

denis johnson tree of smoke

Denis Johnson Tree of Smoke: Exploring the Depths of a Vietnam War Epic

denis johnson tree of smoke stands as a monumental work in contemporary American literature, weaving a complex and haunting narrative set against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. This novel, published in 2007, not only solidified Johnson's reputation as a master storyteller but also offered readers a profound meditation on war, memory, and the human condition. For anyone interested in Vietnam War fiction, literary explorations of espionage, or Denis Johnson's unique narrative style, **Tree of Smoke** presents a richly layered experience that rewards deep engagement.

Understanding Denis Johnson's **Tree of Smoke**

At its core, **Tree of Smoke** is a sprawling, multi-perspective novel that chronicles the lives of several characters involved in the Vietnam War, particularly focusing on the intelligence operations led by Colonel Francis Xavier Sands. Johnson's narrative is often described as dense and challenging, but it is precisely this complexity that mirrors the chaos and moral ambiguity of the Vietnam conflict.

Unlike straightforward war novels, **Tree of Smoke** delves into psychological and philosophical territories, examining not only the events of the war but also the internal struggles of those who fought and those who orchestrated the battles from behind the scenes. The title itself, evocative and mysterious, suggests themes of illusion, decay, and the ephemeral nature of truth in wartime.

The Plot and Key Characters

The novel follows Colonel Sands, a charismatic and enigmatic intelligence officer who leads a secretive CIA project called "Tree of Smoke." His nephew, Skip Sands, serves as a young soldier whose experience in Vietnam provides a contrasting, ground-level perspective on the war. Other characters, like Kathy Jones and James Houston, add further dimensions to the narrative, each bringing their own stories of loyalty, despair, and survival.

Johnson's storytelling style shifts seamlessly among these viewpoints, creating a tapestry of interconnected lives affected by the sprawling and often incomprehensible conflict. The narrative's nonlinear structure and frequent shifts in time and place challenge readers but also offer a panoramic view of the war's psychological and political landscape.

Thematic Exploration in *Tree of Smoke*

One of the most compelling aspects of *Tree of Smoke* is its exploration of themes that go beyond the typical war novel tropes. Johnson uses the Vietnam War as a prism through which he examines broader questions about identity, truth, and the moral ambiguities inherent in espionage and combat.

War and Moral Ambiguity

Tree of Smoke refuses to present the Vietnam War in black and white terms. Instead, it dwells in the gray areas where good intentions clash with disastrous outcomes. Colonel Sands's intelligence operations, intended to win the war through psychological and covert means, often unravel into confusion and betrayal. This ambiguity forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the nature of war and the limits of human understanding.

The Nature of Memory and Trauma

Johnson's novel also delves deeply into how trauma shapes the minds of individuals and societies. Characters grapple with memories that haunt them, and the narrative itself reflects the fragmented, often unreliable way humans recall past events. The Vietnam War, with its contested histories and lingering scars, becomes a metaphor for the elusive nature of memory and the difficulty of finding closure.

Denis Johnson's Writing Style and Literary Techniques

Johnson's prose in *Tree of Smoke* is both poetic and raw, blending lyrical descriptions with stark depictions of violence and despair. His ability to capture the nuances of human emotion and the surreal quality of war settings makes the novel highly immersive.

Nonlinear Narrative and Multiple Perspectives

The novel's structure is deliberately complex, with frequent jumps in time and shifts in point of view. This technique reflects the disorientation of war and intelligence work, where information is often incomplete or misleading. Readers must piece together the story much like the characters try to make sense of their experiences.

Symbolism and Imagery

Throughout **Tree of Smoke**, Johnson employs rich symbolism, with the “tree of smoke” itself serving as a central metaphor. It suggests something that appears solid but is in fact insubstantial, a reflection of the deceptive nature of intelligence operations and the fragility of truth during wartime. The imagery of smoke, fog, and decay permeates the novel, reinforcing its themes of uncertainty and loss.

