of understanding with our own destructive genius. *“Our knowledge of the world. The world itself. Each, the other and both. They're one and the same, after all. It's been said that philosophy teaches us to talk with an appearance of truth about all things and to make ourselves admired by the less learned. There's one branch of philosophy this definition doesn't cover. Bi-Levelism. Bi-Levelism teaches us to talk with an appearance of truth and falsity about all things to make ourselves admired by the more learned.”*

*The secret task of logic may be the rediscovery of play.* There's no doubt that DeLillo is a genius. He's a threat to the general popcorn-munching Pepsi-guzzling populace. Often times *Ratner's Star* jumps around incoherently just to show us the inevitable failure within us all. And because of this, if *Ratner's Star* wasn't continuously jarring in its cold brilliance, it would have easily gotten one regular old nameless star.

*“Alternate physics, if it teaches us anything,” Speidell said, “it teaches us that once you go across the line, once you're over the line and left without your classical sources, your rational explanations, the whole of your scientific ethos, once this happens you have to pause. You have to pause as we may have to pause someday in the future. You're over the line, sure, but that doesn't mean you have to keep going or hurl yourself into the uncharted void. This is nonsense. You pause. You reflect.”*



DeLillo leaves the reflecting up to the reader. But just as the Mainwaring whispered: *"Things are interesting up to a point. Then they aren't interesting anymore."* The inevitable screw loose in our perfected armor, DeLillo proposes that we are the smartest creatures in the universe, that is, until we meet someone or something that is smarter. He also proposes, at least to me, that we have no evidence to deny the fact that a rainbow-colored space whale lives in the center of the universe. Where he fails, though, is that he prematurely assumes that our patience is ready for this haul of bullshit and hilarity and profundity as well.

(view spoiler)

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## Daniel Chaikin says

DeLillo's fourth novel is mystery for those who have read it closely. I just borrowed an audio e-copy out of curiosity, because it was available\*. And I probably only kept listening because I really liked the reader, Jacques Roy, who is challenged here to come up a zillion different male and female voices. It was always curious but in very odd ways, and I found my attention sometimes engaged, but often less than perfectly attentive. Maybe it was more of an audio skim.

This is basically a philosophically playful novel that has some issues with science, math and logic. Billy Twillig is a 14-yr-old winner of the Nobel Prize for obscure work in mathematics (There is no Pulitzer Prize in math, he was apparently given a special addition). He takes on a position in secret research group staffed full of exceptional scientists from a variety of different fields, many of them very strange and well outside stem-stuff, who are working to figure out an extraterrestrial message that came from an object known as Ratner's Star.

There are numerous characters and most of them make single appearances. Each one has a philosophy that he or she tells Billy about, and each philosophy is very carefully thought out from their specialty and then extends from there, and, as we soon discover, each one eventually reaches a very weird point. The idea is that these are serious (and seriously odd) individuals who have pressed into their ideas as deeply as they could go and tried to push further and get something more. The last part of the book has Billy involved with a group trying to come up with a perfectly logical language that any being could understand simply by following the logic. The name Gödel doesn't come up, but if I understand correctly, he more or less proved this was impossible long before all this. This group doesn't seem to aware of this, but so they go. It's, of course, all fruitless, but in some mind-bending and fun ways.

Wikipedia tells me *"The novel develops the idea that science, mathematics, and logic—in parting from mysticism—do not contain the fear of death, and therefore offer no respite."*

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### 14. Ratner's Star (audio) by Don DeLillo

**reader:** Jacques Roy

**published:** 1976

**format:** 16:04 overdrive audiobook (~446 pages, 448 pages in paperback)

**acquired:** Library

**listened:** Feb 22 – Mar 16

**rating:** 3½

\*I'm not sure, but I think this audio version was only released in December

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## Lara Bell says

Totally tedious. Made me regret that I can't stop reading a book once I start it. Put me to sleep after 3 pages every night. It's that kind of pretentious, look how smart I am, off-kilter writing that a college math freshman would probably spooze over. The beginning is fun and sucked me in enough that I waded through to the end for the somewhat predictable payoff.

I guess if you like math give it a try...

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## Holly says

Earth has received an apparent message from a planet circulating Ratner's Star, and a brilliant mathematical boy is called in to decipher the message. Commentary on science and astronomy and a study on brilliant minds and how they relate (?)

Despite the interesting premise, this book was torture to read. The ideas expressed are as vast and disconnected as the characters created to portray them. The characters were not integrated into the plot - not only did you (slowly and painstakingly) read along as Billy worked on the message, you tried to solve the mystery of why DeLillo included about 90% of the characters. The science, math, astronomy may be interesting to a very small minority, but it wasn't explained or integrated well, so those completing those sections was as fun as reading a dishwashing machine manual. I've read that DeLillo likes to forget his earlier stuff, and now I know why.

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## Ian "Marvin" Graye says

### DICHOTOMY & SEQUENCE:

#### Hard Books

*"[Don DeLillo's] books are hard: all of them expressions of someone who has ideas (I don't mean opinions), who reads things other than novels and newspapers (though he clearly reads those too, and to advantage), and who experiments with literary convention."*

Frank Lentricchia

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*"...epic, piquant disquisitions on the philosophy of logic, the logic of games, the gamesmanship of fiction and prehistory, these early efforts preparing the way for speculative meditations on 'the unsolvable knot' of science and mysticism, which in turn led to his famous 'afterthoughts' on the ethereally select realms of abstract mathematics and the more palpable subheights of history and biography, every published work of this humanist and polymath reflective of an incandescent concern for man's standing in the biosphere and hand-blocked in a style best characterised as undiscourageably diffuse."*

Don DeLillo on the writings of character Chester Greylag Dent

*"It's an experimental novel, an allegory, a lunar geography, an artful autobiography, a cryptic scientific tract, a work of science fiction."*

Don DeLillo on "Somnium" (1608) by Johannes Kepler.

