A *New York Times* Notable Book of 2007

Named One of the Best Books of 2007 by

Newsweek

The Boston Globe

Los Angeles Times

Chicago Tribune

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The San Diego Union-Tribune

The Hartford Courant

The Richmond Times-Dispatch

Baltimore Sun

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Tampa Tribune

The Kansas City Star

Booklist Top of the List, Editor's Choice, 2007

Praise for Falling Man

"Classically spare, haunting, and treacherously elegiac . . . DeLillo has created a tableau of specificity and poetic anguish, all of it bearing the themes that have dominated his fiction over the years: the play of art and memory, the miracles and limits of language, the meaning of things trumping the things themselves. *Falling Man* ends in a quiet and masterful crescendo, a lamentation for the dead on 9/11 but also for the living . . . wrenching and exquisite."

—Gail Caldwell, *The Boston Globe*

"DeLillo has an uncanny knack for creating sentences that replicate the feel and rhythm of American life—and a devastating sense of humor in the most surprising places. . . . To his credit, DeLillo never confuses importance with self-importance. . . . *Falling Man* . . . is the clearest vision yet of what it felt like to live through that day and what life became in the shadow of the buildings that were no longer there."

—Malcolm Jones, *Newsweek*

"No one writing in American letters today does better at rendering altered states of mind, and this gift extends to the making of the story itself. . . . DeLillo's prose never wavers . . . one of the most

powerfully rendered and terrifying conclusions in recent American fiction."

—Alan Cheuse, *Chicago Tribune*

"It's become something of a literary sport, trying to capture 9/11 in a novel. Writers great and small have hurled their harpoons at the whale of a subject. No one has come as close to piercing its heart as Don DeLillo with *Falling Man*, his best book since *Underworld*, and maybe his warmest ever."

—Jennifer Reese, *Entertainment Weekly*

"Don DeLillo has long been our most prescient novelist, the man whose imagination felt like a crystal ball in which we made out the ghostly silhouettes of our future. . . . In *Falling Man* he has again looked back at another staggering moment of mystery and change in the American story: 9/11. . . . In such immutable human realities, in such deeply imagined stories, lies the essence of literature's power and, for DeLillo, the strongest possibility of our own psychic redemption."

—Vince Passaro, *O, The Oprah Magazine*

"DeLillo has written the first major 9/11 novel. Of course, like the rest of his oeuvre, it's more than that. It's a document of America's progress as a nation, a civilization, at this particular place in time. And, exactly like the very best of DeLillo's

work, *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*, *Falling Man* stands as a literary milestone. It's a well-crafted, artistic interpretation of a major event that has, for better or worse, helped shape the nation."

—Dorman T. Shindler, *The Denver Post*

"What we see through [Keith's] eyes in the tower's stairwell is an apocalypse . . . all the more harrowing and touching for its historical reality and for the innocence and heroism of the victims. This time the falling men and women tumble before the reader with no safety harness. . . . It is not performance art but the real thing, and it brings at least a measure of memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space."

—Frank Rich, *The New York Times Book Review*

"DeLillo's oddly original phrasings hauntingly evoke the high tension, distorted emotions and unexpected juxtapositions of those awful days just after 9/11."

—Dan Cryer, *San Francisco Chronicle*

"*Falling Man* resists the easy dramatic lure of the cataclysmic noise of 9/11 with a more difficult, more realistic human silence. Everything is muted and contemplative, every presence riddled with sad absences."

—Sam Anderson, *New York* magazine

"DeLillo has written the defining work of 9/11 fiction. His prose quickly breaks into a full-on run, a bravura style from which it seems almost anything can be accomplished. . . . DeLillo achieves a rare level of tenderness in *Falling Man*, a balancing of his sense of the absurd with an ability to evoke genuine pathos . . . it marks the return of one of America's preeminent novelists."

—Edward Su, *Harvard Book Review*

"The most substantive 9/11 novel so far . . . For the past 30 years Don DeLillo has been one of America's most visionary novelists. His portrait of the psychic disarray of a group of people—the entire city, in fact—in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks makes this a powerful read."

—Sam Shapiro, *The Charlotte Observer*

"This spare, beautifully written book has an intricate web of story lines, all revolving around the theme of making sense of the world after 9/11."

—Collette Bancroft, *Lexington Herald-Leader*

"Novelists have written of the trauma of these attacks, and the emotional upheaval, but they have yet to explore the religious sense of awe—the transformative power—wrought by 9/11, until now. In *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo tells the story of a

family stretched apart and thrown together by the attacks. It is a tale of great power."