Why **Tree of Smoke** Remains Relevant Today

Even years after its publication, **Tree of Smoke** continues to resonate with readers and critics alike. Its nuanced portrayal of war and its aftermath offers valuable insights into not only the Vietnam conflict but also the broader implications of military intervention and intelligence work in modern geopolitics.

Lessons on War and Humanity

Johnson’s novel encourages readers to question simplistic narratives about heroes and villains, urging a more empathetic and critical understanding of history. By focusing on the internal lives of its characters, **Tree of Smoke** highlights the human costs of ideological conflicts and the often invisible psychological battles fought long after the physical war ends.

Impact on Vietnam War Literature

Tree of Smoke occupies a special place in the canon of Vietnam War literature. It stands alongside classics such as Tim O’Brien’s **The Things They Carried** and Michael Herr’s **Dispatches** but distinguishes itself through its ambitious scope and literary experimentation. For students, scholars, or casual readers interested in this genre, Johnson’s work offers a challenging yet rewarding perspective.

Tips for Reading and Appreciating **Tree of Smoke**

Given its complexity, approaching **Tree of Smoke** can be daunting. Here are some suggestions to enhance the reading experience:

- **Take your time:** The novel's dense prose and nonlinear plot benefit from slow, careful reading and reflection.
- **Keep track of characters:** Maintaining a list of characters and their relationships can help navigate the intertwining narratives.
- **Reflect on themes:** Consider the broader questions about war, memory, and truth as you read, rather than focusing solely on plot.
- **Engage with secondary sources:** Reading interviews with Denis Johnson or critical essays can deepen your understanding of the novel's context and intentions.
- **Join discussions:** Participating in book clubs or online forums can provide new insights and interpretations.

Exploring **Tree of Smoke** with patience and openness allows readers to appreciate Denis Johnson's craft and the novel's profound meditation on one of America's most divisive wars.

Denis Johnson's **Tree of Smoke** remains a powerful literary achievement that challenges and enriches our understanding of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. Its intricate narrative, complex characters, and thematic depth make it a compelling read for anyone interested in war literature, psychological fiction, or the art of storytelling itself. Whether you're encountering it for the first time or revisiting its pages, **Tree of Smoke** offers a unique journey into the fog of war and the fragile nature of truth.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of Denis Johnson's 'Tree of Smoke'?

The main theme of 'Tree of Smoke' is the moral ambiguity and psychological impact of the Vietnam War, exploring themes of espionage, identity, and the chaos of conflict.

Who is the protagonist in Denis Johnson's 'Tree of Smoke'?

The protagonist is Skip Sands, a young and idealistic intelligence officer working for the CIA during the Vietnam War.

How does Denis Johnson portray the Vietnam War in 'Tree of Smoke'?

Denis Johnson portrays the Vietnam War as a complex, confusing, and often surreal experience, emphasizing the psychological toll on soldiers and operatives, as well as the blurred lines between truth and deception.

What literary style is Denis Johnson known for in 'Tree of Smoke'?

Denis Johnson uses a lyrical, fragmented, and sometimes hallucinatory literary style in 'Tree of Smoke', blending dark humor with intense emotional depth.

Did 'Tree of Smoke' receive any notable awards?

Yes, 'Tree of Smoke' won the National Book Award for Fiction in 2007, recognizing its powerful narrative and literary excellence.

How does 'Tree of Smoke' reflect Denis Johnson's views on war and humanity?

'Tree of Smoke' reflects Denis Johnson's critical and nuanced views on war, highlighting its futility, the loss of innocence, and the complex moral choices faced by individuals in extreme circumstances.

Additional Resources

Denis Johnson Tree of Smoke: A Deep Dive into a War Epic

denis johnson tree of smoke stands as a towering achievement in contemporary American literature, a sprawling novel that intricately weaves the complexities of the Vietnam War through the lens of espionage, moral ambiguity, and human frailty. Published in 2007, this ambitious work earned Johnson the National Book Award for Fiction, solidifying his reputation as a masterful storyteller capable of capturing the chaotic essence of war and its psychological aftermath. Tree of Smoke is not merely a war novel; it is an exploration of identity, loyalty, and the often inscrutable nature of truth amid conflict.

Contextualizing Tree of Smoke within Denis Johnson's Oeuvre

Denis Johnson, renowned for his lyrical prose and poignant short stories such as those found in **Jesus' Son**, ventured into a more expansive narrative with

Tree of Smoke. Unlike his earlier, more intimate works, this novel spans multiple characters, timelines, and locations, reflecting the fragmented realities of the Vietnam War era. Johnson's signature style—marked by vivid imagery and a deep empathy for flawed characters—remains firmly in place, but here it unfolds on a much grander scale.

The novel centers on the enigmatic figure of Colonel Francis Xavier Sands, an intelligence officer whose clandestine operations and personal demons drive much of the plot. Through Sands and a host of other characters, Johnson probes the murky intersections of war, intelligence gathering, and personal conviction. The sprawling narrative resists simple categorization, blending elements of spy thriller, historical fiction, and psychological drama.

Structural Complexity and Narrative Techniques

Tree of Smoke's narrative architecture is notably complex, reflecting its thematic concerns with disorientation and uncertainty. Johnson employs multiple viewpoints and a non-linear timeline that mirrors the chaos of the conflict and the fractured psyches of its characters. This approach compels readers to piece together the story much like the characters attempt to assemble intelligence data—often incomplete and contradictory.

The prose style alternates between poetic introspection and sharp, terse dialogue, creating a rhythm that captures both the internal turmoil of the characters and the external violence of war. This intricate layering of narrative voices enhances the immersive quality of the novel but may challenge readers accustomed to more straightforward storytelling.

Thematic Exploration in Denis Johnson *Tree of Smoke*

At its core, **Tree of Smoke** is an exploration of ambiguity—moral, political, and personal. The Vietnam War serves as a backdrop for examining the elusive nature of truth and the consequences of deception on both large and intimate scales.

The Moral Ambiguity of War

Johnson refrains from painting the Vietnam conflict in stark black-and-white terms. Instead, he delves into the moral gray areas inhabited by soldiers, spies, and civilians alike. Colonel Sands embodies this ambiguity; his motivations are tangled with personal obsession, idealism, and a desire for control. This complexity challenges readers to reconsider simplistic notions of heroism and villainy in wartime.

The novel also critiques the bureaucratic inefficiencies and ethical compromises inherent in intelligence work. Through detailed depictions of covert operations and psychological manipulation, Johnson reveals how the fog of war extends beyond the battlefield into the realm of information and ideology.

Identity and Psychological Trauma

The characters in *Tree of Smoke* grapple with fractured identities, often shaped or shattered by their war experiences. Johnson's portrayal of psychological trauma is nuanced and unflinching, highlighting the enduring scars left by violence and disillusionment. This focus aligns with broader post-Vietnam War literature, which often centers on the personal cost of conflict.

The motif of 'smoke' itself symbolizes both obfuscation and dissolution—reflecting how the characters' perceptions and realities are clouded by war's chaos. This thematic thread reinforces the novel's preoccupation with uncertainty and the search for meaning amid confusion.

Comparative Perspectives: Tree of Smoke and Other Vietnam War Novels

When placed alongside other seminal Vietnam War novels such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, *Tree of Smoke* occupies a distinctive niche. While O'Brien's work blends memoir and fiction with a focus on soldierly camaraderie, and Herr's reportage captures the visceral immediacy of combat journalism, Johnson's novel is more expansive and structurally ambitious.

Unlike many Vietnam War novels that concentrate on frontline experiences, *Tree of Smoke* shifts considerable attention to the intelligence community and the psychological dimensions of warfare. This focus offers readers a multifaceted understanding of the conflict's complexity and the pervasive influence of espionage.

Pros and Cons of Tree of Smoke's Narrative Approach

- **Pros:** The novel's layered narrative and rich characterizations provide a deeply immersive and thought-provoking reading experience. Johnson's prose is evocative and poetic, drawing readers into the emotional landscapes of his characters. The exploration of moral ambiguity and psychological trauma adds depth and nuance to the depiction of war.

- **Cons:** The non-linear structure and dense prose can be challenging, potentially alienating readers seeking a straightforward war story. Some critics argue that the novel's sprawling cast and intricate plotlines require sustained attention and may hinder narrative momentum.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Upon its release, *Tree of Smoke* was widely acclaimed for its ambition and literary craftsmanship. Critics praised Johnson's ability to capture the moral complexities of the Vietnam War with both detachment and empathy. The National Book Award recognized the novel's significance, cementing its place as a contemporary classic.

Over time, *Tree of Smoke* has been analyzed not only as a war novel but as a meditation on American identity and the ethics of interventionism. Its relevance extends beyond the Vietnam context, resonating with readers attuned to the challenges of modern warfare and intelligence operations.

Influence on War Literature and Popular Culture

Denis Johnson's approach in *Tree of Smoke* has inspired subsequent writers to explore the psychological and bureaucratic dimensions of war with similar ambition. The novel's blend of historical detail and philosophical inquiry has influenced narratives that seek to move beyond combat scenes to probe the deeper human consequences of conflict.

While not adapted into a major film or television series, *Tree of Smoke* continues to be a subject of academic study and literary discussion, reinforcing its status as a seminal work in Vietnam War literature.

The enduring power of *Tree of Smoke* lies in its refusal to offer easy answers. Through its intricate storytelling and profound thematic concerns, Denis Johnson crafts a narrative that mirrors the elusive nature of truth in times of war—a narrative that continues to challenge and engage readers decades after its publication.

[Denis Johnson Tree Of Smoke](#)

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denis johnson tree of smoke: Tree of Smoke Denis Johnson, 2007-09-04 Once upon a time there was a war . . . and a young American who thought of himself as the Quiet American and the Ugly American, and who wished to be neither, who wanted instead to be the Wise American, or the Good American, but who eventually came to witness himself as the Real American and finally as simply the Fucking American. That's me. This is the story of Skip Sands—spy-in-training, engaged in Psychological Operations against the Vietcong—and the disasters that befall him thanks to his famous uncle, a war hero known in intelligence circles simply as the Colonel. This is also the story of the Houston brothers, Bill and James, young men who drift out of the Arizona desert into a war in which the line between disinformation and delusion has blurred away. In its vision of human folly, and its gritty, sympathetic portraits of men and women desperate for an end to their loneliness, whether in sex or death or by the grace of God, this is a story like nothing in our literature. Tree of Smoke is Denis Johnson's first full-length novel in nine years, and his most gripping, beautiful, and powerful work to date. Tree of Smoke is the 2007 National Book Award Winner for Fiction.

denis johnson tree of smoke: Tree of Smoke Denis Johnson, 2016-02-11 Tree of Smoke - the name given to a 'psy op' that might or might not be hypothetical and might or might not be officially sanctioned - is Denis Johnson's most gripping, visionary and ambitious work to date. Set in south-east Asia and the US, and spanning two decades, it ostensibly tells the story of Skip Sands, a CIA spy who may or may not be engaged in psychological operations against the Viet Cong -- but also takes the reader on a surreal yet vivid journey, dipping in and out of characters' lives to reveal fundamental truths at the heart of the human condition. 'A Catch-22 for our times' Alan Warner, Books of the Year, Observer 'The God I want to believe in has a voice and a sense of humour like Denis Johnson's' Jonathan Franzen 'An epic of drenched sensuality and absurdly chewable dialogue, as though Don DeLillo and Joseph Heller had collaborated on a Vietnam war novel' Steven Poole, Books of the Year, New Statesman

denis johnson tree of smoke: Tree of Smoke Denis Johnson, 2008 Describing a world where almost everyone is lost or looking for something, where disinformation is the ultimate weapon and disillusion the most insidious enemy, and where war is another way to self-destruction, Johnson takes the reader on a surreal yet vivid journey, revealing the fundamental truths at the heart of the human condition.

