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Life & Arts

Thomas Pynchon offers a satirical exploration of the attacks of Sept. 11 as a day in which “everything was revealed.” Getty Images

Thomas Pynchon’s ‘Bleeding Edge’ finds political roots of Sept. 11

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FICTION

Bleeding Edge

By Thomas Pynchon

The Penguin Press

477 pages,\$29

By Joseph Conte

NEWS BOOK REVIEWER



Inveterate Pynchonites know that no detail in the plot is insignificant if you’re a paranoid. Or it’s the recognition that “everything is connected,” as Tchitcherine mused in “Gravity’s Rainbow.”

Thomas Pynchon’s “Bleeding Edge” begins on the first day of spring, the vernal equinox, March 20, 2001, as the rising sun fills a Callery Pear tree on the Upper West Side in Manhattan with unnaturally bright light. It ends with those same pear trees “exploded into bloom” on “the year’s great pivot.” On a similarly bright morning in September of that year, a few days before the autumnal equinox, the sun slanted between the twin towers of the World Trade Center shortly before they were turned into pillars of fire, smoke and ash.

On this astronomical calendar the twin towers are our modern Stonehenge, marking the turn not at the Y2K millennium, feared by programmers and their binary digit calendars, but in the social order that was remade in the aftermath of 9/11. “Bleeding Edge” spans the period from the collapse of the dotcom bubble to the initial forays of the war on terror, and in that solar year suggests that, had we paid more attention to the details, we might have predicted the pillars’ collapse.

Pynchon's female protagonist is a censured Certified Fraud Examiner "with a skill set being a tendency to look for hidden patterns": Maxine Tarnow. Packing her Beretta in her handbag and her two sons, Otis and Ziggy, off to the private Kugelblitz School, she takes on a pro bono investigation of a computer security firm called hashslingrz that may be back-channeling funds to the Middle East. On a visit to her spiritual guru and "emotherapist" Shawn (rehabilitation through excessive whining), she finds him distraught by the dynamiting that March of "two colossal statues of the Buddha ... carved in the fifth century from a sandstone cliffside near Bamiyan," Afghanistan, by the Taliban. What's this fit of religious extremism got to do with us?

But after 9/11, Shawn points out that the destruction of the twin towers and the twin Buddhas is more than coincidence: the "Trade Center towers were religious, too. They stood for what this country worships above everything else, the market." Shawn decries the neoliberal catechism that "the Invisible Hand of the Market runs everything. They fight holy wars against competing religions like Marxism. Against all evidence that the world is finite is this blind faith that resources will never run out, profits will go on increasing forever, just like the world's population – more cheap labor, more addicted consumers," and the privatization of everything imaginable.

Who then is the global purveyor of fanatical beliefs? While "Bleeding Edge" only briefly tarries on the day of the attacks, the novel strongly implies that Sept. 11, 2001, should not have been thoroughly unexpected, "out of the blue," nor was it unprovoked, as the rules of engagement between Islamic fundamentalism and late capitalism had already been drawn up.

Pynchon, like the British novelist and essayist Martin Amis, refuses to use the numerical acronym of 9/11 because it denotes a parochial American self-regard. The first assignment of one of the book's villains, a rogue CIA agent named Windust, is to participate in the assassination of the democratically elected Marxist president of Chile, Salvador Allende, on Sept. 11, 1973. As Ariel Dorfman, the once-exiled Chilean writer, remarked, there have been "other Septembers, many Americas."

If, as I'm suggesting, the warp of this novel is a political (satirical) investigation into the "cause and effect" of 9/11, a day not on which "everything changed" but on which "everything was revealed ... showing us exactly what we've become, what we've been all the time," it's a decidedly "techie version of politics." Maxine's leads into the activities of hashslingrz come in the form of videotapes in plain manila envelopes from documentary filmmaker/pirater Reg Despard and on flash drives from a codebreaker named Eric Outfield.

From Watergate's Deep Throat to Wikileaks' Julian Assange and, most recently, Edward Snowden's revelations of domestic surveillance at the NSA, the whistleblowers have signaled penalties within our own political, military and security apparatus. The founder and CEO of hashslingrz, one of the few firms in Manhattan's Silicon Alley to survive the technology bust, is Gabriel Ice. Consistent with Pynchon's anti-realist penchant for daffy double-entendre, Ice's surname conjures either the "intrusion countermeasures electronics" of William Gibson's cyberpunk classic, "Neuromancer," or Immigration and Customs Enforcement, either of which suggest that this avenging angel may either be operating to secure American interests abroad or

exploiting the “back doors” of the surveillance packages he codes for his own financial benefit. Ice’s firm is either some form of electronic “hawala” that is moving money to anti-jihadist groups in the Emirates without interest charges or transaction histories, or it gains foreknowledge of the attacks and profits on the “leading indicators” of the conspiracy, or, more than likely, both.

Maxine Tarnow is another draft of Pynchon’s Oedipa Maas in “The Crying of Lot 49,” in pursuit of a secretive organization, the Tristero, that may either be a covert system of unconventional communication or “mucho mas,” an extragovernmental agency that promotes the control of the state by private interests. Maxine’s no Luddite, either, recognizing as did Pynchon in his 1984 essay on our revolutionary information society that, as “we have come to live among flows of data more vast than anything the world has seen,” now “anybody with the time, literacy and access fee can get together with just about any piece of specialized knowledge s/he may need.”

The utopian possibilities of the nascent Web for the anarcho-individualist were abundant, but as reported in *New York* magazine, those same online services quickly revealed, through cross-referencing of data, the famously publicity-averse Pynchon’s home address on the Upper West Side.

Maxine’s investigation takes her over the side, from the surface Web with “all the yakking, all the goods for sale, the spammers and spielers and idle fingers,” into the Deep Web, beyond tracking software and Google-bot indexing, to a place on the “horizon between coded and codeless. An abyss” in which she finds the virtual space of DeepArcher (departure). Here on the “bleeding edge” there may be sanctuary, including for the avatars of 9/11’s casualties, “brought here by loved ones so they’ll have an afterlife” or, conversely, “all kinds of deep encryption” put there by Ice, the feds or other forces unknown.

The duality of our information society is reflected in the narrator’s observation that “if you read nothing but the *Newspaper of Record*, you might believe that New York City, like the nation, united in sorrow and shock, has risen to the challenge of global jihadism, joining a righteous crusade Bush’s people are now calling the War on Terror.” Or, “out in the vast undefined anarchism of cyberspace,” a different picture of “dark possibilities are beginning to emerge.”

Maxine’s father, Ernie, warns that the anarchic Internet had its origins “during the Cold War, when the think-tanks were full of geniuses plotting nuclear scenarios. . . . Your Internet, back then the Defense Department called it DARPA-net, the real original purpose was to assure survival of U.S. command and control after a nuclear exchange with the Soviets.” Remember that Ground Zero is a Cold War term for the site of a nuclear blast. Ernie, channeling his old lefty anxieties and possibly Pynchon’s as well, reminds us that what looks like freedom on the Web is really “based on control. Everybody connected together, impossible anybody should get lost, ever again. Take the next step, connect it to these cellphones, you’ve got a total Web of surveillance, inescapable.” Maybe it’s just paranoia, “the garlic in life’s kitchen, right, you can never have too much.” But think of that the next time you unlock your GPS-enabled iPhone 5S, with your thumb on its fingerprint identity sensor.

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