Most of these descriptions can be applied equally to "Ratner's Star".

## **REVIEW:**

### **A Mere 438 Pages**

*"Ratner's Star"* is funny, playful, intelligent, mathematical, mystical, demanding, stimulating, and ultimately rewarding.

It is not suitable for every reader, which is why I have dropped it a star. However, it does deserve to be read by more fans of Post-Modernism who are labouring under a misapprehension about which authors are truly worthy in that space.

The novel packs more into its 438 pages than most Post-Modernist or maximalist books two or three times longer (at least those I've read, and I've read a few).

It's also worth reading because it was influential on David Foster Wallace's *"Infinite Jest"* and, I would argue, on Joseph McElroy's *"Women and Men"* and William H. Gass' *"The Tunnel"* (one of DeLillo's characters lives in a hole, and tunnels into a hole within the hole).

### **14 Year Old Math Wiz**

Fourteen year old (little) Billy Twillig (a euphonious contraction of Terwilliger) is the first winner of the Nobel Prize in Mathematics. He is invited to fly to *"a distant land"*, where he becomes part of a scientific team that wishes to decode and respond to a radio signal that has apparently been received from another planet (which orbits Ratner's star). The project morphs into an attempt to develop a language (Logicon) which can be used to communicate with all potential aliens.

Mathematics has a central role in the novel, but it needn't intimidate readers who are not mathematically (or geometrically) inclined.

If anything, the novel is just as much interested in the shortcomings of mathematics, if only in the context of the radio signal project. While we do learn the source and significance of the radio signal eventually, it's not due to mathematical reasoning, but more to spontaneous intuition.

The narrative arc follows the increasing scepticism about mathematical logic. Initially, it is respected for its objectivity:

*"There is no reality more independent of our perception and more true to itself than mathematical reality."*

*"There may be a lot of crazy things in the world that scare you and me but mathematics is the one thing*

*where there's nothing to be afraid of or stupid about or think it's a big mystery."*

Ultimately, we discover that reason and logic are not sufficient to help us unravel the mysteries of the universe:

*"It's not inconceivable that some things exist beyond the borders of rational inquiry."*

## **Names and Numbers**

Traditionally, our ability to understand the world depends on words and numbers, or language and counting. We can only understand what we can name (with a word) or count. You can see in this novel the origins of DeLillo's interest in "names", which he explored in his next novel, "The Names":

*"Names tell stories and so do numbers."*

*"Know the names of things and write them like a child in elemental lists. Who was it said names and numbers give us power over the world? Spengler no less."*

## **"The Unsolvable Knot of Science and Mysticism" (Fresh Dimensions)**

In this novel, the real narrative arc seeks to go beyond words and numbers into "fresh dimensions". Like Thomas Pynchon's "The Crying of Lot 49", the quest isn't necessarily successful. There remains a mystery that is unsolved. In the absence of a better word (or concept), what lies outside logic, mathematics and reason falls within the realm of mysticism.

*"We can pretend a little, can't we? We're not so scientific that we can't have a little make-believe, right. Then, if something drips through, there's a continuation, another chance, the universe refreshed."*

*"The history of science is crosshatched with lines of additive and corrective thought. This is how we try to arrive at truth. Truth accumulates."*

*"Logic is the scrub brush the mathematician uses to keep his work free of impurity. Logic says yes or no to the forms constructed through intuition. So-called intuitive truths have to be subjected to the rigors of logic before we can take them seriously, much less use them in our work..."*

*"What we've got to do is restate and strengthen our method of reasoning. Make it exact and supremely taut. Introduce distinctions and fresh relationships. Argue our propositions in terms of precise ideographic symbols. Submit our mathematics, in short, to a searching self-examination. In the process we'll discover what's true and what's false not only in the work before us but in the very structure of our reasoning..."*

*"This is a revolution in the making. All science, all language wait to be transformed by what we're doing here."*

Truth needs a little belief and a little doubt, in order to advance.

Still, without the framework of reason, on the other side of mathematics lies the abyss:

*"Existence would be sheer dread without the verifiable fictions of mathematics."*

We need some tools to help us negotiate it. Ironically, they lie on a continuum that consists of:

*“Theology. Logic. Mathematics. Art.”*

However, are these tools enough?

## **Elements of Madness**

Even within high level science, there is a little madness and a few madmen willing to share theirs with us:

*“The Cheops Feeley Medal is the underground prize, given for work that has an element of madness to it. Of course, no one says this openly. But we all know that madness content is a determining factor.”*

*“Only the fiercest risks make existence possible.”*

*“Alternate physics, if it teaches us anything, it teaches us that once you go across the line, once you’re over the line and left without your classical resources, your rational explanations, the whole of your scientific ethos, once this happens you have to pause...You’re over the line, sure, but that doesn’t mean you have to keep going or hurl yourself into the uncharted void. This is nonsense. You pause. You reflect. You get your bearings. Alternate physics, if it’s to move out of the theoretical realm, as it may have to one day, I guarantee you, with a vengeance, and into areas of direct application, must give us the bearings we need, or, lacking bearings to give, must soothe and support.”*