denis johnson tree of smoke: *The Solitary Journey Home* Harrison Fletcher Dietzman, 2011

denis johnson tree of smoke: *Nachruf auf Amerika* Klaus Brinkbäumer, 2018-03-08 Die USA sind uns fremd geworden. Zwar waren sie immer schon ein Land der Widersprüche, doch mit Donald Trumps Präsidentschaft wurde klar: Fundamentales verschiebt sich, was gerade noch verlässlich schien, bricht entzwei. Auch nach Donald Trump wird es nicht wieder so werden wie zuvor. Warum das so ist, zeigt uns Klaus Brinkbäumer in seinem großen Buch über Amerika. Als Chefredakteur und langjähriger USA-Korrespondent des Nachrichtenmagazins »Der Spiegel« kennt er das Land wie wenige andere. Er hat über die Jahre mit Barack Obama, Dick Cheney oder Hillary Clinton, mit George Clooney oder Bruce Springsteen, mit zahlreichen Persönlichkeiten aus Politik, Kultur und Wirtschaft gesprochen und mit Donald Trump ein etwas anstrengendes Telefongespräch geführt. In seiner so leidenschaftlichen wie analytischen Schilderung von Menschen, Orten, Stimmungen, Geschichte und Geschichten zeichnet er das faszinierende Porträt einer Nation, die für Jahrzehnte wegweisend für uns war und nun im Begriff ist, sich selbst zu verlieren. Das Ende dieser einst so verlässlichen Beziehung wird unsere Zukunft wesentlich bestimmen.

denis johnson tree of smoke: The Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction, 2 Volumes Patrick O'Donnell, Stephen J. Burn, Lesley Larkin, 2022-03-01 Neue Perspektiven und aufschlussreiche Erörterungen der zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Belletristik Mit der Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction: 1980-2020 präsentiert ein Team renommierter Geisteswissenschaftler eine umfassende zielgerichtete Sammlung von Beiträgen zu einigen der bedeutendsten und einflussreichsten Autoren und literarischen Themen der letzten vier Jahrzehnte. In aktuellen Beiträgen bekannter und neuer Autoren werden so unterschiedliche Themen wie

Multikulturalismus, zeitgenössische Regionalismen, Realismus nach dem Poststrukturalismus, indigene Erzählungen, Globalismus und Big Data im Kontext der amerikanischen Belletristik der letzten 40 Jahre betrachtet. Die Enzyklopädie bietet einen Überblick über die amerikanische Belletristik zur Jahrtausendwende sowie einen Ausblick auf die Zukunft. In diesem Werk findet sich eine ausgewogene Mischung aus Analyse, Zusammenfassung und Kritik für eine erhellende Betrachtung der enthaltenen Themen. Außerdem enthält das Werk: * Eine spannende Mischung von Beiträgen bekannter und aufstrebender Autoren aus aller Welt, in denen zentrale aktuelle Themen der amerikanischen Belletristik diskutiert werden * Eine gezielte kritische Betrachtung von Autoren und Themen, die für die amerikanische Belletristik von wesentlicher Bedeutung sind * Themen, in denen sich die Energie und die Tendenzen in der zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Belletristik in den vierzig Jahren zwischen 1980 und 2020 widerspiegeln Die Encyclopedia of Contemporary American Fiction: 1980-2020 ist ein unverzichtbares Nachschlagewerk für Studierende und Doktoranden in den Bereichen amerikanische Literatur, Englisch, kreatives Schreiben und Belletristik. Darüber hinaus darf das Werk in den Bibliotheken von Geisteswissenschaftlern nicht fehlen, die nach einer maßgeblichen Sammlung von Beiträgen bekannter und neuerer Autoren der zeitgenössischen Belletristik suchen.

