

District of Columbia

Jefferson Flanders

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In Jefferson Flanders's thought-provoking novel *District of Columbia*, a diplomat becomes a poet and considers life and morality.

In the early 1960s, the conflict in Vietnam is becoming more of a concern. The youthful President Kennedy steps in and, in a period of upheaval and turmoil, Dillon Randolph embarks on a career as a State Department diplomat. The war highlights divisions within the government and forces Dillon to question his professional and personal standings. His wife is pregnant, which makes his situation less hopeful; Dillon immerses himself in his job. A series of losses and setbacks drive him to abandon politics and government work and pursue his love of poetry and teaching.

Three story lines work into this historical drama, involving Dillon's personal life, the events of the 1960s and 1970s, and a disgruntled veteran. Dillon's story takes up the most space. It is granular and deft, capturing his feelings about living through the challenges of the era. The book's historical portions balances facts and drama well. The veteran's arc is the weakest; he's introduced as the catalyst for the story, but is relegated to back-burner status until late in the book.

Dillon is an intriguing character. He's selfish and longs for the way that his life used to be, lamenting lost love and seeking the prestige of more subversive diplomatic assignments. A passionate affair haunts his dreams and impacts his writing. He's revealed to be a troubled man burdened by his senses of duty and morality, and he makes poor decisions.

Other characters are also flawed, each ensconced in their own troubles and interesting in their own realistic ways: Dillon's wife suppresses her personality, while his father has a storied career as a legendary Washington insider. Dillon's relationships with his coworkers, family, and friends change in logical ways; their inclusion is dynamic and realistic.

Conversations shift focus from the war to Dillon. His growing dissatisfaction with his government job and his strained relationship with his wife color his interactions with everyone. Prose sections are saturated with information designed to add historical context, but both work together well. The secondary story line regarding Dillon's love interest comes to feel unnecessary, and the conflict involved fades away. Nor does the story itself come to a clear resolution; Dillon simply moves on in his life.

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JOHN M. MURRAY (November 18, 2019)

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