—John Freeman, *The Star-Ledger* (Newark)

"*Falling Man* is a gripping, haunting ensemble piece . . . less about the public, historical event than about its psychological radiation through the lives of a single family. It is DeLillo at his most bare-bones, asking, 'How do we now live?'"

—Sven Birkerts, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Verdict: Stunning . . . DeLillo has the ability to make historical matters personal and to do so in complex, brilliant sentences. And now he's done it again . . . *Falling Man* is a great novel."

—Alan Michael Parker,
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

"No docudrama, fiction, theater, or reporting can match DeLillo's capture of the precise, concrete language by which we defined ourselves in the shadow of 9/11."

—Betsy Willeford, *The Miami Herald*

"The subject of 9/11 and its impact on the American psyche will resurface in literature for generations. Those books will have the luxury of time and emotional distance to permit their authors to wrestle with questions that will linger throughout

history. Still, it's doubtful many of them will do so with the grace and undeniable power of this exquisite work."

—Harvey Freedenberg, *BookPage*

"*Falling Man* is an astounding elegy to an entire metropolis. The novel honors the power of memory and narrative to enfold what otherwise drifts away."

—Will Blythe, *New York Post*

"*Falling Man* reverberates with so much of Don DeLillo's intelligence, so many of his sculpted sentences. . . . If anyone has shown himself as capable of capturing the current moment without succumbing to it, it is Don DeLillo."

—Jennifer Szalai, *Harper's Magazine*

"No contemporary writer shows a surer grasp of the unease with which we all live now . . . one of DeLillo's most brilliant inventions ever . . . in many ways the culmination of his eloquent depictions of America in extremis. . . . Its pages sear the reader's hands, but few will want to stop compulsively turning them."

—Bruce Allen, *The Washington Times*

"*Falling Man* is a hymn for the New York of 9/11, and its fallen. It is quietly and sparely voiced, without theatrics. . . . DeLillo pares everything down,

giving a short, shorn, direct, unencumbered and economical account of a vast moment that in the very slenderness and terseness of its telling, captures the horrible power of its impact . . . brilliant."

—A. C. Grayling, *The Times* (London)

"A tour de force."

—Mark Greif, *London Review of Books*

"Read it . . . you'll be exhilarated by [DeLillo's] insights into the ways we live now. . . . DeLillo is a literary artist in top form. He continues to breathe life into historic events with unique, haunting precision."

—Fritz Beshar, *More*

"Astounding . . . Mr. DeLillo is one of the greatest New York writers and here he is writing about the biggest moment in the city's recent history."

—*The Economist*

"In one of his most moving novels, the postmodern master imagines September 11's long-term psychological effects on an extended family of Manhattanites."

—*Entertainment Weekly* (Must List)

"Don DeLillo pits his near-legendary ability to reckon with the zeitgeist against our most ineffable,

epoch-making event. . . . He constructs, and deconstructs with masterly verisimilitude. . . . Brilliant."

—Lisa Shea, *Elle*

"DeLillo is at his best . . . at once a keen imaginer and a cool analyst . . . [writing] with exactitude and lyrical originality."

—James Wood, *The New Republic*

"A deft and breathtaking novel about memory and 9/11."

—Julia Keller, *Chicago Tribune*

"[A] tour de force."

—*Vogue*

"It's impossible to remain unmoved."

—John Mark Eberhart, *The Kansas City Star*

"These are pages of magnificent force and control, DeLillo's genius at full pelt. Reading them, you have to remind yourself to keep breathing."

—Steven Poole, *New Statesman*

"Visceral, exquisitely wrought."

—Heller McAlpin, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"A powerfully written and compulsively creative work."

—James Ledbetter, *The Village Voice*

"A real achievement . . . *Falling Man* is about life in the ruins of an old world."

—Michael Wood, *Bookforum*

"This is prime DeLillo."

—Daniel Handler, *Newsday*

"It wasn't a question of whether Don DeLillo would write a 9/11 novel, or even when. He has been writing it all along, from *Americana* to *Cosmopolis*, dreaming out loud in signs, ciphers, portents and premonitions."

—John Leonard, *The Nation*

"Don DeLillo's great success in this novel is his terribly accurate portrait of the emotional emptiness and hazy desperation New Yorkers felt during the weeks and months following the 9/11 attacks. . . . DeLillo's writing is brilliant . . . a literary work of uncommon power that speaks to the reality of 9/11 in a way that journalism never could."

