**Reading *Libra***

Hello, everyone. This is a good time to explain a few important points about *Libra*, and hopefully give some clarity about its place on the syllabus.

**I mentioned that I have concerns about Libra being a difficult book.** Your potential difficulty doesn’t come from the quality of the writing, or even the difficulty of following the story, even though it makes historical references that could be unfamiliar to you. Most of the people in the story actually existed, and you probably know something about the Kennedy Assassination whether you care about it or not.

**The book is difficult mostly because the events in the book, large and small, are extremely unpleasant.** Not one person remotely approaches the status of a hero. At best, the characters are tragic, and in many places, revolting. The emphasis on male roles can also become distracting at times.

In short, the book is not meant to be uplifting, and you will sometimes wonder why the effort is worth it. When you find yourself struggling through those packages, remind yourself that Don DeLillo (along with Robinson and Wallace) is among a handful of the greatest contemporary American authors. At times, you’ll feel revulsion and awe for the artistic greatness in the same instant.

Recall that the theme of the course is human happiness. So far, all of our readings have spoken to that topic in many different ways, indirectly. You can think of each reading as a proposal about the *conditions* that make happiness possible. For example, Plato (through Socrates) and Montaigne speak to the limits of human knowledge. Woolf and Douglass might emphasize personal freedom and respect for individual dignity. All of them say something about the power of expression.

I also suggested that chaos, whether we see it in our minds, our relationships, or the civilization around us, might be the greatest of every threat to happiness. Chaos of the mind is a close relative to anger, resentment, and a misplaced aspiration to a place in human history, that fills the void for people who are abandoned and exploited.

**For our purposes, read *Libra* as handbook of the destruction of human potential and joy.** In other words, it can add to our store of happiness by reminding us about some seductive traps that sabotage it. Keep close track of Oswald’s personal anguish, and the stream of mistakes that bury his potential. What do we owe the people around us who proceed, invisibly, through their lives of undeserved desperation? Where does our own vanity and misplaced aspiration leads us in these directions, even if the results aren’t as catastrophic? At the same time, how does an artist pull us through this kind of story in a way that we can recognize as distinctly contemporary?