

Chicago Tribune July 25, 1993

## THE LIBERTY CAMPAIGN

By Jonathan Dee

Doubleday. 271 pp. \$22

Once again, an astonishingly talented thirtyish writer presents a man living near the Long Island shore who befriends a neighbor with a cryptic past. Once again, our narrator gets drawn into his neighbor's past, disapproving of him all the while, incurring painful choices and, steadily, lowering the mask from the face of America.

If an analogy to *Gatsby* seems hyperbolic for Jonathan Dee's second novel, following his highly praised *The Lover of History*, I'll move farther onto that limb and predict that if any presently under-40 writer will produce The Great American Novel, it will most probably be Dee. Susan Minot writes more exquisite prose, Madison Smartt Bell hits a rawer nerve and Mona Simpson traverses more land, but no one yields so magnificent a wedding of historical context, cultural insight and writing craftsmanship.

Advance publicity for *The Liberty Campaign* invites almost as ambitious a comparison, to Englishman Kazuo Ishiguro's delicately perfect as a snowflake *The Remains of the Day*. Both books share a modulated, reserved narrative voice and a wisdom far beyond the years of their writers, and both offer central characters who become tiny windows through which we see the fiber of their countries.

Thirty-two year-old Dee gives us advertising executive Gene Trowbridge on the eve of his retirement. Trowbridge begins by recalling his army service in Europe during World War Two, casting an eye back from age to youth, when time looks more vast for still being mostly in the top half of our glass. While he never again mentions those days, they hover, the time when "there was something empowering about being an American" giving freedom back to Europe. Yet, Trowbridge suspects he has had the experience but missed the meaning. At 65, he feels he has always missed the meaning, and nears the end of his life hoping "I shall not die before I know myself."

His opportunity comes when a newspaper reporter questions him about a neighbor, one Albert Ferdinand who has lived down Trowbridge's street for seven years. The questions disturb Trowbridge's placid life of sharing his suburban home with wife Ellie in their tepid marriage and watching WTBS nightly to witness his prematurely washed-up son Jack's last humiliating days pitching for the Atlanta Braves.

Here, sports intersects with history. While Jack had once embodied the mythic male dream of athletic heroism, Trowbridge watches his own vicarious youth and splendor in the grassy park vanish in Jack's decline. This lost ideal and wistful longing for a faded glory mirror key thematic declines at the heart of Dee's book: aging, eroded societal substance and corrupted national virtue.

His curiosity aroused, Trowbridge visits Ferdinand, a Brazilian of almost studied dignity. Then he learns that Ferdinand may actually be one Capt. Joao Carvalho da Silva who ran a "house of Horrors" interrogation center in Brazil, inflicting unspeakable torture on suspected leftists. Brazil wants him back, and his return means certain death.

When Ferdinand asks his help, Trowbridge keeps his dilemma to himself, even lying to Ellie, for this is to be his private touchstone for discovering what he is made of, fearing that "fundamental questions of life and death, of good and evil, of the infinitesimal sliver of world history encompassed by my own lifetime, were too hard for me."

Amid conversational digressions, Dee moves the strands of his plot forward—the manhunt for Ferdinand, Trowbridge's impending retirement, Jack's baseball failure—and gradually braids them snugly around the common theme of early promise and mythic dreams fallen into decay, leaving people and their nation adrift.

The America that made the young soldier feel he was fighting for a virtuous goal now seems less interested in heroes than villains. Its government had helped torturer da Silva, who stood for American economic self-interest in Brazil. It sells rather than pledges its allegiance. Fans who once embraced Jack now slash his tires, reveling more in boos than cheers.

Trowbridge's perception of his culture grows clearest as he makes his farewell speech to advertising at his retirement dinner. Decades earlier, he had designed the Liberty campaign commissioned by the Commerce Department to sell America to foreign tourists. Even then he knew he was selling illusion. Later, he comes close to realizing that his creative joy in making irresistible an insubstantial dream was akin to da Silva's elation in devising new means of torture.

Trowbridge tells his former colleagues, "What troubles me...is the thought that advertising...has brought to American life an era in which every belief, no matter how strongly held, is negotiable.... We live in a culture in which every product—and, in this sense, even our very attitudes are products—has equal weight, since it's all a matter of how attractively that product is represented." His country, which invented advertising, turns to Madison Avenue to sell wars, policies, candidates for President and believes that "the hardest thing to sell is virtue, because you can't create a need for it."

Yet, while much is taken from him, something abides. There is still life's final task: to understand and accept one's life and thus be ripe for death. Even Ferdinand, dwelling internally in the ninth circle of history, wondering if "there are sins for which it is impossible to repent," works resolutely at this task.

Ironically, Trowbridge, softened by an antiseptic life that has cushioned him from extremes of good and evil, seems less equipped to grasp the remains of his day. He sees why aged men talk of the old days: "It's not at all because the old days were superior.... There is a long period that precedes death, in which you are already not entirely of the

world. Nothing makes sense to you any more because it does not try or even think to relate itself to you in any way. It is as if the earth, without warning, begins turning faster, so that only the strongest can stay with it; already, already, you can feel, and see, yourself being thrown clear of it."

If that's what Jonathan Dee is writing at 32, it strains the imagination to think what he'll write at an age we commonly associate with wisdom.