## **The Nameless Being**

The realm of the mystical is the realm of the unknown, the unknowable, the hidden, the infinite, the spiritual, what is not there:

*“The en-sof is the unknowable. The hidden. The that-which-is-not-there. The neither-cause-nor-effect. The G-dash-d beyond G-dash-d. The limitless. The not-only-unutterable-but-by-definition-inconceivable. Yet it emanates. It reveals itself through its attributes, the sefiroth. G-dash-d is the first of the ten sefirothic emanations of the en-sof. Without the en-sof’s withdrawal or contraction, there could be no point, no cosmic beginning, no universe, no G-dash-d.”*

[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein\\_Sof](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ein_Sof)

<http://www.newkabbalah.com/einsof.html>

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/art...>

## **Esoterica**

Some of this is hidden in secret writings, away from the religious or scientific mainstream (I have no knowledge or understanding of the Kabbalah):

*“There is always something secret to be discovered. A hidden essence. A truth beneath the truth. What is the true name of G-dash-d? How many levels of unspeakability must we penetrate before we arrive at the true*

*name, the name of names? Once we arrive at the true name, how many pronunciations must we utter before we come to the secret, the hidden, the true pronunciation?"*

*"All this esoterica. Born in the East. Moving as if by stealth to other parts of the world. Always this obscurity. This secret element."*

*"The mystical writings. The mystical oral traditions. The mystical interpretations, oral and written. These exist beneath the main body of thought and thinking. You don't go into a trance reading the everyday writings. The hidden texts, try them. The untranslated manuscripts. The oral word."*

*"Don't look down your nose at esoterica. If you know the right combination of letters, you can make anything. This is the secret power of the alphabet. Meaningless sounds, abstract symbols, they have the power of creation. This is why the various parts of the mystical writings are not in proper order. Knowing the order, you could make your own world from just reading the writings. Everything is built from the twenty-two letter elements. The alphabet itself is both male and female. Creation depends on an anagram."*

*"When I go into mystical states, I pass beyond the opposites of the world and experience only the union of these opposites in a radiant burst of energy. I call it a burst."*

### **Pantheism vs. The Kabbalah**

At times DeLillo approaches a form of pantheism:

*"The universe is the name of G-dash-d. All of us. Everything. Here, there, everywhere.. time and space. The whole universe. It all adds up to the true name of G-dash-d."*

DeLillo never mentions Spinoza, but he seems to haunt the novel. Ironically (or perhaps not), the editor of some of Spinoza's works was Joseph Ratner. It would be interesting to know whether this is the source of the character's and the star's name.

Nevertheless, DeLillo takes his novel on a journey from mathematics to metaphysics.

### **Fun and Gamesmanship**

There are a lot of fun and games in the novel as well.

The radio signal project is stalked by a Honduran business cabal or cartel, which changes its identity to a consortium (because it sounds more credible and less corrupt), and its name to the more abbreviated ACRONYM.

Its leader speaks in an amusing pigeon English:

*"Nothing trivionis about this operation..."*

*"Try to forgive my wordage."*

*"We admit to a lust for abstraction. The cartel has an undrinkable greed for the abstract. The concept-idee of money is more powerful than money itself."*

*"We lease and sublease multi kinds of time - makeshift, standby, conceptual et al forth. Then we either buy, sell, retain or incite revolution, all totally nonprofitless, done merely to flux the [money] curve our way.*

*"There are things past spelling and far beyond counting. No word or number reaches there. You must live inside a schnitt not to know of this. I can only say tant pis, piccolissimo. I position you neither here nor elsewhere. Oblivio obliviorum.*

*"This is life as it is lived in the world of existenz. A nothingness full of pitfalls. Pitfallful. We're forced to conclude you extemporarily from our cartel. Nihil ex nihilo. A thing deprived of living existenz."*

## **The Rules of the Game**

DeLillo plays Nabokovian games with us throughout the text, but he always does it according to strict rules:

*"Strict rules add dignity to a game."*

This novel is both playful and dignified, without being pretentious.

## **SOUNDTRACK:**

### **Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young - "Woodstock"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrWNT...>

*"We are stardust, we are golden  
We are billion year old carbon  
And we got to get ourselves back to the garden..."*

### **Luna - "Math Wiz"**

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=FYUmVb6...>

*"A twelve year old math wiz  
Came to me in my sleep  
He knew all the answers  
Which he kept to himself"*

### **The Modern Lovers - "Dignified and Old"**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKmgR...>

February 6, 2016

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## **tim says**

There is plentiful evidence of DeLillo's brilliance strewn throughout these pages, but for the most part the

going is laboriously slow. In the imaginative conclusion, math and science are revealed to be just as much a creation of the human mind as mysticism and language, where no single one of these approaches is any more able than another to objectively answer the question: "What is the universe as it exists beyond the human brain?"

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## Brady says

Se la logica è la scienza propedeutica ad ogni possibile conoscenza, il Logicon è il linguaggio scientifico in cui riflettersi (e/o su cui riflettere) per riuscire ad interpretare le proprie avventure.

Le avventure (che si svolgono nei primi 12 capitoli) sono quelle dell'adolescente Billy Twillig , geniale premio Nobel per la matematica (il premio non esiste ma è stato appositamente inventato per l'occasione) chiamato a decifrare un codice proveniente dalla presunta stella di Ratner, si succedono all'interno di una costruzione cicloide collocata in mezzo al deserto, una struttura per metà sotterranea e per metà superficiale. Qui, attraverso lo sguardo ingenuo di Billy, DeLillo descrive personaggi bizzarri e surreali (premi Nobel) dannatamente perduti nelle loro stesse ambiziose ricerche lunghe una vita intera, e sembra voler dire alla comunità scientifica (forse un po' presuntuosa negli anni '70) che il profondo e il superficiale, il visibile e l'invisibile, il lato oscuro e il luminoso, il contenuto e il contenitore, non sono una questione meramente numerica, ma c'è forse dell'altro...

*"C'è una vita dentro questa vita. Un riempire vuoti. Tra gli spazi c'è qualcosa. Io sono diverso da questo. Non sono solo questo, sono di più. In me c'è altro, che non so come raggiungere. Appena al di fuori della mia portata c'è qualcos'altro che appartiene al resto di me. Non so come chiamarlo, né come raggiungerlo. Però c'è. Io sono più di quello che sapete. Ma è uno spazio troppo strano per riuscire ad attraversarlo. Non ci posso arrivare, ma so che c'è, e che ci si potrebbe arrivare. Dall'altra parte è dove si è liberi. Se solo riuscissi a ricordarmi com'era la luce in quello spazio prima che avessi occhi per vederla. Quando al posto dei miei occhi c'era una poltiglia. Quand'ero tessuto grondante. C'è qualcosa nello spazio tra ciò che so e ciò che sono, e ciò che riempie questo spazio è ciò per cui so che non esistono parole.*

...e per vederlo, bisogna bucare la superficie piatta dello specchio, analizzarne i riflessi senza finzione.

*"Solo avvicinandosi alla superficie riflettente di una porta elettronica che si stava aprendo si accorse di avere ancora in faccia i baffi finti"*

I riflessi (che occupano la seconda parte del libro) sono lo specchio da decifrare, il Logicon - da analizzare scrivere accrescere - che sembra giustificare l'esistenza delle avventure senza però riuscire a spiegarne l'arco vitale.

Con continui rimandi all'infinitamente grande e all'infinitamente piccolo, un linguaggio molto complesso, onirico, visionario, spesso ostico e a tratti grottesco, DeLillo crea una "grammatematica" (passatemi il termine) a tratti difficilmente comprensibile che, caratteristica peculiare di questo romanzo, lo rende trasversale rispetto alla maggior parte dei suoi lavori.

In conclusione, dopo aver passato una moltitudine di pagine a cercare una spiegazione all'esistere e all'esistenza, ci abbandoniamo insieme a DeLillo all'accettazione realistica dell'incomprensibile...

*"Continuò a scavare il buco del buco. I suoni che emetteva divennero gradualmente più elementari e rozzi.*



*Avanzò, sapendo, grattò, affondò le dita nella terra dura, ovunque, sentendola, una sensazione di opposti interdipendenti, il paradosso, la commedia, il principio di radiosità totale dello stolto. [...] In superficie si muoveva intanto un'altra figura, quest'ultima a bordo di un triciclo bianco [...] pedalando furiosamente, un ragazzino un po' troppo grosso per il mezzo di trasporto che si era scelto. [...] Mentre si avvicinava al buco una porzione di oscurità delimitata transitò su di lui, che subito dopo si ritrovò a pedalare in uno spazio bianco tra le fasce d'ombra che precedono un'eclissi solare totale. Quell'intervallo di candore, che sembrava suggerire lo spazio tra due linee perfettamente rette, lo spinse a suonare il campanello metallico. Non produsse alcun suono, o almeno lui non ne sentì alcuno, intento com'era a ridere, ora cancellato, ora costeggiato da fasce d'ombra, intento com'era a produrre un rumore che ricordava una risata, a esprimere vocalmente quella che pareva un'emozione incontenibile, intento com'era a gridare, ad ansimare nel silenzio, intento com'era a emettere una serie di strilli involontari, particelle che rimbalzavano nell'aria intorno a lui, la polvere riproduttiva dell'esistenza."*

...dove l'unica soluzione umana possibile sembra lo sciogliersi in un'abbraccio cosmico con il lato oscuro nostro e dell'universo.

Ma non senza fatica.

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## **Kua says**

Chiariamo subito che il libro si è preso una stella sola e che l'altra è per me, che sono riuscita a finirlo. Devo ammettere che in alcuni passaggi mi è sembrato addirittura di aver visto una luce, ma forse era il delirio indotto dalla lettura. Un'esperienza traumatica :D... però è servita a farmi capire alcune cose:

- Leggo perchè mi piace essere portata "altrove"; l'altrove in cui vorrei essere portata NON è lo scenario sconclusionato di questo racconto. La scrittura mi deve prendere per mano, stupirmi, farmi riflettere, emozionarmi... non farmi venire istinti omicidi libreschi.

- Il delirio può anche essere considerato una forma d'arte, ma sinceramente non me ne frega un accidente. Devo già decodificare quotidianamente i comportamenti schizzati dei miei simili, per avere ancora voglia di farlo *anche* leggendo un libro.

- Ho capito perchè l'unica versione reperibile in italiano de *La stella di Ratner* è quella rilegata e fighettosa (la prima edizione): visto il numero inconsistente delle vendite (e di quello, credo, consistente degli invenduti), l'editore avrà deciso di non pubblicare una versione economica di questa "perla" (giustamente).

- Mi piacerebbe sapere cosa si è fumato, ingurgitato, sniffato DeLillo durante la stesura di questo libro. No perchè una mente normale (anche se affetta da turbe psichiche) non credo possa raggiungere queste vette di caos narrativo senza (pesanti) stimoli chimici.