—Jonathan Durbin, *People*

"It doesn't take very long . . . for us to realize that DeLillo—a great American novelist—is in top form. In *Falling Man*, he has fearlessly tackled the defining topic of our time: Not 9/11, per se, so much as the widespread spiritual disorientation that seems to have taken grip in its aftermath."

—Christopher Kelly, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

Also by Don DeLillo

NOVELS

Americana
End Zone
Great Jones Street
Ratner's Star
Players
Running Dog
The Names
White Noise
Libra
Mao II
Underworld
The Body Artist
Cosmopolis

PLAYS

The Day Room
Valparaiso
Love-Lies-Bleeding

Falling Man

A Novel

Don DeLillo

SCRIBNER
New York London Toronto Sydney

SCRIBNER
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This Scribner export edition June 2008

SCRIBNER and design are trademarks of The Gale Group, Inc., used under license by Simon & Schuster, Inc., the publisher of this work.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-800-456-6798 or business@simonandschuster.com

DESIGNED BY ERICH HOBBING

Manufactured in the United States of America

5 7 9 10 8 6 4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2006052306

ISBN-13: 978-1-4165-6229-0
ISBN-10: 1-4165-6229-X

Falling Man

PART ONE

BILL LAWTON

1

It was not a street anymore but a world, a time and space of falling ash and near night. He was walking north through rubble and mud and there were people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads. They had handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths. They had shoes in their hands, a woman with a shoe in each hand, running past him. They ran and fell, some of them, confused and ungainly, with debris coming down around them, and there were people taking shelter under cars.

The roar was still in the air, the buckling rumble of the fall. This was the world now. Smoke and ash came rolling down streets and turning corners, busting around corners, seismic tides of smoke, with office paper flashing past, standard sheets with cutting edge, skimming, whipping past, otherworldly things in the morning pall.

He wore a suit and carried a briefcase. There was glass in his hair and face, marbled bolls of blood

and light. He walked past a Breakfast Special sign and they went running by, city cops and security guards running, hands pressed down on gun butts to keep the weapons steady.

Things inside were distant and still, where he was supposed to be. It happened everywhere around him, a car half buried in debris, windows smashed and noises coming out, radio voices scratching at the wreckage. He saw people shedding water as they ran, clothes and bodies drenched from sprinkler systems. There were shoes discarded in the street, handbags and laptops, a man seated on the sidewalk coughing up blood. Paper cups went bouncing oddly by.

The world was this as well, figures in windows a thousand feet up, dropping into free space, and the stink of fuel fire, and the steady rip of sirens in the air. The noise lay everywhere they ran, stratified sound collecting around them, and he walked away from it and into it at the same time.

There was something else then, outside all this, not belonging to this, aloft. He watched it coming down. A shirt came down out of the high smoke, a shirt lifted and drifting in the scant light and then falling again, down toward the river.

They ran and then they stopped, some of them, standing there swaying, trying to draw breath out of the burning air, and the fitful cries of disbelief, curses and lost shouts, and the paper massed in the

air, contracts, resumés blowing by, intact snatches of business, quick in the wind.

He kept on walking. There were the runners who'd stopped and others veering into sidestreets. Some were walking backwards, looking into the core of it, all those writhing lives back there, and things kept falling, scorched objects trailing lines of fire.

He saw two women sobbing in their reverse march, looking past him, both in running shorts, faces in collapse.

He saw members of the tai chi group from the park nearby, standing with hands extended at roughly chest level, elbows bent, as if all of this, themselves included, might be placed in a state of abeyance.

Someone came out of a diner and tried to hand him a bottle of water. It was a woman wearing a dust mask and a baseball cap and she withdrew the bottle and twisted off the top and then thrust it toward him again. He put down the briefcase to take it, barely aware that he wasn't using his left arm, that he'd had to put down the briefcase before he could take the bottle. Three police vans came veering into the street and sped downtown, sirens sounding. He closed his eyes and drank, feeling the water pass into his body taking dust and soot down with it. She was looking at him. She said something he didn't hear and he handed back the

bottle and picked up the briefcase. There was an aftertaste of blood in the long draft of water.

He started walking again. A supermarket cart stood upright and empty. There was a woman behind it, facing him, with police tape wrapped around her head and face, yellow caution tape that marks the limits of a crime scene. Her eyes were thin white ripples in the bright mask and she gripped the handle of the cart and stood there, looking into the smoke.

In time he heard the sound of the second fall. He crossed Canal Street and began to see things, somehow, differently. Things did not seem charged in the usual ways, the cobbled street, the cast-iron buildings. There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them.

He heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower.