denis johnson tree of smoke: Historical Dictionary of Horror Literature Mark A. Fabrizio, 2023-12-06 Stories of vampires, werewolves, zombies, witches, goblins, mummies, and other supernatural creatures have existed for time immemorial, and scary stories are among the earliest types of fiction ever recorded. Historical Dictionary of Horror Literature is an invaluable aid in studying horror literature, including influential authors, texts, terms, subgenres, and literary movements. This book contains a chronology, an introduction, and an extensive bibliography. The dictionary section has more than 400 cross-referenced entries covering authors, subgenres, tropes, awards, organizations, and important terms related to horror. Historical Dictionary of Horror Literature is an excellent resource for students, researchers, and anyone wanting to know more about horror literature.

denis johnson tree of smoke: The Oxford History of the Novel in English Cyrus R. K. Patell, Deborah Lindsay Williams, 2024 An overview of US fiction since 1940 that explores the history of literary forms, the history of narrative forms, the history of the book, the history of media, and the history of higher education in the United States.

denis johnson tree of smoke: Looking Back on the Vietnam War Brenda M. Boyle, Jeehyun Lim, 2016-06-17 More than forty years have passed since the official end of the Vietnam War, yet the war's legacies endure. Its history and iconography still provide fodder for film and fiction, communities of war refugees have spawned a wide Vietnamese diaspora, and the United States military remains embroiled in unwinnable wars with eerie echoes of Vietnam. Looking Back on the Vietnam War brings together scholars from a broad variety of disciplines, who offer fresh insights on the war's psychological, economic, artistic, political, and environmental impacts. Each essay examines a different facet of the war, from its representation in Marvel comic books to the experiences of Vietnamese soldiers exposed to Agent Orange. By putting these pieces together, the contributors assemble an expansive yet nuanced composite portrait of the war and its global legacies. Though they come from diverse scholarly backgrounds, ranging from anthropology to film studies, the contributors are united in their commitment to original research. Whether exploring rare archives or engaging in extensive interviews, they voice perspectives that have been excluded from standard historical accounts. Looking Back on the Vietnam War thus embarks on an interdisciplinary and international investigation to discover what we remember about the war, how we remember it, and why.

denis johnson tree of smoke: Writing Wars David F. Eisler, 2022-12-14 Choice Outstanding Academic Title 2024 Senators Bob and Elizabeth Dole Biennial Award for Distinguished Book in Veterans Studies, winner Who writes novels about war? For nearly a century after World War I, the answer was simple: soldiers who had been there. The assumption that a person must have experienced war in the flesh in order to write about it in fiction was taken for granted by writers,

reviewers, critics, and even scholars. Contemporary American fiction tells a different story. Less than half of the authors of contemporary war novels are veterans. And that's hardly the only change. Today's war novelists focus on the psychological and moral challenges of soldiers coming home rather than the physical danger of combat overseas. They also imagine the consequences of the wars from non-American perspectives in a way that defies the genre's conventions. To understand why these changes have occurred, David Eisler argues that we must go back nearly fifty years, to the political decision to abolish the draft. The ramifications rippled into the field of cultural production, transforming the foundational characteristics—authorship, content, and form—of the American war fiction genre.