- Sicuramente andrò a leggermi altri libri del Don, se non altro per vedere se riesco a finire due pagine di fila senza chiedermi:

"Ma che c... sta scrivendo?? E soprattutto... perchè?", oppure (variante) "Sono io che sono una capra o lui che è allucinato?" (sono altamente probabili entrambe le cose).

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## Greg says

According to Wikipedia this is Don DeLillo's favorite of his novels. It's not mine. I think that I missed something in the book, like DeLillo was doing something that I didn't quite catch, or I caught but I wasn't that impressed by it. I'm not sure what I'm saying.

This is DeLillo's first 'big' novel. I haven't read *Underworld* yet, but from the books of his I've read I think I like him best when his books are compact. I think it's possible (this could change as I read the rest of his works) that *Point Omega* might be my favorite of his works. It's short but it's tight and beautiful. Every word in the book counts, unlike in most of my reviews. The writing in *Ratner's Star* has the 'DeLillo' sparseness to it (usually) but the plot or the narrative is too sprawling. The narrative sort of reminded me of something that Gaddis might have tried to do (and the characters have a very Gaddis quality to them, and the way especially in the final section of the book that action and characters will shift for no discernible way made me think of the de-centering that Gaddis is such a master at in his 'big' novels), but (I hate to say this), at times many of the scenes felt like skits. As if there were some funny things DeLillo thought he could have scientists do so he made an absurd or slapstick chapter to put them in. Each chapter might have a continuing theme or message he's trying to convey but I never felt like he was successfully getting that message across. It was as if he were being too blunt about what he wanted to say but vague in the details. He wasn't leaving enough table scraps around for the reader (me) to put together the story myself, but what was being given was kind of, yeah, so?

I'm having a hard time writing this. A lot of my criticisms are things I normally like in novels. It's too big, it's too sprawling, there isn't enough of a center, it's too silly at times, it's not clear enough... if anyone were to say that *Infinite Jest* or *JR* were any of these things I'd be ready to jump at the books defense and say, yeah they are but that's all part of the book, it all has to be there. But for this novel I thought that all of these things I'm normally a 'meta-fiction' nerd in loving just weren't working right. It's like this book is a really nice looking car and you want to love it but a lot of stuff in the engine is just not firing off right so you've got this nice looking car that is sputtering down the road being trailed by a noxious black cloud (an Airborne Toxic Event?) and limping along with two nice tires and two donuts. If I was told what the book was about, and how it was presented and all of that I'd be jumping up and down in joy wanting to read it, but somewhere in the execution the book failed for me.

What saved the book was DeLillo's dialogue. I love the staccato overly stylized way he writes dialogue. It's very artificial, but overly stylized things have to be, right? Even though it's not flashy at all, the way his characters speak reminded me of the violence in a (good Hong Kong) John Woo movie. So totally fake, but beautiful in its construction and execution. I'm not sure why I kept thinking about John Woo movies while reading this book but I think the analogy holds at least a little bit.

Two DFW related notes. I'm convinced that DFW is paying homage to DeLillo in *Infinite Jest*. Out of the early novels of his I've read so far, this one has the least explicit things that DFW returns to in *Infinite Jest*, but there is a fictional event called The MIT Language Riots that appear in both works, and the recurring question of "Explain please" I think is used quite often by a character in a DFW work, but I can't remember if it was in *Infinite Jest* or another work, or obviously what character uses this.

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## sologdin says

My favorite Delillo so far, by a wide margin, inclusive of *Underworld*.

First Nobel in mathematics goes to teenage protagonist, whose work was “understood by only three or four people” (4), which work kid has designated as “zorgs” (20): “it’s pretty impossible to understand unless you know the language. A zorg is a kind of number. You can’t use zorgs for anything except in mathematics. Zorgs are useless. In other words they don’t apply” (id.). These statements are of course manifestly dishonest, as kid was really saying on the inside (i.e., the same manner in which I launch dreadful broadsides contra any of my wives when their respective wraths may have been upon them), that “beauty was mere scenery unless it was severe, adhering *strictly* to a set of consistent inner *codes*, and this he clearly perceived, the arch-reality of pure mathematics, its austere disposition, its links to simplicity and permanence” (13) (emphases added).

We should expect therefore that the aesthetic principles of this novel are laid out strictly as a consistent inner code, insofar as the text discloses rules for its own construction. It is of course pleasant when one’s expectations come to fruition, such as in one character’s description of her own writing, which is appropriately self-referential: “it’s an experimental novel, an allegory, a lunar geography, an artful autobiography, a cryptic scientific tract, a work of science fiction” (57). We know that “strict rules add dignity to a game” (334).

I plan to make strict rules that I plan to follow. Reading my book will be a game with specific rules that have to be learned. I’m free to make whatever rules I want as long as there’s an inner firmness and cohesion, right? Just like mathematics.” (352)

Certain ‘notes’ on the final third’s ‘Logicon’ project might serve as hermeneutic rules here (cf. 330-332, 365-66, 383, 391-92); a clever reading might work through those, as well as any mandatory grammars or peremptory language otherwise deployed in the text—I’m not doing it because that’s work and this is pro bono. Regardless, “This is where zorgs fit in, the technicality, the precision, the mathematics, the language. Strict rules” (359).

Text proceeds as kid’s somewhat picaresque journey through several special projects related (vel non) to an alleged alien broadcast. He meets many other science types, all memorable, witty confrontations. A few of these characters recur, but many of them are pynchonian one-offs. There are nevertheless some basic principles that recur with regularity, and might be the rules of the text.