The sky was lighter here and he could breathe more easily. There were others behind him, thousands, filling the middle distance, a mass in near formation, people walking out of the smoke. He

kept going until he had to stop. It hit him quickly, the knowledge that he couldn't go any farther.

He tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold. There were no taxis and little traffic of any kind and then an old panel truck appeared, Electrical Contractor, Long Island City, and it pulled alongside and the driver leaned toward the window on the passenger's side and examined what he saw, a man scaled in ash, in pulverized matter, and asked him where he wanted to go. It wasn't until he got in the truck and shut the door that he understood where he'd been going all along.

2

It wasn't just those days and nights in bed. Sex was everywhere at first, in words, phrases, half gestures, the simplest intimation of altered space. She'd put down a book or magazine and a small pause settled around them. This was sex. They'd walk down a street together and see themselves in a dusty window. A flight of stairs was sex, the way she moved close to the wall with him just behind, to touch or not, brush lightly or press tight, feeling him crowd her from below, his hand moving around her thigh, stopping her, the way he eased up and around, the way she gripped his wrist. The tilt she gave her sunglasses when she turned and looked at him or the movie on TV when the woman comes into the empty room and it doesn't matter whether she picks up the phone or takes off her skirt as long as she's alone and they are watching. The rented beach house was sex, entering at night after the long stiff drive, her body feeling welded at the joints, and she'd hear the soft heave

of surf on the other side of the dunes, the thud and run, and this was the line of separation, the sound out there in the dark that marked an earthly pulse in the blood.

She sat thinking about this. Her mind drifted in and out of this, the early times, eight years ago, of the eventual extended grimness called their marriage. The day's mail was in her lap. There were matters to attend to and there were events that crowded out such matters but she was looking past the lamp into the wall, where they seemed to be projected, the man and woman, bodies incomplete but bright and real.

It was the postcard that snapped her back, on top of the cluster of bills and other mail. She glanced at the message, a standard scrawled greeting, sent by a friend staying in Rome, then looked again at the face of the card. It was a reproduction of the cover of Shelley's poem in twelve cantos, first edition, called *Revolt of Islam*. Even in postcard format, it was clear that the cover was beautifully designed, with a large illustrated *R* that included creatural flourishes, a ram's head and what may have been a fanciful fish with a tusk and a trunk. *Revolt of Islam*. The card was from the Keats-Shelley House in Piazza di Spagna and she'd understood in the first taut seconds that the card had been sent a week or two earlier. It was a matter of simple coincidence, or not so simple, that a

card might arrive at this particular time bearing the title of that specific book.

This was all, a lost moment on the Friday of that lifelong week, three days after the planes.

She said to her mother, "It was not possible, up from the dead, there he was in the doorway. It's so lucky Justin was here with you. Because it would have been awful for him to see his father like that. Like gray soot head to toe, I don't know, like smoke, standing there, with blood on his face and clothes."

"We did a puzzle, an animal puzzle, horses in a field."

Her mother's apartment was not far from Fifth Avenue, with art on the walls, painstakingly spaced, and small bronze pieces on tables and bookshelves. Today the living room was in a state of happy disarray. Justin's toys and games were scattered across the floor, subverting the timeless quality of the room, and this was nice, Lianne thought, because it was otherwise hard not to whisper in such a setting.

"I didn't know what to do. I mean with the phones out. Finally we walked to the hospital. Walked, step by step, like walking a child."

"Why was he there in the first place, in your apartment?"

"I don't know."

"Why didn't he go straight to a hospital? Down

there, downtown. Why didn't he go to a friend's place?"

Friend meant girlfriend, an unavoidable thrust, she had to do it, couldn't help it.

"I don't know."

"You haven't discussed this. Where is he now?"

"He's all right. Done with doctors for a while."

"What have you discussed?"

"No major problems, physical."

"What have you discussed?" she said.

Her mother, Nina Bartos, had taught at universities in California and New York, retiring two years earlier, the So-and-So Professor of Such-and-Such, as Keith said once. She was pale and thin, her mother, following knee-replacement surgery. She was finally and resolutely old. This is what she wanted, it seemed, to be old and tired, to embrace old age, take up old age, surround herself with it. There were the canes, there were the medications, there were the afternoon naps, the dietary restrictions, the doctors' appointments.

"There's nothing to discuss right now. He needs to stay away from things, including discussions."

"Reticent."

"You know Keith."

"I've always admired that about him. He gives the impression there's something deeper than hiking and skiing, or playing cards. But what?"

"Rock climbing. Don't forget."

"And you went with him. I did forget."

Her mother stirred in the chair, feet propped on the matching stool, late morning, still in her robe, dying for a cigarette.