denis johnson tree of smoke: Night Watch (Pulitzer Prize Winner) Jayne Anne Phillips, 2023-09-19 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER • LONGLISTED FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD IN FICTION • A NEW YORKER BEST BOOK OF THE YEAR • From one of our most accomplished novelists, a mesmerizing story about a mother and daughter seeking refuge in the chaotic aftermath of the Civil War—and a brilliant portrait of family endurance against all odds A tour de force. —Tayari Jones, author of *An American Marriage* In 1874, in the wake of the War, erasure, trauma, and namelessness haunt civilians and veterans, renegades and wanderers, freedmen and runaways. Twelve-year-old ConaLee, the adult in her family for as long as she can remember, finds herself on a buckboard journey with her mother, Eliza, who hasn't spoken in more than a year. They arrive at the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum in West Virginia, delivered to the hospital's entrance by a war veteran who has forced himself into their world. There, far from family, a beloved neighbor, and the mountain home they knew, they try to reclaim their lives. The omnipresent vagaries of war and race rise to the surface as we learn their story: their flight to the highest mountain ridges of western Virginia; the disappearance of ConaLee's father, who left for the War and never returned. Meanwhile, in the asylum, they begin to find a new path. ConaLee pretends to be her mother's maid; Eliza responds slowly to treatment. They get swept up in the life of the facility—the mysterious man they call the Night Watch; the orphan child called Weed; the fearsome woman who runs the kitchen; the remarkable doctor at the head of the institution. Epic, enthralling, and meticulously crafted, *Night Watch* is a stunning chronicle of surviving war and its aftermath.

denis johnson tree of smoke: *October Song* David W. Berner, 2017-04-28 In the vinyl era, David W. Berner played rock 'n' roll in a neighborhood garage band. Decades later at the age of 57 he enters a national songwriting contest and quite unexpectedly is named a finalist. But there's more. He's called on to perform the song live at a storied venue for Americana music. Grabbing his old guitar and the love of his life, David hits the road, hoping to live out a musical fantasy he thought had been buried long ago. *October Song* is a powerful examination of the passage of time, love, the power of music, and the power of dreams.

denis johnson tree of smoke: The Contemporary American Novel in Context Andrew Dix, Brian Jarvis, Paul Jenner, 2011-08-04 >

denis johnson tree of smoke: *Victimhood in American Narratives of the War in Vietnam* Aleksandra Musiał, 2020-03-02 This book revisits the American canon of novels, memoirs, and films about the war in Vietnam, in order to reassess critically the centrality of the discourse of American victimization in the country's imagination of the conflict, and to trace the strategies of representation that establish American soldiers and veterans as the most significant victims of the war. By investigating in detail the imagery of the Vietnamese landscape recreated by American authors and directors, the volume explores the proposition that Vietnam has been turned into an American myth, demonstrating that the process resulted in a dehistoricization and mystification of the conflict that obscured its historical and political realities. Against this background, representations of the war's victims—Vietnamese civilians and American soldiers—are then considered in light of their ideological meanings and uses. Ultimately, the book seeks to demonstrate how, in a relation of power, the question of victimhood can become ideologized, transforming into both a discourse and a strategy of representation—and in doing so, to demythologize something of the Vietnam of American cultural narrative.

denis johnson tree of smoke: The Covert Sphere Timothy Melley, 2012-11-15 In December 2010 the U.S. Embassy in Kabul acknowledged that it was providing major funding for thirteen episodes of Eagle Four—a new Afghani television melodrama based loosely on the blockbuster U.S. series 24. According to an embassy spokesperson, Eagle Four was part of a strategy aimed at transforming public suspicion of security forces into something like awed respect. Why would a wartime government spend valuable resources on a melodrama of covert operations? The answer, according to Timothy Melley, is not simply that fiction has real political effects but that, since the Cold War, fiction has become integral to the growth of national security as a concept and a transformation of democracy. In *The Covert Sphere*, Melley links this cultural shift to the birth of the national security state in 1947. As the United States developed a vast infrastructure of clandestine organizations, it shielded policy from the public sphere and gave rise to a new cultural imaginary, the covert sphere. One of the surprising consequences of state secrecy is that citizens must rely substantially on fiction to know, or imagine, their nation's foreign policy. The potent combination of institutional secrecy and public fascination with the secret work of the state was instrumental in fostering the culture of suspicion and uncertainty that has plagued American society ever since—and, Melley argues, that would eventually find its fullest expression in postmodernism. *The Covert Sphere* traces these consequences from the Korean War through the War on Terror, examining how a regime of psychological operations and covert action has made the conflation of reality and fiction a central feature of both U.S. foreign policy and American culture. Melley interweaves Cold War history with political theory and original readings of films, television dramas, and popular entertainments—from *The Manchurian Candidate* through 24—as well as influential writing by Margaret Atwood, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, Joan Didion, E. L. Doctorow, Michael Herr, Denis Johnson, Norman Mailer, Tim O'Brien, and many others.