For instance, protagonist’s “kind of mathematics are undertaken solely to advance the art. In time to come, of course, what had been pure might finally be applied” (33). The most important rule, then: “There is no reality more independent of our perception and more true to itself than mathematical reality” (48). Mathematics

has no content. Form, it’s nothing but form. It stands on thin air. The symbols we use are everything. What they represent we discard without the slightest misgiving. The focus of our thought, the object of our examination, our analysis, our passion if you will, is the notation itself. (286)

The next recognizable rule is “the terror of the irrational” (22), specifically that “no definition of science is complete without a reference to terror” (36). We then see ‘terror’ (lovecraftian terror, rather than osamaniac)

reiterate often: “Of course if evidence of universal blueshifting is ever found, it will merit the smallest note. This is documentary void. Not void whose essence is terror. Not the human sensorium streaked with darkness” (50); “There may be a lot of crazy things in the world that scare you and me but mathematics is the one thing where there’s nothing to be afraid of or stupid about or think it’s a big mystery” (67); “Terror is everywhere. [...] Take demons, for example. You wouldn’t think there’s a connection between demons and the sperm in your testicles. The terror of onanism is that bodiless demons are able to make bodies for themselves from the spilled seed” (227); “But math struck terror” (234); Protagonist hasn’t “had time to drift away from your psychic origins, whatever these may have been, however replete with terror, darkness and fetal shrieks. Routine horripilation” (265).

The terror of the irrational that is inherent to the definition of science leads quite plainly into the second rule of the text: “By common consent the star *code* is no longer an ongoing project. I’m amazed anyone took it seriously in the first place. Radio signals weren’t even repeated. A jumble of pulses” (264) (emphasis added). That is to say, the rules of the text are no longer an ongoing project, a baudrillardian dissimulation that disavows rules even while following them. Consider the following constantly changing reports of the scientist administrators regarding the text’s underlying mystery, the receipt of an apparent transmission from the eponymous celestial object:

- 1: “We’ve been contacted by someone or something in outer space” (46);
- 2: “The star is a common G dwarf. It’s called Ratner’s Star. It lies away from us a bit toward the galactic center. We’ve analyzed the variation or wiggle in its path and we believe the object in question is a low-mass planet that occupies the star’s habitable zone” (50);
- 3: “Is Ratner’s star an illusion? Of course not. It’s out there and everyone knows it. Is the planet’s existence a hoax? Ridiculous. There’s clear evidence of a planet in orbit around the star. Is someone transmitting signals? Absolutely. Is our synthesis telescope receiving on the secret frequency? Nods of affirmation” (63);
- 4: “The star is part of a two-star system” (93);
- 5: “Ratner’s star is a main sequence star and its sister star is a black hole” (101);
- 6: “Ratner’s star is on the verge of becoming a red giant [...] increase in luminosity. Startling increase in radius” (140);
- 7: “Space Brain has now confirmed a two-satellite configuration” (151);
- 8: “the computer retrovert we’ve just run indicates error in the receiving equipment” (240);
- 9: “I’d like everyone to stop using expressions like ‘Ratnerians,’ ‘superbeings,’ ‘extraterrestrials’ and so forth. It’s a radio source we’re in touch with. If Moholean relativity is the real thing, the source isn’t even where it seems to be. So why assume it’s a planet orbiting a star? Remember the homely adage: ‘Belief in the causal nexus is superstition.’ So let’s from now on be sure to use the term ‘artificial radio source.’ And let’s find a more precise name for the so-called beings who are presumed to have initiated the transmission. How about ‘artificial radio source extants’? ARS extants” (274);
- 10: “Because Ratner’s star lies within a suspected Mohole, which is a fractional part, as I understand it, of the value-dark dimension, meaning no spatial area and no time, it was thought the signal picked up by the synthesis telescope was originating from Ratner’s star. But it wasn’t [...] It was just that the Mohole had

trapped the signal and sent it our way. Ratner's star is a binary dwarf. Couldn't possibly sustain a planet of any size" (357);

11: "Using information gathered by satellite, balloon-borne instruments, and, most of all, by a device of recent concoction called an echolocation quantifier, we believe we have traced the radio signals to their source [...] The source of the message is the planet Earth [...] The signals originated somewhere in this planet. Were absorbed in some component of the Mohole totality. Were eventually reflected back this way" (402);

12: "What we've apparently discovered is that we are in the Mohole, if that's the way to phrase it. This solar system appears to be what we call Mohole-intense. We are part of the value-dark dimension" (410).

I'm sufficiently Hegelian to recognize this process as a dialectical reversal of some sort or another; either "the solidarity of opposites is completely shattered" thereby, reduced to "essential dichotomies" (34), or it's just a pedestrian "reconciliation of opposites" (313). (As M&E otherwise lay out in the *Manifesto*, class struggle shall result either in the 'revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.')

It may well be swiftian satire of science, though of course Swift was misanthropically rightwing, whereas Delillo strikes me as nothing if not a strident exemplar of enlightenment. (One may be forgiven if one is confused however by such bits as "He was part of a committee formed to define the word 'science' [...] the debate continued to drag on and the definition at present ran some five hundred pages" (30).) Text presents plenty of bogus theory at the research compound: 'slyphing' (49 et seq.); 'bi-levelism' (66); challenge to phenomenal basis of empiricism (87); a "lust for abstraction" that leads inexorably and completely reasonably to the grafting of a brain on a computer (146, 244); and then moholes (179 ff.), which are the undisputed champion of douchitude in the text.