"I like his reticence, or whatever it is," she said. "But be careful."

"He's reticent around you, or was, the few times there was actual communication."

"Be careful. He was in grave danger, I know. He had friends in there. I know that too," her mother said. "But if you let your sympathy and goodwill affect your judgment."

There were the conversations with friends and former colleagues about knee replacements, hip replacements, about the atrocities of short-term memory and long-term health insurance. All of this was so alien to Lianne's sense of her mother that she thought there might be an element of performance. Nina was trying to accommodate the true encroachments of age by making drama of them, giving herself a certain degree of ironic distance.

"And Justin. Having a father around the house again."

"The kid is fine. Who knows how the kid is? He's fine, he's back in school," she said. "They reopened."

"But you worry. I know this. You like to nourish your fear."

"What's next? Don't you ask yourself? Not only next month. Years to come."

"Nothing is next. There is no next. This was next. Eight years ago they planted a bomb in one of the towers. Nobody said what's next. This was next. The time to be afraid is when there's no reason to be afraid. Too late now."

Lianne stood by the window.

"But when the towers fell."

"I know."

"When this happened."

"I know."

"I thought he was dead."

"So did I," Nina said. "So many watching."

"Thinking he's dead, she's dead."

"I know."

"Watching those buildings fall."

"First one, then the other. I know," her mother said.

She had several canes to choose from and sometimes, on the off-hours and the rainy days, she walked up the street to the Metropolitan Museum and looked at pictures. She looked at three or four pictures in an hour and a half of looking. She looked at what was unfailing. She liked the big rooms, the old masters, what was unfailing in its grip on the eye and mind, on memory and identity. Then she came home and read. She read and slept.

"Of course the child is a blessing but otherwise, you know better than I, marrying the man was a huge mistake, and you willed it, you went looking for it. You wanted to live a certain way, never mind the consequences. You wanted a certain thing and you thought Keith."

"What did I want?"

"You thought Keith would get you there."

"What did I want?"

"To feel dangerously alive. This was a quality you associated with your father. But that wasn't the case. Your father was at heart a careful man. And your son is a beautiful and sensitive child," she said. "But otherwise."

In truth she loved this room, Lianne did, in its most composed form, without the games and scattered toys. Her mother had been living here for a few years only and Lianne tended to see it as a visitor might, a space that was serenely self-possessed, and so what if it's a little intimidating. What she loved most were the two still lifes on the north wall, by Giorgio Morandi, a painter her mother had studied and written about. These were groupings of bottles, jugs, biscuit tins, that was all, but there was something in the brushstrokes that held a mystery she could not name, or in the irregular edges of vases and jars, some reconnoiter inward, human and obscure, away from the very light and color of

the paintings. *Natura morta.* The Italian term for still life seemed stronger than it had to be, somewhat ominous, even, but these were matters she hadn't talked about with her mother. Let the latent meanings turn and bend in the wind, free from authoritative comment.

"You liked asking questions as a child. Insistently digging. But you were curious about the wrong things."

"They were my things, not yours."

"Keith wanted a woman who'd regret what she did with him. This is his style, to get a woman to do something she'll be sorry for. And the thing you did wasn't just a night or a weekend. He was built for weekends. The thing you did."

"This isn't the time."

"You actually married the man."

"And then I threw him out. I had strong objections, building up over time. What you object to is very different. He's not a scholar, not an artist. Doesn't paint, doesn't write poetry. If he did, you'd overlook everything else. He'd be the raging artist. He'd be allowed to behave unspeakably. Tell me something."

"You have more to lose this time. Self-respect. Think about that."

"Tell me this. What kind of painter is allowed to behave more unspeakably, figurative or abstract?"

She heard the buzzer and walked over to the intercom to listen to the doorman's announcement. She knew what it was in advance. This would be Martin on the way up, her mother's lover.

3

He signed a document, then another. There were people on gurneys and there were others, a few, in wheelchairs, and he had trouble writing his name and more trouble fastening the hospital gown behind him. Lianne was there to help. Then she wasn't anymore and an orderly put him in a wheelchair and pushed him down a corridor and into a series of examining rooms, with urgent cases rolling by.

Doctors in scrubs and paper masks checked his airway and took blood-pressure readings. They were interested in potentially fatal reactions to injury, hemorrhage, dehydration. They looked for diminished blood flow to tissues. They studied the contusions on his body and peered into his eyes and ears. Someone gave him an EKG. Through the open door he saw IV racks go floating past. They tested his hand grip and took X rays. They told him things he could not absorb about a ligament or cartilage, a tear or sprain.