denis johnson tree of smoke: *A Political Companion to John Steinbeck* Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, Simon Stow, 2013-05-15 Though he was a recipient of both the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature, American novelist John Steinbeck (1902--1968) has frequently been censored. Even in the twenty-first century, nearly ninety years after his work first appeared in print, Steinbeck's novels, stories, and plays still generate controversy: his 1937 book *Of Mice and Men* was banned in some Mississippi schools in 2002, and as recently as 2009, he made the American Library Association's annual list of most frequently challenged authors. *A Political Companion to John Steinbeck* examines the most contentious political aspects of the author's body of work, from his early exploration of social justice and political authority during the Great Depression to his later positions regarding domestic and international threats to American policies. Featuring contemporaneous and present-day interpretations of his novels and essays by historians, literary scholars, and political theorists, this book covers the spectrum of Steinbeck's writing, exploring everything from his place in American political culture to his seeming betrayal of his leftist principles in later years.

denis johnson tree of smoke: *Contemporary American Fiction* David Brauner, 2010-04-20 This is an accessible, lucid and incisive study that will prove indispensable to students and scholars of contemporary American fiction. Featuring a wide range of authors - from canonical figures such as Philip Roth, Don DeLillo and Annie Proulx, to increasingly influential writers such as Jeffrey Eugenides, Gish Jen and Richard Powers - the book combines detailed readings of key texts with informative discussions of their historical, social and cultural contexts. There are chapters focusing on formal characteristics (the use of irony and paradox in novels by Don DeLillo, Paul Auster and Bret Easton Ellis, and the generic properties of the texts and films of *Cold Mountain*, *'Brokeback Mountain'* and *No Country for Old Men*) and on thematic concerns (the representation of gender and sexuality in novels by Jane Smiley, Carol Shields and Jeffrey Eugenides and of ethnicity, race and hybridity in fiction by Gish Jen, Philip Roth and Richard Powers). Running through all these chapters is an interrogation of all three elements making up the phrase 'contemporary American fiction'.
Key Features* Identifies some of the main trends in contemporary American fiction and situates them in historical and cultural contexts* Discusses a representative range of recent fiction, providing a sense

of the rich diversity of the field and of its key themes and modes of writing* Introduces students to a variety of critical approaches to, and debates concerning, contemporary American fiction* Encourages reflection on the nature of national, gender, ethnic and generic identities

denis johnson tree of smoke: The Racial Order Mustafa Emirbayer, Matthew Desmond, 2024-05-31 Proceeding from the bold and provocative claim that there never has been a comprehensive and systematic theory of race, Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond set out to reformulate how we think about this most difficult of topics in American life. In *The Racial Order*, they draw on Bourdieu, Durkheim, and Dewey to present a new theoretical framework for race scholarship. Animated by a deep and reflexive intelligence, the book engages the large and important issues of social theory today and, along the way, offers piercing insights into how race actually works in America. Emirbayer and Desmond set out to examine how the racial order is structured, how it is reproduced and sometimes transformed, and how it penetrates into the innermost reaches of our racialized selves. They also consider how—and toward what end—the racial order might be reconstructed. In the end, this project is not merely about race; it is a theoretical reconsideration of the fundamental problems of order, agency, power, and social justice. *The Racial Order* is a challenging work of social theory, institutional and cultural analysis, and normative inquiry.

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