Anyway, most of these clowns win Nobel prizes (306). As the text is pleased to reiterate, "keep believing it, shit for brains" (27, 57, 167, 258). (KBISFB is likely a rule of the text, of course.)

There likely a rule in the recurrent discrete/continuous binary (95, 245, 348, 389), but am not sure about it beyond the punchline: "The discrete-continuous quality of zorgs is what really helped us work out the necessary mathematics of Moholean relativity and made Mohole identification practically inevitable" (418).

A further rule: We are assured that there's "something about waste material that defied systematic naming" (38), which is of course the primary concern of the epistemology of the accursed share provided by *Underworld*. But this is also a consideration of "things beyond expression" in general:

the names of deities, infernal beings, totemic animals and plants; the names of an individual's blood relatives of the opposite sex (a ban related to incest restrictions); the new name given a boy at his initiation; the names of certain organs of the body; the names of the recently dead; the names of sacred objects, profane acts, leaders of cults, the cults themselves. Double substitutes must be used." (38)

Looping back to the rule on terror:

To bear a name is both terrible and necessary. The child, emerging from the space-filling chaos of names, comes eventually to see that escape from verbal designation is never complete, never more than a delay in meeting one's substitute, that alphabetic shadow abstracted from its physical source. (19)

We might consider these comments in connection with Derrida's *On the Name* (not now; that's work).

Derridean concerns will provide other rules of the text, which notes a "direct correlation between writing and memory" (361-62) (that's the *Speech & Phenomena*, yo); "writing is memory, she thought, and memory is the fictional self" (362). We are presented with "the very uselessness of Logicon" project (409), which seeks to develop an ideal language to correspond with the ARS extants, who of course, supra, turn out to be Earthlings. The uselessness ('it does not apply,' recall) is considered a virtue by those who do 'pure work': "I do pure work. A lot of it is so abstract it can't be put on paper or even talked about. I deal with proof and nonproof" (46), which is both uselessly virtuous but also another "thing beyond expression," an excess exorbitant to language. "There are things past spelling and far beyond counting" (147).

Other interesting bits in this connection: a guy's voice is a "proto-laryngeal reconstruction of the sound of a lost language" (147-48); another guy believes in "the secret power of the alphabet, the unnameable name, the literal contraction of the superdivinity, fear of sperm demons" (215) (KBISFB?). Something about the Heideggerian polemos (217), the "beginning of distinctions." Elsewise, a "thing beyond naming" (226). One guy eats post-circumcision foreskin (105); another guy eats post-natal placenta (140).

As our teen protagonist notes, "I make no reply" (9, 155).

We make a brief listing of other potential miscellaneous rules of the text: a typology of ignorance (157); "truth accumulates. It can be borrowed and paid back" (193); "The whole history of mathematics is subterranean, taking place beneath history itself" (195); "worship of the body always ends in fascism" (361); "latent in any period's estimation of itself as an age of reason is the specific history of the insane" (387) (cf. Foucault!).

Not rules, but kinda cool: teen protagonist's mentor is a brilliant, extremely sexually active person afflicted by dwarfism, and is described as an "idealized Hollywood dwarf" (312). Perhaps a source for Tyrion Lannister?

Teen protagonist is the inventor of the "stellated twilligon" (116-17), a quadrilateral of some alleged import in the setting, and which shows up repeatedly throughout. Kid receives fill-in-blank quiz questions in the mails (294 ff.) from one of the other Nobel prize winners: "In a tricky situation it is your best friend, above all others, who would find it easiest to \_\_\_\_\_ you. \_\_\_Deceive \_\_\_Believe."

So, am wondering: After reading *Ratner's Star*, the fictive quadrilateral is best described as a \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_stellated twilligon \_\_\_fellated dellillogon?

(view spoiler)

Recommended for readers who touch themselves in the male or female region, persons who wonder how we can learn from the past unless we repeat it, and those who slowly have begun to understand the higher reality of nonobjective truth.

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## Sentimental Surrealist says

This comes off to me as someone self-consciously trying to write a postmodern novel and not quite

succeeding. There are big swaths of Gaddis, Pynchon, and Heller and little hints of Gass and Barth throughout this novel, but those authors did a far better job of combining the intellectual concerns Ratner's Star takes on with interesting stories. When Gravity's Rainbow (still a terrific novel, mind) has more narrative coherence than what you're doing, you're sort of in trouble.

Ratner's Star is a novel with issues. DeLillo's characters are paper-thin, often demarcated by goofy gimmicks. "This guy dug himself into a hole! This guy shows people his nipples!" Contrast this against the still odd, still stilted, but also unforgettable characters of later novels, Murray in White Noise and DeLillo's interpretation of Lee Harvey Oswald in Libra, and you can tell that the guy still had a long way to go before he hit his later greatness in this early stage in the game. They don't really develop, either. Furthermore, while the novel tries to tell the fascinating story of decoding transmissions from far-off Ratner's Star, this terrific premise is unfortunately dropped off the nearest convenient cliff for long stretches at a time, only to be awkwardly shoehorned in later.

What saves this one's bacon, besides the fact that DeLillo is always funny, are the big long intellectual monologues, which are clumsily delivered and as subtle as a sledgehammer to the face but which are about topics that interest me. I've gained a certain amount of patience for interruptive discourse as long as it's about a topic I personally am into, and for as badly as this book wanders off-course (and it's not like I mind digressive books, I just don't find these particular digressions delivered as well as Gravity's Rainbow's digressions), it's fascinating to read so much about language, astronomy and mythology.

