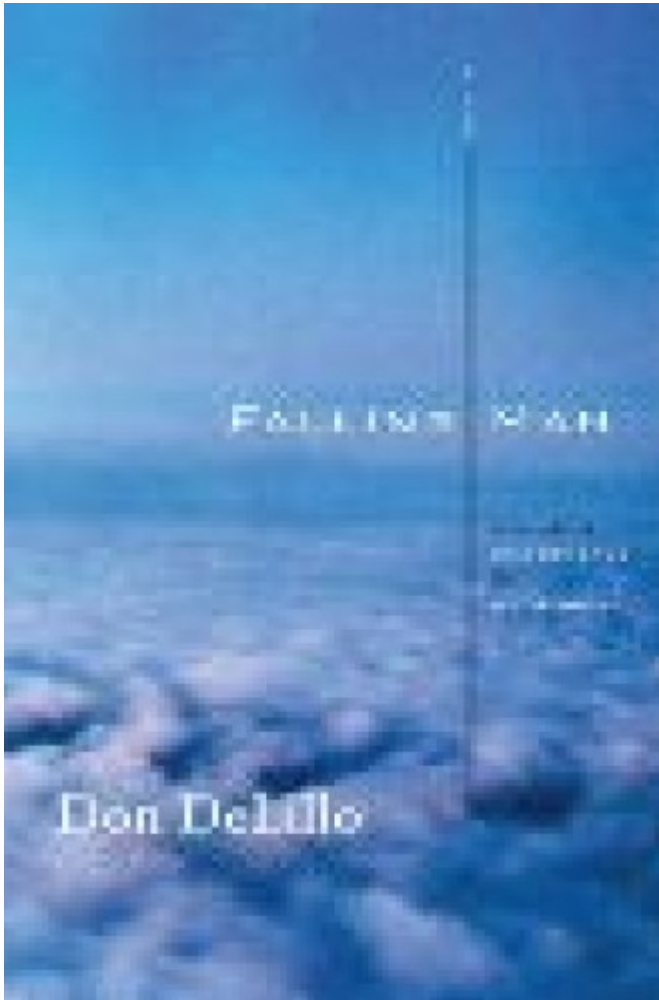


Falling Man

reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Falling Man

Don DeLillo
Scribner

In his 14th novel, Don DeLillo addresses universal themes through the particularity of two lives affected by the events of 9/11. The omniscient narrator flits between

Keith Neudecker and his estranged wife, Lianne, as they try to come to terms with the personal and national trauma of that day.

The title, which refers to a performance artist in a business suit who falls at various locations in New York City while attached to a harness, also carries theological connotations of the “fall of man.” Though DeLillo does not explicitly address this connotation, he does refer to his characters’ beliefs about God.

The novel begins with Keith walking out of one of the World Trade Center towers on 9/11, with “glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood and light.” He goes to the apartment where Lianne lives with their small son, Justin. Throughout the book Keith suffers a certain lethargy and seeks connection in various ways.

Lianne, though she was warned years earlier by her mother that Keith is one of those men who is “sheer hell on women,” welcomes him into their home. A freelance editor, Lianne also works with Alzheimer’s patients, helping them write down their thoughts twice a week.

At one point the patients write about the planes and about God. Where was God when this happened? they wonder. Meanwhile, Lianne struggles with the idea of God. She wants to disbelieve, “to snuff out the pulse of the shaky faith she’d held for much of her life” because once you believe in God, “then how can you escape, how survive the power of it?”

In one scene Keith returns a briefcase he picked up on the way out of the tower to its owner, an African-American woman named Florence Givens. Their shared experience of escaping death leads to an intimacy that emerges out of their staccato conversation. They need say little, since they know each other through what happened.

Lianne and others are disturbed by the performances of Falling Man, “the puppetry of human desperation, a body’s last fleet breath and what it held.” Justin and his playmates look at the skies for more planes and think Osama bin Laden is a man named Bill Lawton.

As the weeks pass, Keith takes up his old obsession, poker. Two of the men he used to play with died in the towers, so he flies to Las Vegas to play in poker tournaments, comes home for several days, then leaves again for more tournaments, where he senses “a small dawn of tunneled meaning.”

Late in the book, Lianne asks Justin to name the biggest thing he ever learned in school. He answers, "The sun is a star." To Lianne "it seemed a revelation, a fresh way to think about being who we are, the purest way and only finally unfolding, a kind of mystical shiver, an awakening."

This is perhaps the closest DeLillo comes to naming some lesson. Throughout the novel he observes characters who live out our nation's fears and trivial obsessions; the book is filled with small epiphanies from everyday encounters. DeLillo also includes three short chapters that delve into the mind of one of the hijackers. While these sections are perhaps needed for symmetry, they are weaker, less focused and less intimate than the rest of the book.

The strongest element in the novel is DeLillo's poetic, laconic way of capturing the defining moment of the new century. The image of a man falling from the towers—referencing an actual photo that was later withdrawn from circulation—haunts the book and haunts Lianne; the picture burns "a hole in her mind and heart . . . he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific."