

*The Body Artist*, by Don DeLillo

Reviewed by [Gordon Houser](#) in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

"Time seems to pass," the opening line of Don DeLillo's 12th novel, could sum up this spare, evocative work. The story begins with an intimate portrait of a married couple at breakfast in a rented summer cottage. The accumulating detail and realistic dialogue introduce the novel's theme of awareness. Lauren Hartke and Rey Robles speak to one another yet do not always hear what is said. Lauren's groan resembles "a life lament." She takes the kettle to the stove because "this is how you live a life even if you don't know it." She sees her husband looking at but not reading the paper and "understood this retroactively."

Like John Cheever's *O What a Paradise It Seems*, this is a novel about appearance and the fleeting nature of reality. For Lauren "it all happens around the word seem." For her and the reader, the difference between what is real and what only seems to be real is unclear. The narrative voice keeps reflecting this uncertainty: a label is "scratchy," then "not scratchy." "He was staring at her. He seemed to be staring, but probably wasn't." "There he was, not really, only hintingly, barely at all."

Lauren is "a body artist" who transforms her physical self in order to portray different characters. Her performances, writes an old friend who is reviewing her work, are "about who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are." Her bodywork, Lauren feels, makes "everything transparent." She seems to need the physical to grasp what is real. Yet she isn't always sure. She sees a bird, but only in retrospect because "she didn't know what she was seeing at first and had to re-create the ghostly moment, write it like a line in a piece of fiction."

After her husband's suicide, Lauren stays on in the cottage. She hears noises, then discovers in the house a man who appears to be an escaped mental patient. His conversation consists of dialogue he's apparently overheard, including whole sentences spoken by Lauren's late husband. We never learn exactly who this man--or ghost--is.

Lauren tries to make sense of the strange events she's experiencing: "Maybe there are times when we slide into another reality but can't remember it, can't concede the truth of it because this would be too devastating to absorb." But then, "she was

always maybeing." Her attempts to control her life by transforming her body fail. She must face what comes and accept it. Such awareness often comes to us in hindsight. "She'd known it was empty all along but was only catching up." DeLillo's novels tend to deal with public issues--cold-war America (*Underworld*), the psychology of crowds (*Mao II*), the Kennedy assassination (*Libra*). Here he handles more personal issues: identity, grief, the nature of time. *The Body Artist* is like a puzzle that demands close attention yet still eludes full understanding.