In the end, though, I only found Ratner's Star engaging in fits and starts. That third star is on account of a good concept and some cool content, as well as how much fun I had digging around for bits that reminded me of Infinite Jest: Billy Twillig is a less-developed Hal Incandenza, and there are those MIT language riots. I know DFW loved this book and understand why to a degree, but this is not the DeLillo of the '80s and '90s, that's for sure.

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## Neil says

In my defence, I was young, my degree in mathematics was still relatively new and shiny and I was just at that point in my life when I was discovering the joys of "literary fiction". This story of a young mathematician hired to attempt to decode a message received from the vicinity of Ratner's Star ticked a lot of boxes for me almost thirty years ago.

And I do owe this book a huge debt of gratitude. It was, I believe, my first DeLillo and I went on to read just about everything else he has written. Some of it isn't to my taste, but a lot of it is. I am very glad that my reading life includes the stellar quintet of The Names, White Noise, Libra, Mao II and Underworld (if there were a prize for "best 5 sequential novels from one author", surely that would be the winner).

But, now, nearly 30 years later, I find Ratner's Star crosses even my high pretentiousness threshold.

I've read a lot of books in the nearly 30 years between my readings of this one. Now I find myself looking at it and thinking DeLillo was attempting one of two things. Either he was seeking to copy Thomas Pynchon, in which case he failed, or he was seeking to parody Thomas Pynchon, in which case this might be brilliant. We have people with bizarre names, we have a mysterious graphic symbol, we have snatches of song, we have a company called ACRONYM where we never get to know what the letters stand for (that bit is quite funny, to be fair). We have complicated sentences that you get to the end of and realise you have forgotten the

beginning, we have paranoia, we have puns. In short, we have everything Pynchon does so well but which, for me, just doesn't work here.

I really wish I had enjoyed this more. I am loathe to stop thinking of it as brilliant. But I can't live on a 30 year old impression of a book where a re-reading has shown I don't actually remember that much of it. In summary, Billy Twillig is a teenage maths genius who has recently won the first ever Nobel prize for mathematics. He is recruited into a team of 30 other Nobel laureates who are working to understand a bizarre radio message received from the eponymous Ratner's Star. The book is in two sections that are modelled on Alice Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass: part one is called Adventures and part two is called Reflections. In part one, each Nobel laureate seems to present Billy with different theories and different hopes for what the message might mean. In part two, Billy, appropriately given the structure, disappears down a hole and sets to work on a different problem with a smaller team.

There's a lot of maths talk, quite a few maths jokes. There were occasions when I thought I might be getting a glimpse through the mist of what the book was actually about. But, as fast as I thought something was coming into focus, the mists closed over it again and it was gone.

It's quite possible I have missed something significant as I read this. The trouble is, a lot of the writing is so pretentious that I have no real desire to go back and attempt to unpick it.

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## **Drew says**

Seems like Delillo took a bunch of postmodern conceits (funny names like Calliope Shrub and Elux Troxl; precocious kid; unrealistic, posturing dialogue; near-opaque symbols; metafiction) and threw them together in a broken blender. Everything works well for the first half, the elements blending together and whirling faster and faster like the book's aborigine. Then something goes horribly wrong; the top pops off, causing the blender to spew postmodernism all over the walls. And as we all know, postmodernism is notoriously difficult to clean up.

So what is there to enjoy in this book? Well, it was interesting to see a direct ancestor of JJ's Hal in Billy Twillig. Not only is Billy freakishly smart, he also has the same childish wit as Hal. Two examples:

"...noting in the mirror how unlike himself\* he looked, neat enough in his sport coat and tie but unusually pale and somehow tired, as though this manufactured air were threatening his very flesh, drawing out needed chemicals and replacing them with evil solvents made in New Jersey."

"...lecture tours, talk shows, a quickie biography, t-shirts, funny buttons. The ancillary rights alone could set us up for years. Endorsements, puzzles, games, mathematics LPs . . . Once the incision heals. And the hair grows back. Leaving you without a scar. We'll package you with somebody you really admire. There must be one special figure in the world community of scientists. Who's your hero? Tell us and we'll get him.'  
'People from the Bronx don't have heroes.'"

And there's one other thing: people don't often say this about Delillo, but he has a tendency to (despite his habitual self-obfuscating) drop little bits of nearly-sentimental, life-affirming philosophy. I've written about this before here, but here's an example from Ratner's Star:

"Everywhere is a place. All places share this quality. Is there any real difference between going to a gorgeous



mountain resort with beautiful high thin waterfalls so delicate and ribbonlike they don't even splash when they hit bottom--waterfalls that *plash*; is this so different from sitting in a kitchen with bumpy linoleum and grease on the wall behind the stove across the street from a gravel pit? What are we talking about? Two places, that's all. There's nowhere you can go that isn't a place. So what's such a difference? If you can understand this idea, you'll never be unhappy. Think of the word 'place.' A sun deck with views of gorgeous mountains. A tiny dark kitchen. These share the most important of all things anything can share. They are places. The word 'place' applies in both cases. In this sense, how do we distinguish between them? How do we say one is better or worse than the other? They are equal in the most absolute of ways. Grasp this truth, sonny, and you'll never be sad."

Logically questionable, but sure makes you feel better if you happen to live in a really crappy place.

\*bonus dissociation/fragmentation!

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